Going to College in Rural Appalachia: Experiences of Low-income, First-generation Students

A thesis presented to

the faculty of

the College of Arts and Sciences of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts

Katlyn M. Sauvage

August 2015

© 2015 Katlyn M. Sauvage. All Rights Reserved.
This thesis titled
Going to College in Rural Appalachia: Experiences of Low-income, First-generation Students

by
KATLYN M. SAUVAGE

has been approved for
the Department of Sociology and Anthropology
and the College of Arts and Sciences by

Debra A. Henderson
Associate Professor of Sociology and Anthropology

Robert Frank
Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
ABSTRACT

SAUVAGE, KATLYN M., M.A., August 2015, Sociology

Going to College in Rural Appalachia: Experiences of Low-income, First-generation Students

Director of Thesis: Debra A. Henderson

This research draws on data from four qualitative interviews to understand the experiences of first-generation, low-income college students from rural Appalachia have as they decide to attend college and transition into college. Previous research shows that Appalachian students in general are less likely than students across the nation to enroll in and successfully complete college. The current study uses the theoretical framework of social capital to evaluate the social and instrumental support these students have received as well as the challenges they have faced throughout their journey to college. The findings indicate that although there is a high level of social support from students’ families to attend college, instrumental support is lacking. More importantly, when these students turn toward their high school guidance counselors, often their only resource for college information, they still experience a lack of instrumental assistance such as help applying for college and financial aid. Additionally, the findings show that once students arrive at college, they experience difficulty transitioning academically and navigating the differences between their previous home life and new college life.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My family: First and foremost I want to thank my family for their continued support and for putting up with me throughout the stress of graduate school. I am so grateful for everything you have done for me. A special thank you goes to my mother. Thank you for listening to me rant and letting me stress to you throughout the ups and downs over the past two years. I would have never made it to where I am today without your constant support!

My friends: I am so lucky to have made such good friends throughout this journey. Thank you to the whole graduate cohort for making my graduate years a wonderful experience. In the beginning, I thought I would never fit in, but by the end we became a family. I am so grateful to each and every one of you. A special thank you goes to my fellow TA’s. Neel, I can always count on you for a great intellectual conversation. I am looking forward to visiting you and your beautiful family as you continue your journey in Tennessee. Clara, you are one of the kindest and most caring individuals I have met at the university. Thank you for always listening to my problems and having my back. Staci, I can always count on you to help when I need it. You always have the answer and always make me feel calm after talking with you. Not to mention, I finally met someone almost as awkward as myself! Jokes aside, I already miss just having all of you right next door. I am so thankful to know each one of you and look forward to finding out where our lives lead us next!

My committee: Thank you for providing me with amazing guidance and support throughout this journey! Dr. Thorne, thank you for your support and your advice on
teaching. I would not be where I am today as an instructor if it were not for your encouragement! Also, thank you for your detailed edits to my writing. I truly appreciate the amount of time you put into giving valuable feedback. Dr. Mattley, thank you for believing in me and giving me the push I needed. If it were not for your encouragement, I would never have entered graduate school and be where I am today. I am sincerely grateful for all you have done. Dr. Henderson, I cannot even begin to thank you enough for all the time, energy and support you have put into making this thesis the best it can be. Thank you for always believing in me and pushing me to get out of my comfort zone. Also, thank you for constantly reassuring me when my anxiety took over! Without you, this thesis would not be the amazing piece of work it is today! I am so very thankful to have worked with you and look forward to keeping in touch with you in the future. I am so happy to have went through this journey with all of you. You have all been wonderful! Thank you for everything.
### TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Introduction</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Literature Review</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Appalachian Region</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher Education</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Capital</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Research</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Methodology</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Findings</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pathways to College</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition Experiences</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: Discussion</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6: Conclusion</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Recommendations</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B: Recruitment Handout</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C: Consent Form</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D: Demographic Questions</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix E: Interview Questions with Prompts</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This study aims to understand the college decision and transition experiences of low-income, first-generation students living in rural Appalachia. The Appalachian region has been a significant area of research over the past several years. The vast majority of this research focused on the limited opportunity structures and rampant poverty in the region (Cotter 2002; Billings & Blee 2000; Duncan 1999; Tickamyer & Duncan 1990; Lichter & Campbell 2005). That said, while reviewing the existing literature, a gap in terms of higher education research in the region was apparent. Many studies have shown low rates of college completion in the Appalachian region as a whole (Lichter & Campbell 2005; Haaga 2004; Pollard & Jacobsen 2014), however, few studies have looked at the dynamic of why these numbers are so low for the region. Additionally, this previous research did not consider multiple facets but rather often only looked at one variable such as being first-generation, being low-income, or being from a rural area in general. The current study serves to bring together each of these important factors by researching low-income, first-generation rural Appalachian students and it seeks to provide a more in-depth understanding of the college decision process as well as the transition experiences of these students.

In order to evaluate these variables, four in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with low-income, first-generation rural Appalachian students attending a Midwestern university located within the Appalachian region. It is important to note that this was an exploratory case study and the sample size is quite small, therefore the findings are not representative of this student population as whole. That said, the study
provides many valuable findings and possibilities for future research in the underdeveloped area of the sociological research on low-income, first-generation, rural Appalachian college students.

To understand the experiences of these students, Bourdieu’s theory of social capital was used as the guiding theoretical framework for this research. Social capital refers to the social knowledge and social connections one has that enables them to meet their goals (Bourdieu 1986; Coleman 1988; Putnam 1995; 2001). These connections often are gained through group membership and access to social resources that are beneficial to meeting their goals. Previous research shows that the social connections first-generation Appalachian students have, both on a personal and professional level, play significant roles in their decision to attend and to successfully transition into college. For example, parental, school, and friend encouragement are central for first-generation, Appalachian student’s college attendance and success (Bradbury & Mather 2009; Bryan & Simmons 2009). Additionally, some research adds the variable of being from a rural location and/or low-income status. The goal of my research is to expand current literature by bringing each of these variables together to address the college decisions and transition experiences of first-generation, low-income, rural and Appalachian college students.

In the following chapters, the roles that these social relationships have in students’ decisions to attend college and their experiences transitioning to college will be evaluated. In chapter two, the previous research on the Appalachian region will be explored. Specifically, the history of the Appalachian region’s extreme poverty and the research on higher education in the region will be discussed. This literature provides a
framework for understanding the experiences low-income, first-generation rural students have regarding the decision to attend college and transitioning to college.

The research methodology will be discussed in chapter three, including the research design, sample, and analysis procedures. The current study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) In what ways are first-generation, low-income, rural Appalachian college students encouraged and/or discouraged to attend college and what forms of support do they receive during the college decision making process? (2) How do first-generation, low-income, rural Appalachian college students experience the transition into college and what forms of support do they receive throughout this transition?

The findings are presented in chapter 4, and they detail the themes that emerged during data analysis. These themes capture the dynamic between instrumental and social support from both personal relationships, such as family and friends, and institutional relationships from high schools. Further, the findings describe the ways in which students navigate the transition into college; specifically, the results show that students experience both academic challenges and challenges navigating the gap between their home lives and college lives.

The final chapters, five and six, present a discussion of the findings, the strengths and limitations of the study, and suggestions for further research. Although the sample size is small and the study is exploratory, the findings from this research provide important avenues for further research in this area to bridge the factors of being low-income, first-generation and living in rural areas in the Appalachian region.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In the following paragraphs, research on the Appalachian region and higher educational attainment within the region will be reviewed. To begin, an overview of the Appalachian region will be covered focusing on the regions’ history of poverty, recent poverty research, and educational and occupational opportunity within the region. The literature on higher education focusing on Appalachian educational attainment rates, and first-generation Appalachian college students will also be discussed. Lastly, the theoretical approach for this research will be discussed. Social capital is used as the guiding theoretical perspective. This literature serves as a framework for studying low-income, first-generation, rural, Appalachian college students’ decisions to attend college and how they experience the transition to college.

The Appalachian Region

As defined by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), Appalachia consists of a 205,000 square mile area that follows along the Appalachian Mountains and includes all of West Virginia and parts of Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. Although the entire region is not rural, the ARC states that overall the Appalachian region is more rural than the nation (42 percent of the region’s overall population is rural versus 20 percent at the national level). Consequently, residents in the Appalachian region are about twice as likely to be living in a rural location. Of the 410 counties in the Appalachian region, 301 were classified as non-metro as of 2000 (Lichter & Campbell 2005). Likewise, a recent report drawing on data from the 2008-2012
American Community Survey states that of the 309.1 million individuals in the United States, the Appalachian region is home to 25.2 million individuals (Pollard & Jacobsen 2014).

In addition to a large rural population, the poverty rates are high for the Appalachian region as a whole. In 2012, the poverty line for a family of two adults and two children was a mean household income of $23,283 or less (Pollard & Jacobsen 2014). Recent research shows that about one out of every six individuals living in Appalachia is living below the poverty line (Pollard & Jacobsen 2014). The Appalachian region is not, however, homogenous; there is much economic variation at the state and county levels. The highest rates of poverty seem to be concentrated in the Appalachian portions of Kentucky and Mississippi, whereas the Appalachian portions of Maryland and Pennsylvania actually have poverty rates below the national average (Appalachian Regional Commission 2013).

Although poverty rates are high for the region as a whole, poverty rates are especially high in the rural regions of Appalachia. In 2000, the rural Appalachia poverty rate was 40 percent higher than the rate of poverty for urban Appalachia (Lichter & Campbell 2005). Poverty in rural Appalachia is not a new phenomenon. Historically, the region has been characterized by both abundant natural resources and severe poverty. In order to understand the current impoverished state of the rural Appalachian region, we must first look toward the history of the area.

Due to the region’s abundant natural resources such as coal and woodlands, rural Appalachia has long been associated with extractive industry. Some research suggests
that the poverty in the Appalachian region has historical roots that can be traced to the resource extraction that occurred heavily during the 1800’s and early 1900’s and still occurs to some degree today (Billings & Blee 2000; Duncan 1999). Rural Appalachian economies were largely dependent on these extractive industries, which included timber, coal, and salt mining as a source of employment. Billings and Blee (2000) detailed the long history of these extractive industries in the rural Appalachian region. They noted that these industries were owned by outside corporations and that individuals living in regions with an emphasis on these extractive industries were reliant on them for economic survival. When these industries declined, so too did the opportunities for gainful employment. As stated by Billings and Blee, “When salt manufacturing declined, therefore, Clay County was left with few local industries or employment possibilities.” (2000:245)

This trend was also noted by Duncan (1999) in her study of the Appalachian coal fields. She concluded that coal companies created *total environments* when they moved into an area. In a total environment, extractive industries, such as these coal companies, were often in control of everything within these communities, including the local economy, schools, stores, etc. and were often accused of blocking other industry from moving into the area (Duncan 1999). Local economies were often tied to these total environments created by extractive industry. Since these extractive industries were characterized by a boom and bust cycle, the entire local economic system in these rural areas was affected by this instability. That is, the local economies in these areas were dependent on jobs in these extractive industries therefore when these jobs declined and/or
the industry moved out of the area very little in terms of wealth and employment remained (Billings & Blee 2000).

While the explanation for poverty in rural Appalachia that is tied to the history of extractive industry is a structural argument, another common way of understanding poverty in the Appalachian region tends to point toward cultural explanations. Much attention has been paid to the belief that poverty is persistent in Appalachia due to a distinct culture in the area. This belief of a distinct Appalachian culture is illustrated in the negative stereotypes of the region portrayed in the media. These negative images discourage investment by outside companies in these regions and label the people residing there as “rednecks” or “hillbillies” (Billings & Blee 2000). These stereotypes often attribute characteristics to residents of rural Appalachia such as laziness, an unwillingness to work, wanting to live off the government, and being a lawless and altogether backward population. Thus, these stereotypes have a negative impact on the region because they serve to separate and isolate rural Appalachia from the rest of the country. Additionally, Billings and Blee suggest that companies may choose not to invest in these regions due these negative stereotypes (2000).

Current research suggests that cultural explanations for poverty are not accurately representative of the region and point toward the importance of structural explanations (Billings & Blee 2000; Duncan 1999; Billings 1974; Cotter 2002; Sherman 2009; Tickamyer & Duncan 1990). Billings and Blee argue that culture of poverty theories “strip away the historical dynamics of regional poverty by attributing modern-day economic problems to supposed timeless qualities of Appalachian culture” (2000:157).
Instead, they claim that the root of poverty in the region is linked to structural limitations of subsistence agriculture rather than personal traits. Some of their research also claims that although cultural factors may play a part in the region’s poverty, these cultural strategies cannot be understood outside of the region’s structural context (Billings & Blee 2000). That is, some of the characteristics associated with rural Appalachians are attributed to culture but must be understood within a broader context (Sherman 2009). These cultural attributes may be understood as being less based in culture and more based on the survival strategies of the poor (Sherman 2009). Although some culture of poverty theorists believe that poverty in rural Appalachia is explained purely by distinctive cultural traits that lend themselves to perpetuate poverty, other theorists advocate for a cycle of poverty approach suggesting that these so-called cultural characteristics may be adaptations to the harsh conditions of poverty (Billings & Blee 2000; Billings 1974; Sherman 2009). For example, while having a strong sense of community and ties to family are often seen as stereotypical of rural Appalachian culture, these same characteristics are representative of poor people across the nation as well. Often, the poor are reliant on social support networks within the community and family for survival when they have few other resources available to them (Sherman 2009).

Other research, from a structural perspective, asserts that the culture of poverty theory has been overemphasized in the Appalachian region and is reliant on the belief that there is a distinct Appalachian culture (Billings 1974; Cotter 2002). Billings (1974) suggests that any attitudinal differences between Appalachian and non-Appalachian residents are not attributed to a distinct Appalachian culture but rather to adapting to
living in isolated rural areas. Likewise, Cotter (2002) suggests that much of the
difference in poverty rates is attributable to the context of living in a rural area rather than
to the culture of rural Americans themselves. This points to the need to analyze the
structural characteristics of rural Appalachia in order to understand the prevalence of
poverty in this region.

To begin we must restate that Appalachia is not a homogenous area. According
to Billings, “Despite its stereotype as an underdeveloped rural area with a distinctive
regional subculture, many of its six million inhabitants enjoy typically urban, middle-
class life styles” (1974:315). Areas within Appalachia range from rural to urban and
wealthy to poor, therefore the region cannot be studied as a homogenous area. As we
have seen, high rates of poverty are typically located in the rural areas of the region
(Lichter & Campbell 2005). Therefore, we need to discuss the reasons poverty is elevated
in these rural areas as well as what impact this poverty has on the life chances of
individuals living there. This can be linked to the earlier discussion of stereotypes in the
rural Appalachian region. These stereotypes play an important role in the life chances of
individuals living in these rural areas of Appalachia. As was discussed, these negative
images of the rural Appalachian region may make outside industry hesitant to invest in
the region due to a belief that it may not be a profitable investment because the labor
force is not willing to work (Billings & Blee 2000). Therefore, with little outside
investment and few job opportunities located within the region, unemployment and
poverty rates are high. These stereotypes of rural Appalachia are so powerful that even if
individuals choose to leave the region, they cannot escape the erroneous representations
of the region and its people. The label of being a rural Appalachian is a powerful one that impacts the life chances of both individuals who stay in the region as well as those who leave.

Again, there are two conflicting explanations for why poverty persists in Appalachia. One explanation is that the region’s distinct culture perpetuates this poverty. The second explanation tends to blame the region’s economy, especially its dependence on extractive industries such as coal (Billings 1974; Billings & Blee 2000; Duncan 1999). Billings (1974) argues that Appalachia is not a “medieval” society but that the majority of the region is quite integrated into the nation’s modern industrial economy through the regions coal production. Poverty is not caused by backwardness or a lack of modernization but rather the type of economic development (i.e. extractive industries) that has occurred as well as the consequences of this development.

In her research on extractive industry, Duncan (1999) argues that these industries created a dichotomous two-class system and prevented other industry from developing in the region. She states that coal companies, in particular, deliberately created a two-class society consisting of the elites and the very poor (Duncan 1999). She further explains that the elites were comprised of the owners of the coal companies. This left all other individuals who were dependent on these companies, and had little in terms of wealth and status, at the mercy of these elites. The coal companies not only enveloped miners in total environments, as they had control of nearly all aspects of the local economy, but they also prevented miners from owning their own land which would give miners a measure of independence (Duncan 1999). According to Duncan (1999), coal companies were in
control of everything, even the education system. Again, this brings up the creation of a total environment by these coal companies. These companies set up schools in mining camps, hired teachers, and deducted an education fee from coal miners’ pay (Duncan 1999). This not only ensured that all individuals in these areas were tied in some way to the company but also further provided the company with additional power since they selected the teachers while also extracting money from miners to pay for this education system. Essentially coal companies controlled everything and as a result, coal miners who were often charged for their food and other goods at the company store would never see any actual money or profit for their work (Duncan 1999). Since the coal companies set extraordinarily high prices for these goods, eventually miners would became indebted to the company and had no way to get ahead (Duncan 1999). Overall, coal companies not only controlled the labor force, but as the elite class of owners, they also blocked new industry from coming into the area because they feared competition would lessen their power (Duncan 1999).

As restructuring of the economy occurred and extractive jobs declined, the Appalachian region was left with few high paying service sector jobs to replace these extractive jobs. As stated by Sherman, “Industrial restructuring throughout rural America has resulted in poverty, underemployment, and changing workforce demographics as well as changing social, family, and gender relations” (2009:29). According to Tickamyer and Duncan (1990), rural poverty has always been linked to limited opportunity structure in these rural areas. These rural regions have either limited access to education or poor quality education, limited access to high paying, stable employment, and a lack of
diversity in the economy in that they are almost entirely reliant on extractive industry or service jobs (Tickamyer & Duncan 1990; Duncan 1999; Lichter & Campbell 2005; Sherman 2009). Therefore, rural communities are becoming more isolated both economically and socially (Tickamyer & Duncan 1990; Billings & Blee 2000; Jensen, McLaughlin, & Slack 2003).

In addition to a limited economic opportunity structure, education has been found to play a significant role in determining poverty. That is, the physical and social isolation experienced in rural Appalachian regions often makes education difficult to obtain. Many public schools do not provide quality education due in part to low levels of tax revenue and levies in these rural areas which is the basis of school funding. Additionally, these schools tend to have high levels of corruption since many school officials are selected by elites in the region (Duncan 1999). Likewise these educational jobs are often passed down through generations rather than hiring individuals based on qualification alone (Duncan 1999). Furthermore, low-income families are less likely to emphasize education than high-income families (Duncan 1999). Although many low-income parents indicated they support their children’s educational decisions and accomplishments, they did not necessarily expect their children to do well in school or to go to college. Instead parents were found to be more focused on meeting their children’s basic needs and less concerned about their children’s educational attainment (Sherman 2009).

Previous generations found high-paying, stable employment, despite little education and/or skills, working in sawmills, coal mining, or other extractive industry. With the decline of these extractive industries in the region, however, there are very few
of these “unskilled” jobs available today (Sherman 2009). This contributes to high levels of poverty in the Appalachian region, especially in rural areas, as well as suggests an important correlation between education and employment opportunities. Research shows that the more education an individual obtains, the less likely they are to live in poverty. Thus, throughout the last several years the benefit and value of education has gained in importance (Lichter & Campbell 2005; Pollard & Jacobsen 2014; Ohio Development Services Agency 2015).

However, in rural Appalachia the benefits of education is undermined by few job opportunities which serves as a disincentive for the community to invest in education and for individuals to pursue further education (Lichter & Campbell 2005). Having a high level of education is not profitable for individuals in a community that does not provide job opportunities that call for such education. Furthermore, due to the reliance many family members have on one another, parents may not encourage their children to get a college education. Additionally, college graduates would likely have to leave their home community to find work, which may be something their parents and families do not want. As Lichter and Campbell state, “The belief among many in the region is that investing in education simply does not pay” (2005:22).

Overall, the Appalachian region is characterized by high rates of poverty and low rates of college completion. This is especially pronounced in the rural areas of the region which provide limited employment opportunities for college educated individuals. With these structural attributes of the Appalachian region in mind, this leads to a discussion of the literature on higher education within the Appalachian region.
Higher Education

To understand higher educational attainment of first-generation, low-income, rural Appalachian students, it is difficult to separate these factors into Appalachian and non-Appalachian categories. To the best of my knowledge, there is adequate literature on each of these factors broadly. However, in regards to the Appalachian region this information is limited for some topics. To begin, the current state of higher education in the Appalachian region will be discussed.

As mentioned previously, poverty rates throughout the Appalachian region, especially within rural areas, are quite high (Lichter & Campbell 2005; Pollard & Jacobsen 2014). Poverty tends to decline as educational attainment increases (Jensen, McLaughlin, & Slack 2003). Therefore, education may successfully decrease poverty rates in the Appalachian region. According to Beaulieu, Israel, and Wimberley (2003), the educational levels of rural adults nationally improved during the decade between 1990 and 2000. This was a decade of progress since an increase in the percentage of adults who had completed college in both the Appalachian region and in the nation as a whole was reported (Haaga 2004). However, although in general the majority of rural adults graduated high school and many had some higher education, community college or technical school, there was no significant reduction in the gap between rural and urban attainment of a Bachelor’s degree or higher (Beaulieu, Israel, & Wimberley 2003). As discussed earlier, the majority of individuals living in the Appalachian region reside in rural areas, and these areas are more likely to have high rates of poverty and low levels of educational and occupational opportunity. Additionally the Appalachian region in general
experiences a large gap in Bachelor’s degree completion rates compared to the nation, and the gap within rural areas in the Appalachian region is even greater (Pollard & Jacobsen 2014). So despite an increase in high school completion rates in rural America, there is still much work to be done to improve Bachelor’s degree completion rates and this may be especially pronounced in rural Appalachia.

As further evidence of the discrepancy in higher educational attainment, in a study commissioned by the ARC Haaga (2004) reported that the gap between the Appalachian region as a whole and the United States grew slightly in terms of college completion, specifically in terms of Bachelor’s degree completion. At the same time, rates of high school completion in the Appalachian region as a whole have risen dramatically in recent years. In another more recent study commissioned by the ARC, Pollard and Jacobson (2014) found that average high school completion rates in the Appalachian region actually exceed the national average. They reported that 55.1 percent of Appalachian residents are high school graduates whereas for the nation as a whole 49.5 percent of individuals have completed high school.

So while there is a so-called “picture of success” in terms of high school completion rates in the Appalachian region, studies show that nowhere in Appalachia is the college completion gap narrowing (Haaga 2004; Lichter & Campbell 2005; Pollard & Jacobsen 2014). Pollard and Jacobsen (2014) found that while many of the adults in the Appalachian region have attended college but did not graduated, others have acquired some form of vocational training. That said, research shows that only about 23 percent of the working-age population in the entire Appalachian region has earned a Bachelor’s
degree or higher (Pollard & Jacobsen 2014). This low-level of post-secondary educational achievement is especially prominent in rural counties of Appalachia. Rural areas of Appalachia have an average Bachelor’s degree or higher completion rate of 15.2 percent whereas urban areas of the region average at 25.5 percent (Pollard & Jacobsen 2014). Likewise, within the Appalachian region low educational attainment is concentrated in Central Appalachia (Haaga 2004). This is an area in which extractive industry was especially prominent. As stated earlier, areas where there is a history of extractive industry are often characterized by high levels of poverty. Therefore the benefit of a college education may be diluted by a lack of high paying job opportunities for college graduates in these areas.

*Low-income College Students*

Based on my review of the literature, there is limited research on low-income college students in rural Appalachia specifically. That said, many individuals residing in rural Appalachia are living below the poverty line. Coming from a low-income family has a significant impact on an individual’s decision and ability to attend college. Research finds that once Appalachian students from poorer families enter a four-year university, they are much more likely to drop out even if their tuition, room and board are paid for, and work study programs are available (Haaga 2004; Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner 2003). This suggests that even when financial burdens are lessened for these students, barriers to their success in college remain. Many of these low-income students are also likely to be first-generation, which may also be a barrier to college success. First-generation students do not have parents who have attended college,
therefore these parents may be less able to guide their children through college. This may especially be the case in the Appalachian region due to low levels of Bachelor’s degree completion among the adult population.

*First-generation Students*

Considerable research has been conducted on first-generation college students, but to the best of my knowledge, research on Appalachian first-generation college students in particular is lacking. Therefore this section takes a more general approach toward discussing first-generation status. In general, although income is an important component to higher education achievement, even without controlling for income, first-generation students are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to accessing higher education. This is because they are less likely to receive assistance from parents in applying for college, they report lower levels of educational expectations than their peers, and they tend to enter college less academically prepared (Choy 2001). Additionally those students who have enrolled in college remain at a disadvantage in terms of staying enrolled and earning a degree (Choy 2001). In particular, Dyk and Wilson found that parental education level and parental educational expectations are significant determinants of future academic attainment for all students (1999). According to Choy (2001), the likelihood of college enrollment is strongly related to parents’ education level. Furthermore, students whose parents have no education beyond high school are less likely to succeed in college than those whose parents have a Bachelor’s degree or higher (Choy 2001; Warburton, Bugarin & Nunez 2001). Even when controlling for factors such as academic preparation and college achievement, parents’ education level is still found
to be a significant determining factor in student’s persistence and success in higher education (Warburton, Bugarin & Nunez 2001).

One explanation for this is that higher education levels equate to a higher likelihood that parents will instill in their children the value of education (Dyk & Wilson 1999). Another explanation is that these parents also tend to function as a connection to others, as role models, and as information agents about education (Dyk & Wilson 1999). For example, parents who have attended college have more knowledge about the college process in general. Thus, they may be better able to help their children through the process of choosing and applying to a college as well as assist them in applying for financial aid and scholarships. Highly educated parents may also be able to direct their children toward experts if they have questions or concerns both about the application process as well as college in general. For example, parents who have attended college have knowledge regarding college offices such as knowing that the registrar deals with scheduling and transcript information and the bursar deals with tuition payments and account information. Students who are first-generation may not have the same level of support.

*Low-income and First-generation Students*

Given that the Appalachian region is characterized by high levels of poverty and low rates of college completion, the combination of being a low-income student and a first-generation student in this region is significant with regards to access to higher education. Engle and Tinto (2008) agree that there are large gaps in terms of access and success in higher education especially for low-income, and first-generation students not
only in the Appalachian region but in the nation as a whole. As of 2008, about 24 percent of the undergraduate college population nationwide was comprised of low-income, first-generation students (Engle & Tinto 2008). Overall, low-income, first generation students, in general, are less likely to stay in college and to obtain a degree than their peers and are more likely to drop out of college within their first year (Engle & Tinto 2008; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin 1998). Engle and Tinto (2008) find that after six years, 43 percent of low-income, first-generation students have dropped out of college without attaining a degree. These findings are significant considering that the majority of Appalachian college students are likely to be first-generation due to low levels of parental college education in the region.

**Barriers to Academic Success for Rural Students**

In addition to economic concerns, there are also many other barriers to students’ academic success within rural areas especially within the Appalachian region. These barriers range from personal issues, including their families, to more structural issues, such as a lack of educational and job opportunity. The majority of research in this area deals with rural college students more generally. Based on my review of the literature, there are not many studies that focus on the Appalachian region. That being said, research indicates that one important barrier student’s face involves the educational expectations and achievement of their parents. Beaulieu, Israel, and Wimberley (2003) show that when students are surrounded by adults who have low academic achievement and aspirations, the children’s educational progress will tend to decline.
Other studies point out additional barriers to higher education in rural areas including limited access to higher education and few job opportunities once a degree is obtained (Sherman 2009). For example, as stated earlier, often there are not many jobs within rural areas that demand a Bachelor’s degree or higher. Haaga (2004) finds that, for Appalachia in particular, college graduates are likely to move out of the region. This may especially be the case in rural areas of the Appalachian region where there are not only few unskilled jobs available but there may be even fewer jobs requiring a college degree (Tickamyer & Duncan 1990; Lichter & Campbell 2005; Sherman 2009).

One result of these limited job opportunities in rural places, according to Sherman (2009), is that individuals who do obtain higher education generally do not return to their home community after graduation. In part, this is because a college education may be of little use in a community that has very few job opportunities (Sherman 2009). Early research by Willis (1981) details how working class individuals do not believe formal education will be beneficial to them later in life. He goes on to note that these students are entering a workforce which may not have high requirements for education. Many of his participants went on to make their living at factories rather than working high-level office jobs or continuing their education. This work is several decades old but provides a context with which we are able to understand the importance education is given by lower-income families due to the type of job opportunities available to them. However, employment opportunities have changed over time. As stated by Sherman (2009), previous generations of individuals living in rural regions were able to find stable employment in places, such as sawmills, without needing a college degree, but today
there are fewer of these “unskilled” jobs available. Thus there are a large number of unemployed and impoverished individuals. This is significant because due to the availability of “unskilled” jobs in the past, education was not given high importance.

In a similar vein to Willis, Sherman (2009) suggests that poverty may have an impact on the likelihood that parents are going to push their children to excel in school or aspire to higher education. Parents living in poverty are focused on trying to provide the basic needs for their children therefore most may be unconcerned about their children attending college (Sherman 2009). Although this may be true, Sherman (2009) also finds that many of these parents would support their children’s decisions and accomplishments if they chose to attend college but did not have direct expectations for them to do so.

Poverty is clearly linked with lower levels of educational attainment especially within rural areas in general but is even more important in rural Appalachia. Duncan (1999), much like Sherman, points towards structural explanations for why rates of higher education attainment are lower in the rural Appalachia region. She suggests that the source exists with the region’s history of extractive industry. Coal companies controlled everything, even the schools, which resulted in a two class system composed of the very poor and the elite (Duncan 1999). Additionally, she finds that lower-income families place less emphasis on education than higher income families. Interestingly though, she reports that although many parents do not have higher education, they still value formal education for their children. One explanation for this paradox may be that they desire a better life for their children than they had. Therefore although these parents
did not have the opportunity to attend college, they may see college as an opportunity for a better life for their children.

*Importance of Social Connections*

Although it may be difficult to obtain a college degree in rural Appalachia, especially for lower-income and first-generation individuals, there are those who succeed in doing so. They do not, however, often achieve higher education on their own. Many of these individuals receive encouragement and help from others. Duncan (1999) finds that poor individuals in rural Appalachia who do achieve higher academic standing are often purposefully guided toward that result by parents, other family members, teachers, their church, coaches and/or other individuals they are close to. Although some low-income Appalachian parents often do not have the financial means to assist their children through college, they may compensate for this deficiency by being very involved in and provide encouragement for their children’s educational goals (Dyk & Wilson 1999). While research by Dyk and Wilson seems contradictory to earlier arguments surrounding the effect parents have on their children’s education, it showcases the complexity of deciding to attend college. On the one hand, these children experience a push from their family to attend college because their families want them to have a better life. However, on the other hand, children also experience a pull back toward home since often play important roles in their family.

Although parental education level has been shown to be an important determinant of a child’s educational attainment, family and school relationships play a significant role in college decisions as well. In contrast to Sherman’s research on poor, rural families
(2009), Dyk & Wilson’s study on Appalachian families in general (1999) indicates that the trend toward larger family support systems often found in Appalachia might actually function to encourage educational expectations rather than inhibit them. Also, Byun, Meece, Irvin, and Hutchins (2012) find that family and school relationships play an important part in determining rural youths’ educational aspirations beyond both income level and demographic background. Research shows that rural students, both Appalachian and non-Appalachian, who think their parents expect them to attend college subsequently discuss college plans with parents and tend to have significantly higher educational aspirations regardless of socioeconomic and demographic background (Byun et al. 2012; Bryan & Simmons 2009). Furthermore, Byun et al. (2012) find that the teachers’ educational expectations are also related to the educational aspirations of rural students regardless of background characteristics. Although being academically prepared is important, it appears that family relationships, as well as teacher support, especially for Appalachian students has been important in promoting postsecondary educational success (Bryan & Simmons 2009).

**College Experiences of First-generation Students**

As stated earlier due to the limited literature on Appalachian college students in regards to this topic, this section will talk about college experiences of first-generation college students more generally but can likely be tied to the experiences of Appalachian students. While some research indicates that parents and high schools may serve as barriers to college success, other research suggests that having parental or school-related personnel encouragement and support for college is vital for higher educational
attainment in rural youths in general. The importance of these social connections is undeniable for all students but may be experienced differently by first-generation, rural Appalachian students. Since many college students in Appalachia are first-generation, it is important to understand these differences. According to Bradbury and Mather (2009), first-generation, Appalachian college students are influenced by their family and friends, their desire to be financially stable in the future, and their own personal goals to complete college. Although first-generation, Appalachian students report receiving social and emotional support and encouragement to attend college from their friends and family (Bradbury & Mather 2009), Barry, Hudley, Cho, and Kelly (2008) find that first-generation students in general are less likely than their non-first-generation peers to report discussing college experiences with their parents. Therefore first-generation students are more likely to be at a disadvantage due to their parents’ limited college knowledge (Barry et al. 2008). This is evidenced by lower reports of discussing college plans or experiences with their parents (Barry et al. 2008). First-generation students may not be able to discuss college with their parents as often as non-first-generation students. The parents of first-generation students have a limited range of college knowledge therefore while they may support their child’s decision to attend college, they may not necessarily be able to be of assistance to them throughout the process. First-generation students also report lower levels of instrumental assistance from parents (Barry et al. 2008). For example, parents of first-generation students may be less able to assist during filling out college applications or the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) form simply because they have no experience themselves in filling out these documents.
Differences also exist in terms of demographics and the reasons for attending college reported by first-generation students. First-generation students are more likely to come from lower income backgrounds, to report pursuing higher education in order to help their family financially, and to be worried about financial aid for college (Bui 2002). While some non-first-generation students may have some of the same concerns, these concerns are more pronounced for first-generation students. This may be especially true for first-generation Appalachian students. These students have witnessed their parents’ financial struggles and they may see college as an opportunity for a better life (Bradbury & Mather 2009). First-generation, Appalachian college students report that they are attending college because they want to have the opportunity for better paying jobs in the future (Bradbury & Mather 2009). In general, research finds that while some goals are shared by both first-generation and non-first-generation students, there are some reasons and goals that are specific to first-generation students (Bui 2002). For example, Bui finds that first-generation students are more likely than non-first-generation students to report that they are pursuing a college degree in order to gain respect, to bring honor to their family, and to help their family financially after completing college (2002).

The Transition to College

Appalachian, first-generation college students face many barriers not only in making the decision to attend college but also once they have arrived at college. The college transition process is difficult for many but is especially so for these students. Although first-generation, Appalachian students often report feeling highly supported by their family, this does not necessarily mean that their families understand the college
experience and the process of transitioning to college (Bryan & Simmons 2009). First-generation, Appalachian students report that it is often frustrating to discuss their college lives with family members due to their lack of understanding of the college experience and the demands of college life (Bryan & Simmons 2009; Bradbury & Mather 2009). Nonetheless, family support has been found to be important for their successful adjustment into college (Bradbury & Mather 2009). Relationships with family members are often motivators for first-generation, Appalachian college students in that they provide encouragement (Bradbury & Mather 2009). That said, Bradbury and Mather (2009) also state that although family members may often be motivators for these students, they may also become distractions that undermine students’ focus. This distraction is often based on their worry about family members back home. Furthermore, many first-generation, Appalachian students often return home on the weekends because they still play important roles in their families such as visiting and caring for grandparents, babysitting siblings, helping with chores, scheduling appointments, shopping and running errands (Bradbury & Mather 2009). Although for the most part these roles serve as motivation and anchors to keep students working toward their goals, they are also at times a burden on students (Bradbury & Mather 2009). Additionally, Bradbury & Mather (2009) suggest that for first-generation Appalachian college students loyalty to family, the need to have a job, and the responsibility they still have at home tend to take precedence over their commitment to college.

Nonetheless, significant adults, including both family and school-related relationships during high school, have been found to be important for successful
adjustment into college for all students (Hudley, Moschetti, Gonzalez, Cho, Barry, & Kelly 2008). The more students talk to teachers and counselors during high school, the more they report being academically prepared for college and this has been found to be especially so for first-generation college students (Hudley et al. 2008).

Once students arrive at college, Bradbury and Mather (2009) find that in some cases, friendships are just as important as family relationships for adjustment to college for first-generation, Appalachian students. They indicate that students’ ability to make friends with other students who have similar interests during the first year of college is an important step in the development of a sense of belonging at college. In any case, positive relationships and connections, both with family at home and friends in college, aide students in navigating the struggles they may face during their first year of college (Bradbury & Mather 2009).

Although these relationships provide an important support system for first-generation, Appalachian college students, they also experience stress from these relationships. Bryan and Simmons (2009) found that these students experience immense pressure to succeed not only for their families but also for their home communities. This pressure may spur them to continue their pursuit of a degree and succeed in college.

Another struggle faced by first-generation, Appalachian college students is a lack of academic preparation in high school (Bryan & Simmons 2009; Choy 2001). Many students state that they do not believe high school prepared them for college (Bryans & Simmons 2009). For example, many report they did not know how to study and prepare for exams (Bradbury & Mather 2009). First-generation students in general often believe
they are less prepared for college than other students and thus fear failing in college more than non-first-generation students (Bui 2002). First-generation students also believe they need to put more time into studying than other students (Bui 2002). Although Bui does not directly address why first-generation students think they must study more than other students, the assumption can be made that this fear of failure may contribute to this increased need to study. When looking at first-generation students in Appalachia in particular, the educational structure of Appalachian schools may contribute to this need to study more due to poor academic preparation for college. Research has shown that Appalachian high schools are often poorly funded and do not offer many opportunities for advanced study such as advanced placement or post-secondary classes that may help students be academically successful in college (Bradbury & Mather 2009).

The students’ high school experience appears to also be an important component that affects the transition process for all college students regardless of class or region. Hill (2008) suggests that what schools do to help students navigate the college process makes a difference in terms of college educational outcomes. Some schools provide limited resources for college, such as college planning workshops and the availability of knowledgeable guidance counselors to both students and their families (Hill 2008).

As discussed earlier, schools in poverty stricken areas have fewer resources than those in more affluent areas. Thus, as a result of limited resources, low-income, first-generation students in general are more likely to enter college less academically prepared than their peers (Engle & Tinto 2008). In particular, some research suggests this may be due to low levels of quality college preparation resources such as more demanding high
school coursework. Choy (2001) suggests that rigorous high school courses may mitigate, but do not completely close, the gaps in access to and persistence in higher education for first-generation students. In general, research finds that students who are well prepared are more likely than those with less preparation to stay enrolled in four-year colleges (Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez 2001). Additionally, students who took rigorous high school coursework account for more than 80 percent of students who stay on track to earn a Bachelor’s degree (Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez 2001). Overall, this suggests that although being first-generation is an important factor in predicting future college success, having gone through rigorous preparation in high school may substantially narrow the gap in the college outcomes of first-generation and non-first-generation students (Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez 2001).

One of the greatest struggles faced by first-generation, Appalachian college students is the ability to pay for their education (Bradbury & Mather 2009; Bui 2002; Engle & Tinto 2008). First-generation students in general are more likely to be worried about financial aid in comparison to other students (Bui 2002). Given the rapid increase in tuition over the past several years, it is likely this worry is still present for first-generation students and indeed may have increased for other students as well. However, this worry over financing college may be exacerbated for first-generation college students, especially those who come from lower income families. Many students, first-generation and non-first-generation students alike, must borrow money and take on student loan debt for the first time in their lives (Bradbury & Mather 2009). While financial aid is available, Bradbury and Mather (2009) found that it is often a complicated
and confusing process for many students, especially first-generation, Appalachian students who may have no one to turn to for guidance. Additionally, many parents of first-generation, Appalachian students did contribute money towards the cost of buying textbooks and paying fees but others did not have much in terms of disposable income and were not as able to help (Bradbury & Mather 2009). Overall, low-income, first-generation students demonstrated greater financial need and tended to graduate with more loans than their peers (Engle & Tinto 2008). The majority of their financial aid comes from federal sources, most of which is student loans (Engle & Tinto 2008). Therefore, although low-income students may receive federal grants due to economic need, they also must borrow money through federal loans in order to finance their college education.

Students who come from low-income families are not only more likely to be dependent on financial aid and loans, but they are also more likely to be employed both during the school year and over breaks to afford school-related expenses (Bozick 2007). These students are also much more likely to be living at home during their first year of college and commuting to and from campus (Bozick 2007). Both of these cost saving strategies may have a negative effect on students’ likelihood of staying in college. As reported by Bozick (2007), students who work more than twenty hours a week during the academic year and who live at home are more likely to drop out of college during their first year than those who work less than twenty hours and who live on campus. Both employment and living arrangements play a strong role in shaping the transition process to college (Bozick 2007). Students who come from wealthier families are less likely to be worried about financial aid, often live in dorms, and/or limit time spent working to focus
on studies (Bozick 2007). With fewer distractions, these students may be more likely to perform well during their first year at college. Meanwhile, students who work and live at home may find their free time consumed with working, commuting, and other family responsibilities, leaving less time to concentrate on their studies and make both personal and professional connections in college.

Importance of Education

Today the benefits of education cannot be understated and have continued to expand over the past several years (Lichter & Campbell 2005). Due to increasing technological development and a globalized economy, the value of an education continues to grow in importance. Jobs that require specialized education and skills are increasing and will likely continue to do so in the future. However, Lichter and Campbell (2005) find that in the Appalachian region the common belief is that the benefits of education are limited. As stated earlier, this may be because the payoff of an education is restricted by few employment opportunities requiring such education. Thus, there is often a disincentive for individuals within this region to invest in and pursue higher education. There is a deep-seated belief that education simply does not pay. But in contrast to this prominent belief, Lichter and Campbell (2005), suggest that it appears education does pay. They conclude that an individual’s likelihood of living in poverty decreases as their educational attainment level increases in both Appalachian and non-Appalachian regions. Therefore although additional education may not in and of itself eradicate poverty within rural Appalachian regions, it is an important component that has demonstrated a need for further examination.
This section has detailed the current state of higher education for the Appalachian region. Since the Appalachian region is characterized by high levels of first-generation students and low levels of income, each of these two student characteristics have been evaluated within the current literature. What this analysis has shown is that first-generation and low-income students from the Appalachian region face many barriers and challenges throughout the college process such as financial hardships, and adjusting to college. Although, these students may encounter many difficulties during their attempt to attain a degree, research shows they also receive overwhelming social and emotional support from family, friends, and teachers which is a major factor that pushed them to attend college.

**Social Capital**

The theory of social capital has been discussed by many theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu (1986), James Coleman (1988) and Robert Putnam (1995;2001). Broadly, social capital states that social knowledge and connections that one has enables them to achieve their goals. These connections often are gained through membership within groups and access to social resources that are beneficial to meeting the goals. Specifically, Bourdieu explains social capital as a collection of both actual and potential resources that are connected to one’s social networks (1986). As stated earlier, the most common means of accumulating social capital is by one’s membership in a group. Examples of group memberships include one’s family, school, a class, or political party. Bourdieu (1986) asserts that the amount of social capital an individual possesses is reliant on how many social connections one has access to that will further their goal.
Additionally, it is not only the number of connections one has that is important, but also the amount of social capital each of these connections themselves possess (Bourdieu 1986). Further, Bourdieu emphasizes the power dynamic of one’s accumulated social capital by stating it is the social connections one has that increases one’s ability to advance their own interests (1986).

In terms of higher education, one could expect that the more social capital an individual has, the more likely they are to achieve their goal of attending and completing college. As previous research has shown, the social connections first-generation Appalachian students have, both on a personal and professional level, play significant roles in their decision to attend and successfully transition into college. For example, parental, school, and friend encouragement are critical for first-generation, Appalachian student’s college attendance and success (Bradbury & Mather 2009; Bryan & Simmons 2009). Therefore, the theory of social capital is best suited to understanding first-generation, low-income, Appalachian college students’ decision to attend college and their first-year college experiences. By evaluating the significant social connections that have either enabled them to attend and successfully transition to college or challenged them along the way, the goal of my research is to expand on current literature addressing first-generation, low-income, rural and Appalachian college students.

Overview

Overall, the literature indicates that the Appalachian region experiences high rates of poverty and low levels of educational attainment especially in terms of Bachelor degree completion. Additionally, many of these individuals are living in predominantly
rural areas, which makes the study of rural Appalachia significant (Pollard & Jacobsen 2014). There has been much research on the Appalachian region in general, especially in terms of the rampant poverty present in the region as a result of the prevalence of extractive industry. Furthermore, there have been a number of studies conducted by the Appalachian Regional Commission that focused on the level of education of individuals in the region. That being said, from the analysis of the literature, there is little research that strives to understand the dynamic of how rural, low-income, first-generation Appalachian college students specifically decide to attend college and experience the transition into college. Low-income, first-generation, and rural student status has been systematically studied in the literature in general. However, based on this literature review, there are few studies that focus on these student characteristics for the Appalachian region in particular. Likewise, to the best of my knowledge, there is no literature that combines these factors. Therefore, this literature review demonstrates the need to study the effects of being low-income, first-generation, and coming from rural Appalachia on decisions to pursue higher education and experiences during the transition into higher education.

**Current Research**

Based on the literature, the goal of this research is to understand how first-generation, low-income, rural Appalachian college students experience the decision to attend college and the transition into college. Much of the literature discusses each of these components separately such as first-generation students, low-income students, rural students, or various combinations of these three, but my research combines and studies
these variables all together. Furthermore, much of the research offers breadth of knowledge by focusing on the components generally, whereas this research seeks to evaluate the personal experiences of these students as told in their own words thus offering depth of knowledge on this topic. To evaluate this topic, the present research asks the following questions: (1) In what ways are first-generation, low-income, rural Appalachian college students encouraged and/or discouraged to attend college and what forms of support do they receive during the college decision making process? (2) How do first-generation, low-income, rural Appalachian college students experience the transition into college and what forms of support do they receive throughout this transition?
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The objective of this research is to understand what factors have impacted the decision to pursue higher education for first-generation, low-income college students from rural Appalachian Ohio as well as their transition into college. In particular, this research was designed in a way so that students could describe their decisions to attend and transition experiences. This research was a qualitative, exploratory, case study of undergraduate students from a medium sized Midwestern university located in a rural Appalachian region. In the following paragraphs the data collection process, sample, and data analysis are discussed.

Data Collection

To participate in this research, respondents had to be enrolled as an undergraduate at the university, be 18 years of age or older, first-generation, come from a low-income family, and be from a rural county in Appalachian Ohio. Low-income status was based on the receipt of income-based grants and/or scholarships such as the Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant (SEOG), Ohio Pathway Award, and/or a Full Federal Pell Grant, etc. Furthermore, information from the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) was utilized in the selection of counties determined to be Appalachian. To determine which counties within Appalachian Ohio were rural, the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) rural-urban continuum code was consulted. This coding system gives counties a number between one and nine. The lower the code number, the more urban the county; the higher the code number, the more rural the county. It is also important to note that this coding system categorizes small towns as urban space. For the
purpose of this study, counties given a code number between a six and nine were
included. A county with a code of a six or seven is considered to be non-metro with small
towns that have a population between 2,500 and 19,999 that may or may not be adjacent
to a county considered to be a metro area. A county with a code of an eight or nine is
considered to be non-metro and completely rural or has small towns with a population of
less than 2,500 that may or may not be adjacent to a county considered to be a metro area.
As a result of this process, fourteen rural Appalachian counties were selected.

The sample was recruited in two ways. First, flyers (see Appendix A) which
included a brief description of the study, participant requirements, and the researcher’s
contact information were placed in various buildings across campus that have high levels
of student traffic including classroom buildings, the library, and the student center. Once
participants responded to flyers, snowball sampling was utilized to build the sample.
Snowball sampling entails asking participants for contact information of other individuals
who fit study criteria as well as asking them to give study information to anyone they
know who may be interested. Due to a lack of response from flyers, a second recruitment
method was utilized. The researcher spoke to various Sociology courses throughout the
2014-2015 Fall and Spring semesters. Many of these courses were lower division
Introduction to Sociology courses but a few were upper division Sociology courses. A
brief five minute description of the study was presented and handouts with contact
information (see Appendix B) were distributed. Overall approximately 20 classes were
visited which equates to a rough average of 1300 students assuming that at least 75
percent of the class was in attendance the day of the talk. After discussing the research
project in these courses, four students who met the study criteria contacted the researcher for interviews.

Once participants contacted the researcher, they were given the choice to interview in the researcher’s departmental office, a conference room, or their own chosen location. All respondents chose to interview in the researcher’s departmental office. Prior to the start of each interview, respondents were given a consent form (see Appendix C). The consent form was read aloud to them and respondents were asked if they understood the interview process and if they had any questions. Once questions were answered, respondents were asked to sign the consent form and were given a copy to take with them. At this point the researcher began the interview. Interviews were open-ended, face-to-face, and semi-structured (see Appendix E). Each interview lasted approximately one hour.

At the start of each interview, respondents were asked a brief set of demographic questions (see Appendix D) such as age, race/ethnicity, sex, home county, year in school, and their major. After these initial demographic questions, the interviews began with broad questions about the respondents’ decisions to attend college (see Appendix E). These interview questions asked respondents to explain their experiences with regard to deciding to attend college, sources of encouragement and/or social support to go to college, challenges they faced during both the decision to attend college as well as the transition into college, and how they experienced that transition in general. The interviews concluded by asking respondents for their opinion on what recommendations
should be made to universities and governmental agencies at the federal level to help students like themselves attend and graduate from college.

At the close of each interview, respondents were asked for contact information of individuals that fit the study criteria. Additionally, respondents were given a copy of the flyer and the researcher’s contact information to give to other interested individuals. However, no additional respondents were gained from this process. Each interview was audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim. At the completion of the study, all audio tapes were destroyed. Furthermore, in order to ensure privacy and confidentiality, each respondent was given a number and pseudonym.

Sample

Several demographic variables were collected from the sample including age, race, sex, county of residency, year in school, major, transfer student status, and the population of the community the students grew up in. Due to the small size of the sample (n=4) and the fact that college campuses are typically quite homogenous, there was not considerable variability in demographics especially in terms of race, transfer status, and size of their community. All respondents reported their race as Caucasian. Since the majority of students at the university are Caucasian, this is not surprising. According to the university’s Office of Institutional Research, as of 2014, 78.4 percent of students reported their race as Caucasian. Additionally, none of the respondents identified as being transfer students from another college or university. All but one respondent reported being from communities with small populations of 10,000 or less. There was also another overall pattern that emerged with respondents. Although each respondent came from a
different county located within the Appalachian Ohio region, these counties tended to be clustered in the same area. That is, all of the respondents’ home counties were clustered in the southern portion of the Appalachian Ohio region which borders Kentucky and West Virginia.

Respondents were of traditional college age and their ages ranged from 18 to 21 with an average age of about 19 years old. Two respondents were in their freshman year of college and two respondents were in their junior year. All respondents lived on campus at the start of their first year of college. Three of the respondents were still currently residing on campus, with one respondent who had moved back home during the first semester and now commuted to campus. Additionally, three respondents were female and one respondent was male.

Lastly, demographic information was collected for the major of each respondent. Due to the small sample size and no overlapping majors, majors were converted into the broader category of which college they were housed. Three respondents had a major within the College of Arts and Sciences, and one respondent reporting that their major was in the College of Health Sciences and Professions. The majors represented from respondents are Psychology, Political Science/Pre-Law, Biological Sciences, and Community Health. The overrepresentation of majors within the College of Arts and Sciences may be reflective of the way respondents were recruited. Since the majority of respondents came from Sociology courses and these courses are often a university requirement or a social science elective for the students in the College of Arts & Sciences, this may explain why so many respondents fell within this category.
Data Analysis

Upon completion of transcription of interview data, names of respondents, towns, schools, and other identifying information were replaced with pseudonyms to ensure anonymity of respondents. Once all known identifying information was removed and replaced with pseudonyms, analysis of the transcripts began.

Grounded theory analysis was used as the framework to analyze the data. Although the sample size was small, when using a grounded theory approach to analyze data, a large sample size is not necessary. According to Glaser and Strauss, “Theory generation doesn't require lots of cases. One case could be used to generate conceptual categories and a few more cases used to confirm the indication. [The researcher's] job is not to provide a perfect description of an area, but to develop a theory that accounts for much of the relevant behavior” (1967:30).

With that in mind, a grounded theory coding method discussed by Kathy Charmaz (2006), was used to analyze the data. She presents a four step coding process including initial, focused, axial and theoretical coding. However, for the purpose of this analysis, only the first three coding steps will be utilized. The full coding process detailed by Charmaz is intended for use in development of grounded theory therefore the final step in the process, theoretical coding, is not applicable to this study since it does not seek to create theory. The first step, initial coding, helps to separate data into initial categories. The second step, focused coding, draws out main themes occurring in the data and compares codes and data with one another. The final step, axial coding, brings the codes back together by relating categories and subcategories to one another. Using this analytic
induction method of analysis, several thematic categories emerged. The following section will discuss these themes.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Based on the results of qualitative analysis of respondents’ interviews, this chapter details the main themes that emerged from the data regarding respondents’ decisions to attend college and their transition into college. From this analysis, two main themes emerged: pathways to college and transition experiences. Within these themes several sub-themes arose which will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Pathways to College

When evaluating respondents’ pathways to college, the importance of support from significant others became apparent. This support comes from the relationships respondents had at both the personal level, with family and friends, and at the institutional level, with high school personnel. Additionally, this support was broken down into two categories: social support and instrumental support. Social support includes encouragement and expectations for college while instrumental support includes having help filling out college applications and requests for financial support. This section begins by discussing the personal relationships that lead respondents to attend college, then analyzes respondents’ pathways to college in regards to their institutional relationships.

Personal Relationships

The data show that for the students interviewed, their relationships with their family and friends played a pivotal role in their decision to attend college. Overall, however, respondents reported that individuals in their community were not explicitly encouraging toward college, for example emphasis was often placed on athletic
achievement or pressure to take on roles in the family business rather than university attendance. That said, support for college can be separated into two forms: social and instrumental. To begin, social support in regards to the importance of personal relationships throughout these students’ pathways to college will be discussed.

Social Support

For this study, social support is defined as any form of encouragement to attend college, such as talking about college with significant others, being encouraged to attend college, and emotional support as students navigate the college application process. The data suggest that the significance of social support at the personal level on respondents’ decisions to attend college was substantial. For many of these students, if it were not for their social support networks they might not have attended college. To discuss the role of social support and personal relationships on respondents’ pathways to college, this section is divided into three sections: encouragement from family, support from friends, and perceived lack of direct community support.

Encouragement from Family

All four respondents indicated they felt high levels of social support and encouragement from their parents to attend college, but to varying degrees and in different ways. Parents often had expectations that their child would attend college and were supportive of respondents’ college decisions. Three of the four respondents stated that their parents always assumed they would attend college. This is exemplified by Emily, a junior who discusses how going to college was not necessarily an option, rather her family expected she would go to college.
Well, it was never really a decision. I just always assumed that I would go. My mom always told me that colleges would choose me. [laughs] Of course, I think everybody’s parents would tell them that but I was a really good student in high school so she just assumed that I was gonna go and I kind of assumed I was gonna go. (Emily, 1/30/2015, Interview)

This assumption by family members that respondents would attend college was explicit—they were often singled out from the other family members as the “one” that would go to college in the family and therefore it was expected of them. They had good grades in high school and their parents and family had selected them as the child that would be the first to attend college. Rachel, a junior, described this expectation that she would attend college,

Anytime I talked about it [college], they’re like, ‘yeah, you’re gonna go to college’. ‘Cuz outta the three children I was always the one that kinda advanced in school, but so they always said you’re the college girl. You’re the one that’s gonna go to college. (Rachel, 10/7/2014, Interview)

For some, this expectation caused stress. Rachel further explained that the assumption she would go to college caused her stress and lead to tension among her and her siblings.

He [my stepdad] calls me the golden child. Which of course it makes my siblings feel awful. He goes, ‘she’s the breadwinner. She’s going to college.’ I mean it means a lot to me but then I feel awful about my siblings. So I’m like stuck in a rut. So I try to be like ‘yeah’. I mean come on, I went to college, I’m a junior. I’m gonna graduate in maybe a year and a half, two years. I’m doing this. And I can’t say that sometimes because I just feel so awful about my older sister but I take pride in it and he does too.

So for Rachel, being singled out as the “one” who would attend college was meaningful, but at the same time it caused her to experience strain since her older siblings were not receiving the same praise. She stated feeling unable to relish the praise of being the first to attend college and rather than feeling prideful of her decision, often feels uncomfortable around her siblings whom are not receiving the same expectations. This is
an unexpected but important finding since this guilt appears to be an important part of the college experiences of some participants.

While the encouragement to attend college was often direct and purposeful, at other times it was indirect and a result of respondents’ perceptions of their parents’ or siblings’ lives. Although this is not direct personal social support, it was often a springboard that not only pushed respondents to attend college but may have also played a role in their family’s desire for them to attend. All respondents reported that their parents were supportive and they encouraged them to attend college. The lived experiences of their families may have contributed to their family’s desire for respondents to attend college in order to live a better life. Rachel is representative of other respondents when she discusses the struggles she and her father had faced and her desire to break away from that lifestyle.

…I was like, I am not living on food stamps for the rest of my life and I told my father too, so I was like I have to go to college. I have to break out. I can’t stay here in this little town and work at a gas station or a dollar store. I can’t. So seeing my father struggle with that and you know getting the support [government assistance] we did, which I am grateful for. It’s just that I don’t want to live like that. So I was like, I’m going. I’m sorry dad. (Rachel, 10/7/2014, Interview)

Although Rachel did not want to leave her father and he did not necessarily want her to leave either, they both knew that if she wanted to have a better life, going away to college would be her best opportunity. Later in the interview, Rachel stated that it was her father who was her main source of social support.

My father gives me the emotional support. My mother doesn’t really do that. So he…when we first started, when I was a freshman here, he didn’t have a cell phone so the way I could talk to him was through letters. So he would write me letters. At the bottom he would say, you make me so proud and all that stuff.
Cynthia also described that seeing how her family, specifically her sister, lived pushed her to attend college,

   I see where she’s [her sister] turned out, like how her life is going so far and it’s not fabulous. So yeah, she definitely impacted me a lot on that because if she had went to school [college], I don’t know if I would have. (Cynthia, 2/5/2015, Interview)

After observing the struggles of their parents, siblings, and others around them who were not college educated, this served as further encouragement for respondents to attend college. Indirectly their personal relationships with family encouraged their college attendance and may have actually increased the social support provided to them by family members. From these experiences, respondents desired a better life than their families and they perceived college as the gateway. It is also evident that their families shared this hope for a better life for respondents, since all respondents said they were encouraged to attend college.

   Even though respondents’ parents were very supportive of their decision to attend college and this had a big impact on their decisions to do so, respondents often indicated that being the first to go to college made the decision to attend difficult. For example, Cynthia states,

   No one’s went [to college] in my family, so no one’s ever went and it’s always just been something I’ve been told to do. But then, my older sister didn’t go so I just kind of wanted to be better than her [laughs]. So I decided to go. It was difficult though. Since no one really went, there was no motivation to go. I mean everyone told me to but there was no like role model in a way that showed me that I needed to go. So it was kind of tough deciding to go. (Cynthia, 2/5/2015, Interview)

For Cynthia, although her family was highly supportive and encouraged her to attend college, she still found the decision difficult because she had no one to look toward for
guidance. Since no one in her family went to college before her, she had no role model to help her through the process of choosing to attend college. Therefore, although respondents reported having high levels of support and encouragement for attending college, they also struggled because they were first generation. This section demonstrates that social support from family for college attendance is one crucial component to respondents’ decisions to attend. However, friends were also a significant source of social support for respondents.

**Support from Friends**

All respondents stated they were encouraged to attend college by their friends. For many, this support was as important, if not more so, than the support from family. All respondents had at least one friend who was planning to attend college and for several, their entire friend group was planning to attend. Thus, respondents reported talking about college often with these friends and some of them even stated they may not have gone to college if it were not for talking with friends about it. Rachel’s comments were representative of other participants’ experiences. She stated,

…without all my friends talking about college, I don’t think I would have went away to college. I would have went to a community college near me, but I think them saying, ‘oh I’m going to [this school], I’m going here’. So that got me thinking, well I can go away. I can try to forget about [my hometown] and try to be something. (Rachel, 10/7/2015, Interview)

Cynthia also exemplified this when she remarked,

…my best friend, Shay, goes to [college] so we had quite a few talks about me going. I told her how I was thinking about not going to school and just staying back and working and helping out with my sister and stuff like that. But she definitely pushed at me to go. So she definitely impacted my life. (Cynthia, 2/5/2015, Interview)
For both Cynthia and Rachel, as well as the other respondents, friends played a critical role in their decision to attend college. These friends often pushed respondents to go to college and they talked about it often with one another since they were attending as well.

For Emily, she not only discussed college plans with her friends but they were also an important social support resource for her. She recounted many conversations she had with her friends about her fears of attending college.

> I generally talked to them [my friends] in terms of finances and how scared I was that I wasn’t going to be able to afford it. So I always talked to them about how scared I was about it and they always just consoled me and told me that everything was going to turn out okay. (Emily, 1/30/2015, Interview)

Additionally, not only did respondents have friends attending college that they discussed college plans with but some of these friends were planning to attend the same university. This was especially represented by Anthony,

> Pretty much my main group of friends attended college and a majority of them are here at [this university]. So about ten people from my graduating class are here. So I mean that’s a good…that’s like ten percent of my class is here. (Anthony, 10/13/2014, Interview)

Rachel further supported this when she said,

> I would say out of my group of friends [pause, counting]…Out of my group of friends, six of us went [to the same university], and four went to [other colleges]. (Rachel, 10/7/2014, Interview)

Having several of their friends planning to attend the same college was an additional push for them to attend since they would not be going to college on their own, but would continue to have that social support network with them. Therefore, friends appear to play an important role in encouraging college attendance for respondents. For many, it was their friends talking about college and planning to attend that pushed them to attend
themselves. However, although there were high levels of support from friends and family, participants reported that overall community support was lacking.

*Perceived Lack of Community Support*

All respondents reported that members of their community were not outwardly supportive of college attendance. Often they said that there were not many people in the community who had attended college so there were few role models. Thus, individuals that they could discuss college with were limited. Anthony exemplified this when he stated,

> Other than teachers that worked in high school there was really no, no one really to talk to that had a college education just randomly on the street. So it was really, you know, it was kinda hard. (Anthony, 10/13/2014, Interview)

Cynthia further supported this assertion in her response to the question about community support,

> There’s very few [college educated people] and that’s only people who have professional jobs where you know they had to go to college. Other than that, the good majority of people don’t go to college at all. (Cynthia, 2/5/2015, Interview)

Anthony continues to build on this by stating that not only are there few role models in their communities but in his case there was also a lack of success stories in the community, because those individuals who successfully attained a degree often did not return to the community.

> There aren’t many success stories of people going to college. If there is they’ve moved away. They’ve gone far away. So the very few success stories that we have, we can’t really build upon….and so you didn’t have anything to base yer, you know, what you would experience college on. You really didn’t have anything so you just kinda had to go with it. (Anthony, 10/13/2015, Interview)
With this limited access to individuals with a college education, and few success stories coming from those who attended college, the college decision making process was more difficult for respondents.

Three respondents reported that college was either not discussed at all by community members or was discussed lightheartedly and only praised under certain circumstances. For example, Cynthia indicated that members of the community did not encourage her to attend college. She stated,

> It’s not really encouraged in my community. Like I said a lot of people they just go to [the local community college] or they just farm. There’s not much else that anyone does. College isn’t really encouraged in my community. It’s kind of just…it’s really not discussed that much. If someone hears that you’re goin’ then they’ll be like, ‘oh that’s great’ but other than that a lot of people just get pregnant at age sixteen and stay home and work. Nothin’ more. (Cynthia, 2/5/2015, Interview)

In Cynthia’s case, although her decision to attend college may elicit praise from some community members, she still perceived the community’s attitude as discouraging toward college attendance, unless it was at the local community college. Rachel also reported believing her community did not provide encouragement for her to attend college.

> I mean they [my community] cared about you going to college but they were more focused on athletic scholarships. Like you would get more praise for a basketball scholarship than you would a 32 ACT score. (Rachel, 10/7/2014, Interview)

In some instances, attending college was outright discouraged or deemed unnecessary by people in the community. This was especially the case for Emily,

> Especially since we lived like in the backroads and stuff like that, I felt like many people were encouraging their kids to take over the farm or something like that. That it was like, here join the family business, don’t go to college, you don’t need it kind of thing. And I think a lot of people in the area didn’t go to college themselves and they felt they turned out okay so then they didn’t…they were like
well I’m not going to spend this much money on something I don’t really need. So that’s how I think it was basically. (Emily, 1/30/2015, Interview)

Rachel also offered further support by stating,

I mean, our town is mostly old people or druggies so not all that much support for college. Not at all. If you look at my town, not even half of my town has been to college. So it’s just an unknown thing to them. They could care less. They really could. No one cares. (Rachel, 10/7/2014, Interview)

Overall respondents experienced discouragement for university attendance from community members. That being said, discouragement was not always directed toward their decision to attend college, since many reported being praised when they told someone they were attending college. However respondents reported experiencing an air of discouragement for college especially in terms of university attendance. They stated that if they were encouraged to attend college, it was at the local community colleges rather than universities that were located further away.

Community support was also referenced indirectly in terms of the conditions of respondents’ home communities. For many, their home communities were rundown and offered limited job opportunities. Several respondents reported their communities had few businesses and that the conditions of the buildings and homes were deteriorating. Therefore, it appears that for these respondents, the fact that their hometowns presented them with few prospects for either profitable or desirable employment pushed them to want to attend college to open up more opportunities for them both in and outside of their communities. Anthony’s comment was representative of other respondents,

I mean people went to trade school and I mean there are good jobs around there like for people that learn a trade but that’s just not for me. That wasn’t for me. That’s not for a lot of people. (Anthony, 10/13/2014, Interview)
While their communities did not outwardly provide social support and encouragement for college, respondents’ responses suggest that the conditions of their communities and the limited job prospects available to them indirectly pushed them toward college since they desired a better life.

In conclusion, it appears respondents experienced high levels of social support from family and friends and relatively low levels of social support from their community. Overall, social support from significant personal relationships was shown to be an important aspect in the college attendance decision making process. While social support is vital, it is just one aspect of successfully deciding to attend, and ultimately apply to college. Instrumental support has also shown to be significant.

**Instrumental Support**

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, instrumental support includes such things as help filling out applications for college and financial aid as well as other related activities. The data indicate that respondents did not often discuss forms of instrumental support with family and friends. Two main categories of instrumental support emerged which include financial support and going through the application process alone.

**Financial Support**

For all respondents money for financing college was an important issue. Two of the respondents reported they had to take out private loans in addition to federal financial aid in order to afford college. To obtain these private loans they needed a cosigner since they themselves did not have sufficient credit. This is where it became difficult. For
Rachel, finding a cosigner was essential since without the private loan, she would not have been able to afford college.

I got discouraged when I found out I had to get a private loan, because I didn’t have credit of course, so I was like well I need a cosigner. So I had to try to find someone in my family who had credit and no one did other than my stepdad. (Rachel, 10/7/2014, Interview)

In Rachel’s case, her stepdad was the only person in her family that was able to cosign on her loan, which enabled her to attend college. Anthony indicated that asking family members for financial assistance for college made him feel guilty. He had to ask his grandmother to cosign for a loan and to help get his textbooks. He pointed out that this made him feel guilty since many of his cousins frequently requested money from her as well and often did not pay it back. Therefore it was quite difficult for him to ask her for assistance.

My thing is I had to talk to her. Like I had to work up a lot of courage just to ask her to be my cosigner on my loan. Like that was what got me. I mean she helped me out with my books and I felt so bad after asking her for it. Like I was choking up when I was asking her for it cuz I just didn’t want her to worry about it or anything, ya know. (Anthony, 10/13/2014, Interview)

Therefore for Anthony, asking his family members, especially his grandmother for money was a stressful experience.

While asking for financial assistance was often stressful, respondents reported their families were willing to help them financially in any way they could. Often they would contribute items for their dormitories or deposit small amounts of spending money in their bank accounts. Anthony is representative of other respondents’ experiences in his comment regarding his mother helping him financially.
My mom put some money in my account every week….I don’t spend a lot and I never did down home. Like I could stretch twenty bucks a far way down home and up here I can do pretty much the same thing depending on what I’m doing. But yeah, financially they have supported [me]. My mom bought my school supplies and just things for my dorm and everything. (Anthony, 10/13/2014, Interview)

So although families were not able to fully provide the financial support needed to attend college, they were still willing to contribute in many different ways.

Going It Alone

As reported earlier, respondents experienced high levels of social support and encouragement to attend college. At the same time, they also reported having to go through the college application process on their own. While their parents supported their decision to attend college, since they were not college educated themselves, they were less able to help respondents navigate the process of applying for and enrolling in college. Therefore, while all respondents noted that they discussed college plans with family to some degree and that their families encouraged them to attend either directly or indirectly, some stated that they were on their own to figure out how to get into college.

For example, as stated by Cynthia,

I had no idea what I was doing and no one could help me. That was kind of confusing. Like there’s a lot of confusing points that you wouldn’t think would be that confusing but when you’re on your own I mean…because no one in my family had went to school really. (Cynthia, 2/5/2015, Interview)

For Anthony, his mother trusted that he would make it to college on his own without her assistance.

So like if I didn’t apply to college by the time the deadlines came around then tough titty, I didn’t get into college. You know that was kind of…But she [my mother] knew, she just had her mind set. She knew that if I could do this stuff
through high school that I would apply to college on my own. (Anthony, 10/13/2014, Interview)

This indicates that while college may have been discussed in respondents’ families, these students were still left to figure out how to get into college on their own. This does not necessarily mean that these students’ families did not want to help their children through the application process but instead it points to their lack of knowledge surrounding this process. Emily’s comment is representative of other respondents,

Of course my mom was always like, ‘I’ll do whatever I can to help you whenever I can.’ So she always wanted to be involved in what I was doing but she didn’t know how. (Emily, 1/30/2015, Interview)

Therefore, respondents’ parents supported their decision to attend college but for many they were unable to provide much guidance with the application process.

Overall, while respondents experienced high levels of social support for their decision to attend college, they did not always experience high levels of instrumental support from personal relationships. As a result, respondents often sought instrumental support from their high schools.

**Institutional Relationships**

Thus far, respondents’ personal relationships have proved to be a significant factor in determining whether they attended college. Primarily these personal relationships provided more social than instrumental support. Oftentimes, since instrumental support was absent within their personal relationships, respondents reported turning toward their institutional relationships for assistance. For the purpose of this analysis, institutional relationships refer to high schools and the academic personnel working within them. Institutional relationships provide not only instrumental support for
college attendance but also serve as a source of social support. For example, high schools are often institutions used to promote and encourage further academic study as well as to provide instrumental support to aid students in getting to college. This instrumental support is often gained through the consultation with guidance counselors. Since social and instrumental support proved to be difficult to separate at the institutional level, support, both social and instrumental, from institutional relationships was discussed together. Three main sub-themes emerged: support from guidance counselors, support from teachers, and the push toward community college/career schools. Each of these sub-themes will be discussed in the following sections, beginning with support from guidance counselors.

**Support from Guidance Counselors**

Overall, guidance counselors were perceived as unhelpful with only one respondent reporting a good experience. Respondents indicated that guidance counselors did not provide them with needed college information (e.g. knowledge about college options, the application process, and ways to finance college). One respondent, Cynthia, discussed her experience of asking her guidance counselor for college assistance quite passionately. She described it as “the worst decision in my life” and referred to her guidance counselors as “jokes”.

…like you make an appointment with them and when I go in there I expect you to have my information pulled up, to know a couple things about me. And you know I’m going in there for college advice, I expect you to help me. That’s why I’m going to you. And that’s not what she did at all. She was just a pain. She was just kind of like, ‘oh here you can do it yourself. Here’s a website for ya, have at it.’ And it’s just like, well you gave me this last time I was in here, so thanks. But she was…it wasn’t worth my time going and talking to her. I mean I sat down with so
many teachers and they gave me better advice than she ever did. (Cynthia, 2/5/2015, Interview)

Cynthia’s experience with her guidance counselor left her frustrated. Her guidance counselor did not give her the amount of help she needed and expected. Anthony also considered the information provided by his guidance counselor as lacking.

…and like our guidance counselor never really talked to us much about like where we should go, or where’s the best place for private loans, ya know, if the FAFSA [Free Application for Federal Student Aid] doesn’t cover all of it. She didn’t really mention that kind of stuff or what to look for or anything like that. It was just kind of like go to their website and apply and then what happens, happens, you know. (Anthony, 10/13/14, Interview)

Being able to afford college is a major concern for students in general and more so for the respondents due to their low-income status. More generally, Anthony indicated that while the guidance counselor did encourage him to apply for college, he still expressed concern that the instrumental support was lacking.

She [his guidance counselor] encouraged it and she brought all of these colleges in for college meetings and stuff but at the same time I don’t think…I mean, yeah, college is encouraged but it’s like survival of the fittest. That’s pretty much their outlook in the high school. Like there was no, ya know, a lot of help, a lot of resources. It was like every man for himself.

In Anthony’s case, the guidance counselor served as a source of social support for college but was perceived as not providing adequate instrumental support for the college application process.

Although three of the four respondents indicated that they found their guidance counselors unhelpful and unable to provide the information they expected, there were some instances when respondents indicated that in some cases, their guidance counselors could be helpful. For example, during high school, Rachel worked with two separate
guidance counselors. One counselor who was very helpful and another who lacked the necessary knowledge to aid students with college plans. She detailed how the first guidance counselor would make a point to talk to each student about their college plans and had several packets of information about college in his office for students to look through.

We had a guidance counselor who would print out these packets and packets, and packets of colleges, scholarships. God bless his soul. His entire desk, he had a whole wall of packets and he goes, ‘take a packet.’ And you would have this thick of packets [shows amount with hands]. So our guidance counselor really pushed it. He really did, he would pull you...he tried to make it to where he would talk to everyone at least once a month, to see all the seniors, to see how they were going. Did you apply? Where are you applying? Scholarship wise [etc.]… (Rachel, 10/7/2014, Interview)

For Rachel, this guidance counselor was extremely helpful and provided high levels of both social and instrumental support for students to attend college. However, when Rachel was a junior in high school, this counselor died and a new counselor replaced him. She expressed being less than satisfied with this new counselor who was not as helpful as the first.

[She was] kind of like a secretary, because that’s what she used to be and she used to be the guidance counselor for the elementary school we had and she just kind of carried that over. She didn’t know how to talk to us as adults. She wanted to talk to us as children [laughs] and so she didn’t know what she was doing. She’d never been a high school guidance counselor so she didn’t know anything about college.

Rachel indicated that this guidance counselor lacked the needed knowledge to help her with college decisions and was overall unhelpful therefore leaving her on her own to navigate the process.
The majority of respondents reported unsatisfactory experiences with guidance counselors. For many respondents, these guidance counselors, who are supposed to serve as a source for college information, did not convey important college information to them or were outright unhelpful. However, one respondent, Emily, did report having a helpful experience with her guidance counselors and gave them credit for providing her a significant amount of instrumental support while she was applying to college. Although Emily described her experience with guidance counselors as a beneficial one, she also indicated that students had to be the ones to initiate a meeting with these counselors.

When we got more toward the junior/senior [year] area, the guidance counselor’s always pushed to make sure you have your resume, to make sure you have your cover letters, make sure you have all your applications in and do this and that. Here are some scholarships for you and they were really involved in the college process but I don’t think they were actively seeking out students. So I think you would have to be like, ‘hey, can you help me with this?’ and they would be like, ‘yeah come on in’. I think that was mainly the big thing for them. (Emily, 1/30/2015, Interview)

So while these guidance counselors pushed college, there was also an expectation that the students would seek their help if they need it.

The interviews suggest that college assistance from guidance counselors was not beneficial for the majority of respondents. That being said, there were exceptions in which guidance counselors provided support for college to some respondents. An important function of guidance counselors at the high school level is to assist students with college decisions and applications, therefore they should be a significant resource of both social and instrumental support for students. However, when guidance counselors proved to be unhelpful, respondents reported that teachers would take on the role of providing information about college.
Support from Teachers

As indicated by respondents, some teachers picked up the slack when guidance counselors did not provide the needed assistance. Several respondents reported having at least one teacher who pushed college or often provided information about college outside of their class curriculum. For Anthony, who earlier indicated a lack of financial information from his guidance counselor, his physics teacher took on the task of providing this information to his students.

I remember one day our physics teacher did an entire PowerPoint on financial aid, on government assistance, and private assistance. Which was very random. It was helpful but it was very random. (Anthony, 10/13/2014, Interview)

In this case, although not required to do so, his teacher took on the task of providing instrumental support through discussing ways to finance a college education.

In Anthony’s case, the support provided from teachers was instrumental; for other respondents, teachers provided more social support. Two respondents, Cynthia and Rachel, indicated they were directly encouraged to attend college by their teachers. For Cynthia, it was a teacher who was a family friend who pushed her to attend college, whereas for Rachel, it was a teacher who was also her track/cross country coach. As she indicated,

She was really sweet and she was like, ‘so where are you going to college?’ and I was like, ‘I don’t know yet, where do you think I should go?’ She goes, ‘well, what are you interested in?’ ‘I think I want to be a coroner so pre-med.’ She was like, ‘well you have lots of options.’ So she went to [a college in Kentucky] and so she said, ‘you can go there but you have to pay out of state tuition.’ I was like ‘yeah’…. (Rachel, 10/7/2014, Interview)

Rachel reported having many conversations such as this one with her coach/teacher.

Often she would go to her teacher’s free period and they would have discussions similar
to the one above. Rachel stated that, “she was the one that I would stress to.” For these three respondents, teachers played an important role of providing either instrumental and/or social support that respondents were not receiving from their guidance counselors.

*The Push Toward Community College and Career/Technical Schools*

Overall, respondents believed their high schools to be somewhat encouraging with regard to college, but they often reported believing they were funneled into specific *types* of colleges. Three respondents recounted that they believed university study was not always expressly encouraged. For example, many respondents noted that the majority of their graduating class was attending career or technical schools as noted by Rachel:

> I graduated with 86 people in my class. Over half of them were CTC [Career and Technical School]. (Rachel, 10/7/2014, Interview)

From these numbers we can see that at Rachel’s high school there was clearly a push toward attending a career and technical school during high school rather than to attend a four-year college. In Anthony’s high school, many students were expected to attend a local trade school.

> It [college] was encouraged but the school expected kids to go to [a local career center], the trade school. They expected it to happen and if the large number of students that they would expect to go didn’t go, they would have an overcrowded classroom [in the high school] because the way the system...my class, we had 100 freshman year and by that time you could already tell who was gonna go to a trade school and who was gonna go on the route to college and pretty much by the end of their sophomore year, it was pretty much guaranteed who was going where. And if half of the kids that went to [the trade school] would have stayed at [my high school], like I said they would have had overcrowded classrooms. So like they expect it to happen. (Anthony, 10/13/2014, Interview)

As described by Anthony, many students were expected and even encouraged to take the trade school route to the extent that the school was set up in a way that almost required it.
As he stated, the school had an expectation of many students going to these trade schools therefore if these students did not go, the school was not able to accommodate all of their students.

Cynthia also felt discouraged from attending university, and felt that she was instead expected to attend a local community college.

I mean the college decision in high school, for my high school, it was just like you do it yourself. No one really pushes you to do it. Some teachers might but as far as that, no guidance counselors really did. The principal sure didn’t talk about it…like nothing…no superior figure pushed it at you so it wasn’t [encouraged]. It just wasn’t an option for a lot of people. Everyone just assumed you’d be going to [a local community college] or not going at all. (Cynthia, 2/5/2015, Interview)

In her experience, the high school did not promote college and assumed that if students were going to attend college it would be at a local community college.

Overall, respondents’ institutional relationships were found to be important. Analysis of the role these institutional relationships played in encouraging or discouraging college attendance as well as providing both social and instrumental support, suggests three key findings. First, high school guidance counselors were described as largely unhelpful or unable to provide needed college information and assistance in applying to college. Second, these data indicate that teachers were picking up the slack of these guidance counselors. Some teachers were important sources of both instrumental and social support for respondents, often providing information or encouragement not otherwise being provided by guidance counselors. Lastly, respondents believed their high schools promoted attendance at local trade schools and community colleges rather than encouraging university study or other college options.
In conclusion, when evaluating these students’ pathways to college, both personal relationships and institutional relationships are significant. Within these personal relationships, family and friends are important providers of social support and encouragement for college whereas the community is regarded as lacking in social support. In general, instrumental support was absent from these personal relationships. Many respondents reported navigating the college application process on their own. Furthermore, at the institutional level, instrumental support was also somewhat lacking. For many respondents, guidance counselors were unhelpful during their application process and they perceived their high schools as promoting trade schools or community colleges rather than universities. The main source of support for some respondents was teachers. These few teachers offered mainly social support and encouragement for college with one providing instrumental support by discussing how to finance college with students.

While challenges often presented themselves throughout respondents’ path to college, challenges were also present once they arrived at college. Likewise, support was also found to be significant for students’ successful transition into college. In the following section, the second theme, transition experiences, is discussed.

**Transition Experiences**

In the above sections, the encouragement and discouragement that respondents received from both personal and institutional relationships in terms of deciding to attend college and actually attending college were presented. This section details the transition experiences of respondents as they try to adjust to college. From the data, two main
themes emerged: a lack of academic preparation, and the strain of navigating between home and college life.

*Lack of Academic Preparation*

For many high school students, college may be viewed as a slightly more difficult version of high school. In reality, it is often quite different from high school both socially and academically. All respondents noted academic troubles to some degree. Some reported only a slight issue, while others experienced more substantial problems. For most respondents, Advanced Placement (AP) classes were offered at their high schools. For those who did not have access to these classes, there was some form of college prep courses offered at their high schools. All respondents indicated they took these classes if they were available. However, even though respondents had taken these advanced courses, they still had difficulties with the academic portion of the transition to college. They all reported that high school did not prepare them academically for the rigors of college courses. For some, this was unexpected and was not one of their immediate fears regarding the transition. For example, Anthony describes his surprise at his lack of preparation for college courses compared to his classmates.

Personally I thought what I was doing in high school was good enough, but it wasn’t. Whenever I came here I realized that my school was very underdeveloped. I thought at the time, ya know, taking two AP classes was crazy and nuts but it’s like normal for most of the kids here. Most of the incoming freshman, and I was just like blown away by that. (Anthony, 10/13/2014, Interview)

Prior to coming to college, Anthony believed that the two advanced placement courses he had taken put him ahead of the game in terms of preparation for college. Upon arrival at college though, he was shocked to find that taking these courses was the norm for many
incoming students. Rachel also described being shocked at the disparity between her high school courses and college.

I mean I felt at the time that it [high school] was hard and then…my GPA was a 3.6. I mean and then I get here and all of the introductory classes apparently are supposed to be learned in high school and I’m like what?! This is not what I learned in high school. My boyfriend’s from [a large city] and he’s like are you kidding me, you didn’t have this in your high school? I was like no. I mean there’s a few methods and concepts that were taught but Sociology, no. Psychology, no. Health was pushed but our books were outdated. They are not up to par whatsoever so they were from the 90’s. So whatever we were learning was from the 90’s. (Rachel, 10/7/2014, Interview)

Although Rachel had done well in her high school courses, earning a 3.6 GPA, once she arrived at college, she realized how far behind the other students she was. By the end of her first semester, she reported falling into academic probation with a GPA below a 2.0. One possible explanation, based on the interviews, was that respondents did not have study skills or note taking skills. Emily’s response was representative of other respondents in that many indicated they did not need to study or take notes during high school.

So I never had to study or anything like that. I always got straight A’s in high school. It was just the easiest thing for me. It was just like, college is gonna be a breeze. It’s not a breeze. Well, first I didn’t study. It was like, this is gonna be easy, I don’t have to study or anything like that….Then I got my grades back and was like, okay now I need to learn how to do stuff. So then I started doing homework and catching up on the readings and stuff like that, and it still proved to be too hard for me to do that so then I just gave up. So that was the…that was a really tough thing for me. I just…everything came so easily for me in high school that it was just like a wakeup call. (Emily, 1/30/2015, Interview)

During high school, respondents like Emily did very well academically with minimal studying, however, once they arrived at college they realized how necessary those skills
were and how inadequately they had been prepared to utilize them. Therefore, some respondents, such as Rachel, noted having to learn these study skills anew in college.

Readjusting everything I’ve ever been taught in high school was big. I would say that I’ve learned a lot of how to, I mean my grades are better so I’ve learned how to take notes, how to pay attention in class….So I mean learning how to readjust your learning process is probably the hardest because it’s not the same. Nowhere near the same from high school. (Rachel, 10/7/2014, Interview)

Thus, even when respondents did well in high school and tried to prepare themselves for a college curriculum, they still found themselves lagging behind other incoming students in terms of academic preparation. That being said, academic adjustment is only part of the transition process; as will be discussed below, respondents did not always find it easy to negotiate the often conflicting expectations of home and college.

*The Strain of Navigating between Home and College Life*

Throughout their transition into college, respondents had to learn to manage being away from home while finding ways to keep in touch and share their college experiences with those at home. For many respondents, their first challenge was adjusting to being away from their families. Many of them had familial responsibilities such as household chores, running errands, providing rides to other family members, and caring for siblings. Since they had differing family situations, some of them expressed more concern over the family they left behind than others. However, each of the respondents had played pivotal roles within their families prior to coming to college. Additionally, some respondents had family situations that either directly impacted their college life or caused them worry. Cynthia, for example, expressed concern about leaving her recently divorced mother and
younger sister back home. Prior to coming to college, she had served an almost motherly role for her family.

My junior and senior years [of high school] that’s when my dad left my mom so I kind of became the mom in my family because my mom was pretty torn up about it, so she spent a lot of her time just crying. So I had to look after my younger sister and she’s not that much younger. She’s a sophomore [in high school] now…but I had to definitely look after her and take care of her and take care of my mom….So it’s weird being away from them and knowing that they’re doing things on their own. I mean she’s my mom and she’s fine with it and my little sister’s old enough to do her own things, but I mean it’s still weird not being there and making sure they are piecing their lives together correctly. (Cynthia, 2/5/2015, Interview)

Since Cynthia played such an important role in her family before coming to college, she reported not feeling like she was a part of their lives anymore since she spent the majority of her time at the university. Rachel had also served a crucial role in her family. She lived with her disabled father prior to attending college and reported helping care for him as well as providing financially for him. Since he did not have a phone when she first arrived at college, her only way of communication with him was through letters. In addition, freshman are not allowed to have cars and she did not have the money to take the bus, so making it home to visit her father was often not possible. Her father was the main source for emotional support so it made her first semester difficult. Rachel also indicated that when she did make it home, she found it hard to leave.

So I didn’t have the extra money to take the GoBus as much as I wanted to. So I tried to make one trip back home a month and when I did it was just awful. I just didn’t want to leave his side and I was just always, like, upset when I left. It was really hard the first year and then he got a phone my sophomore year so then we texted and I got more money so I got to go home more and, um, now that I’m living in an apartment, I guess it just like hit me that ya know I’m only going to see him so often instead of as much as I did in high school. (Rachel, 10/7/2014, Interview)
For Rachel, adjusting to the realization that she would no longer see her father as much as she wished was difficult. Therefore, both Cynthia and Rachel had family situations back home that caused them to worry about those they left behind.

The strain experienced as respondents navigated between their home and college life was especially impactful for Emily. Her home responsibilities caused her to have to move back home to help care for her brother, who had a severe debilitating disease.

Then second semester, my brother started getting really sick so then I went back home and I stayed there for a year and a half or something like that. So I moved out of the dorms back with my mom, helping take care of my brother and then she would drive me to school every day. So that was a little harder because I didn’t really have much time to study cuz I was watching him every day cuz she worked. So then there was that. So those semesters were kind of bad for me. Like my GPA plummeted. I was in academic probation for a while. I did pull myself out once and then I went back and now I’m working my way out of it. I have like a 1.9 right now so I need like a 2 to get out of it. So I’m like ahh. (Emily, 1/30/2015, Interview)

For Emily, her home responsibilities became the priority, causing her to struggle academically. Although all the of the respondents discussed challenges when it came to bridging home and college life, some respondents, such as Emily, had experiences that were much more difficult to overcome and that inhibited college success.

In addition to worries about those left at home, many respondents also stressed that discussing their college lives with family was difficult. Their families supported them and were proud of them for attending college, but respondents often believed their families could not relate to them. As stated by Emily,

So they think it’s great that I’m doing it but like I said they just, I just don’t think they appreciate how much actually goes into it. (Emily, 1/30/2015, Interview)
Emily knew her parents were proud of her for attending college, but also believed that they underestimated the amount of work that she had to put into her classes. Rachel also experienced frustration with her family’s attitude toward her education. She reported feeling alone because she could not talk in depth about college with her parents or siblings since they often did not understand. She expressed wishing her parents would ask her more about her college life.

I wish my parents would have been more like, how are your tests? What tests do you have this week? Kind of like the typical parent. My parents were nontypical. So not funny how untypical they are. But if I could say it to them from my freshman perspective, I would probably lash out and be like, could you be a little more energetic about when I talk about college. So I just don’t talk about it now. I mean, they asked me about how my classes are but I just say, they are good. Because I’m not going to…well in my sociology class, then my microbiology class…They don’t get it. They don’t know what I’m saying so I tried not to talk about it. So I just say, yeah classes are going great. [laughs] That’s all I say because what am I going to say. They don’t know what I’m talking about. (Rachel, 10/7/2014, Interview)

As a result, Rachel simply stopped discussing her college life with her family. In general, respondents indicated that they could not share their college experiences with their family. Their families did not understand since they had not experienced college themselves. Moreover, respondents expressed feeling frustration when talking about their college life with family because they felt their family took college lightly.

Overall, respondents experienced several challenges throughout their transition into college. A major issue was their lack of academic preparation for college courses. Many respondents reported taking advanced courses in high school and receiving good grades but upon arrival at college, realized the inadequacy of these classes. Additionally, respondents had to find a way to navigate the challenges of bridging their home and
college lives. For some respondents, going through a period of homesickness was their only issue, but for others, more significant issues in their family caused them to either worry about family members at home or, in one case, the need to move back home.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that while social support for college attendance is generally high from the personal relationships respondents had with friends and family, instrumental support is altogether lacking. As a result, respondents sought instrumental support from their high schools, specifically guidance counselors. However, although these guidance counselors should have served as a resource for college information and assistance, often respondents reported their ability to serve this purpose as lacking. Further, the findings suggest that teachers tend to intervene when guidance counselors do not provide adequate college assistance and information. Additionally, respondents believed their high schools pushed them toward community colleges and trade schools rather than encouraging university study or other college options. Once respondents arrived at college, they experienced many challenges. According to the data, two of the most prominent challenges were difficulty adjusting to the academic climate of college and the difficulty respondents had navigating the gap between their family back home and their new life at college. Respondents reported that their high schools did not academically prepare them for high school, thus their adjustment to college classes was difficult. In addition, respondents also experienced tension between their home and college life. Many respondents found it difficult to discuss their college lives with family members due to their lack of knowledge and experience with college.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This study evaluates the experiences of first-generation, low-income, rural Appalachian college students regarding their decisions to attend college and transition experiences once they arrive at college. Although the sample size is small and the study is exploratory, the results are critical for furthering the understanding of college experiences of these students.

The theory of social capital was used to guide this research and evaluate the findings. Social capital is comprised of the social knowledge and connections one has that enable them to reach their goals. For respondents in this study, their social connections influenced their decision to attend college as well as their successful transition into college. The theory of social capital emphasizes the importance of social connections for reaching one’s goals. It helps us to understand this research because the amount of social capital respondents had affected their decisions to attend college and their transitional experiences. For all respondents, the significant social connections they had were influential in their decision to attend college and their ability to successfully transition into college. These respondents did not have the necessary social capital to make the process of attending college and transitioning into college easy. Although students were encouraged to attend college, their social connections did not provide them with sufficient help with regards to applying to college, and understanding financial aid information. This made the process of applying, attending, and subsequently transitioning into college difficult. Instrumental support was low at the personal level, since as research suggests much of the rural Appalachian region has low levels of higher
educational attainment (Haaga 2004; Lichter & Campbell 2005; Pollard & Jacobsen 2014). Therefore, since many individuals in the region have not attended college, their knowledge of college processes is limited.

In terms of a lack of resources for students at the high school level, this study supports previous literature by Hill that states high schools are important sources of college encouragement and that some schools do not provide adequate college information through school personnel and college workshops (2008). Although this study supports Hill’s work, it serves to go a step further and provides a more in-depth account of the lived experiences of these rural Appalachian students.

Since none of the respondents’ parents had attended college, and they had no familial connections to help them through the decision and application process, they often turned toward institutional relationships for help. The point of contact for college information within their high schools is guidance counselors. However, the respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the level of instrumental support provided to them by their guidance counselors. This is important because guidance counselors were often their only source of help and information for college. Thus the current study indicates the need for guidance counselors who have adequate knowledge and information about college to help serve their student populations in these rural Appalachian high schools. That said, since the study sample was small and not representative of this population as a whole, further research is needed to evaluate the adequacy of guidance counselors in rural Appalachian high schools.
Additionally, one unexpected finding that could lead to further study is the feeling of guilt respondents expressed. Although respondents were not asked about feelings of guilt, all of them described some level of guilt about leaving their family behind when transitioning to college. Since they played important roles at home in terms of financial support and caretaking, in a way they were letting their parents down by going to college. However, since they had been chosen as “the one” to attend college, they were under an immense amount of pressure to succeed and if they did not they would be letting their parents down. This was an interesting and unexpected finding that emerged from the data. In terms of social capital, these feelings of guilt experienced by respondents suggest there is an emotional component to social capital. From the current research the relationship between emotion and social capital is unclear and therefore needs to be addressed. Research should further explore this dynamic to understand how students navigate feelings of guilt and what impact this guilt has on their college success.

As with all research, this study has both strengths and limitations. In terms of strengths, this study provides in-depth, qualitative results by allowing respondents to describe their college decisions and experiences in their own words. Whereas many previous studies have evaluated the quantitative data on individuals attending and completing college within the Appalachian region, this study serves to provide a more thorough understanding of the experiences respondents had with their decision to attend college and the transition to college. Additionally, this research adds to the limited body of higher education research within the rural Appalachian region of low-income first-generation students and serves as a stepping stone for future studies.
However, the study also has limitations. There were very few respondents in that it was a convenience sample. Since the goal of the research was to evaluate multiple factors impacting rural Appalachian students, the selection criteria was extensive. Thus, the pool of potential respondents may be limited making it difficult to ascertain if emerging themes are indicative of this population as a whole. Further, the sample was limited to one college and only sought respondents from rural Appalachian counties located within one state.

While the current study has limitations, the research suggests other opportunities for further investigation. Future research needs to address whether the themes reported in this study are indicative of this student population in general. There are many suggestions for how this may be done. First and foremost, a larger sample size would provide more representative results. Second, there are many other variables that could be added to further understand this student population. For example, this study only evaluated a university setting but future research could compare different sizes, ranks and types of colleges such as university and community colleges. Additionally, future studies could also assess whether the findings from this study are exclusive to rural students by conducting a comparison between urban and rural low-income, first-generation Appalachian college students. Lastly, since the rural Appalachian region is vast and encompasses many states, future studies should include more states and address similarities or differences between these states.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Although there are many possibilities for future research, this study emphasizes the continuing importance of studying higher education in the Appalachian region, especially these first-generation students coming from rural, low-income backgrounds. Overall, studying higher education is significant since research both past and present indicates the growing gap between college completion in the Appalachian region versus the nation. By and large, the findings of this research suggest that there is a lack of instrumental assistance in general from students’ families and especially from their high schools. Additionally, the results of this study indicate that many of the staff at the respondents’ high schools lacked sufficient knowledge and ability to assist students as they are making college decisions. Lastly, the findings suggest that once first-generation, low-income students from rural Appalachia arrive at college, they often struggle with bridging their home and college lives as well as navigate feelings of guilt. These students were pushed to attend college by their families but at the same time feel a strong pull to come back home. Often these students feel guilty if they do not attend college because they would be letting their families down. However, once they are in college, they also feel guilt for leaving their families behind since many play pivotal roles at home.

Policy Recommendations

There are many important suggestions for policy from this research. First, there is a need for policy that increases instrumental assistance available to not only students but their parents as well. Research finds that in general, participation in college guidance programs by parents is much more beneficial to those students whose parents have low
levels of educational attainment (Kim and Schneider 2005). Therefore, programs could be instituted in high schools that encourage parents to be involved in the college process as well as provide information about college directly to parents. Secondly, the results indicate many high school guidance counselors, who often serve as students’ point of contact for college information, lack the necessary knowledge to help their students with college decisions. To increase the capability of these counselors to help their students attend college, mandatory training sessions could be instituted. This policy implication would serve to assist not only first-generation, low-income, rural Appalachian students but all students in these schools who do not have social connections with experience and knowledge about college. Thirdly, colleges within the Appalachian region need to be aware of the circumstances of these first-generation, low-income, rural Appalachian students and must take into consideration their struggles with guilt and navigating the demands of home and college life. Often these students are isolated in regards to sharing their guilt because they have no one to talk to or that can relate to their situation. Therefore, colleges could institute specialized sections of orientation or other programs these students could utilize during their time at the college that address these feelings of guilt and the difficulty bridging home and college these students experience. Lastly, universities need to reach out more often to these high schools in poor, rural Appalachian areas. Programs such as Upward Bound, which brings high school students from low-income, and first-generation families to campus to experience university life, do exist. However, more energy needs to be placed on promoting these programs in these rural Appalachian areas and getting these students engaged in such programs.
While this research has many facets that are difficult to tease apart and leads to many more questions than answers, the study has serious ramifications for future research in an underdeveloped area of the sociological literature on higher education in rural Appalachia. The study builds on the current literature by identifying a relatively new finding on the guilt component of college decisions and transition experiences of low-income, first-generation students in rural Appalachia. Further, the findings serve as a platform for new study on the emotional component and feelings of guilt associated with deciding to attend college and transitioning to college for these students. Therefore, this research is important because it identifies a new area of interest that has not previously been addressed in the literature and serves as a springboard for future study in the area.
REFERENCES


Are you a student from rural Appalachian Ohio?

Share your experiences about your transition to college & your 1st year at college?

If you are from one of the counties highlighted on the map below & are a first-generation college student I want to interview you for my Master's thesis in Sociology!

Am I eligible to participate?

- Currently enrolled OU student?
- 18 or older?
- First-generation student?
- Receiving Ohio Pathway Award or SEOG (Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant)

CONTACT: Katlyn Sauvage (Department of Sociology) @ ks360609@ohio.edu or (740) 597-2762
Are you a student from rural Appalachian Ohio?

Share your experiences about your transition to college & your 1st year at college?

If you are from one of the counties highlighted on the map below & are a first-generation college student, I want to interview you for my Master's thesis in Sociology!

Am I eligible to participate?

- Currently enrolled OU student?
- 18 or older?
- First-generation student?
- Receiving Ohio Pathway Award or SEOG (Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant)?

CONTACT: Katlyn Sauvage (Dept. of Sociology) @ ks360609@ohio.edu or (740)-597-2702
APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM

Researcher: Katlyn Sauvage

You are being asked to be a part of this research for the completion of my thesis. 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. Once you have read this form and your questions about the study are answered, you will be asked to sign it. You will receive a copy of this document to take with you.

Explanation of Study

The study hopes to understand the encouragement and discouragement that you have experienced while deciding to attend college, the forms of support you may or may not have received and your experiences during your transition from high school to college.

Risks and Discomforts

No risks or discomforts are anticipated

Benefits

Indirectly, you benefit by being a part of an important study and having the ability to share your information and stories. The results of this study will not benefit you directly, but it will contribute valued information that may better the experiences of other students in similar situations in the future.

Confidentiality and Records

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and confidential. The interview should last approximately ½ to 1 hour. I would like to tape record the interview in order to aid my research. You may request that the tape recorder be turned off at any time and you may end the interview at any time.

Your interview information will be kept confidential by not using your name or any other identifiable information that may connect you personally with the data. A pseudonym and number will be used to identify your information. At the end of the study all tapes will be destroyed.

Contact Information

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

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

Signature_________________________________________ Date________

Printed Name__________________________________________

Version Date: [6/22/2014]
APPENDIX D: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

1. Sex

2. Age

3. Race

4. Which county are you from?

5. What is your year in school?

6. What is your major/college?

7. Are you a transfer student?

8. What is the estimated population of the community you grew up in?
   A. 0-10,000
   B. 10,001-20,000
   C. 20,001-30,000
   D. 30,001-40,000
   E. 40,001-50,000
   D. Over 50,000
APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS WITH PROMPTS

1. Tell me about your decision to attend college. Were there certain things or people that led you toward that decision?

2. Did you have any fears or concerns about coming to college? Explain.

3. Did those fears or concerns impact your decision to attend college? If so, how? If not, how did you overcome these fears or concerns?

**Family**

4. What does your family think about college in general?

5. What does your family think about you attending college?

6. Do you have any siblings that went or are currently attending college? Did that impact your decision to attend college? If so, explain.

7. In general, do you believe that your family was supportive of your decision to attend college? If so, in what ways were they supportive? If not, how did you deal with their lack of support?

**Finances**

8. During your high school years, I know your family received public assistance at some point, did this impact your experiences during high school? Explain.

9. Did the fact that your family received public assistance impact your decision to attend college? If so, in what ways? Explain.

10. Did you work during high school? If so, tell me what that job was like. (How many hours did you typically work? Was it close to home? Why did you choose to have a job during high school?)

11. Did your job impact your decision to attend college? If so, explain?

12. Did finances impact your college decisions in general? If so, explain.

13. Did finances impact your decision to attend Ohio University? If so, explain.

**Friends**
14. What do your friends back home think about college in general?

15. What do your friends back home think about you attending college?

16. Do you have any friends back home that have attended or are currently attending college? Did this impact your decision to attend college? If so, explain.

17. Do you think that your friends were supportive of your decision to attend college? If so, how were they supportive? If not, explain how they were unsupportive.

**High School**

18. Tell me about your high school experience. What was it like? (What was the size of the school compared to others in your county, if there were others? Were Advanced Placement (AP) or college prep classes available? Were you involved in any extracurricular activities? How close did you live to your school? Did you ride the bus to school? If so, how long did it take to get to your school?)

19. Overall, to what extent was college encouraged at your high school?

20. Was there anything or anyone at your high school that influenced your decision to attend college? (Programs, counselors, teachers, etc.) If so, explain.

**Community**

21. Could you tell me about the community you are from? What is it like? (What was the nearest town?)

22. Overall, to what extent is college encouraged in your community?

**Applying & Choosing a College**

23. Did being a first-generation student have an impact on your decision to attend college? If so, explain.

24. Once you decided to attend college, did you get any assistance in applying to colleges? (For example, did anyone help you fill out the application, get information on colleges, etc.) If so, explain. If not, how did you navigate this process on your own?

25. Once you were accepted to colleges, was there anyone that helped you choose a college to attend? If so, explain. If not, how did you navigate this process on your own?
26. Were there certain things that were important when selecting a college to attend? (For ex: Were scholarships, financial aid, proximity to home, etc. instrumental to your college decision?)

27. Did you attend another university/college prior to attending Ohio University? If so, why did you choose to attend this other university? What made you decide to transfer to OU?

28. Were there other colleges that you were accepted to other than OU? If so, why did you choose to not attend those colleges? (Were there things that made you unable to attend these colleges? (Such as finances, distance from home, etc.)

29. Ultimately, why did you choose to attend Ohio University?

**Transition**

30. Tell me about your transition from high school to college. What was that experience like?

31. Did being a first-generation student have an impact on your transition to college and your first year in college? If so, explain.

32. What was the most difficult thing you experienced during that transition and how did you handle that difficulty?

33. Were there things that happened during your transition into college that were easier than you expected? If so, explain.

34. Were you involved in any programs or organizations during your first year of college? If yes, did these help you with the transition from high school to college? If no, why did you choose not to be involved in any programs or organizations?

35. Overall, what was the best thing about coming to college? Were there any specific moments or experiences during your transition into college and your first year in college that you would say demonstrate your favorite thing about coming to college?

36. What was the biggest challenge/problem you faced during the transition? How did you navigate this challenge/problem?

37. Is there anything that the college could have done better to help you transition from high school to college?

**Final Thoughts**
38. After having experienced transitioning from high school to college and adjusting to your first year of school, what advice would you give to someone coming from a similar background that has just decided they want to attend college?

39. If you could tell President McDavis and the administrators at Ohio University one thing about the problems facing first-generation students from poor rural backgrounds, what would that be?

40. If you could tell President Obama and Congress one thing about the problem facing first-generation students from poor rural backgrounds, what would that be?

41. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

Thank you – remind that they can contact me for questions.