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# A Qualitative Life Course Study: Significant Life Events in the Lives of Appalachian First-Generation College Graduates

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A QUALITATIVE LIFE COURSE STUDY: SIGNIFICANT LIFE EVENTS IN THE  
LIVES OF APPALACHIAN FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE GRADUATES

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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May 2014

Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
School of Graduate Studies and Research  
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Although in recent decades many of the outer Appalachian counties have stabilized economically, the central region of Appalachia continues to have the highest concentration of distressed and at-risk counties in the country. The geographic isolation and cultural characteristics of Appalachian communities have limited their ability to achieve economic and educational equity. Through the lens of life course theory, this qualitative study analyzed the life stories of five first-generation college students from Appalachia in order to identify the experiences that encouraged them to attend and persist to college graduation. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews and were analyzed through the use of restorying and typological codes. The study identified family, school, and community experiences that Appalachian youth considered to be influential in their decision to pursue postsecondary study. The research also found that technology played a role in their decision to attend and then stay at a postsecondary institution.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Background of the Problem**

In 1636, Harvard University was established as the first institution of higher education in the American colonies. Nine degree-granting institutions would soon follow, each focused on the teaching of religious tradition to wealthy White men interested in becoming clergy or serving as leaders in society. Following the Revolutionary War, there was a proliferation of institutions of higher learning, as the nation began to see education as a necessity for the development of a new nation who wished to instill in its citizens the principles of liberty. Throughout this period, attainment of higher education was limited to the wealthy classes. Although White men of the lower classes were not barred from attending universities, the price of attendance was generally prohibitive (Brickman, 1972; Lazerson, 1998; Noftsinger & Newbold, 2007).

As a way of expanding access to higher education to the lower classes, Congress passed the Morrill Act in 1862 which established land grant institutions. The establishment of land grant institutions was seen as a way to support the upward mobility of the lower classes and to educate the electorate that was seen as necessary for a strong democracy. The Morrill Act was reauthorized in 1890 and included wording that required states to establish institutions that educated African-Americans. It was during this time that many of the traditionally Black universities were established. With the Supreme Court rulings in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century overturning the “separate but equal” ruling of Plessy v. Ferguson and the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the number of African-Americans attending college grew steadily. Between 1964 and

1972, the percentage of 18-24 year-olds attending college who were African-American rose from 10% to 20%. By 1990, 25% of African-American Youth were enrolled in college (Lazerson, 1998; Noftsinger & Newbold, 2007).

The tangible benefits of earning a college degree are seen in the statistics released by the U.S. Census Bureau. Blacks who have earned a college degree on average earn twice what a black person with only a high school diploma earns. Although the income gap between Blacks and Whites has remained fairly consistent during the last 30 years the income gap between Black college graduates and White college graduates has narrowed substantially. In 2005, Blacks with a college degree earned 95% of what White college graduates earned. Although there is certainly still a need for improvement it is apparent that, as access to a university education has grown, so has the economic status of African-Americans (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2007).

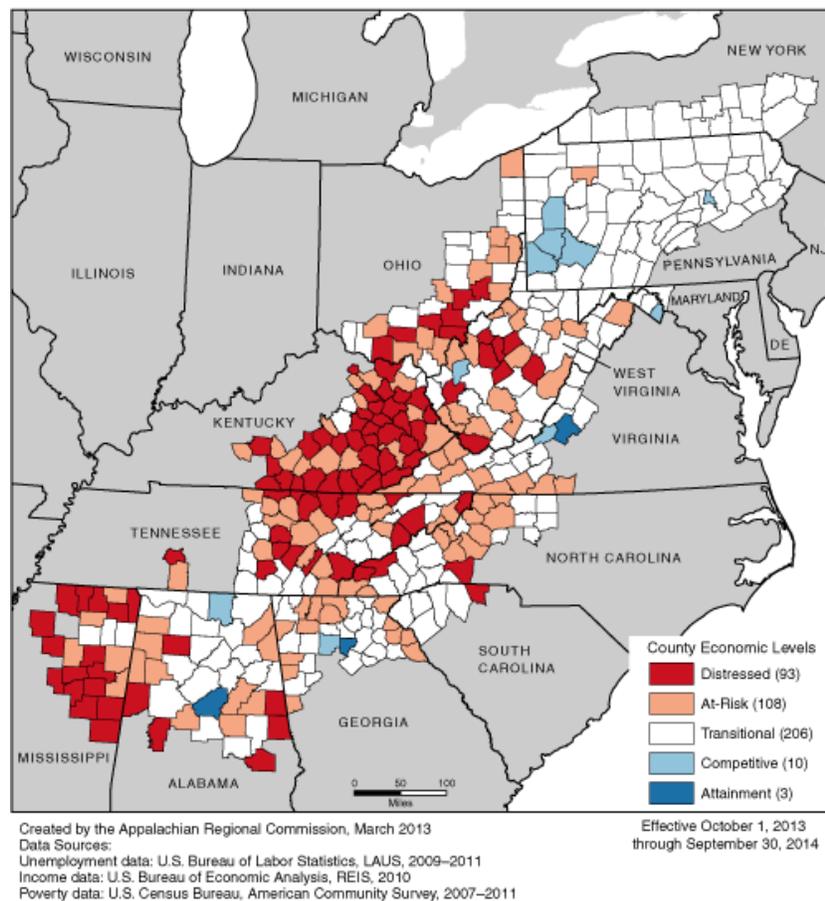
Women have also struggled to gain economic equality with White men. It is due to economic reasons that women were granted access to higher education. As the first institutions in the American colonies began granting degrees, they excluded women from their rolls. However, by the early 1800s, common schools were being opened all over the country, and a cheap labor force was needed to fill the role of teacher. Women were the logical choice, as they were accustomed to teaching children, and they could be hired for one-fourth the wage of a man. Two-year seminary schools began to spring up to meet the need to prepare female teachers, but the first women were not admitted to four-year degree-granting institutions until 1837, when four women entered Oberlin College. However, only four institutions accepted women until another financial crisis precipitated the need for female students. During and following the Civil War, male enrollment fell

drastically, and, in order to keep the doors of institutions open, they were forced to accept female students. This trend continued well into the 1960s. During times of peace and relative economic prosperity, women were forced out of the work force and discouraged, if not barred, from attending co-educational universities. However, in times of crisis or economic hardship, women re-entered the workforce and were again welcomed into institutions of higher learning that were struggling from a lack of male students (Graham, 1978; Roby, 1972). By 1990, 54% of college students were women. In 1970, 22% of working women had attended at least some college, but, by 2012, 67% of working women had attended college (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). This increase in educational attainment is paralleled by an increase in women's wages. In 1979, the first year that statistics for the ratio of women's earning to men's is available; women earned 62% of what men earned. By July of 2012, women were earning 80% of what men earned (U.S. Department of Labor, 2010). Although women have not yet reached economic equality with men, there is clearly a relationship between their entrance into the university and their subsequent gains in earnings.

The story of African-American access to higher education has been one of steady growth coupled with growing economic equality. For women, the story has been one of highs and lows, but, in recent decades, women have outnumbered men in college attendance and are making great strides toward economic equality. However, for individuals who grew up in rural Appalachia, the democratic ideal of equal access to higher education with a view toward economic stability and advancement has not been realized.

## Statement of the Problem

Traditionally, the Appalachian region has struggled with poverty and isolation. Although in recent decades many of the outer Appalachian counties have stabilized economically, the central region of Appalachia that includes West Virginia, Southeastern Ohio, and Eastern Kentucky continues to have the highest concentration of distressed and at-risk counties in the country (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2011). One of the most effective ways of combating poverty and isolation is through education; yet, educational opportunities for Appalachian youth have been limited.



*Figure 1.* Map of the Appalachian Region showing economic levels. Adapted from “Map of County Economic Status in Appalachia, FY 2014” by Appalachian Regional Commission, 2013.

In 1980, 16.2% of Americans had a college degree while only 11% of individuals living in the Appalachian region had a college degree. The numbers for the central region of Appalachia were even lower. The Appalachian region of Kentucky had a 7.3% college graduation rate; Ohio's Appalachian region was at 8.9%, almost five percent less than Ohio's non-Appalachian regions. In West Virginia, 10.4% of the population had college degrees. Between 1980 and 2000, the nation's percentage of residents with college degrees raised 8.2%, while the Appalachian regions of Ohio, Kentucky, and West Virginia only raised 4.3%, 3.1%, and 4.4% respectively. During the same period of time, the non-Appalachian regions of Ohio and Kentucky narrowed the gap with gains of 7.3% and 6% .

In 2011, the Appalachian region continued to lag behind. The percentage of Americans who held a college degree was 28.2%; yet, in the Appalachian region, only 21.1% held a college degree, with some county's rates coming in as low as 9% (Appalachian Regional Commission, 1980, 1990, 2011).

Since the founding of the American Colonies, Americans have viewed education as the engine of social and economic mobility, but the geographic isolation and cultural characteristics of Appalachian communities have limited their ability to achieve economic and educational equity (Billings, 1974; Payne, 2005; Pollard & Jacobsen, 2012).

Past research has focused on the fact that there is a gap between the educational attainment of Appalachians and the U.S. population (Appalachian Regional Commission, 1980, 1990, 2000, 2010; Haaga, 2004). There has also been some research into the

relationship between the lack of educational attainment and the economic distress experienced by the region (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2001; Billings, 1974; Payne, 2005; Pollard & Jacobsen, 2012). Another line of research has focused on the cultural aspects of Appalachians that contribute to low educational attainment rates (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Montgomery, 1949; Uhlenberg, 1973), particularly the strong place attachment that is a central characteristic in many Appalachian communities (Barcus & Braun, 2010; Fraley, 2007). Traditionally, this attachment to place has kept Appalachians close to home, even when economic and educational opportunities are scarce or non-existent. The phenomenon also contributes to isolation from the larger community, which results in many young people who leave Appalachia returning home after feeling overwhelmed and alienated by a culture they do not understand (Barcus & Braun, 2010; Obermiller & Rappold, 1990; White, 1987). Despite the geographic isolation and the depressed economic situation of the Appalachian region, many young people who identify themselves as Appalachian have been successful in college (Bradbury & Mather, 2009; Hand & Payne, 2008).

Hand and Payne (2008) conducted a study with first-generation Appalachian college students who were on track to graduate from a four-year institution. They found that first-generation Appalachian students had many of the same concerns as did non-Appalachian students. Financial concerns, internal locus of control, communication of information, and emotional support were found to influence a student's academic persistence. However, they found that Appalachian students experience an acute struggle between independence and loyalty to home and family.

Bradbury and Mather (2009) found similar results in their study with students attending a university in the Appalachian region of Ohio. However, both studies are limited by a focus on students who are attending universities within Appalachia. Bradbury and Mather's study was conducted at a university where 68% of the students attending are from the southern region of Ohio. Over half of their participants maintained daily contact with their families, attending family functions and continuing to uphold family responsibilities, such as babysitting siblings, taking care of grandparents, completing chores at home, running errands, and doing the shopping.

Hand and Payne's participants also belonged to the TRIO program, which is a federally funded program that offers first-generation low-income students tutoring, academic advising, counseling, and student activities. Although attending an Appalachian university is one option, students should not be limited to that option. Howley and Hambrick (2010) found that "students from poorer families are more likely to want to leave their home town, but less likely to do so." From a survey of 149 rural high schools, performed by Howley and Hambrick, 81% of the 501 responses said that they would prefer to live away from home; 65% of the same responders said that they expected to earn a bachelor's degree. Yet, we know from current U.S. census statistics that only about 10-14% of them will earn a degree.

In order for the central region of Appalachia to grow economically and culturally, the educational attainment of its population must increase. College attendance within Appalachia is only part of the solution. This study seeks to identify what has made the difference in the lives of students who did leave home and attend a university away from home. Did technology play a role? What were the life events and who were the

individuals that influenced them? If research can identify the influences that initiated the change, then schools and communities can replicate those experiences with a view towards encouraging other students to set and achieve the goal of attending and completing college.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to analyze the life stories of first-generation college graduates from Appalachia in order to identify the experiences that encouraged them to attend and persist to college graduation. The study identified family, school, and community experiences that Appalachian youth considered to be influential in their decision to pursue postsecondary study. The research also examined if technology played a role in their decision to attend and then stay at a postsecondary institution.

### **Research Questions**

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What life events do Appalachian youth identify as exerting a major influence on their ability to graduate from college?
2. How do Appalachian youth describe the contributions made by their schools, families, and communities that contributed to their success?
3. How do Appalachian youth describe their use of social media (i.e., Facebook), chatrooms, email, texting, and video chat (i.e., Skype or Facetime) in high school and college, and does that description indicate a belief that online communication influenced their decision to attend and then stay at a postsecondary institution?

## **Significance of the Study**

Each year the Coalition for Rural and Appalachian Schools compiles vital statistics for its 136 member school districts (out of 170 districts) within the Ohio Appalachian region. The 2010 report finds the median poverty rate at 48% in Appalachian districts. The range goes as high as 89% in Mahoning County. According to the Federal Education Budget Project (2012), the number of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch in West Virginia is even higher, with an average of 52% in their 55 school districts, up 2% from last year, with rates as high as 89% in McDowell County. The average unemployment rate in Appalachia is 6.4%, which does not seem high in the current economic recession; however, the unemployment rate in Appalachian is consistently at this rate, and, in central Appalachian counties, which are not adjacent to urban areas, the unemployment rate is at least 10% (Pollard & Jacobsen, 2012).

In the United States, 30% of working adults have at least a bachelor's degree. In central Appalachia, only 13% have earned a bachelor's degree. One of the keys to addressing the crippling poverty in central Appalachia is to increase the educational attainment, but first we must understand what events in a young person's life gives him or her the courage or skills or desire to leave home to attend university and persist in that pursuit. Instead of focusing on what holds them back, this research seeks to discover what propels them forward. By analyzing the life course of youths who grew up in Appalachia and who have attained at least a bachelor's degree, events can be identified that could be developed by schools and communities as they develop equity initiatives that encourage Appalachian youths to complete college.

## **Limitations**

Although there are cultural characteristics that tend to be present in Appalachian communities, it is difficult to define the culture of such a large and diverse population. This is compounded by the popular stereotypes of Appalachians as ignorant, lazy, inbred, moonshine- running, welfare-dependent, gun-toting, trailer-dwelling, snake-handling, and meth-addicted teen parents that have been propagated by writers, artists, and the media since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Cooke-Jackson & Hansen, 2008; Massey, 2007). This study endeavored to focus only on the norms that can be shown – namely, that Appalachians live in rural communities that isolate them geographically; unemployment rates have consistently been among the highest in the country, as are the rates of individuals who live in poverty (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2014); young people tend to stay close to home after high school graduation; and, as noted by the participants, those who do leave home tend to return home before obtaining a degree or after failing to find a job (Barcus & Braun, 2010).

Using the life stories of an individual presents several limitations. First, individuals often have selective memory. Those interviewed were asked to describe events that happened several years earlier; this could have resulted in forgetting to mention important events. This was corrected to some degree by allowing the participant to read the transcript later and add any events or details they did not mention at the time. Second, individuals sometimes remember events in the wrong order or place them in the wrong time-frame. Lastly, people tend to exaggerate positive and negative experiences. When using self-reported data, the researcher can only use what the interviewee remembers and perceives which can be distorted over time. By interviewing individuals

who were preparing to graduate or who had recently graduated from college this distortion was minimized.

Another limitation of this study is the researcher's cultural bias. The researcher lived in the region for 12 years and has many friends and family connections that identify themselves as Appalachian; however, she does not identify herself as Appalachian. She had to be continually cognizant not to project her own stereotypes and beliefs about Appalachian culture onto the Appalachian youths that she interviewed. Although there are some cultural norms, Appalachia is certainly no more culturally homogeneous than any other cultural region.

### **Delimitations**

This research was delimited to include the experiences of a small number of individuals from different areas of central Appalachia. Although the researcher hopes that their stories will reveal the reasons these students were able to go against the norm in their communities, therefore, giving schools ideas of how to encourage students in Appalachia and in poverty to attend college, the results are not applicable to every situation. More research would need to be done into the specific events that are identified as having an effect on the life course of these youths in order to establish a connection. A related delimitation is the characteristics of the participants. For inclusion in the study, the participants must have self-identified as Appalachian and have graduated from a high school located in the central Appalachian region, which includes the counties of West Virginia, Southeastern Ohio, and Eastern Kentucky. For this research, it was important that the participants view themselves as Appalachian, because the research questions focus on the experiences of Appalachian youths. If an individual lives within Appalachia but does not identify as Appalachian, their cultural values and experiences may

have no connection to those of Appalachian youths. Similarly, if an individual identifies as Appalachian but did not spend their school years in Appalachia, their experiences could be completely different, and it was the purpose of this research to identify experiences that the geographically-isolated Appalachian youth had that affected their life trajectories and sent them down the path of college attendance and graduation. Also, participants must have recently graduated or were preparing to graduate from a four-year college/university.

Although the life stories of the Appalachian youths interviewed would have been richer if supporting documents had been used, the researcher chose not to use those documents, due to the difficulty of obtaining them. The difficulty was due to school privacy policies, parents who either did not save documents or were unwilling to share them, and the extra burden on the Appalachian youths who had little ready access to those documents.

### **Definition of Terms**

***Appalachia:*** The Appalachian Region Commission defines Appalachia as:

The 205,000-square-mile region that follows the spine of the Appalachian Mountains from southern New York to northern Mississippi. It includes all of West Virginia and parts of 12 other states: Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. (“The Appalachian Region,” para.1)

Forty-two percent of the Region's population is rural, compared with 20% of the national population. However, this study focuses on the central region of Appalachia that includes West Virginia, southeastern Ohio, and Eastern Kentucky. The map on page four shows the central region to have the highest concentration of distressed and at-risk counties which leads to the hopelessness and debilitating place attachment.

**Success:** For the purposes of this study “success” is defined as having graduated from a four-year university or college.

**Online Presence/Communication:** By participating in online activities, such as blogging, creating websites, commenting on websites, engaging in chatrooms, and joining social media sites (such as Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and YouTube) individuals use technology to communicate with others or to express their opinions. This communication creates an online presence that is virtual and permanent. Another term that is often used is “computer mediated communication.” As the number of technological methods of communication has increased, this term has become less commonly used, but it generally refers to communication using video-conferencing platforms such as Facetime or Skype, as well as email. These types of communication require an online connection, but they are not permanent and do not contribute to an online presence.

**Life Events:** Within the context of life course theory, “life event” refers to any historical event, geographic factor, individual decision or life curve that influences the path a person’s life takes.

**Life Stories:** When used as a methodology a “life story” is the story a person tells about his or her life course in a specific moment. How he or she tells that story may change over time, but a story told during a specific time in response to a question or experience expresses an internalized understanding of the story’s relationship to the individual’s understanding of themselves at that point in time.

**Culture:** “Culture” is the shared attitudes, beliefs, traditions, customs, and values of a group of people.

**Community:** In the broadest sense, a “community” is any group of individuals who are interacting. Typically, communities are thought of as individuals who have a commonality or live in a common location. For the purposes of this research, a “community” includes a group of people who live near each other, a group who is bound by culture, and a group who interacts (the interaction could take place exclusively through digital means) based on a common interest.

**Place Attachment:** Used by behavioral scientists, “place attachment” describes an affective attachment to a geographical location. In Appalachian culture, the physical land is often thought of as being a physical part of the person. The attachment to place in Appalachia is both physical and emotional. The attachment is particularly to the land and to the mountains, but it can include the plants that grow on the land, the animals that are sustained by the land, the people who live off the land, and the structures that are built from the fruit of the land.

**Place Elasticity:** For the purposes of this research “place elasticity” refers to the ability of individuals who are living away from home to stay connected to their home and culture through the use of digital communication.

### **Summary**

Historically, the United States has supported the creation of institutions of higher learning with the purpose of encouraging the upward mobility of the lower classes and educating an electorate that was seen as necessary for a strong democracy. Many African-Americans and women have taken advantage of the opportunity to obtain higher education, and by doing so, have slowly increased their economic worth and financial stability. Research has clearly shown a connection between economic stability and

educational attainment, but those who live in Central Appalachia have fallen behind other groups and continue to live in precarious economic circumstances. Whether the cause of the inequity is culture or geography, Appalachian youths who have the desire to help themselves, their families, and their communities by obtaining a college degree should not be held back. This qualitative study used life course theory to focus, not on what is holding Appalachian youths back, but on identifying the experiences that encouraged them to attend and persist to college graduation. The study identified family, school, and community experiences that Appalachian youths considered to be influential in their decision to pursue postsecondary study. The research also examined whether technology played a role in their decision to attend and then stay at a postsecondary institution.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to analyze the life stories of first-generation college graduates from Appalachia in order to identify the experiences that encouraged them to attend and persist to college graduation. The study identified family, school, and community experiences that Appalachian youths considered to be influential in their decisions to pursue postsecondary study. The research also examined if technology played a role in their decisions to attend and then stay at a postsecondary institution.

The central region of Appalachia has been consistently designated as a region at risk due to its high poverty rate, which has led to widespread drug use, poor health, and high rates of teen pregnancy (Griffith, 2011; McCave & Shiflet, 2010; Paulozzi et al., 2009). Although past research has argued that these risk factors are actually the result of the region's dependency on coal mining (Billings, 1974; Narciso, 1998), more recent research has indicated that lack of educational attainment is responsible for the underdevelopment of central Appalachia. There are many factors that contribute to this lack of educational attainment. Some are certainly economic, but many are related to the unique culture that has developed over generations (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Snyder, 2007; Sohn, 2006). The factors include: a strong sense of family, a culture of poverty, an attachment to place, attitudes toward education, and definition of gender roles.

Like most regions in the United States, Appalachia is becoming increasingly diverse. However, due to the geographic isolation of the region, cultural development has occurred slowly. Central Appalachia is still mostly rural and its population is

overwhelmingly White at 93% (Pollard & Jacobsen, 2012). Their own cultural beliefs and isolation from a broader racial and cultural context create a fear of leaving home that most find insurmountable.

Some educators have found that technology can be used to mitigate the isolation and increase global awareness (Dressman, Journell, Babcock, Weatherup, & Makhoukh, 2012; Groenke, 2008; Kan, 2011). However, in many regions of Appalachia internet service is unavailable or only available as a dial-up service. Therefore, it is the public school system that often provides Appalachian youths with technology experience. Schools generally have Internet access due to government initiatives. Education has been shown to have a profound effect on ameliorating poverty and may be Appalachia's only hope for economic development and cultural survival.

The goal of this literature review is to examine studies that identify the cultural factors that impact an Appalachian youth's decision to attend college, identify how technology can be used to increase understanding of other cultures, identify how technology can be used to create and maintain connections across distances, and explain the theoretical framework and empirical literature related to life course theory and its four factors.

### **Cultural Factors Influencing College Attendance Decisions**

Although there has been little research into the cultural influences on an Appalachian's choice to attend college, there are two studies that sought to identify the factors that attributed to the success of first-generation Appalachian college students (Bradbury & Mather, 2009; Hand & Payne, 2008). Bradbury and Mather interviewed nine students, once at the beginning of the academic year and then again after their first

semester. Both qualitative studies were done with students currently enrolled in colleges located in the Appalachian region. The themes that emerged from these studies were the importance of family, the home culture, a sense of belonging, and financial issues. Hand and Payne, through interviews with 16 Appalachian youths, also identified relationships and emotional support, as well as communication of information, as factors that influenced students' academic persistence. Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) considered factors that influenced college aspirations of West Virginian high school students. Although their findings have some bearing on the current research project, they only looked at college aspirations, not actual attendance. In their survey of 242 students attending high school in rural West Virginia, students cited money/status most often as the reason for going to college and escaping as the least cited reason to attend college. Those who dismissed the idea of going to college most often cited a desire to stay close to home. The factors the researchers found that most influenced a student's college aspirations were parents' education attainment levels and father's occupation. In order to determine other factors that influence college attendance and persistence rates, future research needs to exclude students whose parents attended college.

Snyder (2007) expanded upon Chenoweth and Galliher's work by identifying specific cultural attitudes toward education that are barriers to college attendance: (a) families seem to have little understanding of the admissions process; (b) "the fear of the outsider," families tended to view their home county as safe, while the outside was scary and dangerous; therefore, going away to college would open their young people and their families up to undesirable people and activities; (c) they often hold the view that colleges are full of partying and rebellious teenagers; (d) they are also concerned with the

immediate necessity to earn money. Manual labor jobs that do not require an education are seen as preferable, because families who do not have extra money cannot perceive of spending money they do not have to make money later; (e) parents often viewed occupations in gender-specific ways; (f) lastly, the community is highly critical of individuals who attended college but failed to graduate. Because of the large number of drop-outs, college is seen as a risky enterprise that can bring ridicule from the community on the family.

Katherine Sohn's ethnographic study (2006) is the most recent research done on the effects of Appalachian culture on college attendance and persistence. One of the themes that emerged from her study was education as power. The women continually cited wanting to be somebody as a reason for attending college. Sohn found that these women felt that, before attending college, they had no voice in their community and no power to get a job beyond minimum-wage jobs in traditionally female occupations, like cleaning houses or waitressing. Interestingly, what Sohn found was that gender roles defined in Appalachian culture persisted even after college attendance. The women in Sohn's study felt that earning a college degree gave them more say in their communities, which gave them a voice in their children's education and gave them opportunities to help improve their communities. However, all of the women chose to stay in gender-specific roles, becoming teachers, nurses, and social workers. This notion of gender roles is very strong in Appalachian culture and affects men as well as women. Traditionally, literacy was seen as a woman's realm, because women often took on the tasks in the church that required some literacy. Young men in the region still often get the message that "book learnin' is for women." Men take care of their families by hunting, working in

the coal mines, or “driving something” (Sohn, 2006). Again, this researcher is not advocating for a change in Appalachian culture. It is an important part of the American fabric, and it is a collection of beliefs and values that define who these people are. However, the women in Sohn’s study discovered what Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) concluded, that education is the key to central Appalachia’s progress. None of the women in Sohn’s study left their home county. They used their education to improve their family’s financial situation and to improve their communities.

### **Place Attachment and Place Elasticity**

Despite a persistence of poverty and lack of economic opportunity, residents of this region often refuse to relocate. It is as if some omnipresent force shuns them from ever leaving. Perhaps the mountains are to blame. Dark and menacing, they discourage any thought of escape...In this land where inspiration is as scarce as income; they suffer the cyclical effects of poverty. (Snyder, 2007, p. 113)

The literary words of Appalachian writers such as Marilou Awiakta, George Ella Lyon, Artie Ann Bates, and Cynthia Ryland proclaim the importance of place to Appalachians and Appalachian culture. In Appalachian culture, the land is personified as having blood and bones; it is described as the sustainer of life and as being a physical part of the people who live there. Place attachment is defined as an emotional, cognitive, and behavioral bond with a physical place (Low, 1992). For social and behavioral scientists, this bond has often been considered to be important for a person’s well-being and sense of belonging (Gustafson, 2001; Hays, 1998; Malkki, 1992). This strong place attachment is an important part of Appalachian culture and should not be dismissed, but, with

increased global mobility and lack of economic development, Appalachian young people need options that will allow them to stay connected to their communities and to move where there are more economic and educational opportunities. Technology can provide such an opportunity.

Barcus and Braun (2010) conducted interviews with adults that identified as being Appalachian and found that technology can create a “place elasticity.” Those who lived outside of the region continued to feel connected to the region through the use of technology. Many of the respondents said they would move back to “the home place” if it were economically possible. They also reported reading the hometown newspaper online on a regular basis. Most expressed the desire to move home after retirement and almost all of the respondents said they planned to be buried in their home counties.

A study done in 2007 by Gilleard, Hyde, & Higgs of elderly people in England also shows that technology can mitigate the effects of place attachment. Individuals tend to become more place attached as they grow older, and place attachment is strongest when people perceive that they have limited opportunity to live elsewhere (Oswald, Hiever, Wahl, & Mollenkopf, 2005). However, elderly people who were given access to cell phones and the Internet were less likely to have a place attachment to their neighborhoods. They felt as if they were a part of communities outside of their physical communities, therefore, the place attachment that is often developed by elderly people is not due to a developmental process but a lack of access to a larger community. Once given the tools and skills to access the larger community, they began to form fluid community attachments. One would assume that the same would be true for young people who have a strong place attachment. If they are given the tools and skills they

need to connect to a larger community, they would form community attachments that are more fluid. However, they could also use the technology as a way of staying attached to their home communities and maintaining their cultural ties.

### **Using Technology to Narrow the Culture Gap**

A glance at how Appalachians are portrayed on television and in films such as *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia*, *Wrong Turn*, *Deliverance*, and the now defunct MTV reality series *Buckwild* illustrates the negative stereotypes and racist attitudes held in popular American culture about Appalachians. These attitudes are often internalized by Appalachian youths and create a divide between them and mainstream American culture, which isolates them from career and educational opportunities (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Klien, 1995; Porter, 1981). This belief that mainstream American culture sees them as hillbillies, rednecks, uneducated, and inbred creates a fear of interacting with individuals from the outside. Kan (2011) found that students who held preconceived notions about how others feel, think, and behave generally hold a preconceived idea of what others think of them. This has particular significance to the current study because, if Appalachian students perceive that the larger community has negative beliefs about their culture, then they are less likely to engage outside of their communities. Kan's research suggests that a way of combating the presumption that others hold negative and stereotypical beliefs about people from Appalachia is to first expose the students' inaccurate perceptions about others. Kan used video conferencing to combat the preconceived ideas his students had about people who lived in China.

Other educators have utilized computer-mediated communication technologies to combat this fear of the unknown and erroneous assumptions about other cultures and how

others view their culture. Ausband and Schultheis (2010) utilized Web 2.0 tools with pre-service teachers to address technology standards that require students to use current and emerging technologies to communicate and collaborate with individuals of different cultures, both locally and globally. An online survey was given in order to determine the pre-service teachers' attitudes about internationalization in teacher education and the students' Web 2.0 skill levels. The project began by having students create a profile on a discussion board and contacting their international partners through the discussion board, chats, and blogs. Students from different countries chose a common project and used a wiki (mixxt.com) to work together online. In 2009, the researchers used a similar process with another group of teachers and administered a pre- and post-test. They determined through descriptive statistics and constant comparison of qualitative data that, throughout the project, the pre-service teachers had improved their communicative competence in an international setting using Web 2.0 tools and that they had developed more positive attitudes toward people of other countries.

A similar study undertaken by Dressman, Journell, Babcock, Weatherup, and Makhoukh (2012) involves pre-service teachers videoconferencing with a group of Moroccan students. The authors found through the administration of an open-ended questionnaire that the American and Moroccan students came to the conversation with inaccurate beliefs about each other's culture and politics. After the 2-hour video conference, students' post-conference comments were analyzed, and the researchers found that a tolerance for each other's cultural and political beliefs was emerging. The videoconference technology provided an opportunity for the students to engage with a culture with which they had no prior experience. The computer-mediated face-to-face

conversation had the same effect on the students' understanding of complex cultural issues as many researchers have found physical face-to-face dialogues to have (Groenke, 2008).

A great deal of research has been done to show the effectiveness of technology in the teaching of foreign languages and global cultural awareness (Cunningham, Fagersten, Beers, & Holmsten, 2010; Dressman, Journell, Babcock, Weatherup & Makhoukh, 2012; Kan, 2011). There has also been a great deal of research done to show the positive effect that synchronous technologies have on the learning process (Bower, 2011; Groenke, 2008; Skylar, 2009; Smyth, 2011). However, there has been very little, if any, research on how the use of computer-mediated communication technologies can be used by public school teachers to mitigate the negative effects of cultural, economic, and geographic isolation that limits students' opportunities for higher education and economic prospects. Future research needs to be done that focuses on technologies used in K-12 education to determine if they have an effect on young people's views of their place in the larger social context.

### **Life Course Theory**

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, lives were studied in what Nisbet (as cited in Elder, 2009) terms the "timeless realm of the abstract." Social scientists often used cross-sectional surveys that provided a snapshot of a person's life. The effects of social structures on a person's life were considered, but only the structures that existed during that point in time. New scientific questions about health issues precipitated the emergence of longitudinal studies, but still little consideration was given to the social and historical impacts on the lives of those being studied. Elder approached his own research,

*Children of the Great Depression* (1974), by focusing on the social changes and life transitions experienced by the participants. Through that work, Elder identified four factors that affect life course and human development: historical and geographic location, social ties, human agency, and variations in timing. Giele, Professor Emeritus of sociology and women's studies at Brandeis University and co-editor of several books with Elder, expands Elder's original concept in two ways. First, Giele adds to the definitions of Elder's structural factors to include the concepts of diversity and equity. Second, Elder's original work utilized quantitative longitudinal data, but Giele found that her interest in the "relationship between the individual and the surrounding social structures" (Elder & Giele, 2009, p. 11) was more suited to qualitative methods. In order to analyze individuals' life stories through the lens of life course theory, Giele developed four functional factors which are related to each of Elder's structural factors: identity, relational style, drive and motivation, and adaptive style (Elder & Giele, 2009; Giele, 2008).

In life course theory, the term "life trajectory" refers to the path our lives take that is defined by the aging process (Elder, 1985). There can be multiple trajectories within a life course; for example, an individual could have career, family, educational, and artistic trajectories which could be studied independently. Trajectories are interspersed with events and transitions. Events are abrupt changes, while transitions are gradual changes within a trajectory. Although a research project may focus on a specific trajectory or span of time, the entire life span and the factors that influence it must be considered.

Research in the medical field has made extensive use of life course theory to identify inequitable conditions that have led to medical and emotional conditions (Black,

Davis, & Miles, 2009; Horrocks, 2002; Settersten & Mayer, 1997). Others have applied the life course paradigm to identify how the cumulative effects of individual access or lack of access to work, education, health services, and family produce group-level privilege or inequity (Elman & O’Rand, 2004; Prokos & Keene, 2012). Elder’s work consisted of longitudinal studies and survey data, but Giele expanded the use of life course theory by using qualitative methods of collecting and analyzing life stories.

### **Historical and geographic location (Identity)**

This principle is derived from the work of Ryder (1965) and Riley, Johnson and Foner (1972), who developed historical meaning from the year in which a person was born. As a member of a birth cohort, people experience many of the same historic events, but they experience them differently, depending on their geographic locations. For instance, most people living in 1963 were affected by the assassination of John F. Kennedy, but those effects were determined by their age when the assassination occurred and in what part of the country they lived. Individuals born after 1980 are said to belong to the digital generation. These digital natives have an understanding and interconnectedness with technology that the pre-1980 birth cohorts, or digital immigrants, do not (Prensky, 2001). However, those born in rural areas may have a different experience with technology than those born in urban areas. The difference could be caused by access issues or by cultural issues. Giele’s work (1995) includes the consideration of cultural background, because location is often a strong indication of culture (Titma & Tuma, 1995).

For example, the geographic isolation of Appalachia has produced a unique culture. One aspect of that culture that has been identified by several social scientists is

the tendency toward fatalism, or the tendency to live for the day and give little thought to the future (Bauer & Gorowick, 2003; Greelee & Lantz, 1993; Lemon, Newfield, & Dobbs, 1993). In his research, Phillips (2007) explored the connection between the geographically influenced characteristic of fatalism and an individual's identity style. He began by administering the Hopelessness Scale for Children (Kazdin, French, Unis Esveldt-Dawson, & Sherick, 1983) to a group of adolescents from Appalachia and to a similar group of adolescents who lived outside Appalachia. His findings concurred with earlier research that Appalachian adolescents tend toward fatalism. He then gave the same group of students the Identity Style Inventory (White, Wampler, & Winn, 1998). Overwhelmingly the Appalachian adolescents were found to have a diffuse-avoidant identity style, which is associated with procrastination, avoiding dealing with problems, an inability to adapt and negative life outcomes. Phillips concluded that there is a direct correlation between the diffuse-avoidant identity style and the cultural characteristic of fatalism that is found in the geographically isolated population of Appalachia.

### **Social Ties (Relational Style)**

Our lives are greatly influenced by the people around us, including family, friends, teachers, and neighbors. In Elder's study on children of the Great Depression, he compared how children in deprived families were changed by being forced to take on different roles, such as taking on household responsibilities or being sent to work, while children in non-deprived families maintained what Giele terms the "default role" (2009). This necessity to take on different roles changed the relationships they had with individuals within their social circles and greatly changed their life trajectories. Giele's study of feminist leaders (1995) shows how the women were influenced differently by

their family, friends, and religious organizations, which led to their focus on either charitable endeavors or political ones.

A study conducted by Huscheck, De Valk and Liefbroer (2011) also indicates a connection between social and cultural ties to the life course. The researchers used the data collected in a previous study of 438 Turkish and 425 Moroccan individuals who were second-generation immigrants in the Netherlands and 484 Dutch individuals to determine if the respondents' choices for mate were more influenced by their ethnic cultures or their social groups. The researchers found that the more socially embedded the youths were, the more likely they were to follow the marriage traditions of their Dutch peer groups than that of their ethnic groups.

For Appalachian youths who may be leaving home for the first time to attend college, maintaining their social ties is very important. In a study conducted by Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007), they found that Facebook can help college students maintain their offline community ties and create new ones. Of the 286 undergraduate students who completed an online survey, 96% reported that they used Facebook to stay in touch with high school friends and to strengthen ties with new friends with whom they shared an offline relationship, such as people who lived in the same dormitories or who they shared classes with. Those who had created these social ties reported being more satisfied with campus life and feeling less "friendsickness" by the separation from their old friends. Valenzuela, Park, and Kee (2009) found that, not only did using online social networks help college students maintain relationships and create new ones, but that those social ties increased their senses of well-being and their participation in their communities. Maintaining the old ties allowed the students to stay connected to a place

and to people with whom that they felt comfortable. That stable connection then allowed them to reach out to their new communities and become part of them as well. Other researchers have also found that similar types of technology can be used to maintain and enhance our social ties (Cummings & Kraut, 2006; Kavanaugh, Carroll, Rosson, Zin, & Reese, 2005).

### **Human Agency (Drive and Motivation)**

“Human agency” refers to an individual’s ability to make decisions that shape his or her life course. Our decisions are shaped by social constraints, economic pressures, and any number of factors, but we each have the ability to set goals and make decisions that set us on the path to achieving them. It is important when looking through the lens of life course theory to identify what our goal orientation is and what shaped it. Titma and Tuma (2007) used the unique circumstances of the breakup of the Soviet Union to study the effect that human agency in adolescents has on future success. Participants from Estonia were first interviewed at the age of 18, shortly before graduation from secondary school. They were again interviewed at ages 23, 28, 32, and 39. During the first stage of transition from Communism to a free market society, the lack of rules and oversight created an environment where there were lots of opportunities to create businesses and to obtain jobs in fields that may not have been open to everyone in the past. In the second stage, structures stabilized, and the opportunities to create businesses were controlled by government policies and regulations. Obtaining a job was more difficult, because factors such as education and experience became more important than just willingness to do the job. What Titma and Tuma found was that those who participated in the economic activity in the first stage, when human agency factors were

of most importance, were economically successful as middle-aged adults, even though they lived in a very different society from the one they grew up in. Earlier results had shown that those most willing to participate in the economic activities had, as adolescents, been recognized by their peers as leaders, showed good organizational skills, and completed their education. Therefore, Titma and Tuma concluded that a strong adolescent agency or identity has an enduring positive effect on later success.

### **Variations in Timing (Adaptive Style)**

As external events happen, people and groups must adapt to changing circumstances. In the terminology associated with this factor, “events” refer to those events happening to individuals, families, or social groups. They do not refer to historical events and an individual’s place within a time period. Here, the concept of time is chronological; it includes the ordering of events as they relate to age and age-related expectations. The timing of the loss of a job or loved one would call for the adaptation of an individual’s or family’s circumstances. Some of that change is passive, happening without any reaction, but it should also be active as individuals and groups make choices in order to adapt to a change.

For adolescents and young adults, the move towards independence is a time that requires a great deal of adaptation. Society has expectations as to the timing of this move into adult independence. For most western cultures, the age of 18 is the “magic number” when individuals seemingly overnight are expected to be independent adults. Children who are in residential care immediately age out of the system on their eighteenth birthday. Horrocks (2002) undertook a qualitative study of youths who were in care as teenagers and followed them through their transitions into independence. She used life

course theory to analyze the data she collected through a series of interviews with several youths. She was particularly interested in Peter, who had been identified by his caregivers as being “too young” to live on his own. Peter was happy in his stable residential placement. He expressed a great deal of affection for the caregivers, and them for him. But within one year of being required to move from that placement because of his chronological age, he became homeless, was admitted to a psychiatric hospital, and eventually landed in prison. By using the life course theory factors to analyze Peter’s life story, Horrock concluded that it was society’s expectation of timing and Peter’s inability to adapt that changed his life trajectory and took him down such a negative path.

A study by Schafer (2009) uses life course theory to identify the effect that the death of a parent has on an individual’s subjective age. A person’s subjective age is the age they report they feel, as opposed to their chronological age. Schafer used data collected by the National Survey of Midlife Development in the United States. Through a random digital-dialing procedure, the survey produced a sample of 2,643 people. Through the use of statistical analysis, Schafer concluded that the age at which a person’s mother died significantly altered the individual’s subsequent subjective age. Individuals who experienced the death of a mother before the age of 16 reported a subjective age 3.15 years older than those who did not experience the loss of a mother. Schafer did not find a significant effect on a person’s subjective age associated with losing a mother at ages beyond 16 on a person’s subjective age. Interestingly, the death of a father at any age did not affect an individual’s subjective age. In another study, Case and Ardington (2006) considered the effect parental death had on educational outcomes. The researchers used longitudinal data collected by the government of South Africa that

included information on all individuals residing within a surveillance site. They compared data that were collected in 2001 with data collected on the same children in 2003-2004. Case and Ardington found through statistical analysis that school-age children who lost their mothers had significantly lower educational attainment than did their peers. Although they fall short of proving a causal relationship because of the many other factors involved, it is apparent that a mother's death has a significant impact on a child's educational attainment and that the impact was greater for children between the ages of 6 and 10 than for children between the ages of 11 and 16. Therefore, the timing of the parental loss is integral to the understanding of its impact.

The timing of events in individual lives and our ability to adapt to those changes have a profound effect on our life trajectories. This emphasizes the importance of not only identifying the events that set individuals on the path toward college attendance but also identifying the timing of those events and identifying what types of experiences helped them to adapt to changing circumstances.

### **Summary**

Identifying the experiences that help Appalachian youths make the decision to attend college and to persist in college attendance requires that we first consider the cultural factors that influence those decisions. As a review of the literature reveals, the connection to family has a major influence on the decision to attend college. Many families do not value college education and discourage their youths from attending. Others discourage attendance because they believe their youths will be negatively influenced or that there simply is not enough money to attend. We also see through the literature that the Appalachian tendency toward fatalism and a belief in traditional gender

roles can also influence the decisions of Appalachian youths. In several studies, the simple notions of being afraid of the unknown and being afraid of being alone without family and friends was expressed. However, several researchers have studied the use of technology to combat these fears and have found that technology can be used to connect people to the larger world and to maintain important connections, even when at a great distance. Life course theory and life stories can be used to identify the factors that influenced an individual's decision to attend college and continue until graduation by chronicling the significant life events that steered an individual's life trajectory toward earning a college degree.

## CHAPTER THREE

### DESIGN OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to analyze the life stories of first-generation college graduates from Appalachia in order to identify the experiences that encouraged them to attend and persist to college graduation. The study identified family, school, and community experiences that Appalachian youth considered to be influential in their decisions to pursue postsecondary study. The research also examined if technology played a role in their decisions to attend and then stay at a postsecondary institution. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What life events do Appalachian youths identify as exerting a major influence on their ability to graduate from college?
2. What do the Appalachian youths perceive that their schools, families, and communities did that contributed to their success?
3. How do Appalachian youths describe their use of social media (i.e., Facebook), chatrooms, email, texting, and video chat (i.e., Skype or Facetime) in high school and college, and do those descriptions indicate a belief that online communication influenced their decisions to attend and then stay at a post secondary institution?

This chapter describes the how the interview instruments were designed and how the pilot study was conducted. It also explains how participants were selected, the methods used to collect the data, and how the data were analyzed.

## **Instrumentation**

### **Instrument Design**

In order to develop the interview protocol, the researcher considered each research question separately and developed questions that would elicit remarks that would help answer each research question. Although the researcher considered other qualitative research that used semi-structured interviews (Bradbury & Mather, 2009; Gilligan, 1993; Hard & Payne, 2008; Perry-Black, Holditch-Davis, & Miles, 2009; Sohn, 2006) due to limited research on the topic, there was not an existing protocol that the researcher could adapt; therefore, the instrument used was developed by the researcher. (See Appendix A). The questions were developed using the principles of Socratic questions (Paul & Elder, 2007) and essential questions (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006). The researcher considered if each question was open-ended, if it would elicit other questions, and if the question would provoke the participant to think more deeply about the issue being raised. If the question seemed to naturally elicit another question, that question was included in the protocol. The researcher also considered each question carefully for bias or leading phrases. After developing 20 questions, the researcher created a matrix that showed the relationship between the interview questions and the research questions. (See Table 1.) Upon doing this, it became apparent that there were more questions relating to research questions 1 and 2; therefore, questions 24-27 were added to enhance the data collection relating to research question 3.

After conducting the pilot study, which consisted of two interviews using the participant protocol and one using the family protocol, the interview protocol was refined by adding two more questions.

Question 6: What did teachers or your school do that encouraged you to go to college?

Question 11: When you were in high school, how did you think that outsiders viewed your culture? Did this perception change after you went to college?

The refined participant interview protocol used with the five participants consisted of 29 questions. (See Appendix A.)

The family interview protocol was developed after the participant questions were developed. (See Appendix B.) The purpose of those questions was to add data to the participant’s life story. As seen in Table 1, the family questions relate to the participant questions with the purpose of collecting pieces of information the participants may not tell about themselves or may not be aware of. The questions served to define the relationship between the parental figure and the participant, present a view of the community and the school from a different perspective, present the participant’s decisions and goals from a different perspective, and illuminate family values and beliefs about education of which the participant may not have specifically been aware.

Table 1

*Interview Questions as They Relate to Research Questions*

Research Questions	Corresponding Participant Interview Questions	Corresponding Family Questions
(1)What life events do Appalachian youths identify as exerting a major influence on their ability to graduate from	1. When did you know that you wanted to go to college? 2. What motivated you to go to college? 3. What made you decide on your chosen profession? 4. Before attending college did you visit any campuses? If so, please describe the experience. 5. Did anyone from a university visit your school? If so how old were you and what was the purpose and effect?	5. What do you think is the most important thing that ever happened to _____? 6. Did _____ like school? Why? 7. Was _____ good in school? Describe an event that makes you say they were/were not good in school.

college?	<p>6. What did teachers or your schools do that encouraged you to go to college?</p> <p>7. Were there times when you almost gave up and went home? If so, were those times due to pressures or events at home? Were they due to something going on at school? Please describe what made you feel that way.</p> <p>8. What made you change your mind?</p> <p>15. What types of experiences did you have traveling?</p> <p>16. What experiences do you believe helped you to be successful away from the community and culture you grew up with?</p>	<p>20. What would ____life be like right now if he/she had not gone to college?</p>
<p>(2) How do Appalachian youths describe the contributions made by their schools, families, and communities that contributed to their success?</p>	<p>9. Please describe the culture that you grew up in?</p> <p>10. How would you describe your connection to that culture?</p> <p>11. When you were in high school how did you think outsiders perceived your culture and did that change any after you went to college?</p> <p>12. In what ways are you connected to your home community?</p> <p>13. What other communities do you feel a part of?</p> <p>14. Do you have family that lives outside of Appalachia? If so who and how often were you in contact with them or visited them? In what ways did you stay in contact with them?</p> <p>17. Who, if anyone, had an influence on your success? How did they influence you?</p> <p>18. How do your friends and family back home feel about your success? Can you give me examples of the types of words or phrases they use when talking about your achievements?</p> <p>19. Comparing yourself to others in your high school that have not been able to take advantage of opportunities outside your community, what is it about you that makes you different?</p> <p>20. If you think about the characteristics that set you apart from other Appalachian youth, how did you develop those characteristics?</p> <p>21. When you were growing up did</p>	<p>1. What is your relationship to ____?</p> <p>2. Did you live with him/her or how often where you together?</p> <p>3. Give me three words that you think best describes ____?</p> <p>4. How do you think other people would describe ____?</p> <p>8. What type of friends did ____have?</p> <p>9. Was ____ involved in extracurricular activities? What?</p> <p>10. Describe an event involving the two of you?</p> <p>11. When did you know ____was going to go to college?</p> <p>12. Did you ever worry that ____wouldn't graduate from college? Why?</p> <p>13. Did you ever think that ____should not have gone to college? Why?</p> <p>14. How do you think ____feels about this community?</p> <p>15. Do you think ____ will ever want to come back and live here?</p> <p>16. Would you</p>

	<p>your family ever talk about education? What was their attitude toward basic education (K-12) and higher education?</p> <p>22. When you had difficulties at home or school how did you handle it? How did you learn to handle difficulties?</p>	<p>want _____ to come back and live here? Why?</p> <p>17. Are there people in your family or community who think _____ should not have left home to go to college?</p> <p>18. If so why do they feel that way?</p> <p>19. Do you think _____ having gone to college can help this community or your family in anyway? How?</p>
<p>(3) How do Appalachian youths describe their use of social media (i.e., Facebook), chatrooms, email, texting, and videochat (i.e., Skype or Facetime) in high school and college, and does that description indicate a belief that online communication influenced their decision to attend and then stay at a postsecondary institution?</p>	<p>23. What level of online presence do you have? Do you use Facebook, chat rooms, blogs Skype or other online social networks?</p> <p>24. How old were you when you had your first social network account?</p> <p>25. Please describe for me your online history.</p> <p>26. When you were in middle school and high school did your online communities include people who live outside of Appalachia?</p> <p>27. Did any of your teachers in elementary, middle or high school use communication technologies in the classroom? If so, please explain how they used them.</p> <p>28. While in college did you use technology to stay in touch with your friends and family home? If so, what technologies?</p> <p>29. While in college did you feel connected to your home community? What made you feel that way?</p>	<p>21. How much access to a computer and internet did _____ have?</p> <p>22. How often did _____ use social networks on their phone or computer?</p> <p>23. Were you ever aware of relationships they formed with people outside of the community? If so did they ever concern you?</p>

## **Pilot Study**

After receiving IRB approval, the researcher conducted a pilot study by interviewing two participants who met most of the criteria for the study but did not qualify for the study because of their ages. Each of the participants in the pilot study were known to the researcher prior to the study. They are both educators who have an awareness of Appalachian culture.

After conducting the semi-structured interview with each of the pilot study participants, the researcher compared the participants' answers and confirmed that the questions were eliciting comparable answers. The answers were also compared to the research questions. The researcher added two questions to ensure that the data needed to answer the research questions were collected.

Question 6: *What did teachers or your school do that encouraged you to go to college?* Was added because Question 2: *What motivated you to go to college?* Did not elicit any comments about what schools did to motivate them. The research question sought to find what family, communities and schools did to encourage college attendance so a specific question about schools became necessary.

Question 11: *When you were in high school, how did you think that outsiders viewed your culture? Did this perception change after you went to college?* Was added because when asked to describe their culture, in Question 9, the individuals who participated in the pilot interview were reticent. They were not quite sure how to answer the question, but when asked how others viewed their culture they quite easily described

the perception of Appalachian culture and then what they felt people got right or wrong and then how their views had evolved.

At the end of the interview the researcher asked the participants to critique the instrument for clarity and culture bias. The researcher was particularly concerned with cultural bias or assumptions that others may perceive in the questions. Both of the individuals interviewed felt that the questions were clear and had not felt that they were being led toward an answer or that the interviewer had a predetermined agenda.

Researchers are concluding that online video interviews function in the same way as face-to-face interview, particularly with younger participants who are accustomed to communicating online. They also cite convenience and cost-effectiveness as reasons to use online video chat (Hanna, 2012; Sullivan, 2012). The researcher conducted one of the interviews using Skype in order to ensure that the technology would function correctly and to assess the impact that the use of the technology would have in the interview. The Skype interview was effective and did not affect the outcome of the interview, as evidenced by the comparison of the Skype interview with the face-to-face interview. Each interview took approximately the same amount of time. The interviewees were equally comfortable, and both interviewee and interviewer were engaged in the discussion.

A family member of one of the pilot study participants was also interviewed. The questions elicited the information the researcher had expected and the family member was unable to offer any critique. Therefore, the researcher sought the advice of a colleague who is the mother of an Appalachian youth and a teacher. After piloting the

protocol the colleague helped the researcher refine the questions for clarity but no questions were added.

## **Participant Selection**

### **Method: Snowball Sampling**

In order to identify the desired population, a snowball sampling procedure was used. Snowball sampling is a link-tracing methodology and is used when attempting to identify a hidden population (Spren, 1992). In the context of this research, the population is hidden because universities do not track which of their students are Appalachian. The technique works when a participant shares with the researcher the name of another person who could potentially be included in the study. That person in turn shares the name of another person until an adequate sample is established. Snowball sampling has the advantage of being economical and efficient. A broad sample can be established quickly and with little cost, but, most importantly snowball sampling is used when it is important to establish trust between the researcher and the participant. Because the referrals are made by peers, the individual is more likely to respond to the researcher's initial contact than to a formal request from an unknown source (Atkinson & Flint, 2001).

For inclusion in the study, the participants met the following criteria: they must (a) self-identify as Appalachian; (b) have graduated from a high school located in the central Appalachian region which includes the counties of West Virginia, Southeastern Ohio, and Eastern Kentucky; (c) have recently or be preparing to graduate from a four-year college/university; and (d) be a first-generation college graduate. Individuals who were raised in Appalachia, but whose parents are not from Appalachia, and individuals who

graduated from a high school in Appalachia, but did not live most of their life in that county or an adjacent county, were not included in the study.

## **Procedures**

A group of five Appalachian youths who are of the first generation in their families to attend college and who have received or are about to receive a 4-year degree were identified, as was one family member for each participant who contributed to the participant's life story. This group was identified by contacting basic education teachers, college professors, and university administrators who live within the central Appalachian region, by email, text, and telephone. Upon contacting the educators, the researcher explained the purpose of the research and the criteria for participation. Then the researcher asked the educators to contact students who they believe met the criteria. The researcher emailed to the educators information that explained the research, the criteria for participation, and participant expectations that the educators could share with potential participants. The researcher asked the educators to share this information with any individuals they contacted and to gain permission to share with the researcher the potential participant's contact information. In most cases the educator gave the potential participant the researcher's email address, and they contacted the researcher.

The researcher received over 30 emails from individuals interested in participating in the study and the contact information of ten other potential participants. Initially, the researcher emailed informed consent forms for both the potential participants and their family members (See Appendices C and D) and the demographic survey (see Appendix E) to potential participants and asked them to read, sign, and send them back via email. None of the potential participants who received the documents via email responded.

Realizing potential participants were not going to return the consent forms via email, the researcher asked potential participants for physical addresses so that she could mail the informed consent forms and demographic surveys with a SASE. Many did not respond to that request. A few responded that they either did not meet the criteria or they did not have time to participate. Eventually, five people who met the criteria mailed back the informed consent form and the demographic survey. After receiving the informed consent form and the demographic survey via mail the researcher reviewed the demographic survey to confirm that the potential participant met the research criteria. Then the researcher contacted the potential participant via email to set up an interview. During this contact the researcher also asked potential participants to identify other individuals that might meet the criteria and obtain permission for the researcher to contact them.

The researcher continued to use the snowball sampling procedure until enough individuals who met the criteria and were willing to participate in the study were identified. A total number of five participants and five family members participated in the study.

## **Data Collection**

### **Method: Semi-Structured Interview**

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with participants and a family member of each of the five participants. The use of a semi-structured interview (see Appendix A) allowed the participants to interpret questions more freely and to expand upon their answers. It also allowed the interviewer to respond to the participants' answers by asking follow-up questions and/ or clarifying questions that revealed valuable

information (Gilligan, 1996). In addition to the interviews conducted with the participants, a family member designated by each participant was also interviewed using a semi-structured approach. (See Appendix B.) The purpose of including this interview was to add to the life story and gain a perspective of how the family members felt about the participant attending college. Having a second source of data to compare with the initial data provided by the Appalachian youths improved the trustworthiness of the findings. Four of the participants chose their mothers to be interviewed; one chose an uncle. The close-knit family dynamic in Appalachian culture makes their attitudes towards education and their perceptions of the life events and transitions that affected the participants' life trajectories an integral part of the participants' life stories (Bradbury & Mather, 2009; Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Hand & Payne, 2008; Snyder, 2007).

### **Procedures**

After receiving informed consent forms from the participants and from family members, the researcher contacted the participants to set up interviews. The researcher offered to travel to conduct face-to-face interviews, but the participants preferred to do the interview using Skype, except Alice's uncle, who chose to do a phone interview. The researcher sent each of the participants a request through Skype to connect to their networks. At the designated time the researcher called the participants. Consistency of the data was ensured by asking each participant the same primary questions. Clarifying questions were asked during the interview as needed.

The first three participants and their parents chose to do the interviews at the same time. Elle and her mother stayed on-camera during both interviews. The other pairs had the mother go first and then the participant. During all six interviews, the participants

and their parents prompted each other when they felt a detail was left out or when the person being asked the question was struggling to find an answer. However, with Samantha and Chase, this interaction was very limited, because their mothers were not in the same room, but could be heard at times commenting on questions or responses. This interaction was not anticipated by the researcher, but the researcher allowed it because it made the participants feel more comfortable, it yielded data that may not have been collected and it served as a member check (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The last two participants were interviewed at different times from their family members. Lisa also chose to have her mother interviewed, but Alice chose to have her uncle interviewed.

### **Data Analysis**

The data collected were analyzed using the structural factors common to life course theory, which are historical and geographic location, social ties, human agency and variations in timing (Elder, 2009), and the functional factors which are identity, relational style, drive and motivation and adaptive style (Giele, 2008). The life course framework facilitated the identification of themes within each case. Those themes were compared across-case in order to identify the events that are most likely to influence an Appalachian youth's decision to attend college and persist in their postsecondary endeavors.

### **Use of Life Stories**

Life stories can take the form of autobiographies, interviews, oral histories, memoirs, and any other format that is narrative. For the purposes of this research, interviews were used to construct life stories. The advantage to using life stories is that

each story is in the present. As Mishler (2004) points out, stories change over time, but a story told in a moment in response to a specific question or experience expresses an internalized understanding of the story's relationship to the individual's definition of self. A famous example of this phenomenon is the telling of Malcolm X's story to Alex Haley. Malcolm told his story to Haley over a period of years. The early story of Malcolm's life was told in retrospect, but a great deal of the story was told in the present. Later, when Malcolm changed his beliefs about Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam, he wanted to change the story. Haley recounts the conversation in the afterward of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Malcolm saw his life course on a different trajectory than he had when he originally told his story. The events and transitions in his life took on new meaning. Haley refused to change the story because he wanted readers to understand how Malcolm defined himself in those moments, not retrospectively.

Asking Appalachian youths who are about to graduate from college, or who have recently graduated from college, to tell their life stories allows the researcher to identify what events and transitions the participants believe motivated them at the time of realizing this significant achievement. This is important; asking them the same questions earlier might elicit a different response, because the students may not be aware of what it really takes to earn a college degree. Asking graduates years later could also change the story. Other events, like earning graduate degrees, having children, or experiencing loss could take on more significance and obscure the parts of the life story that are of most concern for this research.

Also, the use of life stories, a qualitative approach, reveals patterns that quantitative approaches, such as surveys, cannot. Surveys use a fragmented approach

focusing on predetermined variables, whereas the life story method is designed to allow the respondent to delineate what is important (Giele, 2009). For this research, that freedom was important, because there has been so little research done on the factors that influence Appalachian youths' choices to go to college that choosing what variables to study would have been at best guesswork.

### **With In-Case and Across-Case Analysis**

A within-case analysis is characterized by close reading and allows the researcher to consider the story as a whole. Ayres (Ayres, Kavanaugh, & Knafl, 2003) describes her use of within-case and across-case analysis as a back-and-forth reflection and reinterpretation. In this research, life course theory provided the framework for emerging patterns, but a within-case analysis allowed the researcher to identify which of the factors is most influential on Appalachian youth's decision making, while an across-case analysis identified the commonalities. In Ayres' research, she found that people often contradict themselves, but, by considering the story as a whole and by using this method of back-and-forth reflection with in-case analysis and across-case analysis, she was able to tease out implicit themes and patterns. Although life course theory provided a general framework, the back-and-forth reflection facilitated the sifting of data within those major themes to reveal implicit data and commonalities that were not immediately evident.

### **Procedures**

To begin the data analysis process, a within-case analysis was performed. Each interview was read several times. For the purposes of the within-case analysis, the interviews of each participant and the participant's family member were considered one dataset (Elder & Giele, 2009; Hatch, 2002; Mishler, 2004). After reading through the

interviews several times, the researcher marked places within the data that represented major life events or a shifts in the participant's life trajectory as it related to college attendance. (See Table 2.) This process of restorying identified life events the participants had in common and experiences that were unique to their stories (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002).

A typological approach was used to analyze the data from the five semi-structured interviews across-case (Hatch, 2002). First, four typologies were chosen from the factors common to life course theory: historical and geographic location (identity), social ties (relational style), human agency (drive and motivation), and variations in timing (adaptive style) (Elder, 2009; Giele, 2008). Then, the researcher read through the first transcript and marked data that related to the first category. Each transcript was read and marked for the first category. Next, the marked data were copied to a new document. The original document was left intact so that the entire document could be analyzed when considering the successive categories. After the five interviews were marked and the identified data were copied into a new document, the researcher repeated the procedure for the next three typological categories. Once the data were organized by categories, the data in each category was read and similarities between participants' comments began to emerge. In order to establish patterns, the data were coded. In the first category, Historical and geographic location (Identity), four codes were used: HE-historical event, C-cultural content, UE-unique event, and T-travel. In the second category, Social Ties (Relational Style), four codes were used: PI-people who influenced them, ST-social ties, CV-cultural view, and SS-school support. The third category, Human agency, was coded using two codes: MC-motivation to attend college, and MP-motivation to pick

profession. The last category, Variations in Timing (Adaptive Style), was coded using two codes: LCE-life changing events, and CA-common attitudes. Lastly, representative quotes were chosen that supported each emerging pattern.

### **Trustworthiness and Validity of Data Collection and Analysis**

In qualitative research rigor is ensured by establishing trustworthiness and validity of the research. Several models are commonly used; however, Krefting (1991) summarizes the strategies into four basic categories: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. To ensure trustworthiness and validity of the study the researcher used strategies from each category: data triangulation, rich description, dense description of methods, member check and reflexivity.

#### **Data Triangulation**

Within the category of credibility is the strategy of triangulation of data sources. This strategy is based on “the idea of convergence of multiple perspectives for mutual confirmation” (Krefting, 1991, pg. 219). Each interview conducted serves as a separate data source. According to Johnson (1997) the use of multiple interviews that can be compared for commonalities is data triangulation. In addition to the interviews the researcher also used demographic data that was compared to the data collected through interviews.

#### **Rich Description**

A rich description allows the reader to make a judgment as to whether the information presented is transferable. Although qualitative researchers are generally not interested in generalizability many readers will be interested in what Lincoln and Guba

(1985) call “fittingness”. A rich description allows other researchers to see how the information presented can fit the populations they are researching.

The description was enhanced by the use of restorying (Mishler, 2004; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). Restorying helped the researcher identify the important moments in each participant’s life by combining the data from the participants’ interviews and the data from the participant’s parental figure. Placing the data into a restorying matrix facilitated the juxtaposition of the participant’s life stories which revealed commonalities. Also enhancing the rich description, is the demographic data presented about the participants’ schools and communities.

### **Dense Description of Research Methods**

In order to ensure the dependability of the findings Guba (as cited in Krefting, 1991) suggests that a detailed description of the data gathering and analysis must be provided. Unlike quantitative research methodological descriptors do not exist for qualitative research. Each situation is unique and the description in qualitative research should be dense enough for the reader to determine if the research is repeatable. In this chapter the researcher has provided a detailed explanation of how participants were selected, data were collected, and how data were analyzed.

### **Member Check**

The researcher emailed each person interviewed a copy of their transcribed interview and ask them to review it for accuracy. This member check allows those interviewed to revise or add information that more accurately expresses the message they wish to convey and addresses the limitations of using recalled events by giving the participant an opportunity to reflect on their answers (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

## **Reflexivity**

In qualitative research the researcher is part of the research not just an observer. Therefore, it is important that the researcher be reflexive. Ruby (1980) described the process of reflexivity as the researcher's evaluation of the effect their background, perceptions and beliefs have on the research. The idea of the researcher as neutral is a myth so qualitative researchers ensure trustworthiness by analyzing their place in the research. This researcher's connection to Appalachia certainly influenced the study, but she was aware of that influence from the beginning and it informed her process. She asked colleagues to review her interview protocol, the interviews were recorded and then transcribed by a transcriptionist who is unfamiliar with the participants and their families this helped to ensure confidentiality and accuracy (see Appendix F for transcription guidelines), she informed the reader of potential bias in the limitations and ultimately she positioned herself by presenting to the reader a reflection that outlined her background, perceptions and connection to the subject.

## **Protection of Human Subjects**

A protocol for this study was submitted and approved by the Institutional Review Board. A copy of the letter for informed consent signed by individuals who were interviewed is included in Appendix C. In order to ensure confidentiality, transcripts of interviews will be retained in the researcher's home office for three years, and a pseudonym was used for each interviewee.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### PRESENTATION OF DATA AND ANALYSIS

Using a qualitative approach, this study used life course theory (Elder & Giele, 2009) as a framework in order to identify the experiences that encouraged first-generation college graduates from Appalachia to attend and persist to college graduation. The research questions were:

1. What life events do Appalachian youths identify as exerting a major influence on their ability to graduate from college?
2. How do Appalachian youths describe the contributions made by their schools, families, and communities that contributed to their success?
3. How do Appalachian youths describe their use of social media (i.e., Facebook), chatrooms, email, texting and video chat (i.e., Skype or Facetime) in high school and college, and does that description indicate a belief that online communication influenced their decisions to attend and then stay at a postsecondary institution?

The data were analyzed by using the within-case method of restorying as described by Mishler (2004) and Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002). The researcher also used the method of back-and-forth reflection as described by Ayers (2003) to increase reliability and credibility of the data. An across-case analysis was done using Hatch's (2002) typological method. In this method, the data were first organized into categories and then coded so that patterns, relationships and/or themes may emerge.

This chapter includes a narrative for each of the participants detailing the significant events in their lives and a theoretical analysis of the data.

## **Narrative of Participants Lives and Demographic Data**

The participants in this study were raised in rural counties of West Virginia, Kentucky, and Ohio table 2 provides demographic data for each of the counties from which the participants in this study lived. For comparison, the average in each category for the Appalachian region and the United States is provided. As evident from table 2 Samantha and Elle lived in the largest counties with populations of 79,499 and 62,450 respectively. On the other hand Chase lived in the smallest county, Magoffin County, KY, which has a population of 13,333. To put that in perspective, Kanawha County, the largest county in West Virginia, has a population of 193,000. The largest county in Ohio, Franklin County, has a population of 1.2 million and the largest county in KY, Jefferson County, has a population of 109,000. Also noteworthy is that all but one of the participants (Alice) lived in counties that had significantly lower high school graduation rates than the national average, but they are similar to the average in the Appalachian region. However, Chase lived in a county that had a drastically lower graduation rate than the Appalachian region.

A comparison of the 2000 census data with the 2010 census data showed an increase in high school graduation rates across the board as well as an increase in college graduation rates. However, the increase in college graduation rates has not kept up with the increase in high school graduation. For example, Magoffin County, which in ten years saw a 14% increase in high school graduation rates, only saw a 3% increase in college graduation rates. However, that is in line with the increase seen across the country. The increase of college graduation rates in the participants' counties range from

2.6% to 4.4%. The increase in the Appalachian region is 3.5% and in the US the rate of college graduation increased 3.8%.

The table also includes the per capita income of each of the counties. The Appalachian region as a whole falls below the national average, however, many places in Appalachian are substantially lower than the Appalachian region’s average income. Magoffin County, KY, the County where Chase grew up, only has a per capita income of \$23, 923. Marion County, the County where Alice grew up, has a highest per capita income than the Appalachian region’s average at \$34,000. Marion County is not far from Pittsburgh and is close to Morgantown where West Virginia University is located. These two factors certainly have a positive effect on the economy of that area.

Table 2

*U.S. Census Bureau Data for Participants Home Counties*

	Lawrence County, Ohio (Elle)	Scioto County, Ohio (Sam)	Magoffin County, KY (Chase)	Randolph County, WV (Lisa)	Marion County, WV (Alice)	Appalachian Region	United States
Population (2010)	62,450	79,499	13,333	29,405	56,418	25,243,456	308,745,538
Per capita Income (2010)	\$29,243	\$27,953	\$23,923	\$29,588	\$34,000	\$32,645	\$39,937
Percentage of U.S. Average	73.2%	70.0%	59.9%	56.3%	86.8%	81.7%	100%
Unemployment Rate (2011)	8.4%	12.1%	16.6%	9.6%	6.7%	8.9%	8.9%
Poverty Rates (2011)	17.4% (122% of U.S. average)	21.8%	30.0%	18.4% (128% of U.S. average)	16.6%	16.1%	14.3%
Percent Completed High School (2000)	75.6%	74.1%	50.1%	73.5%	79.5%	76.8%	80.4%
Percent Completed High School	82.7%	80.9%	64.7%	82.0%	85.3%	85.5%	85.4%

(2011)							
Percent Completed College (2000)	10.3%	10.1%	6.3%	13.6%	16.0%	17.6%	24.4%
Percent Completed College (2011)	12.9%	13.2%	9.4%	18.0%	19.3%	21.1%	28.2%
County Economic Status (2012)	At Risk	At Risk	Distressed	Transitional	Transitiona 1		

The participants in this study are representative of the population’s economic situation. Although there are differences in the families’ economic situations none of the participants came from a privileged background. Although the participants were not asked about their families finances two of the participants volunteered that their families relied on public assistance. None of the parents had professional jobs they were coal miners, railroaders and steel mill workers. Only one of the mothers worked outside of the home and she worked in the school cafeteria. Each of the participants relied on grants, loans and scholarships to pay for college. Although all of the families gave the participants moral and emotional support none were in a position to support them financially through college.

**Elle’s Story**

Elle is a 20-year-old African-American female who is currently attending a mid-sized public university in northern Ohio. Elle is studying Fashion Merchandising and chose Kent State primarily because of that program. She was born and raised in Ironton, Ohio, a small town near the Ohio River, located in Lawrence County. Although most of Lawrence County is rural, Ironton is the county seat and is considered to be a small city with a population of 1,139 (2010). Lawrence County has 62,450 residents with a per capita income of \$29,243. This is slightly lower than the average per capita income in

Appalachia but only 73% of the US average. In 2011, the poverty rate was 17.4%, which is slightly higher than the average poverty rate in Appalachia and 122% of the U.S. average. Only 82% of the residents in the county have graduated from high school, and 13%, up from 10% in 2000, hold a college degree. (See Table 2.) Approximately 5% of Lawrence County residences are non-White and 6% of Ironton's residents are non-White (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2012).

This created a community at Ironton High School, the high school Elle attended, that is unique in Appalachia. Ironton High School has approximately 500 students with a graduating class each year of approximately 100. Elle graduated in the top 25% of her class. While in high school, Elle was very involved in the band and met lots of people at competitions and band camps with whom she continues to stay in contact. Elle is a very outgoing and social person who was universally liked by her classmates. During the summer between her junior and senior years in high school, Elle got the opportunity to attend a weeklong camp on the Ohio State University campus. She met many new friends from all over the state and made several contacts that helped her to identify her career opportunities. Elle said that before she attended the camp she had no idea what to study in college. She knew she loved design but could not conceive of how someone got into that world or what types of jobs were available. Being from such a small town limited her perception, but she came into her senior year knowing what she wanted to do and determined to get into the college of her choice.

Elle's father's family is from the town she was raised in, but very few of them are still living. Her mother's family is from the Louisa, Kentucky, area, which she describes as, "really country." Although her father had other children, Elle was raised as an only

child to older parents. In high school, she was an average student more interested in band than academics but is currently doing very well in her courses at Kent State. Dawn is Elle's mother; she describes Elle as quiet, extremely intelligent, kind-hearted, and talented. Dawn is from Louisa, KY and married Elle's father after she was in the military for several years. She describes herself as "an older parent." She did not attend college but has always wanted Elle to have the opportunity. She describes her family as being very supportive of Elle's decision to attend college but notes that none of her cousins went to college. Most of Dawn's family still lives in Louisa, which she also describes as "very country." Dawn is a very active member of the band boosters. She traveled with Elle on every school trip and attended every parent-teacher conference. She is one of the mothers that other kids came to when they needed a ride or something to eat.

### **Samantha's Story**

Samantha is a 27-year-old Caucasian female who recently graduated from a small public university in southern Ohio where she studied elementary education. She was born and raised in Scioto County, Ohio. Scioto County has 79,499 residents with a per capita income of 27,953, which is only 70% of the U.S. per capita average income. In 2011, the poverty rate was 22%, which is substantially higher than the U.S. poverty rate of 14%. The average high school completion rate of 80% is improved from the 2000 average of 74% but is still below the U.S. average of 85%. Similar to Lawrence County, 13% of Scioto County residents hold a college degree. (See Table 2.) Ninety-four percent of residents in Scioto County identify as White and 2.7% identify as African-American. The other 3% identify as various categories (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2012). Samantha graduated from Northwest High School in 2004. According to the

Ohio Department of Education, the high school has 465 students enrolled. Currently, 99% of the students identify as White. Samantha was an honors student and graduated 11<sup>th</sup> in her class. She was also very involved in band. Her mother was a band booster and often traveled with the band to games and competitions. She is also very involved in her church. She often teaches Sunday School and Vacation Bible School.

Samantha's father's family is originally from Martinsburg, Kentucky, and her mother's family is from West Virginia. Samantha lives with both of her parents and was raised as an only child. She has three brothers, all of whom left home before she was ten. Her father works on the railroad, as do two of her brothers. Samantha began college right out of high school. At first, she thought she wanted to be a physical therapist, but she soon realized it was not really what she wanted to do. After becoming pregnant, she quit school and got married. Samantha says she could have continued going to school but she used the pregnancy as an excuse to quit, because she just did not know what she wanted to study. After getting a divorce, she realized she wanted to become a teacher, so she moved back home and began taking courses. She never looked back. During her second year, her mother was diagnosed with cancer. It was a very difficult time, but this time, Samantha was determined to finish college: "I knew that if I had a college education, I would be able to support my kids and give them a better life." Even though she had to help her mother who was less available to help with the kids, she persevered. She noted a professor who told her, "You can do anything, as long as you know how long it's going to last. You have 15 weeks, and then it is going to be over." Each semester Samantha just kept telling herself, "I can do anything for 15 weeks and then it is going to be over."

Lynn is Samantha's mom who describes her as enthusiastic, friendly, good-

natured and hard working. She is married to Samantha's father, and they have four children. Their three oldest children are boys who are much older than Samantha. Her husband is retired from the N&S Railroad. The three boys do not hold bachelor's degrees, although the oldest went to college and taught in a private school for a few years before taking a job on the railroad. The second joined the Marines and then took a job on the railroad. The third completed an associate's degree and works at AK Steel in Ashland, KY. Samantha hopes to stay close to home and has applied for a position in the school district from which she graduated.

### **Chase's Story**

Chase is a 25-year-old Caucasian male who recently graduated from mid-sized public university in eastern Kentucky with a degree in Physical Education. He was born and lived his entire life in Magoffin County, Kentucky. Magoffin County is a rural area located in the eastern part of Kentucky about 100 miles east of Lexington. With a population of 13,333, Magoffin County is the smallest and most rural of the counties the participants in this study are from. The per capita income of \$23,923 is only 60% of the U.S. average. In 2011, the poverty rate was 30%, which is twice that of the U.S. poverty rate. Only 65% of those living in the county have graduated from high school, but this is a marked improvement from 50% in 2000. The college graduation rate increased three percentage points to 9% in 2011, but it is still woefully below the national average of 28%. (See Table 2.) Exactly 98.6% of Magoffin County identified as White in the 2010 U.S. census (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2012). Chase does not recall anyone of color attending his high school; "When I was in high school, we didn't have any Hispanics or African-Americans or anything. It was just White." Magoffin County High

School has 624 students. While in high school, Chase was an average student but was interested in computers and played football. After high school, he attended a technical college and then a community college near his home. He completed an associate's degree but still was not satisfied with his job opportunities. After coaching Little League, he realized he wanted to become a physical education teacher. He took a semester off and began attending Morehead State University in the fall.

Chase's mother is a single parent and he is an only child. While Chase was growing up, he and his mother lived with his grandmother and grandfather. Both Chase and his mother describe the grandfather as a father figure for Chase. Chase's grandfather died a few months before this interview. In elementary and middle school, Chase was a very good student, but his grades began to slip in high school. Chase had some issues with being bullied, and, at one point he asked his grandparents to let him home school.

Charla is Chase's mom who describes him as "very intelligent," "well-respected," and "awesome." Charla was not married to Chase's father, and they did not live together, but Charla says that Chase was very affected by his father's death. Charla has always lived at home with her parents and continued to do so after Chase was born. She has lived in a rural area of Magoffin County her entire life. Due to injuries sustained in a car accident Charla is unable to work outside of the home and finds it difficult to be out in crowds but always attends Chase's functions.

### **Lisa's Story**

Lisa is a 21-year-old Caucasian female who is a senior at a large public university in West Virginia. Lisa is studying Biology with a minor in Microbiology. She was born in Elkins, West Virginia, and lives in Mill Creek, a small rural town of 720 residents in

Randolph County, WV. Randolph County is located in the eastern part of the state approximately two hours south of Morgantown, WV. Randolph County has a population of 29,000 with an average per capita income of \$29,588. In 2011, the poverty rate was 18%, which is 2% higher than the average in the Appalachian region and 128% of the U.S. average. Recent census data shows that 82% of the residents have graduated from high school, which is a marked improvement from the 73% recorded in 2000. Only 18% of the residents hold a college degree, which is 10% lower than the national average (See Table 2). Ninety-seven percent of the population is White (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2010), and Lisa remembers only two students in her high school who were non-White. Lisa graduated salutatorian in a graduating class of 76. She achieved all As in high school, but her best friend, the valedictorian, beat her by .001 point.

In the second grade, Lisa attended a summer camp that encouraged her to read. After that experience, she read all the time in order to escape her small town. Her mother stayed at home until Lisa went to school, but, at a very young age, she was left to get on the bus by herself and was often at home by herself. Lisa has three siblings, but they are much older. She feels that she had to be independent at a very young age, and that is what made her success in college a lot easier. Lisa was involved in the band and traveled all over West Virginia. She made many friends during those trips and continues to use social media to stay in touch with them. She realized early in her high school career that in order to make something of herself she would need to attend college. At first, she thought she wanted to be a doctor, but, after attending a summer program at West Virginia University, she realized that she wanted to do research instead. She will

graduate in the spring of 2014 and hopes to attend graduate school at Penn State University.

June is Lisa's mom who described her as "wonderful," "delightful" and "brilliant." Neither June nor her husband attended college. June's family is all from Randolph County, and Lisa is the first person in her family to attend college, but she says they are all very proud and excited about Lisa's accomplishments. June is still having a very difficult time with Lisa leaving home, but she knows that, in order for Lisa to be successful, she will probably have to permanently leave West Virginia. "The individuals Lisa graduated with who did not go to college are mostly now married with kids and living on minimum wage jobs." She believes Lisa has had a profound effect on her niece and expects that she will soon go off to college as well. She is clearly heartbroken that her youngest daughter, and the one she feels closest to, has left home and will not be returning, but she feels that it is her only choice, and she accepts that Lisa is different from her other children and that she has a drive and desire to be someone and make something of herself.

### **Alice's Story**

Alice is a 21-year-old Caucasian female who is a senior at a large public university in West Virginia. She is currently studying Environmental Natural Resources Economics but hopes to attend graduate school and eventually become a professor and teach introductory economics. Alice was born and lives in Fairmont, West Virginia, which is in Marion County. Marion County is in the Northern part of the State, and Fairmont is a small city of 18,000, which is located approximately 20 minutes from Morgantown. Its close proximity to WVU has an obvious effect on the economics and

education of the county. The average per capita income of \$34,000 exceeds the average income in the Appalachian region but is still below the national average of \$39,937. The unemployment rate in Marion County is low at 6.7%. The poverty rate is very close to the average poverty rate in Appalachia at 16.6%, but it is 2.3% higher than the national average and is quite a bit lower than the averages for the counties of the other participants. It is not surprising, then, that the high school graduation rate is on par with the national rate and that the college graduation rate at 19.3% is higher than most other Appalachian counties. However, it is still substantially lower than the national rate of 28.2% (See Table 2). Ninety-four percent of Marion County is White and 3.5% are African-American. In the city of Fairmont, 88% are White and 8% are African-American (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2010). Although only a small percentage of non-Whites live in Marion County, it is significant for West Virginia and Appalachia. Alice graduated 12<sup>th</sup> in her class of 178 from Fairmont High School.

Alice's father committed suicide when she was very young. Although she did not mention it, her uncle spoke about it in his interview. She describes her mother as an "alcoholic and a drug user, who was married six times." Alice describes her home environment as "manipulative, degrading, and destructive." At 15, Alice and her sister went to live with her grandparents, but her sister soon chose to return home to live with her mother. Alice believes it was her choice to stay with her grandparents that changed her life course: "When I moved out, I changed myself completely." Her sister had two children very young; she also used drugs and does not work. Alice hopes that her example will affect her niece and nephew and, in that way, she can break the cycle.

While in high school, Alice played volleyball and softball. This gave her an opportunity to be around other families and it helped her to see that other families lived differently. She was often invited by her friends' families to go on vacation with them and to participate in their family activities. Alice gives credit to those families for helping her to see what her life could be like. During her freshman year in high school, she began spending time with her uncle and aunt who had two older daughters and, although neither of them had gone to college, the couple wanted their daughters to attend college, so they talked about it a lot with all of the girls. However, Alice remembers not knowing what a FAFSA was or even what the ACTs were and having to go to her high school counselor for help. The transition to college was very difficult for Alice, partly because she had been very isolated by poverty and her mother's lifestyle until she was 15, but also because, she admits, that at first she tried to hang on to her life and friends at home. The University she attends is only 20 minutes from her grandparent's home, and, in the first two years, she came home all the time and did not make friends at college. Once she realized that she needed to make the transition, Alice said she matured a lot and that it made school easier and more fun. Alice also mentions she did not feel that her high school prepared her for the rigors of college.

Alice chose to have her Uncle Mike interviewed. Her mother she described as uncooperative, and her grandparents were uncomfortable with the idea of being interviewed. Her Uncle Mike and Aunt Cathy helped with the logistics of applying for college and continued to support her emotionally when she had doubts about finishing college. Mike was very open about his family's situation and their struggles. He was not involved in Alice's life when she was young, because he did not want anything to do with

his sister. Although he gives his parents a great deal of the credit “for taking her in and giving her a safe environment where there wasn’t fighting and drugs,” he says they were not always like they are now. Mike and his siblings grew up very poor and that caused a great deal of stress and upheaval. Mike escaped it, but his sister did not. He believes Alice and her sister are a reflection of the environment and culture in which they were raised. One sister had the opportunity to associate with other families and “experience normalcy” and escaped as soon as she had a chance. The older sister felt a responsibility to her mother and could not give up on the idea of her mother getting better, so she stayed in that environment and continued the cycle. Alice is going to graduate from WVU in the spring of 2014 and has applied to Carnegie Mellon University and UC Davis for graduate school.

### **Theoretical Analysis**

This section is organized by using the four factors of life course theory as developed by Elder and expanded by Giele: Historical and Geographic Location (identity), Social Ties (Relational Style), Human Agency (Drive and Motivation) and Variations in Timing (Adaptive Style). Within-case and across-case analysis using the four factors of life course theory resulted in the identification of the themes presented in table 3. Direct quotes are attributed to pseudonyms.

Table 3

*Themes Within Each Life Course factor*

Life course theory factor	Themes within each factor
Historic and Geographic (Identity)	1) Having involved and supportive parental figures in their lives 2) The effects of travel on thinking and worldviews

	3) The effects of culture on identity and worldviews
Social Ties	1) Strong ties with parental figures 2) Acceptance of people different from themselves 3) Use of technology to develop and maintain relationships 4) Career exploration and the investigation of college options
Human Agency (Drive and Motivation)	1) Desire to be successful 2) Financial security 3) Choosing a profession that they will enjoy 4) Making their families proud
Variations in Timing (Adaptive Style)	1) Family support 2) Developing a belief in the ability to overcome obstacles

### **Historical and Geographic Location (Identity)**

The first factor of life course theory refers to the historical events that are experienced by the larger society. These events are experienced differently within a geographic location and can have an impact on our identity. For this research, events that occurred within the school, family, and community contexts that affected a participant's decision to attend college are of primary concern. Therefore, identity refers to their identity as a student, future college student, college graduate, and member of a profession. The themes that emerged through the analysis and comparison of data using the historical and geographic location (identity) factor are: (a) having adults in their lives who were involved and supportive; (b) traveling can affect thinking and worldview; and (c) the culture in which you are raised does not have to define your identity, but, it is a large part of who you are and the decisions you make.

Each of the participants experienced very specific events in their lives that contributed to their decisions to attend college. One they have in common is that they identified adults who were active in their lives and who were very supportive.

Table 4

*List of Participants and Parental Figures*

Participant	Parental Figure	Home County
Elle	Dawn	Lawrence County, OH
Samantha	Lynn	Scioto County, OH
Chase	Charla	Magoffin County, KY
Lisa	June	Randolph County, WV
Alice	Mike	Marion County, WV

Four of the participants were raised without siblings present. Elle’s father had other children, but he married her mother, who has no other children, years later, and Elle did not have a relationship with her siblings. Samantha’s parents also had other children, but they were much older and had left home before Samantha was in the fifth grade. Chase was the only child of a single mother. They lived with his grandparents, and he was particularly close to his grandfather, who never missed a game or an awards banquet. Lisa, like Samantha, had older siblings but was not raised with them, and she is not close to them. Alice lived with her sister until right before she entered high school. She moved in with her grandparents and received their complete attention and support. The participants and their family members describe this dynamic, of having the singular attention of a parental figure, as having a major impact on the participants. The parental figures in the participants’ lives were very involved and seemed to pin future hopes on

the participant. When asked what the most important event that ever happened to Elle her mother said, “Being born to me. I was older when I had her, she was a late child. She didn’t have any cousins her age growing up; she was like the only one her age, everyone else was grewed up. So she was forced to grow up around older people, so she never really had any kids to grow up with, other than the ones at school.” She went on to talk about how involved she was with Elle, being a band booster, traveling with her to all the games, and attending performances. Samantha’s and Chase’s moms echoed this sentiment:

We went on band trips together, and we go to church together. She teaches Sunday School and Vacation Bible School and I have always been with them. (Lynn)

We go to the movies together. I went to all of his football games. When he had games, I went with him, and all his college stuff, any activities, I always went to them. (Charla)

Even Alice, whose mother was not involved in her life, describes the involvement of her grandparents, her aunt and uncle, and the support she got from friends’ parents as central to her current success.

Traveling was another event that each of the participants mentioned as having influenced their decisions to attend college. They each felt that it had affected their ways of thinking and viewing the world, which made it easier for them to choose to attend college. Elle stated:

It definitely made me realize that I was okay with being away from home for however long, because I would go travel, and I would just want to stay there. I noticed how people had different accents, and the land was different, and how

people had different professions because of the farmland. I liked New York and how everyone there is very city.

Samantha concurred stating:

I knew some of my classmates had actually never been outside of West Virginia, Kentucky, or Ohio and I think I saw more things, experienced more things because of that. I think a little bit different than them. I think, basically, because I saw more. They never had the chance, but we had the chance, so we went.

Lisa commented that even just traveling around West Virginia had an influence on how she thought about others: “I started to realize that people are different, but, after I got more aware of what was going on, I was like, Wow two people can be from the exact same place and be very different. It was a rude awakening but a nice rude awakening.”

For Elle, one of the most important events that affected her decision to go to college was her attendance at an Accounting Careers Awareness Program (ACAP) summer program at Ohio State University. The purpose of the program is to introduce minority students to jobs in accounting. Elle was not specifically interested in accounting, but a teacher encouraged her to attend because the program included a week’s stay on Ohio State’s campus. Elle said, “Being on the campus made me excited to get out and do more things and then I knew I wanted to go far away.” Before attending the summer program, Elle had a very narrow view of her career opportunities, but they helped her to discover a multitude of options, “I knew I wanted to do something fun and creative, but I didn’t think I could do it... I found out that there are jobs in fashion that I just didn’t know about.” Chase expressed the same feeling of having limited options. “It was, get a job after high school, or you are wasting your time and money, unless you are

going to be a doctor or a lawyer, because that is really all that is around here, because you are either going to be a coal miner, a lawyer or a doctor and there is really nothing in between.”

Although both Samantha and her mother said that Samantha always wanted to go to college, she quit after her first year. It was after her divorce that Samantha decided to return to college. “Well, she had two children, she got married and divorced and has two children, she has seen she is going to have to support them, so getting an education was a biggie.”

The event in Chase’s life that seems to have had the most effect on him is the rejection by, and then the death of, his father. He mentioned several times throughout the interview that he was able to go against the cultural grain and graduate from college because he learned to persevere when he was young. “I learned to persevere when I was younger, and a lot of kids around didn’t know that, and when something bad happened they just quit, but I learned that when something bad happens, if you just chip away at it something good will happen.” Due to his mother’s accident it was necessary for Chase and his mother to live with his grandparents. Chase describes his grandfather as having “killed himself to provide for his family.” He stated:

You could call me lazy if you want to, but I never want the whole labor job. I wanted something more, and I want to say that I am meant to do more and not just labor my life away on a coal mine. I learned how to persevere when I was younger, and it helps to get through college, if you know how to do that.

A historical event experienced by all of the participants, although more profoundly by Elle, Chase, and Lisa, who are several years younger than Samantha, is the

technology revolution. Elle and Chase particularly expressed how they used technology to expand their communities. They both communicated regularly with individuals who lived in different parts of the United States and considered these individuals to be friends. They also used technology to communicate with their friends from high school after they went to college and to connect to new friends at college. The effects of technology on the participants' decisions to attend college and persist to graduation will be discussed in detail in the context of the Social Ties factors, which focuses on who we are influenced by and how we maintain relationships with them.

The other aspect of the historical and geographic location (identity) life course theory factor focuses on how our culture and geographic location affect our life course. Although all five of the participants and their family members describe Appalachian culture in similar ways, Elle and Chase expressed dissatisfaction with their culture and a deep desire to escape their hometowns. Lisa desperately wanted to escape her hometown because of the isolation and limited opportunities and, although she sees many negatives in her culture, she also saw positives. Samantha and Alice spoke positively of Appalachian culture. While Alice intended to leave the area in order to pursue better opportunities, Samantha expressed a preference to stay close to home. Phrases such as "close-knit," "religious," "everybody knows everybody," and "family as the heart of Appalachia" appeared throughout all of the interviews. However, there were also negative descriptions that occurred multiple times throughout the interviews. Several references were made by the participants and their parental figures to drug use in the community.

The only thing my community is known for is Pill Creek. That's its nickname, instead of Mill Creek. ( Lisa)

There is a really big drug problem here; so many get into drugs, and it ruins their lives. (Alice)

They're on drugs and have kids and aren't doing anything. (Lynn)

Drugs are a really big problem in this community. (June)

Lack of jobs, a general lack of interest in education and lack of ambition in the youth were also mentioned as negative aspects of the culture.

There were quite a few students who said, "I'll just get a job around here, and I'll live with my parents until I have a family." (Lisa)

We don't value education like everywhere else does. Like, it's not a big deal to drop out of high school here, and it is not a big deal not to go to college. (Chase)

I feel, like, that the lack of opportunity plays out in the culture. People are very hopeless, and they are settling. (Alice)

Lastly, the tendency toward having children when they are too young and unprepared to raise children was mentioned by the participant's parental figures.

They ended up pregnant or they are running the streets. They just seem to be wasting their life, but they were smart kids, and they could of done well, but it is just like they chose not to and I don't understand. (Dawn)

Parents are too young having kids, and they have other things to do, other than doing anything for their kids. It is just such a shame. (Lynn)

For Elle, the dissatisfaction mostly lies in the geographic isolation. She said, "I have a mom and a dad, and we have always lived in the same house in this little town. It

has always been very happy and close-knit.” She is clearly very close to her mother and speaks lovingly of the group of girlfriends that she has known literally her entire life, but she felt that to be herself and to develop her creativity she had to leave that isolation. She mentioned several times how she is a creative person, and, needed to be around creative people and as her mother said, “Everyone stays at home, and they do not experience the world, but [Elle] never did what the other kids done; she always had to be different.”

Chase is the most descriptive about the aspects of Appalachian culture that make him feel like an outsider. “I don’t fit in. I am not a redneck, I guess you could say. I don’t like the whole “motorcycles, four-wheelers, and big truck stuff.” In this area “if you’re not Baptist, Christian, and White, you are trash.” Although Chase has a great deal of affection and respect for his grandfather, who was entrenched in the culture as an Eastern Kentucky coal miner, Chase has had different experiences. When he began communicating with people all over the country through video games, he began to accept that people were different. He stated:

A couple of my friends were Hispanic. They were the first Hispanics I ever talked to, because there is not any diversity in Magoffin County; we are all Caucasian. It was kinda weird; we would hear them talking on the headset, and they would be talking in English, and then their mother would walk in and say something, and they would be talking in Spanish...I just got more accepting. I knew that, if they could understand me and we could talk, we could be friends. It didn’t matter what you are; we could still talk and be good friends, and that was a good thing to know. It helped me learn to diversify, or, being able to diversify

and not look for people that are just like me, but look for people that are different from me, and still be a friend.

Chase, like the other participants, felt that people on the outside were very critical of his accent and treated him differently because he was from Kentucky. “When you tell people that you are from Kentucky, they will automatically treat you different, like you are mentally handicapped, because you are from Appalachia...They think we are just hillbillies, that we are just basically dumb and just not educated.”

Chase also felt that the people in his own community were critical of his decision to get an education. He said, “I have heard, ‘You are trying to get above your raisin’, and, ‘you are trying to be better than everybody else.’” Clearly he finds it hurtful that only his mom and grandmother have congratulated him on his graduation,.“Nobody has said anything except my friends from Morehead...I don’t want to say they are jealous but I guess you could say they are jealous, but I guess they don’t care. Their idea of success is getting a high-paying job, which I don’t have; I just graduated from college and that’s no big deal.”

Although Samantha echoed much of what the other participants said about Appalachian culture, she spoke more positively than Elle and Chase did. She took a class in high school which she affectionately referred to as “Hillbilly Literature” and said, “I loved studying about the culture. I loved learning about the folk tales and the stories.” Unlike the other participants, Samantha does not have friends or family who live outside of Appalachia; she chose to stay at home while attending college and she expressed a desire to get a job in Scioto County.

Lisa's expressions are similar to Samantha's. She saw a great deal in her community that she would like to change. "There is a lot of backward thinking. The one thing I would really like to see change is just for people to be more accepting." However, she also saw a lot of good in her culture. "Everybody helped everybody... We are definitely a poorer community, and not everyone had the ability to help everyone else out; you took a little less; that way, people that needed it could have a little more." Like Alice, Lisa wants to go to graduate school outside the state of West Virginia, and she does not believe she will ever come home to live, because the opportunities are limited but she said, "West Virginia is my home, I couldn't call anywhere else home."

### **Social Ties (Relational Style)**

Our lives are greatly influenced by the people around us: family, friends, teachers, and neighbors. This factor refers to who we are influenced by and how we maintain our relationships. The themes that emerged while looking through the lens of the life course theory factor of social ties are: (a) a strong tie with a parental figure that encourages college attendance throughout a child's life is very important to college success; (b) the importance of developing relationships with individuals at school; (c) the acceptance of people different from themselves; (d) technology can be used to develop and maintain relationships with individuals outside of Appalachia, friends at home and the university community; and (e) teachers and counselors should be encouraging career exploration and the investigation of college options.

When asked who influenced their lives, four of the participants immediately responded that their parents had the greatest effect on them. For Chase one of his parental figures was his grandfather whom he lived with and views as a father figure. "I

just want to make him proud.” For Alice the answer to the question was easy, but the labels were difficult. Although she lived with her biological mother until she was 15, she did not see her as a parental figure; it was her grandparents and her aunt and uncle who loved and supported her. “I would say my grandparents are the supportive part, but my uncle is logistics; he is the glue that holds it together. He and his wife are the reason I am in college. I love my grandmother; she is my #1, but my Aunt Cathy, she is a pretty big deal, too.” Each of the participants talked about how their parental figures encouraged them to attend college and to keep working to achieve their goals.

They always talked about education. They always wanted me to go to college and get straight A’s. They taught me to always do my best and that I should never give up until I get what I want. (Elle)

Both my parents encouraged me to go to college and I know some of my peers parents didn’t care. (Samantha)

They would never let me quit...I remember one time I was having a hard time with bullies and stuff, and I wanted to drop out or change schools, and they wouldn’t let me....I guess I learned from Mom and Papaw about being able to push through it or get over it or get under it or get around it, just some way to get by it. (Chase)

Their parents also mentioned during their interviews how they consciously encouraged their children to attend college and how they actively taught their children principles that they believe are part of what has helped them to be successful in college.

Yep, I always said you got to go to college. I never worried that she wouldn’t graduate from college. (Lynn)

I always told her, if you have the chance to go somewhere, take that chance and go, because you are going to learn something...We have worked hard to make sure that every opportunity she had, we have been able to provide her a way to get there, because that is the only way you learn, is by traveling and seeing things. It helps you get a better outlook on life. (Dawn)

I pushed her to be dependable...When she made wrong choices she was smart enough to learn from them. I let her do that so she could be independent and not depend on me and her dad. (June)

He liked everybody. He liked kids in wheelchairs, and he liked kids who were disabled. He liked all kinds of people. I always taught him not to be better than anybody else, and he had all kinds of friends. (Charla)

Elle's mom was particularly instrumental in helping her to persist in college attendance. During her freshman year, when Elle became overwhelmed with work and began doubting her decision to leave home and attend college, she would text her mom and they would stay up all night texting back and forth as Elle worked. "I would tell my husband, 'Elle and I are staying up all night tonight,' and, while she worked, I would do my sewing, or I would be making chocolate candies. I just tried to encourage her, and encourage her, that you can do it, and keep pushing her, and we would just talk and text until she would finish."

Samantha's mom also took a central role in her ability to complete college. After having two kids and divorcing, Samantha stayed at home, and her mother helped with the children so that she could take classes, do school work, and complete her student

teaching. Her mother explained, “[Without a college degree] she would never be able to support herself enough to live by herself and take care of her family.”

Being able to connect to their new community was vital to each participant’s college persistence. Chase went to technical school and returned home. He then went to community college and returned home, but after going to Morehead State University, he joined a fraternity and said that he finally felt like he belonged. Elle knew immediately when she visited Kent State that it was the place for her. Alice and Lisa talked about visiting other colleges and that, “it just didn’t feel right” and, “I just got nervous there,” but when they visited WVU, “it felt like home, it felt right.” This feeling that it was the right place for them was important to the four participants who went away and became part of the campus community.

Elle dove right into the arts community and only went home during school breaks. Lisa understood the importance of breaking from her home community before she went to college, which was one of the reasons she chose WVU over a school closer to home. “If I am in another city, I’m not going to be, like, I can just hang out here and see my old friends. I am here to go to college. I am going to college.” For Alice, the transition was the most difficult. She chose to go to a university only 20 minutes from her home, and she admits that during the first year she stayed very connected to her community. “I lived so close that I didn’t feel the need to make friends here. I felt a strong connection, almost a yearning, like I missed being at home, but, once I got more involved in school, I started letting that part of me go.” As a McNair Scholar she became connected with Student Support Services, and she credits them with helping her through the transition. Now she is very involved in her community at university and feels that

getting “over the hump of missing home and feeling comfortable away from home” gives her the desire to challenge herself to move somewhere different “to learn something completely different about myself and about my surroundings.”

While in high school, Elle, Chase and Lisa established social ties outside of their Appalachian communities. They maintained those relationships and, in some cases established them through the use of technology. While attending college, establishing and maintaining social ties with friends at school and friends at home were both important. All three participants used technology to maintain those relationships. Even Samantha, who stayed at home while attending college, used technology to form new friendships with her college cohort and maintain friendships with her established communities. The two technologies most often cited were texting and Facebook.

On Facebook, we have a group page for our high school class to keep in touch...I am on Facebook every day. I communicate with them a lot through texting. All of us are so busy...most of the time I send a text message, or through Facebook.

(Samantha)

I have a Facebook group from school. We talk about all kinds of things, but mostly about school...I Skyped my family and friends and, of course, Facebook...I just wanted to stay connected with my four or five closest friends.

(Elle)

While in college, I talked to my friends here and ones that moved away on Facebook, Myspace, and Twitter. (Chase)

It [Facebook] is pretty much my only way of communicating with people that I graduated with, and friends from high school, and friends from the community.

(Lisa)

Elle attended many band camps and youth retreats where she met people from all over Ohio. She stayed in contact with many of those friends through the use of technology. She felt that those social ties helped her to make the decision to attend Kent State. However, it is the social ties that she forged during her Accounting Career Awareness Program (ACAP) summer workshop at Ohio State University that she cited as having the greatest impact on her choice to go to college. Throughout her senior year in high school and throughout college, the leaders of the program stayed in contact with her. “I talked to them a lot on email and Facebook.” They helped her to network and form connections as she navigated college and choose a specific field of study.

Chase was particularly influenced by the social ties that he created through the use of online gaming. While communicating with others playing the game, he developed relationships beyond the games. As was stated earlier, his relationships with others all over the country affected the way that he viewed other cultures. It helped him become more accepting of others and interested in cultures beyond his own. “I just got more accepting... it helped me learn to diversify...the way I was able to talk to those guys, I think I was able to know that they were like me, but different.”

One theme that emerged throughout the interviews was a social tie that only Lisa developed. The other participants felt that their relationships with their school counselors were lacking and that they were not encouraged at school to explore educational options.

Our guidance counselor, when I was in school, didn't do a very good job.... I felt like they kind of wanted us to go, but they wasn't handing us any materials to go away to school. I felt like they were saying "Nope Shawnee is your only choice."  
(Samantha)

There were scholarship packets and ACT packets outside the counselor's office, but, other than that, they didn't talk about it much....No one really goes to college here. Some [teachers] said, "You ought to go to Big Sandy Community College" but that was the only choice. (Chase)

When I was a senior, they gave us this pin to fill out a FAFSA; no one told us how important it was they just told us it was for the FAFSA, and I was, like, I don't even know what that is...People would say, "You need to go to college but it was never like people going out of their way to help you go to college. (Alice)

Samantha felt that her decision to attend Shawnee was greatly affected by this lack of encouragement. "I was always interested in OSU, but I guess the opportunity never came. I was kind of afraid, and there was just no one to talk to me about it."

Samantha began college the fall after graduating from high school, but she quit after one year, because she felt that she did not know what she wanted to do. Chase had the same experience. He began attending Big Sandy Community College right out of high school, but he took time off after completing an associate's degree, because he did not know what to do. Both felt that they wasted time and may have made other choices if their counselors and teachers had helped them to explore other career and college options. Having not attended college, their supportive parents were ill-equipped to help them in this regard. Elle on the other hand, was fortunate to have attended ACAP where she

received the type of support and career exploration that she needed to make an informed decision. Alice was lucky enough to have an aunt and uncle who had just gone through the process, so, during her senior year they stepped in and helped her. Lisa was the exception. Because she was at the top in her class, and because she was involved in so many activities, her teachers and school counselors seemed to have gone out of their way to help her; but like all the other participants her parents had no idea how to apply to college or for scholarships.

### **Human Agency (Drive and Motivation)**

Human agency refers to an individual's ability to make decisions that shape his or her life course. Our decisions are shaped by social constraints, economic pressures, and any number of factors but, in order to achieve goals, we must be able to make decisions that set us on the path to achieving them. Our goals and the decisions we make are determined by what drives and motivates us.

The themes that emerge within the Human Agency (Drive and Motivation) factor are: (a) the desire to be successful is a strong motivating factor, (b) financial security motivated college attendance, (c) choosing a profession was most strongly motivated by the need to enjoy the profession, and (d) making their families proud and being able to support their families was a strong motivation.

For the purposes of answering the research questions, the participants were asked what motivated them to attend college. Elle and Lisa focused on wanting to be successful. Their motivations were external. Lisa said, "I wanted to do something with my life and get out of this town and do something." Elle was also motivated by wanting

to “get out of” the town she grew up in but she also says she was motivated by “hearing other people’s success stories. They made me want to be successful.”

Samantha and Chase focused on financial security; however, Samantha’s motivation came from wanting her children to feel secure. “It was basically my kids that were motivating me, because I knew I had to support them. I knew, if I had a college education, I would be able to support them better and give them a better life.” Chase saw how difficult his mother’s and grandparents’ lives had been. His grandfather had been a coal miner; they lived in a mobile home in a very rural and poverty stricken area. He wanted something different for himself. “There are no jobs around here, so I wanted to add some security. I wanted something more, and not just labor my life away in a coal mine.” Alice’s priority was making her family proud and wanting to help her nephew. “The fact that he was really proud of me really motivated me to go to college. Also, my nephew, if I get a college education, I could get a better job, and he could live with me someday. I could help him out and do for him what my uncle did for me.”

When asked what motivated them to choose their fields of study each participant expressed that the most important motivation was to have to a profession they found enjoyable.

I have always been creative, and I have always liked making clothes. I don’t really know how I became creative, but I would rather do that over math or science or anything. I guess I just started when I was a little kid, using my imagination. (Elle)

I first went into Physical Therapy, but then I ended up changing over into Education. It was always in the back of my mind that I always wanted to become

a teacher. I just hated the pay and hated the response teachers get from the community and I didn't know if I really wanted to go into that and have all that weight on my shoulders, but, after I got my divorce, I really started looking at things. I have always been around kids; I love being around kids; it was just a natural fit. (Samantha)

It was fun. It was just that I wanted to do something that I could do every day that I wouldn't hate going to work. (Chase)

At first, I wanted to be a doctor...but we did a lot of classes, and we did a lot of research, and, after completing small research projects, I was, like, "Okay this is it. Excuse me; this is what I want to do." (Samantha)

A pattern of commonality that runs throughout participants' interviews is that they were motivated by their families to attend college and to persist to graduation.

My mom and dad always pushed me to do my best and be my best so that I can get out of here and make something of myself...They always wanted me to go to college. (Elle)

I said, "You want to do this and we spent the money. You are staying there or you are going to OU to be a nurse." She hates blood. (Dawn)

I knew I had to finish college so I could support my kids. (Samantha)

Mom made sure that education was always important to me. They continued to push me to do the best I could do. I just wanted to make my Papaw proud.

(Chase)

I knew she had it in her to do something with her life bigger than I ever did.

(June)

They knew the situation I was coming from; I didn't have to hide it from them and they were completely willing to help me better my life...They were always willing to go the extra mile. (Alice)

### **Variations in Timing (Adaptive Style)**

As external events happen, people and groups must adapt to the changing circumstances. In this factor, "events" refers to those events happening to individuals, families, or social groups. They do not refer to historical events or an individual's place within a time period. Here, the concept of time is chronological or the ordering of events as it relates to age and age related expectations. The timing of the loss of a job or loved one would call for the adaptation of an individual's or family's circumstances. Some of that change is passive; it will happen without any reaction, but it should also be active, as individuals and groups make choices in order to adapt to a change. All participants identified events in their lives that led them to make the choice to attend college and events before or during their college careers that helped them develop adaptive styles that helped them persist in their education.

For Samantha, the event that changed her life trajectory was her divorce. The fall after graduating from high school, Samantha began college but, after getting pregnant, she quit college got married and had a second child. After getting divorced, Samantha knew that she needed to complete college in order to take care of her family. When asked why getting pregnant stopped her the first time she said, "I didn't really know what I wanted to do, and, when I got pregnant it was just a way out." Having children of her own and wanting a job that is secure inspired her to choose teaching as her profession.

When asked how she developed the characteristics that allowed her to adapt to college and simultaneous difficulties that arose, Samantha first mentioned that she had older brothers who “tormented” her all the time. “They were always pestering me and giving me a hard time; even after they were gone from the house, they would still call and give me a hard time about things. I guess it would make me want to do things more.” Her mother supported this with a story about how Samantha wanted to get a job when she was in high school, but her brothers told her she couldn’t work and go to school with all her extracurricular activities, so she got a job at McDonalds. “Her brothers said, ‘You can’t do that,’ and she was one busy person...but they had to eat their words.” Another event that Samantha mentioned as having defined her adaptive style is when her mother was diagnosed with cancer. “It was the second year that I went back, and she got cancer, and I was having to do a lot more here at the house; then there was the unknown of how she would react to the chemo. I had two kids to take care of, and, right about then, I thought about quitting.” Samantha credits a professor with teaching her a life lesson that helped her through that time and that she has kept in mind since.

A professor told me that you can do anything, as long as you know how long it’s going to be. She said, “You can hold your breath a long time, as long as you know how long you are going to have to hold it.” That stuck with me. I thought, “That’s right. I know I have 15 weeks per semester; that is all I have to do.” So I just take it one step at a time. I set my mind to it, and I just do it. (Samantha)

Chase had two events in his life that radically changed his life trajectory and shaped his adaptive style. When Chase was young, his father died, and, later his mother was severely injured in a car wreck. Chase’s mother consistently talked about him as

being respected and respectful, while Chase described himself as “having learned to persevere at a young age.” Throughout the interview, it became apparent that Chase has had to deal with many difficult situations, but that he has learned to “just keep chipping away at it.” His attitude of “just learn to deal with things and not let them hold you back” comes from a mother and a grandfather who constantly encouraged him to “never quit and do the best [he] could do.” When he thought about quitting college, and during the semester that he took off it was those lessons, his mother’s expectations that he would earn a college degree “she always made sure education was important to me” and his grandfather’s example of laboring in the coal mines that pushed Chase to persevere.

Alice’s situation is quite different from the other participants, although it is most closely related to Chase’s. From a young age, she experienced a father’s suicide and her mother’s alcoholism and drug abuse. She witnessed the abusive relationship between her mother and stepfather, lived in poverty, and relied on public assistance. The most important thing her uncle said that her grandparents provided her “was a safe environment,” and Alice said that one of the best things about living with her grandparents was learning that you did not have to fight and yell about everything. The word she used most often when describing her mother and the other people she saw in her community in similar situations is hopelessness. The most profound event that changed Alice’s life course was certainly moving in with her grandparents, but growing up in such an unstable household taught her to be “independent and resilient.” She also talked about how playing sports had a major impact on her development of skills that she relied on when college got difficult. “It [sports] helped me be more determined and more resilient

and to look at the bigger picture.” The other participants mention similar feelings about their participation in sports, band, and other extracurricular activities.

What the participants have in common is that they developed “never give up attitudes” that were supported by their families. They each had people in their lives that were there to support them when things were tough, but they relied on a belief that they could accomplish anything if they just kept working at it. Samantha expressed that sentiment as, “One step at a time,” and Chase expressed that idea as “Just keep chipping away at it,” but the message is the same.

### **Summary**

This chapter has presented the data collected through semi-structured interviews in order to identify the experiences that encouraged first-generation college graduates from Appalachia to attend and persist to college graduation. Although each participant had unique experiences that affected their life trajectories and influenced their decisions to attend and persist in college, a comparison of their experiences revealed commonalities. Working within the framework of life course theory, and following accepted qualitative protocols of coding recoding through within-case analysis and across-case analysis, key themes emerged. The data were presented using the factors associated with life course theory as an organizational method. Life course theory utilizes four factors: Historic and Geographic Location (Identity), Social Ties (Relational Style), Human Agency (Drive and Motivation) and Variations in Timing (Adaptive Style). The use of these four factors helped to organize the data into categories and provided a framework within which to analyze and compare the data. Representative quotes were used to represent themes that emerged.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter presents an interpretation of the data as analyzed through the lens of life course theory and three research questions. The study uses qualitative methods in order to analyze the life stories of first-generation college graduates from Appalachia in order to identify the experiences that encouraged them to attend and persist to college graduation. The study identified family, school, and community experiences that Appalachian youths considered to be influential in their decisions to pursue postsecondary study. The research also examined if technology played a role in their decisions to attend and then stay at postsecondary institutions. At a time when technology can be used to connect with the world and to stay connected with family and friends, Appalachian youths do not need to feel geographically or culturally isolated.

This chapter begins with a brief review of the study. Then each research question is considered separately. The data collected through ten semi-structured interviews were used to answer each research question and then provide recommendations for parents, high school faculty, and faculty in higher education. Also discussed, is the related finding of how stereotypes have influenced the participant's perceptions of themselves and their culture. The challenges, limitations and lessons learned by the research along with recommendations for future research are also discussed. After, the final conclusions are presented, the researcher offers her personal reflections on the topic and how she came to select the topic for research. The researcher's family roots run deep in

Appalachia, but she has never considered herself to be Appalachian. In this personal reflection the researcher positions herself and emphasizes the study's importance.

### **Overview of the Study**

The 2010 census data confirms that the Appalachian region is still lagging behind the United States in high school graduation and college graduation rates. While the entire country has continued to increase college graduation rates, the gap between the national rate and the Appalachian region's college attainment rates has held steady. In 2000, 24.4% of Americans held college degrees. In the Appalachian region, 17.6% held college degrees. The data released in 2011 showed that 28.2% of Americans hold a college degree, while only 21.1% of those living in the Appalachian region hold a college degree. In the state of West Virginia, the only state that is entirely within the Appalachian region, the percentage of people who hold a college degree is 17.6%. Appalachian Kentucky is at 12.7%, and Appalachian Ohio is at 15.7% (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2011).

Traditionally, the Appalachian region has struggled with poverty and isolation. Although, in recent decades, many of the outer Appalachian counties have stabilized economically, the central region of Appalachia that includes West Virginia, Southeastern Ohio, and Eastern Kentucky continues to have the highest concentration of distressed and at-risk counties in the country (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2011). One of the keys to addressing the crippling poverty in central Appalachia is to increase the educational attainment. In the United States, education is the engine of social and economic mobility, but the geographic isolation and cultural characteristics of Appalachian communities have limited their ability to achieve economic and educational equity (Billings, 1974;

Payne, 2005; Pollard & Jacobsen, 2012). In order to understand which events in a young person's life could give him or her the courage, skills, and/or desire to leave home to attend university and persist in that pursuit, five young people and a family member of each youth were interviewed. The qualitative method of semi-structured interviews was used to collect the data, and the data were analyzed by using a topological approach to conduct a within-case and across-case analysis (Hatch, 2002). The researcher used life course theory as a theoretical framework which required that a life story be developed. This was accomplished by using the method of restorying.

By analyzing the life courses of youths who grew up in Appalachia and who were working toward or had attained at least a bachelor's degree, common experiences were identified that should be considered by schools and communities as they develop equity initiatives that encourage Appalachian youths to complete college. The overarching themes that emerged while analyzing the data using the life course theory factors are: (a) having parental figures in their lives that were involved and supportive, (b) participating in activities that gave them the chance to meet people from outside their community, (c) support from adults other than their parents, (d) participation in summer and college academic programs, and (e) the use of communication technologies in high school and in college. The remainder of this chapter will focus on relating the categories that emerged to the research questions.

### **Discussion of the Research Questions and Related Findings**

The central research questions in this study were:

1. What life events do Appalachian youths identify as exerting a major influence on their ability to graduate from college?

2. How do Appalachian youths describe the contributions made by their schools, families, and communities that contributed to their success?
3. How do Appalachian youths describe their use of social media (.ie., Facebook), chatrooms, email, texting, and videochat (i.e., Skype or Facetime) in high school and college, and does that description indicate a belief that online communication influenced their decisions to attend and then stay at a postsecondary institution?

### **Research Question One: Life Events**

The first question sought to identify what life events changed the participants' life trajectories or set their life courses on a path towards obtaining a college degree. The participants identified having parental figures in their lives that were involved and supportive, and participating in activities that gave them the chance to meet people from outside their communities as the events that had the most impact on their life trajectories.

#### **Involved and Supportive Parental Figures**

Each of the participants cited the parental figures in their lives as having the greatest impact on their decisions to attend college and to overcome the obstacles they faced while at college. The parents did two key things that encouraged them to attend college. First, they spoke about college and the need for a good education from the time the participants were young. The phrase, "I always knew they were going to go to college," was repeated by all of the adults interviewed, except for Alice's uncle who was not a large part of her life until she was in her teens. Most of the participants have older siblings who did not attend college, and the parents seemed to feel that this child was their last chance. According to Alice and her uncle, her grandparents felt similarly. None of their children had attended college, even though they had encouraged the

youngest of their children, Alice's mother, to attend after her grandfather began working as a maintenance man at a local college.

Second, in each case the parental figure was very involved in the child's life. Three of the five participants were involved in their school bands and their parents were band boosters who traveled with the bands to every game. They also attended awards banquets and other events to encourage their children to stay involved in school activities and to show them how proud they were of them. They believed that being involved in school activities was very important to their children's future. According to one parent, "I encouraged her to do something in school just to keep her busy, instead of having time to run around and get in trouble." Even though none of the parents had attended college, and they, as well as the participants, admit they knew very little about college and the process of applying and attending, they went to all of the financial aid and college meetings their schools held, and several of the parents mention physically helping their children fill out the applications for admittance and scholarships. The parents were confused by the process. They were scared and nervous about the process and about their children leaving home, but they were desperate to give their child every opportunity. This sentiment is illustrated by the following quotes: "I just want him to be somebody," "I knew she had it in her to do bigger things," and "She can break the cycle."

This involvement did not end when their children left for college. They continued to support their children by attending college events, expressing their pride in the youths' accomplishments, and by using communication technologies to support their children when they became discouraged. This study mirrors the findings of Hand and Payne (2008) and Bradbury and Mather (2009) who found that a continued connection with

their families was important to their success, but this study extends their findings by including the use of technology as a way to facilitate that connection when students attend college away from home.

There was not one specific event that participants pointed to that had a major impact on their college attendance; rather, it was dozens of small things that their parents did throughout their lives, particularly in high school, that encouraged them to go to college and taught them the skills they needed to persist. The participants often used words such as “independence,” “responsible,” “dependable,” “resilience,” “determined” and “perseverance” to describe how they were different from their peers. It is important to note that Alice learned the same skills and developed the same traits through her negative experiences, but she had also learned, like many Appalachian youths, “hopelessness” (Bauer & Gorowick, 2003; Greelee & Lantz, 1993; Lemon, Newfield & Dobbs, 1993). It was her grandparents and aunt and uncle who helped her to become hopeful about her future. She said, “Living with them gave me hope that I could be normal.”

### **Meeting People Outside Their Communities**

Living in Appalachia can be a very isolating experience. This isolation has created a culture that is often close-knit and insular. As was expressed by the participants and discussed in Sohn’s ethnographic study (2006), however, this can also be good. Neighbors often help neighbors in need and there is a community feeling that generates a sense of belonging. However, the isolation also contributes to narrow-mindedness, fatalistic attitudes, and intolerance. When you grow up in an environment where everyone you know looks the same and believes the same things, it is easy to develop a

fear of what is different. This finding aligns with the work of Phillips (2007) who concluded that there is a direct correlation between the diffuse-avoidant identity style and the cultural characteristic of fatalism that is found in the geographically isolated population of Appalachia.

Each of the participants, through school activities, band camp, church camp, gaming, summer programs, and travel, met people outside of their communities and developed a network of friends that were different from themselves. One of the participants commented, “Even just traveling around West Virginia, I started to realize how different people were.” By recognizing differences, becoming curious about those differences, and accepting that people are different assuaged many of the fears that their peers had about leaving home. The participants’ comments that many of the Appalachian youths who leave home return because they are overwhelmed by people and cultures they do not understand and have not been taught to accept is supported by the research done by Barcus and Braun (2010) and Obermiller and Rappold (1990) who cite in their research alienation due to an unfamiliarity with other cultures as a reason Appalachians often return home. All five of the participants interviewed for this research expressed a desire to learn about different cultures and a willingness to open their minds to different ways of thinking and living. Only one of the participants felt negatively about Appalachian culture. The other participants wished that people in their culture could be more open-minded and accepting, but they also saw the good in their cultures, and they were very proud to be Appalachian.

In summary, the first research question identified two life events that were common to all five of the participants that exerted a major influence on their decisions to

attend college and their abilities to persist to graduation. First, they each had parental figures in their lives that were involved and supportive. Their parents consistently expressed their beliefs that the participants would graduate from college. Second, the participants developed friendships outside of their communities and had a desire to learn about different cultures and the ways people live and think.

### **Research Question Two: Contributions by schools, families, and communities**

The second question sought to identify what influence the participants' schools, families, and communities had on their decisions to attend college and what contributions they made that the participants recognized as having helped them be successful. The participants identified support from adults other than their parents and participation in summer and college academic programs as having contributed to their decisions to attend college.

### **Support from Adults other than Parents**

Each of the participants had other adults in their lives that supported them and helped them attain their goals. The parents of the girls Alice played sports with knew what type of home environment she came from, so they picked her up for games, took her out to eat with them, and invited her on family vacations. These experiences helped Alice see what other families were like. She knew that her family was not happy, but until she saw what other families were like, she did not know what it was supposed to be like. Several participants mentioned a teacher who gave them a love for math or who encouraged them to attend a summer program. When asked, "What did your teachers do that encouraged you to go to college?" Lisa said, "They spoke to me like an adult, which empowered me to make my own decisions about my life." Other participants felt that

their teachers did not encourage their students to go to college, and even the ones who told their students they should go to college did not offer any practical advice or guidance on how to actually make that happen. Teachers often forget that students whose parents have not attended college do not understand the process, especially the financial aid aspect. Abbreviations like FAFSA and ACT sound like foreign words, and the amount of money students are told college will cost sounds completely insurmountable. Lisa was the only participant who felt that she got any help from a guidance counselor. Each of the other participants expressed a wish that their guidance counselor had been more proactive and available. After attending college, several of the participants mentioned professors who had taken the time to speak to them individually and give them encouragement. It was particularly important in times when they had done poorly on a test or were feeling overwhelmed that a professor acknowledged their struggles and provided practical advice for overcoming the obstacles. Several participants used phrases similar to, "They talked to me like a real person." Bradbury and Mather (2009) reported similar findings. Hand and Payne (2008) also found that emotional support and communication from college faculty were important to the success of the students.

### **Participation in Summer and Academic Programs**

Two participants participated in summer college programs, which helped them to explore career options and create networks that provided support while applying for colleges and have continued to provide support as they have participated in internship and research projects. Two participants are also part of a cohort of students and faculty which has provided career counseling and student support services. They were particularly crucial for one student during a time when she almost left school and

returned home. The two participants who did not participate in any summer programs and were not members of cohorts struggled to choose majors, and felt they wasted time and money because they did not receive any career exploration counseling in high school or college. Both of these participants had a long start-to-completion time because of their indecision and lack of support, in contrast to the other three, who are on track to finish in four years.

In summary, Appalachian youths describe the contributions made by their communities and families as essential to their success. For Appalachians, the phrase, “It takes a village” is a reality. All but one participant felt that they gained a great deal of support from their communities and extended members of their families. Some of that support was tangible, but much of it was in the form of encouragement and expressions of pride in their accomplishments. Participation in academic programs and cohorts provided them with support and a network of people dedicated to the purpose of helping them explore career options and navigate the university experience. This is a place where their schools let them down and their communities and families lacked the necessary knowledge.

### **Research Question Three: Effects of online communication**

The third research question sought to determine if, while in high school, social media and digital communication technologies could be used to mitigate the negative effects of cultural, economic, and geographic isolation that limits students’ opportunities by connecting them to individuals who live outside their communities and who have ways of living and thinking different from their own. Further, it sought to determine if social media and digital communication could be used by Appalachian students while in

college to mitigate the sense of isolation and loss they often experience during their first few years at college by providing a means of staying connected to their families and communities. The participants noted that their use of technology in high school and in college as having an effect on the attitudes and experiences that have contributed to their college success.

### **Use of Online Communication in High School**

All of the participants began using social media by the age of 14. Even the participants who said they did not use social media that much described getting their first Myspace and Facebook accounts when they were about 14. While in high school, the participants used social media to stay connected with individuals they met while traveling with their school bands, sports teams and other groups that took them around the state and, in several cases, to other parts of the country. Participants who were involved in summer programs used social media not only to stay connected with friends but also to network with the adults who became their mentors. All of the participants agreed that the friendships they made outside their communities and the communication they had with them through the use of digital technologies was a life-line that made them feel less isolated from the rest of the world. Learning about other cultures and religions helped several of the participants recognize the cultural characteristics within their own community that were negative but also those that were positive. It helped them appreciate that being different is not bad, it is just different. This finding confirms Kan's (2011) findings that learning about other cultures increases our ability to perceive accurately how others perceive us, but extends it by suggesting that the technology can be used with younger students to achieve similar results.

The participants grew up in fairly homogeneous environments. They describe cultures where homophobia, racism, and religious intolerance are acceptable. It is not until they begin forming relationships with people outside their communities that they even recognize that these attitudes exist in their own communities and that they had incorporated these attitudes into their own belief structures. They each mention being shocked when they visited other places and when their online friends told them about their beliefs and their ways of living. Having these experiences gave the participants a desire to go to college away from home and to meet people and experience things outside their communities. Many of their peers who left for college came home within the first year, some within the first semester, but having made connections outside their communities and having already experienced some of the culture shock made them feel less isolated from their college communities. Ausband and Schultheis (2010) suggested similar findings; however, their participants were all pre-service teachers. Therefore, this research builds upon theirs by suggesting that the use of technology communications at younger ages can combat the cultural isolation which often leads to racism and intolerance, which are grounded in a fear of the unknown.

### **Use of Online Communication in College**

As much as it is important for Appalachian students to connect with people outside their communities, it is also important that they are able to stay connected with their communities. Appalachian culture is very family- and community-oriented, and they are accustomed to getting their support from that community. To cut it off is devastating for some youths, and the overwhelming sense of loss sends them home. Three of the participants (Elle, Chase, and Lisa) went to college at a significant distance

from their homes. One participant (Alice) was only about 30 minutes drive from her home, and one of the participants (Samantha) went to a college located near her home so, for that participant, this was not an issue.

However, Lisa did identify the use of digital communications in college as important because she used them to stay in contact with other students in her major. They developed a Facebook page which they used to share information and encourage each other. They also used digital communications when they worked on group projects. Even though she did not live far from campus, other students commuted quite a distance.

The other four participants went to universities where the majority of the students lived on campus. However, they did each belong to Facebook pages developed to keep people in their major informed and connected and they used social media when they first arrived on campus to meet new friends. This is similar to the findings of Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2007) who also found that students on college campuses used Facebook to strengthen ties with people they had an offline relationship with, such as people who lived in their dormitory or individuals with whom they shared classes. They found that students who created these ties felt more satisfied with campus life and were less likely to miss their friends at home.

One of the most important ways they used the technology was to stay in touch with their high school friends and families. They used Skype, social media sites, instant messaging, and texting on a regular basis. Interestingly, they did not use email. They saw email as a formal medium for business or communicating with professors. Four of the participants had no intention of returning home to live, but they each described Appalachia and their state as home. Their families are there and they feel it is important

to stay connected to their roots. Especially during their first few years at college, the digital communication they had with their parents and their friends sustained them. It made them feel less isolated, and they felt it provided them the means to stay connected to communities that they did not want to totally abandon. Barcus and Braun's (2010) research supports this notion of feeling the need to leave the community in order to pursue opportunities but needing to maintain a connection to it. The use of digital technologies has given Appalachian youths an easy and practical way of doing that.

In summary, social media and digital communication technologies influenced the participants' decisions to attend college by connecting them with communities outside of their own, which made them feel less isolated and gave them a desire to meet new people and experience life outside their communities. After going to college, digital communication technologies provided a means for the participants to stay connected with their families and friends at home. This connection was particularly important during their first year at school before they formed new communities, but it continued to be important for the participants to feel like they were connected to their communities and that they had not abandoned the place they will always call home and the people who helped them achieve their goals.

### **Related Findings**

For over two centuries, the primarily Scotch and Irish descendants who live in the Appalachian region have developed a unique cultural identity that has alternately been maligned and romanticized. Campbell (1921) argues that well-meaning missionaries and educators used the image of the "cultural backwater, inhabited by practitioners of primitive religions, and speakers of defunct dialects" (Towers, 2005, pg. 76) in the late

19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> as a means of raising money. Waller (1988) and Batteau (1990) argue that in order to ease the nation's conscience of late 19<sup>th</sup> century land grabs and massive coal industry layoffs during the Great depression that resulted in wide spread economic disenfranchisement in Appalachia; disagreeable characters such as the feudists the Hatfields and McCoys, Li'l Abner and Snuffy Smith were introduced to mainstream America. These images and caricatures have stayed with the American conscious and over time have developed into the stereotypes that have come to define Appalachian culture. Generally, stereotyping has a negative connotation but all cultures have stereotypes. Outsiders generalize in order to make sense of a culture or as a way of speaking of a culture as a group. Insiders often use stereotypes as a way of developing cultural identity (Cadinu, Marcella & Carnaghi, 2013). However, negative stereotypes, whether developed by the insider or the outsider, if internalized can have a negative impact on an individual's self-perception. Negative stereotypes can also be internalized by a group which could result in the marginalization of that group and social and economic struggles (Hess, Auman, Colcombe, & Rahhal, 2003; Kotter-Grühn & Hess, 2012).

The participants in this study are aware of the stereotypes and they have at times felt that people looked down on them because of where they are from. They cite their dialect as the most overt clue to their Appalachian identity and the characteristic for which they have felt most criticized. Three of the participants expressed a conscious effort to "correct" their speech when they traveled outside of Appalachia. However, they do not feel held back by those stereotypes. In fact, they have like many other Appalachians embraced what some may term a stereotype as a cultural characteristic.

Samantha talked about taking “hillbilly literature” and students at a nearby Kentucky high school all wear overalls to football games as a sign of solidarity. In his article “The Performing Hillbilly: Redeeming Acts of Regional Stereotypes” Roberts (2010) gives multiple examples of how Appalachians have embrace the “stereotypes” as part of their culture in order to assert a cultural identity. This phenomenon is seen in many other cultures as well. One prominent example is the usurpation of the N-word by the African-American community. In order to neutralize its power against African-Americans, they have incorporated the word into their vernacular so that the word’s power now belongs to them.

When the participants were asked: When you were in high school how would you have thought that people from the outside viewed your Appalachian culture? The participants used very stereotypical words like “redneck,” “ignorant,” “uneducated,” and “hicks.” However, when ask if their perceptions of their culture and the way others perceived their culture had changed after they went to college, they each responded that their perceptions had absolutely changed. First, they learned that not everyone perceived their culture negatively. Then they began to think about their communities cultural characteristics differently. For example, the “close-knit,” “everybody in your business” element that they had disliked as teenagers— some of the participants came to realize how much they missed that close community and how important that closeness was to the community’s survival. But they also come to understand some of the negatives. Amanda talks about realizing how her community has been affected by “hopelessness,” Lisa recalled the racism that exists in her community and Chase questioned the control the coal industry has in the region. Although some scholars have argued that the

Appalachian region does not have a distinct cultural identity and should not be considered a separate culture (Billings, 1974; Fisher 1978; Stephenson and Greer, 1981) by embracing the historic images of Appalachia, the inhabitants are speaking loud and clear. They have a cultural identity that should not be marginalized because of the struggles in their community. That marginalization only serves to exacerbate those struggles.

One of those struggles is the out-migration experienced by many Appalachian communities. West Virginia has experienced an out-migration that has resulted in the number of deaths to outnumber the number of births in the state each year. Towers (2005) surveyed 689 West Virginian high school students to determine if the negative stereotypes affected their residential preferences. Towers concludes that the “stereotypes channel dissatisfaction with their state and discourage young residents from staying home and contributing to their state’s future” (p. 82). In fact, Towers survey indicates that West Virginian youths internalize the stereotypes to the point that as a group they target regions within West Virginia as “the worst places to live within the state” (p. 83). When asked what is most appealing about the regions within West Virginia, they identified as desirable they cite features outside the state such as proximity to cities in Ohio and Pennsylvania. In another study, Reck (1987) concluded that the stereotypes of rural Appalachians were internalized by both Appalachian and non-Appalachian teachers. Teachers similarly described their town students as “more confident,” having “better social skills” and “grammar,” doing “better academically,” and being more “involved in school activities” (p. 10). They described their rural students as “more inhibited, uncomfortable in new situations” having “bad grammar and

slower slurred speech” (p. 11). Although these studies do seem indicate that Appalachians have internalized Appalachian stereotypes, as do several other studies (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Klien, 1995; Porter, 1981), many scholars have concluded that stereotypes can be combated by introducing individuals to other cultures (Ausband & Schultheis, 2010; Cunningham, Fagersten, Beers, & Holmsten, 2010; Dressman, Journell, Babcock, Weatherup & Makhoukh, 2012). Giddens, North, Carlson-Sabelli, Rogers and Fogg (2012) as well as Kan (2011) suggest that the awareness of other cultures requires individuals to examine their own culture and held beliefs and biases. Therefore, meeting, interacting and learning about the cultures of people outside our own communities facilitates, not only our confrontation of how we perceive other cultures but, our perceptions of our own culture and our perceptions of how others perceive our culture.

### **Challenges, Limitations and Lessons Learned**

This study has many of the limitations inherent in qualitative research, but some are magnified by the characteristics of this special population. The reluctance of individuals to participate in the study was a surprise. The researcher had taught high school for several years in the region, went to graduate school in West Virginia, and retained contact with many of the teachers with whom she worked. She thought by using this network that finding participants would not be difficult. Even those who were initially willing to participate declined once they realized it would require them to participate in an hour-long interview. Those who eventually agreed to be interviewed were uncomfortable meeting in person. Fortunately, technology allowed the researcher to conduct interviews using Skype, which worked well. However, some of the parental figures felt uncomfortable using the technology without their children nearby. Chase and

Samantha set up the technology, introduced their mothers, and then walked away from the camera. Elle and her mother chose to sit next to each other while the other one interviewed. However, the researcher used the same questioning protocol and interviewed one and then the other. Lisa and Alice were interviewed at different times from their chosen parental figures.

Although having a parent nearby could have limited participants' responses, the researcher believes it did not. The only pair that interacted consistently during the interview, except for a few brief comments, was Elle and her mother. When the transcripts of all the pairs are compared they are strikingly similar in tone and length. The participants do not seem to have said more or less because someone else was in the room. The variation in environments is certainly a methodological limitation; however, this is a limitation present in most qualitative research. Conducting individual interviews with all of the participants in the exact same environment is generally not practical. The discomfort with strangers and the perception that others see them negatively that is often felt by Appalachians was at the foundation of the struggle the researcher had finding participants and is why allowing them to interview in a way they felt comfortable with was necessary.

The second limitation to this study is the development of life stories using only interviews of the participants and of one family member each. The development of a rich life story would be greatly enhanced by supplementary documents, such as school records. However, the researcher realized early in the process that the collection of those records was going to be unlikely. Due to privacy laws, the researcher could not obtain those documents, and asking the participants to obtain those documents was a burden no

one was going to comply with. If the researcher had a relationship with the school or formed a partnership with someone at the school, those documents could be obtained and might provide insights that did not emerge in this research. However, the research would then be limited to students who graduated from that school, and, in this research, those who participated were each from different parts of central Appalachia.

One strategy to improve credibility is to have a prolonged engagement with the participants. A prolonged engagement strategy also works well with life course theory. Multiple interviews with participants over an extended period of time might have revealed more details about their life course. It also could have mitigated the phenomenon of selective memory. Over time, people tend to exaggerate positive and negative experiences. They also tend to remember things out of order and, often, we just forget details in the moment but may remember them later. The researcher attempted to minimize these limitations in two ways. First, by interviewing individuals who had just graduated from college or who were preparing to graduate. The research questions sought details about life experiences that were closely related to their current circumstances. Secondly, following the transcription of the interviews, the participants were sent a copy and asked to add any details they may have forgotten to mention during the interview.

## **Recommendations for Parental Figures and Educational Practitioners**

### **Parents/Parental Figures**

The involvement and support of a parental figure in the youth's life during high school and throughout college is paramount to their success. This parental figure does not have to be a biological parent. This is not a revolutionary idea, but many parents

begin to pull back when their children reach high school age, believing that they need to learn independence. Learning to be independent is important, but does not exclude parents from continuing to show their pride and support for their children. In rural communities young people are often given a great deal of responsibility at a young age but their attachment to their home, their families and their communities is very strong. Removing that sense of connectedness can be devastating for an Appalachian youth so while they need to feel independent and have responsibility it is also important that they maintain their place and community attachments.

Other parents/guardians pull back at this age because they have not attended college and feel they are unqualified to direct their children. The parents figures in this study did not let this dissuade them. They continued to be involved, attended meetings, and did online research to help their children with their goal.

Parents/guardians may also consider encouraging their child to participate in activities that give youths a chance to meet people from outside their community. Young people who grow up in geographically isolated regions often have limited experiences with people of different cultures and religions. Interacting with people outside of their community can have a positive effect on how they view other cultures, which can make it easier for them to make the transition when they attend college. All of the participants in this study had the opportunity to meet people outside of their community through activities while they were in high school. They continued to stay connected to those people through the use of digital technologies. They viewed these relationships as positive and felt they helped them to be more accepting of others. They each recognized this was a characteristic that made their transition to college more successful.

“It takes a village.” The participants in this study received support from teachers, parents of friends, and extended family members. The pride that their communities and their families felt in their accomplishments encouraged them to keep going and not give up.

Students need help to explore college options and create networks of adults and peers in their chosen fields. Parents/guardians may want to encourage youths to participate in summer programs and other academic programs. Participation in these types of programs helped students in this study to choose professions they were excited about and those who developed professional networks had the opportunity to participate in research projects and internships that enriched their academic careers and will benefit them as they begin looking for jobs and applying to graduate school.

It is important that young people be digitally connected. If at all possible, parents/guardians should consider providing young people with a digital device and internet at home. If this is not possible due to financial or connectivity issues then take advantage of the resources available in your community. Due to several government initiatives, public buildings in Appalachia often have access to technology. Local libraries and community centers typically have computers available for community use or parents could ask their students’ school if they could arrange times after school when students and parents can use the computers. Parents/guardians could take a class with their child so that they both learn how to use digital communication technologies. Most public libraries offer free classes. Digital communication can be used to mitigate the physical and cultural isolation that is holding many Appalachian students back from pursuing their dreams. It can also be used while young people are away from home to

mitigate the sense of loss they feel when they are separated from their families and community. Appalachian culture is defined by its fierce attachment to family, community, and physical location. Digital technologies can provide the bridge that allows youths to pursue educational and economic opportunities while staying connected to home.

### **High School Faculty**

Young people need a parental figure in their lives. Teachers, counselors and administrators, are in a unique position to encourage parental figures to stay involved in their child's life. They should inform parental figures about opportunities to attend concerts, awards banquets, and other school functions. They should thank parental figures for their attendance and make sure they understand how important their attendance is. If there is a parental figure who is not attending, they could invite them personally and most importantly know when their students' situation does not include a parental figure. Anyone who is willing can serve in that capacity. Encourage an aunt, uncle, or a community member to step up and provide the child with support.

School counselors are without a doubt overworked. There are often one or two counselors for a school population of 1,000 to 3,000 students. It will benefit young people for administrators and teachers to work with school counselor to provide students with the experiences and resources they need to be successful.

Teachers, counselors, and administrators can use technology to communicate with parental figures. If parental figures do not know how to use the technology, then encourage them to learn by providing training at school or publicizing the classes that are given in your community. When parents are familiar and comfortable with the

technology, they can help their child create a safer online environment, they will be more involved in the research and application phase of choosing a university, and they are more likely to use the technology to offer support to their children while they are attending college.

Teachers, counselors and Administrators might also consider encouraging students to participate in academic, career exploration, and other summer programs. The students in this study who did not participate in these types of programs floundered during their first few years in college and feel they wasted time and money. Many students do not pursue post secondary education because they do not have a concept of the possibilities and are confused by the process. School counselors and teachers could be doing more to help students navigate the process. If students cannot afford these types of programs, then counselors can offer assistance in locating financial support.

Counselors often get information about these types of opportunities and should consider sharing them with teachers; however, teachers and administrators are also often contacted about enrichment and scholarship opportunities. These opportunities can be shared with the school counselor and other teachers so that a student who would benefit from the opportunity can be identified. Below is a list of organizations that provide funding every year specifically for Appalachian students.

1. Ohio University Appalachian Scholars Program offers a scholarship, book stipend, summer pre-matriculation program, academic support, a residential learning community and technology and research training to individuals living in the Ohio Appalachian counties.

2. Corporation for Ohio Appalachian Development administrates the David V. Stivinson Appalachian Community Action Scholarship Fund, which gives multiple scholarships each year to Ohio Appalachian students in need.
3. Foundation for Appalachia Ohio awards 12 scholarships to Ohio Appalachian students each year.
4. Berea College offers 13 different scholarships to students who live in the Appalachian region.
5. Foundation for Appalachia Kentucky offers grants to students, schools and community projects.
6. Appalachian Leadership Education Foundation provides academic and financial support to young men and women, who display academic and leadership abilities in West Virginia. They partner with universities to provide academic counseling, retention services and scholarships.
7. The College Foundation of West Virginia lists several scholarships available to students in West Virginia. It also gives information about applying for the Promise Scholarship which is given to any student in the state of West Virginia that meets certain academic requirements.
8. The Appalachian Regional Commission offers two all-expenses paid math, science and technology camps for students and teachers.

It is imperative that all students understand the process of applying for college and that they are given support along the way. Administrators, teachers, and counselors can ensure that all students and parents receive the support they need. Many parents have never been through this process and none of the students have. Particularly for

students whose parents have not attended college, they do not understand some basics that as college graduates we take for granted. Ask people in the community to help. Most college graduates, especially those who are alumni of your school, will be willing to walk students through the process of filling out a FAFSA or talking about their first year college experience and the lessons they learned.

Administrators might want to consider developing a communication plan that outlines how information will be shared with parents and students. The plan could include a timeline that indicates when information would most benefit students. The participants in this study expressed that they began seriously thinking about attending college in the eighth grade, therefore, students might benefit from a plan that includes discussing the benefits of post-secondary education, career options and the availability of financial support before students enter high school.

Teaching students to be digitally connected and requiring them to communicate, create, and learn through the use technology is not an option. Schools must prepare students for the next phase of their life. Communities in geographically isolated areas, more than anyone else, should be taking advantage of the benefits technology can bring to their students.

### **Recommendations for Higher Education Faculty**

Institutions of higher education can play an important role in helping Appalachian students gain access to higher education. Higher education needs to provide more opportunities for Appalachian students to visit college campuses. The participants in this study mentioned that being on a college campus when they were young got them interested in attending college. Universities could host science fairs or invite students to

a play or a sporting event. The National Association of College Basketball Coaches has a wonderful reading program where they team up with a local elementary/middle school and invite the students and parents to a game. Waiting until students are in high school is too late for many. Spending time on campus for any reason helps students become more comfortable and less intimidated by the overwhelming environment of a college campus.

As students get closer to making a decision about career paths and college attendance, connecting with faculty and talking to them about plans of study and university culture can make students feel that college is a place where they can be successful. The participants in this study cited their connections with faculty, prior to attending college, as extremely instrumental in their choice of college, and feeling that they entered college with a plan. Those who did not have this opportunity began college with more stress and uncertainty.

University recruiters and program coordinators could work with teachers and counselors to identify students who have the potential to do well in college but who are not exploring their options out of fear. Universities outside of Appalachia could make more of an effort to connect with geographically isolated schools. If a recruiter is unable to make the trip technology could be used to conduct a virtual college fair. When recruiters visit schools, they should consider identifying specific students who have the potential to be successful at their institution and engage with them on a personal level. After getting to know the student's field of interest, recruiters could offer to connect the high school student with a college student, advanced graduate student, or faculty member in the field. Knowing one person on campus may give that student the connection they need to feel more comfortable.

Faculty members should consider serving as mentors. Several of the participants in this study mentioned how important a mentor at the university had been to their survival as a college student. The professor took the time to speak to them one-on-one. They offered advice on career paths and encouragement when students became overwhelmed. None of the interactions took a great deal of time, but were of great value to the student and were interactions that they gathered strength from years later.

Every discipline provides curricular opportunities for the professor to invite students to share a part of who they are. Providing such an opportunity lets students know that their culture is respected and that they are cared about as a person. Opportunity for students to introduce their culture can be included in the curriculum. For example, in-class writings that use traditional stems such as “Where I am from...” or “I am what I am...” could be used. In other disciplines students could be encouraged to choose projects that illuminate where they are from, geographically, anthropologically, sociologically, culturally, historically or philosophically. For example, in an environmental science class, Appalachian students could look at the impact of coal on the Appalachian region or, in sociology class, they could examine the impact of poverty or fatalism on society. In these types of projects a requirement for primary sources could be included by asking them to do an interview with a family member or community leader. These types of assignments help students stay connected to their communities, but it also requires that they look at them critically, which is important if Appalachians are going to help Appalachia progress toward economic stability.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

### **Data Collection**

Finding participants was a major challenge in this study. This is often the case to different degrees in a qualitative study. The situation is more challenging when working with a hidden or special population. Strategies that did not work were: (a) contacting teachers (b) obtaining lists of graduates from universities or alumni organizations (c) asking friends and family.

The teachers, who were contacted, had not kept in contact with students. This was as true for high school teachers as it was for university professors. A few professors were willing to mention the research to current students or forward an email, but the researcher did not get any participants through this method. The researcher also obtained lists of graduates from the university she attended and had access to an alumni database. She was only able to contact individuals through email and from those she sent, only two people responded. Neither of them fit the criteria. Friends and family mostly just dismissed the request. They immediately responded that they did not know anyone who met the criteria. This was unexpected because the researcher asked friends and family who live in Appalachia.

Strategies for finding participants that did work: (a) contacting university program coordinators that had extensive contact with students (b) contacting high school administrators that have or are working on doctoral degrees.

The strategy that yielded the most response was contacting the coordinators of the Upward Bound program at West Virginia University and the Field Experience Coordinator at Morehead State University. Each of the individuals who coordinate those

programs had a relationship with the students they supervised and they kept records of contact information for recruitment and research purposes.

In this technology influenced world, one would have expected that sending emails would have been the most effective way of communicating with potential participants. After the participant had agreed to participate, this was true. However, when the informed consent forms were sent as an attachment to an email, not one person signed the letter and sent it back. It was not until they were sent through snail mail that participants responded. The researcher feels that several other participants could have been identified had she sent the letters through the mail from the start.

When working with special populations, it is extremely important to take into consideration cultural characteristics that could influence the data collection. The researcher failed to take into consideration how uncomfortable the participants, and particularly their family members, would be talking to someone they did not know. Having their children close by made the parental figures feel more comfortable. Doing the interviews together might have produced richer data. If similar research is performed in the future, developing the protocol to include pair interviews should be explored.

Although the researcher sent the participants a copy of the transcribed interview as a member check, a further member check could have been performed by sending to the participants the research findings to gather their reactions (Krefting, 1991). This process could have furthered and refined the researcher's thinking and strengthened the trustworthiness of the study.

## **Future Research**

This research revealed the need for additional research in several areas. As was stated earlier in this chapter, the development of life stories is greatly enhanced by the collection of diverse documents. A longitudinal approach would allow for the collection of diverse data sources and would not rely so heavily on the selective memory of the participants, which was mentioned as a limitation of this study.

Other research recommendations would include looking at other culturally or geographically isolated populations to see if they struggle with similar issues. A historical look at minority populations that have been successful in attaining college graduations and economic stability rates that are equal to the national average may reveal additional strategies that can be used by populations that do not have access to higher education.

More research needs to be done into the use of technology in basic education. Teachers are reluctant to use social networking sites, but can the use of other technologies at school be used to connect students? If technology cannot be used, then are there other types of programs that can help students feel more comfortable with the world and mitigate the fear that keeps young people from taking advantage of economic and educational opportunities? Using a mixed methods approach could yield answers to those questions. The researcher could interview practitioners who are using technology and/or other programs that have as their goal to connect students with cultures and communities beyond their own and then use a quantitative approach to determine if the student's attitudes or beliefs were impacted by the program. The same approach could be used to determine if initiatives to spend more time on college campuses or connect

with students with college faculty has an impact on their feelings or attitudes about college attendance.

### **Conclusion**

This dissertation began with a description of how land grant institutions were established in the United States as a way to support the upward mobility of the lower classes and to educate the electorate that was seen as necessary for a strong democracy. African-American men and women have benefited from this and there has been a steady growth in this subpopulations access to higher education and growing economic equality. However, rural Appalachia has not benefited from the democratic ideal of equal access to higher education, and they are still struggling with generational poverty.

The literature review that followed provided an overview of cultural reasons Appalachians are still lagging behind the rest of the nation in college attendance and how that is related to the region's economic instability. Further, the literature review discussed how other populations are using technology to narrow the cultural gap. The literature review concluded with an explanation of life course theory and examples of its application.

The researcher endeavored to identify what factors contributed the success of Appalachian youths who were successful in college. By analyzing the data collected through semi-structured interviews and using life course theory as a theoretical framework the researcher concluded that the involvement and support of a parental figure in the youth's life during high school and throughout college is paramount to their success. In addition, she concluded that participating in activities that give youths a chance to meet people from outside their community will have a positive effect on how

they view other cultures, which can make it easier for them to make the transition when they attend college. She also concluded that support from teachers, parents of friends, and extended family members were also important and that students need to explore college options and create networks of adults and peers in their chosen fields while in high school and in college. Lastly, she concluded that digital communication can be used to mitigate the physical and cultural isolation that is holding many Appalachian students back from pursuing their dreams, and it can also be used while young people are away from home to mitigate the sense of loss they feel when they are separated from their families and communities.

Since the beginning of the founding of the colonies, American's have viewed education as the engine for social change and upward mobility. Appalachian students should have the same opportunities as every other American youth to attend college and gain the knowledge and skills they need to help their communities to progress beyond the poverty that has plagued central Appalachia for decades. Support from family, teachers and the community is needed, but technology can be the tool that allows Appalachian youths to expand their sense of community and mitigate the cultural and geographic isolation that has held them back.

## **Researcher's Reflections**

Although I grew up in Dayton, Ohio, a small city in west central Ohio, my roots are in Appalachia. My mother grew up in the foothills of Appalachia that extend into Ohio along the Ohio River. Her family as far back as anyone has been able to research came from Wayne County, West Virginia. My great aunts talked of being buried in the family cemetery that is perched on the top of a hill in Fort Gay, West Virginia. Their brothers, Boyd, Earl and Jennings, who had died as teenagers from Spanish influenza lie there and they wished to be reunited with them and their parents. My father's parents were also born in the Appalachian region and he spent his childhood going back and forth between his parents, who lived in Cincinnati, and his grandparents who lived in Scioto County, Ohio. His family, like most Appalachian families, had immigrated to the hills of West Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee straight from Scotland and Ireland. When Katherine Sohn (2006) writes of displaced Appalachians who speak of returning home to be buried, I nod in understanding for my paternal great grandmother died in Cincinnati after a desperate trek across country from California to get home before she died.

My roots are in Appalachia but many of my attitudes and beliefs are shaped by the Dayton suburbs I grew up in and by a mother who desperately wanted to escape her upbringing. The most beloved figure in my life was my grandmother who lived in Scioto County her entire life. I visited her often and spent summers with my aunt and cousins. I thought I knew what it meant to be from that region. I thought I understood the culture and was sensitive to it. I felt a connection to the hills, but when I met and married a man who was born in West Virginia, had lived in a small Appalachian river town his whole

life and whose family's Appalachian roots grew deeper than my own, I found out how little I knew and how very different I was.

In 2003, I began teaching in an Appalachian high school. I immediately became aware of how few of my students aspired to go to college and I soon learned that even though many began college at a nearby branch, a very small portion graduated. Those who went away came home within a few months and those who went to the branch eventually just quit. I remember the first time I taught *Of Mice and Men* we focused on the theme of dreams and I asked my students, "If you could dream your biggest dream what would it be?" I was surprised at how pragmatic their dreams were. At the time, I had not read the research on fatalistic attitudes in Appalachian culture but their responses helped me see their hopelessness. They did not believe that anything special or amazing would ever happen to them. They were so isolated that they had no idea what the possibilities were.

I have a friend who grew up in Webster County West Virginia and he blames it on the mountains. He says that the mountains are so imposing that they smother anything that lives at their feet. In less metaphorical terms, the mountains have created a physical barrier between Appalachia and the rest of the world. Within that barrier, a rich culture has developed that is often ridiculed and denied.

As modern technology lessened the power of the mountains to isolate its inhabitants, families and communities held tighter to protect their members from contamination and the ridicule that comes from outsiders. It took me almost five years to understand that what really held them back was fear. The physical and cultural isolation created a fear of leaving home. Even though most of them talked about going other

places, they did not because they were overcome by the fear and hopelessness that permeated their communities. Talking to Elle, Chase, Samantha, Lisa and Alice helped me to understand this at a deeper level. What I did not understand before I began this research is how much they feel the weight of their culture. On one hand they are proud of it but they are also ashamed. In American culture, it is okay to make Appalachian jokes and to represent Appalachians in stereotypical ways. These negative images weigh on them. Kan's (2011) research had a great effect on my thinking because he suggests that debunking a person's preconceived notions about others will actually help them to confront what they perceive as other's preconceived notions about them. Appalachian pedagogy has focused on teaching Appalachian pride, but in some ways that has produced more of a divide by creating a them against us attitude. But if Kan's findings are accurate then the key could be to introduce students to different cultures. As I continued with my research I became increasingly convinced of the importance of that strategy.

There is also a sense in Appalachia that one is being disloyal if you want more than your family has, that you think you are better than your upbringing and that you are looking down on your community. None of the participants felt that from their own families but their comments support my perception that this feeling does exist. Chase particularly felt that many in his community felt this way, but all of them felt that there were factions in their community who looked down on people who were trying to get ahead and they also felt it had some effect on friends who did not go to college.

Dealing with all of these forces is stifling and results in most young people staying home and living the lives they know and are comfortable with. But, as a teacher,

I did not want my students to be limited to the opportunities available in their communities. I wanted them to dream big so I began to think about what made the students who were successful at college different. I had a tradition, which I continued from a retired teacher that every student who went away to college hung their college banner on my classroom wall. I looked at those banners every day as did my students and I challenged them to ask the question, “What are my dreams and how can I achieve them?” It is not that I think everyone needs to go to college or that everyone in Appalachia should leave. It is important that Appalachian culture be preserved but central Appalachians have lived in abject poverty long enough. The drug abuse, teen pregnancy, hopelessness and apathy will not improve until the youth feel that they have the opportunity to achieve their dreams. Technology can open the world to them. It can help them see the possibilities and feel connected to other communities. Appalachian youth should have the choice to stay with the mountains, but they should be reveling in their majesty, not feel oppressed by them.

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Appendix A  
Participant Interview Protocol

1. When did you know that you wanted to go to college?
2. What motivated you to go to college?
3. What made you decide on your chosen profession?
4. Before attending college, did you visit any campuses? If so, please describe the experience.
5. Did anyone from a university visit your school? If so, how old were you and what was the purpose and effect?
6. What did teachers or your school do that encouraged you to go to college?
7. Were there times when you almost gave up and went home? If so, were those times due to pressures or events at home? Were they due to something going on at school? Please describe what made you feel that way.
8. What made you change your mind?
9. Please describe the culture that you grew up in.
10. How would you describe your connection to that culture?
11. When you were in high school, how did you think that outsiders viewed your culture? Did that perception change any after you went to college?
12. In what ways are you connected to your home community?
13. What other communities do you feel a part of?

14. Do you have family that lives outside of Appalachia? If so who and how often were you in contact with them or visited them? In what ways did you stay in contact with them?
15. What types of experiences did you have traveling?
16. What experiences do you believe helped you to be successful away from the community and culture you grew up with?
17. Who, if anyone, had an influence on your success? How did they influence you?
18. How do your friends and family back home feel about your success? Can you give me examples of the types of words or phrases they use when talking about your achievements?
19. Comparing yourself to others in your high school, that have not been able to take advantage of opportunities outside your community, what is it about you that makes you different?
20. If you think about the characteristics that set you apart from other Appalachian youth, how did you develop those characteristics?
21. When you were growing up, did your family ever talk about education? What was their attitude towards basic education (K-12) and higher education?
22. When you had difficulties at home or school, how did you handle it? How did you learn to handle difficulties?
23. What level of online presence do you have? Do you use Facebook, chat rooms, blogs, Skype, or other online social networks?
24. How old were you when you had your first social network account?
25. Please describe for me your online history.

26. When you were in middle school and high school, did your online communities include people who live outside of Appalachia?
27. Did any of your teachers in elementary, middle, or high school use communication technologies in the classroom? If so, please explain how they used them.
28. While in college, did you use technology to stay in touch with your friends and family back home? If so, what technologies?
29. While in college, did you feel connected to your home community? What made you feel that way?

## Appendix B

### Family Interview Protocol

1. What is your relationship to \_\_\_\_\_?
2. Did you live with him/her or how often were you together?
3. Give me three words that you think best describe \_\_\_\_\_.
4. How do you think other people would describe \_\_\_\_\_?
5. What do you think is the most important thing that ever happened to \_\_\_\_\_?
6. Did \_\_\_\_\_ like school? Why?
7. Was \_\_\_\_\_ good in school? Describe an event that makes you say they were/were not good in school.
8. What type of friends did \_\_\_\_\_ have?
9. Was \_\_\_\_\_ involved in extracurricular activities? What?
10. Describe an event involving the two of you.
11. When did you know \_\_\_\_\_ was going to go to college?
12. Did you ever worry that \_\_\_\_\_ wouldn't graduate from college? Why?
13. Did you ever think that \_\_\_\_\_ should not have gone to college? Why?
14. How do you think \_\_\_\_\_ feels about this community?
15. Do you think \_\_\_\_\_ will ever want to come back and live here?
16. Would you want \_\_\_\_\_ to come back and live here? Why?
17. Are there people in your family or community who think \_\_\_\_\_ should not have left home to go to college?
18. If so why do they feel that way?

19. Do you think \_\_\_\_\_ having gone to college can help this community or your family in anyway? How?
20. What would \_\_\_\_\_ life be like right now if he/she had not gone to college?
21. How much access to a computer and internet did \_\_\_\_\_ have?
22. How often did \_\_\_\_\_ use social networks on their phone or computer?
23. Were you ever aware of relationships they formed with people outside of the community? If so, did they ever concern you?

## Appendix C

### Participant Informed Consent Form

**Dear Participant:**

You are invited to participate in this research study. The following information is provided in order to help you to make an informed decision whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask. You are eligible to participate because you are a self-identified Appalachian and first-generation college student or graduate.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the life stories of first-generation college graduates from Appalachia in order to identify the experiences that have encouraged them to attend and persist to college graduation. The study will identify family, school, and community experiences that Appalachian youth considered to be influential in their decision to pursue postsecondary study. The research will also examine if technology played a role in their decision to attend and then stay at a postsecondary institution.

You may find the process of identifying the critical incidents in your life revealing and helpful to you as you continue to work toward your goals. I hope that the information gained from this study will help me to identify ways that teachers, schools, and communities can encourage other students to attend and persist in college.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with the principal investigator. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you choose not to participate, you may withdraw at any time by notifying the principal investigator by email using the address listed below. Upon your request to withdraw, all information pertaining to you will be destroyed or returned. If you choose to participate, all information will be held in strict confidence. Your response will be considered in combination with those from other participants and the statements of your families. You will have complete control over which family members I speak with. The information obtained in the study may be published in academic journals or presented at conferences, but your identity will be kept strictly confidential. Pseudonyms will be used in all publications and presentations.

After completing the interview, you will be given the opportunity to read the transcripts and make additions or revisions. You may choose not to have your interview used for the study at that time or at any other time.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please sign the statement below and return it to the principal investigator.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Peggy Henderson Murphy, Principal Investigator  
Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
Professional Studies in Education  
8364 Finch Shelter Drive  
Columbus, OH 43235  
740-646-5070  
murphderson@gmail.com

Dr. Crystal Machado, Faculty Sponsor  
Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
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307 Davis Hall  
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**This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (Phone: 724/357-7730).**

## Appendix D

### Family Member Consent Form

**Dear Family Member:**

\_\_\_\_\_ has been invited to participate in my research study. The following information is provided in order to help you to make an informed decision whether or not to participate in an interview. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to ask. You are being asked to participate in this interview because \_\_\_\_\_ has agreed to be a participant in my study and your insight on his/her life will help me to get a better picture of how he/she came to the decision to attend college and what events in their life have contributed to their success in college.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the life stories of first-generation college graduates from Appalachia in order to identify the experiences that have encouraged them to attend and persist to college graduation. The study will identify family, school, and community experiences that Appalachian youth considered to be influential in their decision to pursue postsecondary study. The research will also examine if technology played a role in their decision to attend and then stay at a postsecondary institution.

Your participation is voluntary. You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with the investigator. If you choose to participate, you may withdraw at any time by notifying the principal investigator by email using the address listed below. Upon your request to withdraw, all information pertaining to you will be destroyed or returned. If you choose to participate, all information will be held in strict confidence. Your response will be considered in combination with those from other participants and the statements of your family member. The information obtained in the study may be published in academic journals or presented at conferences, but your identity will be kept strictly confidential. Pseudonyms will be used in all publications and presentations.

After completing the interview, you will be given the opportunity to read the transcripts and make additions or revisions. You may choose not to have your interview used for the study at that time or at any other time.

If you are willing to be interviewed for this study, please sign the statement below and return it to the principal investigator.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Peggy Henderson Murphy, Principal Investigator  
Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
Professional Studies in Education  
8364 Finch Shelter Drive  
Columbus, OH 43235  
740-646-5070  
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## Appendix E

### Participant Demographic Survey

1. Where were you born?
2. Where do you call home? (county and state)
3. Where did you graduate from high school?
4. What year did you graduate from high school?
5. How many years did you live in the community where you went to high school?
6. Do you consider yourself to be Appalachian?
7. Are you currently a senior in college or have you graduated in the last two years?
8. What university do you attend or did you graduate from?
9. Where did you live while you attended college?
10. Are you the first person in your family to graduate from a four-year university?  
If not, explain their relationship to you and when they graduated.

Appendix F  
Transcription Guide

Adapted from the Unified Committee for Afro-American Contributions and the Southern Maryland Folklife Project -- 2/26/2003

**Transcribe everything**

1. Do not change regional dialects or other grammatical forms that sound nonstandard to your ear. Transcribe all of the words spoken in the order in which they were said, even if they do not make sense to you.
2. Do not spell phonetically or convey dialects through your spellings. For example, if it sounds like someone is saying that they were in the woods hunting for a "bar," type "bear." However if they use 'cause, ain't, drop a g at the end of a sentence or other common speech habits these are dialectical and should be maintained in the transcript.
3. It is important to the reader of the transcription to have as much information as you can provide about what transpired during the interview. Pass along the information that your ear picks up as you listen. If the speaker laughs, type [laughs]. If you can hear that the recorder is turned off and then back on, type [Recorder turned off and back on], skip a line, and continue.
4. Transcribe audible pauses such as "uh" and "um." As well as sounds used as expressions such as "uh huh" and "umm hmm" or "ah hah!"
- 5. The double hyphen --** Most of us speak in interrupted sentences. We start to say something, and then switch directions, or choose other words. Note these with a double hyphen, period, and two spaces. For example, "When I was--. I was about six years old when . . . ."

**6. Ellipses . . . or . . . .** If, after trying several times, you can't understand a word or a phrase, signify that something is missing by typing space, period, space, period, space, period, space, and then go on to the next word you can hear: ( . . . ) If a sentence ends or begins in the span of unintelligible words, indicate this with an additional period and space: ( . . . . )

7. Punctuating spoken speech is difficult. Just do your best to put periods and other appropriate punctuation where they belong to help with readability and accurately convey what was said. Use exclamation points to indicate emphasis or that someone said something with a laugh in his/her voice.

8. Insert page numbers at the bottom of each page. Type in the date of the interview in the header so that it appears on each page.

9. Indicate the person speaking by beginning the sentence with the person's first name and a colon. Do not indicate the person's last name. If it is mentioned in the recording leave out the name and put ellipse in its place to indicate the deletion.

## Appendix G

### Restorying of significant events in participants life story

	Elle	Samantha	Chase	Lisa	Alice
Early Childhood (0-13)	<p>Lived with both parents</p> <p>Always wanted to attend college</p> <p>Lived in the same house in the same town her whole life</p> <p>Used her imagination</p> <p>Loved School until the 6<sup>th</sup> grade</p> <p>Traveled with family</p> <p>Realized she liked being away from home</p> <p>Noticed people had different accents and different ways of living</p> <p>Began using Social Networks at 10</p> <p>Joined the band in the</p>	<p>Lived with both parents</p> <p>Has lived in the same town and same house her entire life</p> <p>Was in gifted and talented</p> <p>Traveled Every summer</p>	<p>Lived with mother and grandparents</p> <p>Lived in the town and same house his entire life</p> <p>Mother was disabled in a car accident</p> <p>Father died</p> <p>Learned to persevere</p> <p>Won a Computer Whiz award in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade</p> <p>Loved School until the 6<sup>th</sup> grade</p>	<p>Lived with both parents</p> <p>Loved to read to escape</p> <p>Grew up in a very small town</p> <p>Lived in same town her entire life</p> <p>Knew very early she wanted to escape her hometown</p> <p>Felt she had to be very independent from a very young age.</p> <p>First Social Networking account at 13</p>	<p>Lived with mother until she was 15 and then moved in with Grandparents</p> <p>Father died</p> <p>Lived in small town about 20 minutes from WVU</p> <p>Very difficult childhood had to take care of herself and often her mother.</p>

	6 <sup>th</sup> grade				
High School Years	<p>Visited Local Colleges</p> <p>Went to OSU Camp summer between junior and senior year</p> <p>Made connections with people from camp both professional and personal</p> <p>Local Colleges visited her HS</p> <p>Visited Kent State her Senior Year</p> <p>Decided on Fashion Design</p> <p>Traveled with Band</p> <p>Used internet to stay in touch with people she met on trips Traveled to Europe on a school trip</p>	<p>Visited the local college</p> <p>Two local colleges visited her school</p> <p>Traveled with the band</p> <p>Taught Sunday School and vacation bible school</p> <p>Worked at McDonalds for 6 months</p> <p>Took college Prep classes</p> <p>Decided to go to college</p> <p>Took "Hillbilly Lit"</p> <p>Traveled Every summer</p> <p>Began using instant messaging and chat rooms</p>	<p>First Social networking account at 14</p> <p>Visited Big Sandy CC</p> <p>Big Sandy CC visited HS</p> <p>Was bullied and wanted to drop out of school</p> <p>Decided to go to college</p> <p>Really into online gaming</p> <p>Became friends through the games with guys around the US</p> <p>Became aware of different cultures and ways of living</p> <p>Did not fit in</p> <p>Traveled to DC and Disney World with school</p>	<p>Graduated Salutatorian</p> <p>Very involved in band</p> <p>Traveled throughout WV with band</p> <p>Involved in many clubs</p> <p>Had a part time job</p> <p>Very involved in church.</p> <p>Taught Sunday school</p> <p>Got a computer and internet her Freshman year through Gearup</p> <p>Parents very leery of internet</p> <p>Uses social media to stay in touch with friends made around the State</p> <p>Realized her freshman year that she needed to go to college</p> <p>Visited campus of small college near home for festival since a young child</p> <p>Visited WVU during her senior year</p>	<p>Graduated 12<sup>th</sup> in her class</p> <p>Visited three college campuses during her senior year</p> <p>School had college fair but not until Senior year</p> <p>Played Volleyball and Softball</p> <p>Got first computer and internet in high school</p> <p>First Social networking account at 14</p> <p>Realized as a Freshman she needed to attend college but didn't know what she wanted to study</p> <p>Didn't know anything about college or how to apply. Had to ask what the FASFA and ACT were.</p> <p>Did and A-Z major search provided by WVU and chose Environmental Natural</p>

					Resource Economics
College Years	<p>Overwhelmed with work and lack of sleep thought about quitting school</p> <p>Mom stayed up all night with her texting with moral support</p> <p>Realized she had an accent</p> <p>Grew apart from friends and hometown</p> <p>Formed online groups with college friends Skyped with family and friends</p>	<p>Began college in Physical Therapy</p> <p>Decided she wasn't interested in Physical Therapy</p> <p>Got pregnant</p> <p>Niece died</p> <p>Quit school</p> <p>Got married Had a second child</p> <p>Got divorced</p> <p>Returned to college as an education major</p> <p>Mom got cancer</p>	<p>Went to a technical College in Lexington, KY</p> <p>Went to Big Sandy Community College</p> <p>Complete and Associates degree</p> <p>Took a semester off and then decided to Attend Morehead</p> <p>Was in a fraternity</p> <p>Coached little league and helped with football</p> <p>Realized his community did not value education</p> <p>Grandfather died</p>	<p>Attended WVU on a full scholarship</p> <p>Started out wanting to be a doctor</p> <p>Decided to study Biology is currently involved in a research project</p> <p>After first round of exams was afraid she wasn't cut out for college</p> <p>Is applying for graduate school</p> <p>Influenced her niece to attend college</p>	<p>Almost quit after doing poorly on first exams.</p> <p>Difficult first year but got support from McNair Scholars program</p> <p>Got lots of support from her Aunt and Uncle</p> <p>Stayed connected to home during first 2 years but began letting that go and transitioning</p> <p>Is applying to graduate school</p>
Siblings	None	3 brother but they were teenagers when she was born and left home when she was young.	None	Has three older siblings. Grew up as an only child. Not close to her siblings	Has one older sister. Lived with her until she was 15
Parents	Both Parents Families are from	Both Parents Families are from	Both Parents families are from	Mom's family is from Appalachia	Father passed away when she was young

	Appalachia Stay at home mom Both parents active in Band boosters Neither parents attended college	Appalachia Stay at home mom Mother active in band boosters Father worked for Railroad Neither parent attended college	Appalachia Stay at home Mom Grandfather his father figure. Grandfather was a Coal miner Neither parent attended college	Mom began working when she started school Neither parent attended college	Grandfather was a coalminer but is now a maintenance man at Fairmont State Mother married six times and was an alcoholic and on drugs Neither parent attended college
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