Dropping the Invisibility Cloak: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Sense of Belonging and Place Identity Among Rural, First Generation, Low Income College Students from Appalachian Kentucky

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Dropping the Invisibility Cloak:
An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Sense of Belonging and Place Identity Among Rural, First Generation, Low Income College Students from Appalachian Kentucky

A Dissertation Presented

by

BRENDA HARDIN ABBOTT

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2019

College of Education
Dropping the Invisibility Cloak: 
An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Sense of Belonging and Place Identity Among Rural, First Generation, Low Income College Students from Appalachian Kentucky

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BRENDA HARDIN ABBOTT

Approved as to style and content by:

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Associate Dean of Academic Affairs
College of Education
DEDICATION

FOR APPALACHIA
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We do not need magic to change the world, we carry all the power we need inside ourselves already: we have the power to imagine better.

-J. K. Rowling

This work rests on the shoulders of many wizards. I begin here thanking the two smallest ones and their father. My son Connor was just over 2 years old when I began this journey, and his brother Ian was about to turn 4. They have only really known me to be at the university working on my doctorate and teaching as a professor at another. Now that this is coming to a close, and they are approaching ages 9 and 11, I am struck by how much it has mattered to their own college-going identities. They have seen themselves at the university from the very beginning. I thank them for supporting me amid their screaming and fighting. My husband, Brandon Abbott, is owed my deepest thanks and gratitude for the sacrifices he made to see this the work through its completion. He has suffered many nights of being on his own with the children, so I could attend classes or write endless papers. He has complained, but only reasonably so, and he has been steadfast in his love and support of me.

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this program, and while he was aware I was pursuing my doctorate, and very happy for me, he was not able to celebrate here at the end of it. Still, he provided financial and emotional support throughout my life. Both of them did this despite not having attended college on their own.

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Figure 1: Fitzpatrick Arena, Holyoke, MA, 2019
ABSTRACT

DROPPING THE INVISIBILITY CLOAK: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF SENSE OF BELONGING AND PLACE IDENTITY AMONG RURAL, FIRST GENERATION, LOW INCOME COLLEGE STUDENTS FROM APPALACHIAN KENTUCKY

MAY 2019

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In a country that once was 95% rural in the late 1700s, only 19.3% of the population of the United States now live in rural areas (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The shift in population from rural to urban areas is not simply demographic; it imbues a shift in who and what matters. Only 13.6% of adults over 25 in Appalachian Kentucky have earned bachelor’s degrees, 18.9% below the national average (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2016). This phenomenological study seeks to understand how rural, first generation, low income college students from Appalachian Kentucky experience a sense of belonging in their first year of college and how their understanding of their place identity impacts their belonging to both their institutions and their home communities. Through interviews and photographs, the students reveal how they developed a college going identity, the ways they belong and the tensions they felt with belonging at their colleges and universities, and how they experienced a place identity as Appalachian.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>xvii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>xviii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbol of the Study</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Study</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodological Overview</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitions</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural: Population Density and Size</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Generation</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Income</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Attainment</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assumptions</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher Education</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delimitations</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity/Identities</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butler: Performed Identities</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bourdieu: Habitus and Forms of Capital</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Rural Identity ...........................................................................................................34
  Rural Myths ...............................................................................................................34
  Urbanormativity ........................................................................................................38
  Rural Disappearance ...............................................................................................40
Working Class Identity ...............................................................................................43
  The Crisis of the Working Class in the Twenty-First Century .........................44
  Middle Class Higher Education and Working Class Students .....................48
  Class Based Inequalities in Higher Education .....................................................53
Conceptual Framework: Sense of Belonging and Place Identity .........................57
Summary ....................................................................................................................62

3. APPALACHIA: REAL AND IMAGINED CONTEXTS ............................................66
  Introduction ............................................................................................................66
  American Indians and White Settlers .................................................................67
  Daniel Boone ..........................................................................................................69
  The Invention of Appalachia .....................................................................................71
     Hillbilly ..................................................................................................................72
     Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty .................................................................74
     Redneck Trump Voter .........................................................................................75
  The Extractive Economy .........................................................................................77
  Twenty-first Century Appalachia ...........................................................................79

4. METHODOLOGY .....................................................................................................80
  Introduction ............................................................................................................80
  Rationale for the Methodological Choice .............................................................81
  Phenomenology .......................................................................................................83
     Husserl: Foundations of Modern Phenomenology ............................................84
     Heidegger: Hermeneutic Turn in Phenomenology ................................................85
     Merleau-Ponty & Sartre: Phenomenology after Heidegger .............................87
     Narrative Inquiry and Phenomenology .............................................................88
     Interpretative Phenomenology ..........................................................................92
  Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Research Design ...........................92
### Research Questions

- Purposive Sampling .......................................................... 93  
- Data Collection .................................................................. 93

### Interpretative Phenomenological Data Analysis

- Re/Reading........................................................................... 94  
- Initial Noting...................................................................... 94  
- Developing Emergent Themes ........................................... 95  
- Searching for Connections Across Themes ....................... 96  
- Cross-Case Patterns ......................................................... 96

### Research Questions

- TRIO Programs ................................................................... 98
- Freedom College Talent Search ......................................... 99
- Sunset and Forest Counties .................................................. 100
  - Sunset County .................................................................. 101
  - Forest County .................................................................. 101
- Big University ..................................................................... 102
- Mary Lincoln College .......................................................... 102

### Data Collection

- Developing Emergent Themes ........................................... 103

### Interpretative Phenomenological (Data) Analysis

- Bracketing........................................................................... 106
- Re/Reading........................................................................... 108
- Coding and Developing Emergent Themes ......................... 108
- Searching for Connections across Themes ......................... 108
- Cross-Case Patterns ......................................................... 109

### Limitations and Delimitations

- Conclusion ........................................................................... 110

### 5. FINDINGS: COLLEGE-GOING IDENTITY AND SENSE OF BELONGING IN COLLEGE

- Prologue............................................................................... 111
- Introduction........................................................................ 111
- Part One, Act I: Setting the Stage for College-Going Identity .................................................................................... 114
  - Family Support and Going to College ................................. 114
First Generation College Students and Academic Belonging......157

| STEM and Gender ..................................................157 |
| STEM and Identity Challenges ................................158 |
| STEM and Tensions with Belonging ............................160 |
| Academic Challenges and Study Skills ........................161 |
| Changing Majors to Belong ....................................165 |
| Managing Time and Commitments ..............................168 |
| Seeking Academic Support ....................................168 |

Mental Health/Depression/Stigma and Belonging.............170
Resident Assistant (RA) Position and Belonging ............171

Conclusion .........................................................................172

7. FINDINGS: PLACE IDENTITY AND BELONGING ..................174

| Prologue ..........................................................................174 |
| Introduction ......................................................................175 |
| Part Two, Act IV: Place Identity and Belonging .............176 |

| Hillbilly .........................................................................177 |
| Redneck ..........................................................................178 |
| White Trash and Trailer Trash ....................................180 |
| Trump Supporters ......................................................182 |
| Language ..........................................................................192 |
| Race ................................................................................193 |
| Poor .............................................................................195 |
| Socialized to be Poor ..................................................198 |

Place Identity .....................................................................200

| Home is not the Same ..................................................201 |
| Going Home ....................................................................202 |
| Close Friends and Family at Home ..............................202 |
| Home is Where I Belong ..............................................203 |
| Belonging in Two Places .............................................204 |
| Facing Home ...................................................................205 |
| Religion and Sexuality ...............................................206 |
| Religion as Oppression ..............................................209 |
| Religion as Belonging ................................................213 |

Advice to First Generation, Low Income Students Planning to Go to College ...213
Conclusion .........................................................................214
8. DISCUSSION: SENSE OF BELONGING IN COLLEGE AND PLACE IDENTITY AMONG RURAL, FIRST GENERATION, LOW INCOME COLLEGE STUDENTS FROM APPALACHIAN KENTUCKY .................................................. 216

Introduction ........................................................................................................ 216
Identity .................................................................................................................... 217
Rural Identity as Master Identity ........................................................................ 218
Appalachian Identity as Master Identity .............................................................. 219
Rural Identity Positioned by Urbannormativity and Rural Simulacra ............... 222
White Identity Positioned by Other Whites ...................................................... 223
“Poor” as a Discourse Identity vs. Working Class Identity ............................... 224
Poor Identity as Performed Identity .................................................................. 225
Poor Identity as Positioned Identity .................................................................. 226
First Generation College Student and Interactional Identity ............................. 226
First Generation College Student and Cultural Capital ..................................... 226
First Generation College Student and College Going Identity ....................... 230
First Generation College Student and Sense of Belonging .............................. 232
Appalachian Kentucky Place Identity as Habitus ............................................. 234
Implications ......................................................................................................... 237
Limitations ........................................................................................................... 240
Recommendations ............................................................................................... 241
Conclusion ............................................................................................................ 242

APPENDICES

A: CONSENT LETTER, INTRODUCTION LETTER, EMAIL SCRIPT ............................. 243
B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PARTICIPANT INTERVIEWS .................................. 249
C: PHOTO PROJECT .......................................................................................... 253

BIBLIOGRAPHY .................................................................................................. 255
## LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: Federal TRIO Programs Current Year Low-Income Poverty Guidelines Talent Search</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: Three Types of Identity, Tracy, 2013</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: Identity as an Analytical Lens, Gee, 2000</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: Forms of Capital, Bourdieu, 1986</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5: Research Participants</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Fitzpatrick Arena, Holyoke, MA, 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Harper’s Weekly Cartoon Satirizing Kentucky’s Stance on Neutrality, 1861</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Map of Appalachia, with Subregions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>U.S. Census Bureau, Urban and Rural Classification, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>President Lyndon B. Johnson and Tom Fletcher, Inez, Kentucky, April, 1964</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Heidegger’s Hermeneutic Circle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“I don't need a cloak to become invisible.” --Dumbledore
— J.K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone

Introduction

I begin this study on the lived experiences of rural, first generation college students from Appalachian Kentucky by sharing my own story as way of centralizing the significance of storytelling in this work. I begin also with an epigraph quoting the powerful wizard, Dumbledore, from the Harry Potter series, because I have been able, like Dumbledore, to forge an alchemy of invisibility without a cloak. While I don’t claim magical abilities, I have had the power of invisibility, one that I share with 60 million rural people across the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017).

I was born in Chicago, where my parents lived for over twenty years, part of an Appalachian diaspora, also known as urban Appalachians, who moved to northern cities to pursue economic opportunities in the mid to late twentieth century (Alexander, 2006). My paternal grandfather, Johnny, was a deep miner at Blue Diamond Coal Co., in Perry County, but his four boys stayed with his wife, Flossie, on the family farm in the community of Smith Branch, outside of Jackson, the seat of Breathitt County, named in honor of President Andrew Jackson. He would leave for weeks at a time and return during production breaks. When his own children came of age, work in the coal mines was in decline due to technological advancements. After a stint in the U.S. Army, my father moved our family north with two of his brothers and their families along with many other Appalachians seeking employment in midwestern cities. They settled in the
Wicker Park neighborhood of Chicago, and here he joined the Boilermakers Union as a welder. This experience was pivotal in my father’s life. Here he learned the trade that would mark his life. He was proud of his work in this brotherhood, where he learned to weld, and he noted the irony of having spent so much of his career in the employment of coal companies, that the Boilermakers were the ones who provided him death benefits when he passed away in 2013.

In 1971, Kentucky became the leading coal producing state in the United States ("Kentucky Coal Facts," 2016), and in 1977, my family moved back to Kentucky. My aunt revealed to me, “We never went to Chicago to stay. We always planned to return when the jobs came back.” My father said of this time, “Well, it seemed like all the people we knew were leaving the city and going to the suburbs. Arthur [his brother] got a job with Falcon [Coal Co.], and he got me and Fred jobs there, too. It seemed like the right time to leave.” My mother lamented the move as she had grown accustomed to the affordances of urban living. She enjoyed buying tamales from street vendors, volunteering at my Lutheran elementary school, and exploring the city through public transit. Central to diaspora are feelings of displacement, confusion over staying v. leaving, and watching land, resources and people disappear (Wyrick, 2015). My mother continued to have these feelings the rest of her life, but she never seriously considering uprooting the family and moving back to Chicago. It was never home. It was always “the city.”

I grew up in Breathitt County, Kentucky, one of 120 counties in the state. The population estimate of Breathitt County is 13,284, and 82% of the county is classified as rural (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). This county has been marked by bloodshed and
violence and is commonly known as “Bloody Breathitt.” In his book, *Bloody Breathitt: Politics and Violence in the Appalachian South*, T.R.C. Hutton (2013) argues that the mass killings that twice dispatched state troopers in the 1870s in Breathitt County and again in 1903 to restore order, were the result of power struggles for land, position and control. The lawlessness that marked the Reconstruction Era was not hidden from national view, but it was constructed through an othering of whiteness (Isenberg, 2016). The hillbillies of Appalachia were seen as another breed, as white, but not properly bred. (Isenberg, 2016). The fascination and lore of feuds fueled by the infamous Hatfield-McCoy feud (1863-1891), masked white on white violence as familial and clannish (Hutton, 2013). Historian and documentarian Jerry Deaton notes that “the Breathitt feuds involved about six families and led to probably more than 100 deaths” (as cited in Brammer, 2012). In contrast, the more publicized Hatfield-McCoy feud involved 12 deaths, yet it managed to capture the public’s fascination through dime-store novels and carve a powerful image of *hillbilly* in our national folklore. The problem with such images is as powerful as they are, as startling and discontent, they emerge, retreat and are remade amid real people.

In reading this snapshot of my own rural and working class identity, I am struck by my conversation with the narrative past, a construct of identity making salient to the work of Gee (2000) and Hall (1990/1996). The historicity of being coupling with the making of self, current self, at work writing about identity, struggling to not fix states, not retreat from *hillbilly* being remade upon seeing my own ancestors’ names in Hutton’s (2013) book. The work of identity is not in the end states, but in the processing of those states. How does the nomenclature of *urban Appalachian*, itself an oxymoron, a
signifying of two things brought together at once disparate, engender identity? How is it possible to be of “the city” and Appalachia? What to make of working class ethos? A strong cultural pride in coal, the dirtiest of fossil fuels and life’s blood of my lineage?

Three Christmases ago, my aunt sent me detailed family genealogy she handwrote from tombstones at local graveyards. Next to the name, Ira Allen, she wrote: HE DIED IN CIVIL WAR. I counted back the generations and figured out Ira Allen was my great-great-great paternal grandfather. The story of immigration is lost in my family, the origins are Virginia, North Carolina, more immediate than afar. Graves go back to the 1800s in Kentucky, in graveyards named after family and locations; my kin, my people. They convey a sense of always being. That story begets origin. That story hides conflict and violence and erases who was there before it. After a few days, I googled Ira Allen because I thought he might appear in a Civil War historical document. I wondered if he would be a Confederate or Union soldier.

Living in a Border State, like Kentucky, these questions of ascribed identity remain. Positioned between the South and the North, Kentucky had economic interests in slavery as well as in northern industrialism (Klotter & Friend, 2018; Marshall, 2010; McKnight, 2012; Dollar, Whiteaker & Dickinson, 2011). Kentuckians’ strong cultural and economic identification with slavery linked them to the Deep South, while at the same time, Kentucky’s links to the industrialized North and an expanding West made them unwilling to sever Union ties over the question of slavery or the issue of states’ rights. Though loyal to the Union, Kentucky did not intend to end slavery or reject white supremacy (Klotter & Friend, 2018). The Great Compromiser, Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky, is credited for his role is limiting the expansion of slavery, in the Compromise
of 1850. As an outspoken critic of slavery, whose own presidential hopes had faltered, Clay remarked, “I’d rather be right than president.” Still Clay owned 60 slaves and believed slavery was so much a part of southern culture that abolition would destroy the Union (King, 2012). More than any other Border State, 19% of the population of Kentucky were slaves, and some 80,000 slaves were sent to the Deep South through Kentucky, as the state was a major site of slave trading (Klotter & Friend, 2018). The 1861 Harper’s Weekly political cartoon illustrates Kentucky as the cat on left restraining the cock of the walk (the Union) while the Confederate Cat (Jefferson Davis) kills off his chickens. (See Figure 2: Harper’s Weekly Cartoon Satirizing Kentucky's Stance on Neutrality, Library of Congress).

Figure 2: Harper’s Weekly Cartoon Satirizing Kentucky's Stance on Neutrality, 1861, Library of Congress

The presumed neutrality of Border States was a political demarcation between Union and Confederate. How was it possible to be neutral? Kentucky was anything but neutral
politically and socially on the issue of slavery.

Geographically, Kentucky served an important role as the contested territory between the North and South. It’s long length mirroring Tennessee, Kentucky controlled important waterways and routes, essential in a strategy for war, and necessary to protect its shared borders with Missouri, Ohio, Illinois, Indiana (Klotter & Friend, 2018; Dollar & Whiteaker, 2011; Kennedy, 2001). In 1861, Abraham Lincoln is reputed to have said, “I hope to have God on my side, but I must have Kentucky.” In September of 1861, he wrote in a letter to Orville H. Browning, “I think to lose Kentucky is nearly the same as to lose the whole game. Kentucky gone, we cannot hold Missouri, nor, as I think, Maryland” (p. 533). Lincoln’s strategy to maintain the Union relied heavily upon appeasing these Border States and their conflicted loyalties.

I found Ira Allen, a fifth sergeant for the Confederate States of America (CSA), in the battle known as Morgan’s Last Raid into Kentucky, also called the Second Battle of Cynthiana, where Brigadier General John Hunt Morgan initiated his second raid on Union troops on June 11th, 1864 (Bishop, 2012). Resisting orders not to invade Kentucky, which had adopted a stance of neutrality, Morgan was considered rebellious amid the chaos in the CSA. At first successful, his men defeated and then captured 1,300 Union soldiers in two separate battles. The next morning, when Brigadier General Stephen Gano Burbridge arrived with 2,400 Union troops, the Confederates were forced to retreat (Bishop, 2012). Over 2,000 men were killed, 1,000 on each side, including Ira Allen, who is buried in a mass grave at Battle Grove Cemetery, in Cynthiana, Kentucky, under what is believed to be the first Confederate monument anywhere in the U.S. (www.battlegrovecemetery.com). How to filter the images of Border State, Confederate,
*Hillbilly*? In the words of Hall (1990) and Hall & Du Gay (1996), how have I been positioned by this place and its violence? How have I positioned it?

After reading Klotter’s account of the Second Battle of Cynthiana, I was struck by the name, Brigadier General John Hunt Morgan. I went back to the genealogy in my aunt’s handwriting. And there were the names of Ira Allen’s two children: John Morgan and George Washington Allen. The patriotism was not lost on me. My great-grandmother, Margaret Allen, was the daughter of George Washington Allen, and she named her oldest son after her uncle, John Morgan. My grandfather. *Was my grandfather ultimately named for a sergeant in the CSA?*

If I came to the work of rural and working class identities out of my own self, it wasn’t initially apparent to me. It maybe we see what we see because we have a lens on the world that draws our gaze to it, even then our gaze is battle-worn among subject positions, partial at best, frail. I understood rural < urban. I have lived that experience, but more significantly, I have shared this experience with others because the marginalization of rural people and places is normative and widespread. In Judith Butler’s terms, it has been embodied, not only by those who identify as rural, but by all of us.

To examine rural means to untangle working class from it, then fold it back in and reimagine it. The conflation of rural and working class creates racialized myths of the white, working class celebrated in country music songs and despised by liberal pundits. One of the greatest sources of capital Bordieu does not name specifically is the political capital rural people exchange in election years. Lying dormant most of the time, rural and working class people are made visible through symbolic violence during
national elections, where attempts to silence and denounce their politics as backwards is commonplace. Moreover, they are imagined by pollsters to hold one, homogenous political view, contrary to their best interests. They are painted as right-wing, conservative, overly religious and unaware. The presidential election of Donald Trump has released a swarm of articles on social media aimed at eradicating the “hillbilly problem,” one largely framed by liberal, elite white men as those uneducated whites who benefit from the social programs they vote consistently against (Catte, 2016). In *Hillbilly Elegy*, J.D. Vance (2016) accepts the culture of poverty view of “hillbillies” responsible for their own messes: “There is a lack of agency here—a feeling that you have little control over your life and a willingness to blame everyone but yourself” (p.7). Hillbilly poverty porn appeals to class unconscious Americans who simultaneously get to feel compassion and disgust for the poor in one minute clickbaits on their smartphones while also feeling a sense of accomplishment that they are not them.

As we come to know rural and working class through simulacra, what Baudrillard (1994) called those copies of things that may not even have a true original, we also know it through the stories people tell of their lived experiences. In my own story, what truth can be discerned among the strong patriarchal undertow, the glimpses of violence in this conversation with the narrative past of hillbilly, Confederate, Border State? These stories are chosen for a conflicted representation of Appalachian identity, not for completeness.

**Symbol of the Study**

“If surviving were as simple as hiding under the Invisibility Cloak, we’d have everything we need already!”—Hermione, *Harry Potter and The Deathly Hallows*, p. 426

In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, Harry Potter is gifted the Invisibility
Cloak, a magical cloth owned by his father that allows him to roam the halls of Hogwarts, unseen. Harry and his friends, Ron and Hermione, use the cloak to hide themselves as they search for the truth about Nicolas Flamel in the restricted section of the library, release Norbert the dragon, discover the wonders of the Mirror of Erised, and make their way to the third floor to battle Lord Voldemort for the Sorcerer’s Stone. In the series, Harry goes on to use the Invisibility Cloak strategically to hide from his enemies and to eavesdrop. In the magical world of Harry Potter, the Invisibility Cloak gives the young wizard an advantage in his battles with the evil Lord Voldemort, yet readers learn the Invisibility Cloak is not an ordinary piece of magic. It was one of three gifts from Death himself to one of Harry’s ancestors, and in many ways, it was the most powerful and useful of all the gifts. In the *Harry Potter* series, the act of being invisible is essential to Harry, Hermione, and Ron as they search for Voldemort’s horcruxes, and Harry would not have been able to successfully defeat Lord Voldemort without the assistance of his cloak. When the time comes for Harry to face Lord Voldemort, he must drop the Invisibility Cloak and meet Death, much as his ancestor Ignotus Peverell had done. In short, for Harry to resolve the prophecy, *Neither can live while the other survives*, he must become visible.

In the real world of higher education, invisibility comes at great cost to those students who are unseen, and first generation, low income college students are further made invisible by their rurality. In a country that once was 95% rural in the late 1700s, the U.S. Census Bureau (2010) reports that only 19.3% of the population of the United States now live in rural areas. The effects of industrialism in the late 1800s moved the country toward urbanization with the increase of factories and mills in the cities of the
U.S. By 1920, more than half of the population of the U.S. lived in urban areas, and this trend toward urbanization has increased in every decade (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The shift in population from rural to urban areas is not simply demographic; it imbues a shift in who and what matters. Few people today outside of rural areas have direct contact and understanding of rural people and places. The results are an abundance of misunderstandings about rural people and places empowered through rural myths, rural simulacra, and urbanormativity (Thomas, Lowe, Fulkerson and Smith, 2011). As the U.S. population grows increasingly urban, the concerns of rural students are not in the forefront of the landscape of education (Brooke, 2012; Carr & Kefalas, 2010; Corbett, 2007; C. B. Howley, A. Howley, & Johnson, 2014). Unlike Harry Potter, being invisible is not an advantage for rural, first generation, low income students, and the chasm of inequality faced by rural, first generation, low income students is deepened by their social class. For rural Appalachian Kentucky students, the marginalization of their home communities is another layer in this chasm. Like Harry Potter, rural, first generation, low income students must drop their Invisibility Cloaks and be seen in higher education.

Research shows first generation students face challenges transitioning to college. (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004). First generation college students are more likely than continuing generation college students to struggle academically and financially in college, but they are also more likely to report feeling out of place socially (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004; Rubin, 2012; Strayhorn, 2012). Even as higher education implements programs for first generation college students, these students are still more likely than their continuing generation peers to drop out of college or receive poor grades (Duncan & Murnane, 2011; Fisk & Marcus, 2012; Strayhorn,
In short, academic persistence and educational attainment are lower for first
generation college students than for their middle and upper class peers, yet the focus in
higher education remains on transitioning first generation college students to the middle
class culture of higher education despite continued evidence of an ever growing social
class achievement gap (Stephens, Hamedami & Destin, 2014). How might a greater
understanding of rural and working class identity make visible rural, first generation, low
income college students experiences?

When rural, first generation college students drop their cloaks and become seen,
their evanescence is again hastened by the very programs put in place to assist them. The
focus on transitioning first generation, low income students to the middle class culture of
higher education rather than valuing the social class diversity first generation, low
income students bring to their institutions shrouds them again in Invisibility Cloaks. At
first unseen, yet when seen, in the narrative of transition, they are made to seamlessly fit
into the culture of higher education and disappear once more. The success of transition is
in making the students invisible, and this is especially salient for rural, first generation,
low income college students from Appalachian Kentucky whose home cultures and
communities are further marginalized within the national landscape.

**Statement of the Problem**

The Appalachian Region of the United States encompasses all of West Virginia
and parts of twelve states: Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New
York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia. (See
Figure 3: Map of Appalachia, with Subregions). Forty-two percent of the region is rural,
compared to 19.3% of the entire United States (Appalachian Regional Commission,
In the years from 2011-2016, 85.5% of the population in the Appalachian Region held high school diplomas or higher, compared to 89.6% of the United States. In 2017, in the United States, 34.2% of the population held Bachelor’s degrees or higher (NCES, 2018) as did 22.6% of the Appalachian Region (Hale, Malone & McCann, 2018). Both of these statistics drop further in looking at the Appalachian Region of Kentucky, the site of this study.

Figure 3: Map of Appalachia, with Subregions

Map by: Appalachian Regional Commission, November 2009.
Appalachian Kentucky consists of 54 of the state’s 120 counties, located in the eastern part of the state, and noted on the Map of Appalachia in yellow as Central Appalachia. (See Figure 3: Map of Appalachia with Subregions). From 2010-14, 75.5% of Appalachian Kentucky residents held high school diplomas or higher, and 13.6% had Bachelor’s degrees or higher (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2016). According to the United States Department of Agriculture (2016), lower educational attainment is associated with poverty and unemployment. In 2014, the U.S. poverty rate was 15.5%, and the rural poverty rate was 18.1% with the urban poverty rate at 15.1%. The Appalachian Kentucky poverty rate from 2010-2014 was 25.4%, which is 163% of the U.S. average rate for poverty (USDA, 2016). Single-parent households and people of color were also more likely to have lower educational attainment, poverty and unemployment in rural areas (USDA, 2016). Higher educational attainment has long been documented to have positive economic outcomes (USDA, 2016). Rural college graduates have lower unemployment rates, higher familial incomes and are less likely to live in poverty than rural people without college degrees (USDA, 2016).

While many studies have considered the first generation college student experience (Tinto, 1993; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Abel & Deitz, 2014; Brand & Xie, 2010; Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011; Stephens, Hamedani & Destin, 2014; Storia & Stebelton, 2012); few have considered the significance of place identity as a salient social position that effects students’ college-going identity and sense of belonging in college (Hand & Miller Payne, 2008). This study contributes such a perspective to our understanding of first generation, low income college students from Appalachian Kentucky.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of sense of belonging and place identity among rural, first generation low income college students from Appalachian Kentucky in their first year and/or second year of college. Additionally, this study seeks to understand the saliency of belonging and place identity for rural, first generation, low income college students from Appalachian Kentucky. The study seeks to understand how place shapes the students’ identities, and how students make sense of place as an important social position that impacts their lives and their understandings of themselves and their communities. To that end, the study seeks to understand how higher education contributes to rural first generation, low income students “sense of belonging.”

Research Questions

In this study, I examine how rural, first generation, low income college students from Appalachian Kentucky experience a sense of belonging at their institutions. I was also interested in how they experience their place identity to Appalachia and their home communities, and how this place identity aligns with their sense of belonging in their college communities. Specifically, my research questions in this study are

1) How do first generation, low income college students from Appalachian Kentucky experience a sense of belonging at their colleges and universities?

2) How do first generation, low income college students from Appalachian Kentucky experience their place-identity to Appalachia and their home communities, and how does this align with their sense of belonging in their college communities?
Significance of the Study

The socioeconomic benefits of earning a college degree are well-documented. On virtually every measure of quality of life, research shows that earning a college degree has a positive impact. College graduates are more likely to be employed and less likely to live in poverty. Those with bachelor’s degrees are healthier (Schafer, Wilkinson & Ferraro, 2013), make positive life choices (Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011), and are likely to influence their children to pursue higher education (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). With the increased costs of higher education, policymakers and parents worry about the financial return on a college education, yet a study by Abel & Deitz (2014) revealed a 15% return on the investment of both bachelor’s and associate’s degrees over the last decade. In short, even with higher costs of education, the investment pays off significantly. The 15% return reveals a growing income gap between those with and without a college degree, as Abel & Deitz (2014) argue the investment return has remained significant because the wages of those without a college degree continue to drop. Also, research shows that individuals least likely to obtain a college education benefit the most from earning it (Brand & Xie, 2010); while the increased gap in wages between college graduates and non-college graduates illuminates this, the additional psychological and social benefits of greater financial stability also helps to ameliorate the effects of poverty. While many argue that those who benefit the most from earning a college degree are those who are most likely to obtain a college degree, Brand and Xie (2010) found the opposite was true. When students had less to begin with, their gains were more significant.

In Forest County, Kentucky, one of the sites of this study, the educational
attainment rate of a bachelor’s degree or more for adults over the age of 25, was 7% in 2011-2015, and the poverty rate for those with bachelor’s degrees was 9.8% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). In the other site of this study, Sunset County, Kentucky, the educational attainment rate of a bachelor’s degree or more for adults over the age of 25, was 14.7% in 2011-2015, and the poverty rate for those with bachelor’s degrees was 5.4%. In stark contrast, the poverty rate of those without any college education (which includes high school graduates and those who dropped out of high school) was 89.9% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). As noted earlier, the Appalachian Kentucky region at 13.6% is far below the national average of 34.2% for educational attainment of bachelor’s degrees, and Forest County is 6.6% below the average of the region. Few studies have explored the sense of belonging and place identity of Appalachian Kentucky college students, and none to my knowledge have specifically focused on Forest and Sunset Counties. Despite the dire need for increased educational attainment in area once dominated by the monoeconomy of King Coal, the research has mainly focused on first generation college transition without consideration of the significance of place. As Appalachian Kentucky moves into a 21st century economy, one not dominated by coal, what becomes of the rural people who live there? In the fourth chapter, I explore Appalachia more deeply, but understanding the experiences and identities of first generation, low income college students in Appalachian Kentucky is vital to moving more people in the region out of poverty.

**Methodological Overview**

This study uses a phenomenological approach with a concern for the lived experiences of individuals (Rossman & Rallis, 2012) as it sheds light on the phenomenon
of sense of belonging and place identity among rural, first generation, low income college students in Appalachian Kentucky. Phenomenological studies demand long, iterative interviews with participants (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Within these long interviews, participants will share stories of their lives. While this study is not focused on the storying of their lives, narratives are used here as data. Narratives are inherently partial, and this study does not attempt to present what narrative researchers call, “big stories,” of these participants’ lives (Andrews, Squire & Tamboukou, 2012). Instead, the focus here are on the “small stories,” that reveal the experience of two key aspects of the participants’ lives: their sense of belonging in college and their sense of place as an active social position shaping their identities. To understand how participants conceive of place in their lives, I will also collect photographs as an additional data source.

**Definitions**

**Rural: Population Density and Size**

The U.S. Census Bureau defines rural as “as all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area.” The U.S. Census Bureau also defines two types of urban places: those with 50,000 or more people, known as Urban Areas (UAs), and those with at least 2,500 people and less than 50,000 people, referred to as Urban Clusters (UCs). In sum, the U.S. Census Bureau defines rural as having less than 2,500 people in a location not included within an urban area (See Figure 4, U.S. Census Bureau, Urban and Rural Classification, 2012.)
According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service (2012), multiple definitions of rural can be found within government work; researchers often use the term rural to mean non-metro areas, and government officials define rural more descriptively to meet the needs of their constituents. However, the U.S. Census Bureau definition is the official statistical definition. In this study, I will complicate understandings of rural that move beyond population, by looking closely at how the myths of the rural help shape those definitions and by examining the dominance of urbanormativity in making rural disappear from our view while teaching youth in rural areas to leave (Thomas, Lowe, Fulkerson, & Smith, 2011). I maintain the official governmental definition since its widespread use constitutes a dominant view and use of the word rural.
**First Generation**

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 1998) defines “first generation,” as those students whose parents have never enrolled in college. In 2017, the NCES definition is still widely used, but first generation students have complicated this definition by pushing the boundaries to reflect a more diverse and inclusive understanding of family and IHEs (Institutes of Higher Education). In practice, first generation student groups, like the one at Smith College, have widened and complicated “first generation,” to mean students who do not have support or access to higher education, students whose parents have some college education, or even blended families where some parental figures have college degrees but do not play active roles in the children’s access to education (“First-Generation Student Alliance of Smith College”). The NCES definition is used here because of its widespread use and general understanding, but this study also recognizes students may name themselves as “first generation” because they do not have access to parental figures or traditional family structures even though they may technically not be considered “first generation” in academic writings.

**Working Class**

Working class is a contested definition complicated throughout Chapter Two, the literature review. In an imagined, mythical and iconic sense, working class strikes nostalgic images of masculinity, manual labor, blue collars, union jobs, and small town life. In research presented here, working class is variously defined in economic terms as low income and poor. In education, it can be synonymous with first generation. Because
of the variety of working class definitions and imaginings, when appropriate, I name how working class is being used. For the purposes of a general understanding of what is working class, I have adopted Michael Zweig’s (2011) definition of working class as those who do not have power and control over their work and do not oversee other workers.

**Low Income**

The students in this study are participants in a federal program called Talent Search and they are defined as low income by the Federal Government. My use of the term low income in this study reflects this economic measure. (See Table 1, for Federal TRIO Programs Current Year Low-Income Poverty Guidelines Talent Search).

**Educational Attainment**

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2017) educational attainment is the highest level of education a person has completed.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size of Family Unit</th>
<th>48 Contiguous States, D.C., and Outlying Jurisdictions</th>
<th>Alaska</th>
<th>Hawaii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>$18,210</td>
<td>$22,770</td>
<td>$20,940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>$24,690</td>
<td>$30,870</td>
<td>$28,395</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>$31,170</td>
<td>$38,970</td>
<td>35,850</td>
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<td>$43,305</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>$55,170</td>
<td>$50,760</td>
</tr>
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<td>6</td>
<td>$50,610</td>
<td>$63,270</td>
<td>$58,215</td>
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<tr>
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<td>$57,090</td>
<td>$71,370</td>
<td>$65,670</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>$63,570</td>
<td>$79,470</td>
<td>$73,125</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For family units with more than eight members, add the following amount for each additional family member: $6,480 for the 48 contiguous states, the District of Columbia and outlying jurisdictions; $8,100 for Alaska; and $7,455 for Hawaii.

The term "low-income individual" means an individual whose family's taxable income for the preceding year did not exceed 150 percent of the poverty level amount.

The figures shown under family income represent amounts equal to 150 percent of the family income levels established by the Census Bureau for determining poverty status. The poverty guidelines were published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in the Federal Register on January 18, 2018.

**Assumptions**

I am conducting this research with tacit assumptions about place, working class, and higher education. I attempt below to make these explicit. These assumptions reveal my thinking as a researcher and how I am framing the intersections of storytelling and
social positioning within home and school communities.

**Place**

1) Place is an important social position that shapes individuals’ understandings of their identities and selves.

2) Rural people are largely understood through an urbanormative gaze and have thus been mythologized and marginalized.

3) Rural, Appalachian Kentucky college students have a strong sense of place they define diversely, but also shapes their identities.

4) Places are not static representations but mutable in relation to human experiences and understandings of place (which is why I think place is so important!)

5) People may identify as rural even as their communities do not fit the U.S. Census Bureau’s definition of rural or other people’s understandings of rural.

**Working Class**

1) Working class is often conflated with first generation and low income, and this study seeks to complicate understandings of working class.

2) In describing social class, the term working class foregrounds “work,” and ideas or myths about work; while the term first generation centers education and the term low income focuses on economic strata.

3) In the aftermath of the decline of the Industrial Age and the growth of technology and outsourcing of jobs once squarely working class, in the 21st century, we ask what is the working class?
Higher Education

1) A bachelor’s degree is a worthwhile lifetime investment.
2) Students from Appalachia are less likely to attain a bachelor’s degree than people in other parts of the United States.
3) More research on the experiences of college students from Appalachia is needed to understand their experiences with transitioning to college and the barriers they face in college and how they overcome them.

Delimitations

Delimitations are boundaries set by the researcher to limit and fully communicate the scope of the study to readers. These are the delimitations I have knowingly set for the study:

1) This study is limited to the experiences of a group of 7 students from the two counties in Appalachian Kentucky who attended two different colleges and universities in their first two years of college.
2) This study is limited to students from two counties in Kentucky: Forest County, defined as 100% rural, and Sunset County, defined as 53.9% rural with an Urban Cluster of Sunset within the county (U.S Census Bureau, 2016).
3) All of the students in this study are low income and first generation.
4) The students all participated in a federally funded program for low income students, Talent Search, at their high school.
Overview

This dissertation is presented in eight chapters. Chapter One identifies the research problem and questions. The significance of the research and the methods employed are broadly shared. Important terms are defined in this chapter, and the assumptions and delimitations that frame the study are noted. Chapter Two reviews the literature on rural identity and working class identity and brings together a conceptual framework for place, social class and education. Chapter Three describes the Appalachian Kentucky context of this study. Chapter Four reviews the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as the methodology used in this study. It also outlines how and where the study will take place and who the participants are. Chapter Five includes the findings as related to college-going identity and ways of belonging in college. Chapter Six exacts themes across the participants’ narratives that reveal the tensions students faced with their sense of belonging in college. Chapter Seven explores the findings related to the students’ sense of place identity. Chapter Eight is the discussion of the findings and contextualizes the study in light of the literature in Chapter Two.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

“Which came first, the phoenix or the flame?”
"I think the answer is that a circle has no beginning." - Luna Lovegood, Ravenclaw
— J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*

**Introduction**

Harry enlists the help of Luna Lovegood to search in the Ravenclaw Tower for the lost diadem of Rowena Ravenclaw, one of Lord Voldemort’s horcruxes. At the top of the steps, Harry asks Luna for the password, and she responds that they must answer a riddle to enter the Ravenclaw common room. Harry asks what happens if they don’t get the answer right, and Luna responds they will have to continue to reason or wait until someone else comes along. The ability to reason out a complicated answer is a characteristic of Ravenclaws, whose motto is *Wit beyond measure is man’s greatest treasure*.

At Hogwarts, students are sorted in four houses reflecting the personality and values of the four founders of Hogwarts: Helga Hufflepuff, Rowena Ravenclaw, Godric Gryffindor and Salazar Slytherin. When students arrive in their first year, they sit before everyone in the Great Hall, and the Sorting Hat is placed on their heads. This magical hat decides which qualities the students possess that aligns most closely with the respective houses. Hufflepuffs are known to be hardworkers. Ravenclaws are the most intelligent. Gryffindor are the bravest. And Slytherins are the most cunning. In the series, readers come to know many Gryffindor students since Harry Potter is sorted into Gryffindor, and Harry does not disappoint readers in his fearlessness. He embodies his identity as a “true Gryffindor,” when he pulls the sword of Godric Gryffindor out of the Sorting Hat in the
Chamber of Secrets and slays the Basilisk. Dumbledore implores him: “Only a true Gryffindor could have pulled the sword of Godric Gryffindor out of that hat.” Even the adult wizards and witches reveal the houses they were sorted into, and much is made of the sorting throughout the series. Rowling uses this as a character device to provide more depth on character identities without having to be explicit. When readers learn Professor Snape was sorted into Slytherin, it provides a context for understanding him, and it leads readers to question his motives throughout the series.

In the real world, our identity sorters are race, ethnicity, class, gender, religion, ability, sexual orientation, and region. Just as the reader’s view of Professor Snape is clouded by the reading of him as a Slytherin, the focus in real life on one aspect of identity over another limits perspective. Identity is intersectional and contrasting, much like Professor Snape himself.

This literature explores theories of identity and centers on the intersection of geographic race, place and social class by asking, 1) What is identity? 2) What is rural identity? 3) What is working class identity? 4) What is the research on rural, white, working class students in higher education? This literature review looks at how rural identity has been mythologized and understood in popular media in the United States with an understanding that rural people and places are largely understood through television shows, movies, social media, and so on.

**Identity/Identities**

According to Karen Tracy (2013), identities are features of a person that are stable, not fixed; dynamic and situated; social and personal. Identities change in

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1 I use identity as a collective noun to refer to the whole of identities. In discussing actual people and their identities, I use the plural identities to both refer to the plurality of people and their multiple identities.
response to contexts and experiences at hand. Stuart Hall (1996) refers to this aspect of changing and shifting identities as the work of “becoming rather than being” (p. 4). Hall asserts identities are always shifting in response to the past, present and future states of selves. The negotiation of identities in given contexts, amid multiple roles and relationships, Hall (1990) sees as positioning. He notes that people are positioned by others in this interaction of identity making, since identities cannot be enacted solely. For an identity to be named as an identity, someone else has to recognize it (Bailey, 2013, personal communication). While others can position a person within an identity, the person may also position herself within the multiplicity of identities she is negotiating. Hall (1990) adds that this positioning is being played against the stories of the past, and thus his concern with cultural identity is akin to this discussion on rural identity. While not a specific cultural identity, the images and connotations of rural work in the way Hall (1990) explains the emergence of cultural identity: the conversation of self with the narrative past. Both Gee (2000) and Hall (1990) acknowledge the importance of narrative with the past, where difference and continuity exists simultaneously (Hall, 1990). Gee (2000) provides a useful lens for the consideration of how power informs identity, while Hall’s work (1990) on cultural identity considers the role of colonization in shaping identity. Tracy’s types of identity (2013) allows for fluidity, like Gee (2000) and Hall (1990), because she recognizes that experiences matter in shaping identities. She asserts that identities are personal to the individuals, but they are also social entities, enacted on by social forces and recognized socially by others. (See Table 2, Three Types of Identity, Tracy, 2013).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description and Example</th>
<th>Master</th>
<th>Interactional</th>
<th>Personal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Description and Example</td>
<td>Relatively stable and unchanging, but they change over time and situation, e.g. race, gender, age, origin.</td>
<td>Specific roles in a given context</td>
<td>Stable, qualities of person. Personality, attitudes, character, e.g. easy-going, hard-working, always late, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considerations</td>
<td>Often presented in contrastive sets, i.e. male-female, northerner-southerner as a way of explaining identity against another identity.</td>
<td>Not independent of master identity, although separate from it. A master and interactional identity that are not the dominant partners can have created difficulty for the individual in enacting the identities, e.g. a male nurse.</td>
<td>Contested Spaces. Others may not agree with individual’s understanding of own identity.</td>
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</table>

Gee (2000) explains being recognized as a “certain kind of person” is an identity, and he offers four ways to analyze identity. (See Table 3, Identity as an Analytical Lens, Gee 2000). What Gee (2000) brings to the conversation on identity is a way of considering how power, and different kinds of power, interplay with roles to affect identity. Gee (2000) also examines the embodiment of identity, through what he calls “combination,” a way of combining speaking, writing, acting, interacting, body language, dress, the communication of values, and use of things in particular ways (p.109). Further
those combinations that can get one recognized as a “certain kind of person” are known as Discourse, with a capital D, which refers to the ways in which individuals produce identities and are recognized as having such identities. Because Discourse is shaped over time through multiple interactions with other people, language and culture, it is considered to be the “core” of the individual’s always changing and contested identity.

In the case of the rural identities, however, I argue that rural identities have been defined through an urbanormative lens, enveloped by myths of rural and are enacted through rural simulacra, since so few people witness rural life firsthand (Thomas et al., 2011). Working class identities have been developed through the lens of work, and the articles in this literature review reveal a strong analytical connection between types of work and working class. Judith Butler (1990) also extols the instability of identity, by challenging the core construct of subject positions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3: Identity as an Analytical Lens, Gee, 2000</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature-Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A stated developed from</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution-Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A position authorized by</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourse-Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An individual trait recognized in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affinity-Identity</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Butler: Performed Identities

Judith Butler’s (1990) theory of gender performativity decenters subject positions in fixed gender identities and stresses the process of repetition that produces gendered subjects. Jackson and Mazzei (2014) argue repetition in Butler’s theory is not a performance by an agent, but the performance is what makes up the subject; as such the performance produces the space of multiple, contested subject positions, or subjectivities. Agency comes as those subjectivities are positioned with and against another as they contest the stability of the identity. More specifically, people do not choose gender identities, rather they perform gender identities and the repetition of the performance produces gendered identities. Butler (1990) sees gender as a verb, an action, not as a noun. Whereas Gee (2000), Hall (1990/1996) and Tracy (2013) write of identity as fluid and not fixed, Butler (1990) decenters identity as performed acts over time, which further theorizes identity in relation to power and discursive moments. Similar in concept to Gee’s big D- Discourse (2000), Butler (1990)’s construct of performativity relies on the repetition of the identity over time. The social situation becomes greater than the subject as the reproduction of the identity shifts in relation to these moments; each social situation leaves out some aspect of another contesting identity at work within the reproduced identity. As the reproduction of identity is being made over and over again, it never fully remakes itself in the same way. It is acted upon by the contested spaces, the shifting nature of other identities, and by the power present in the discursive moment. The repetition of the identity does lead to conformity of identity, but this is not fixed, it is performed.
Rural identities, and the myths that shape those identities, are being performed through rural simulacra. Many of these aspects of simulacra are developed through popular culture and media. According to Thomas et al. (2011) rural simulacra is “the ‘real’ material objects and artifacts that we encounter when we visit a physical location that convey a particular image or idea about rurality that may or may not have a basis or true physical point of origin” (p. 139). Baudrillard (1994) named simulacra as that without a reference or substance upon which models of real are formed. Similar to Butler (1990) and Gee (2000), it is the repetition of the simulacra gives it potency, identity, even as its performance makes it real.

So far, I have discussed identity as a fluid state held by a subject in the work of Tracy (2013), Gee (2000), and Hall (1990/1996), and positioned through performance in the work of Butler (1990). Another important theoretical consideration in moving toward an understanding of how social class and rurality layers upon identity can be found in the work of Pierre Bourdieu.

**Bourdieu: Habitus and Forms of Capital**

Bourdieu (1986) furthered the understanding of social class by moving beyond Marx’s economic determinism and emphasis on structures. In describing *habitus*, Bourdieu (1986) wrote it was the embodiment of practices, the collective combination of dispositions, which he defined as the tendencies or inclination of people or things. Habitus organizes and structures fields, which are given social situations or institutions, like school, work, an interview, etc. with doxa, inherent rules. Bourdieu (1986) argued in field theory that agents bring their habitus to a field and engage with the doxa, or rules of the game.
For example, Bourdieu (1986) noted in *Distinction* that the working class appreciated practical people and solutions and tended to move away from abstractness. In a consideration of art, Bourdieu (1986) noted that the working class preferred landscapes to the abstract or impractical, “art for art’s sake” art. He called this the working class “taste of necessity.” The lover of great art was given the privilege of being disinterested. The working class who values the landscape art because it has personal meaning or depicts a home location is diminished because they do not value the art for art’s sake. Such distinctions in taste are not simply personal.

As Bourdieu (1986) posits, they are social in terms of capital. He described four types of capital: economic, social, cultural and symbolic. Capital itself is valuable, legitimate resources attributable to people, institutions, and things which people struggle to obtain for themselves. Of these, cultural capital bears immediate impact on the marginalization of rural people and places and the working class. Cultural capital is the accumulation of knowledge, behaviors and skills that one can tap into to demonstrate one’s cultural competence, and thus one's social status or standing in society (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital has been used to keep dominant groups in place through social and cultural reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Cultural capital may be embodied in experiences like using proper table manners, or it may be objectified through the acquisition of material that signify culture, like art or books. Finally, cultural capital is institutionalized by the qualifications educational institutions can grant in terms of titles and certifications. Cultural capital can be exchanged with economic and social capital, and it does often work in concert with the other types of capital. (See Table 4 for Bourdieu’s four types of capital).
Table 4: Forms of Capital, Bourdieu, 1986

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economic</th>
<th>Social</th>
<th>Cultural</th>
<th>Symbolic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Money. The acquisition and</td>
<td>Social class and connections to</td>
<td>Cultural inheritance.</td>
<td>Prestige.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>exchanging of money.</td>
<td>people with money or power.</td>
<td>Upbringing. Belonging to</td>
<td>Honors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>groups in power.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Education.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Qualifications.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

For Bourdieu (1986) economic, social and cultural capital could equate to symbolic capital. Likewise, the dominant view (obtained through having the most economic, social and cultural capital) could dismiss others and inflict a form of symbolic violence, as Bourdieu argues the art world’s disdain for the utilitarian view of the working class towards art as being too simplistic, not sophisticated enough. Using art as example, the elite class maintains a dominant position in artistic taste over the working class, and this is achieved through social reproduction. Social reproduction, according to Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) refers to the continuing replication of the dominant positions, values, and practices of a given group or experience, what Bourdieu called social fields, through the reproduction of expected and repeated production of field-appropriate and competent actions. The dominant culture is accepted, but sometimes resisted, by all as the normative state.

This review of identity (Gee, 1990; Hall 1990/1996; Tracy, 2013; Butler 2006) and habitus (Bourdieu, 1986) offers an understanding of how people interact with themselves and their environs to construct a recognizable identity, but for further understanding of how rural people and places have been marginalized I now turn to rural myths, urbanormativity and disappearance.
Rural Identity

In addition to the statistical definition set forth by the U.S. Census Bureau, rural also conjures images and ideas of “rurality,” a conceptual construction of place often grounded in engagement with ideologies and imagery. Donehower, Hogg, and Schell (2013) call on the public to recognize the rural, to see the rural. According to 2010 U.S. Census, over 59 million people, or 19.3% of the population in the United States, live in rural areas, yet their lives are painted in a swath of homogeneity in the media and in our collective minds. The myths of rural shape both rural and non-rural communities. Such understandings engender myths about rural places and people, but these myths present rural as it is imagined, more than as it is. For example, one image of rural as rows of corns in the flat landscape of Iowa would fail to capture the real geology of Iowa, which is not flat, though popular perception believes it to be. This is the power of rural simulacra. As we encounter an image an idea of a rural place, we come to know the place in this way (Thomas et al., 2011). There is no one collective rural landscape, but the myths of rural people and places conjure sameness. Such images parlay into myths about rural people and places and serve to further marginalize and misrepresent rural people and places. People in Iowa may be seen in relation to corn as Iowa is the leading corn producing state in America. It is not uncommon for rural people and places to be defined in terms of natural resources and agriculture (Thomas et al., 2011). For most people, who will never experience rural Iowa, the image of corn serves as their understanding of it.

Rural Myths

In a nostalgic glance, rural America harkens to the nineteenth century with bucolic pastures, family farms and homesteads, or what Thomas et al. (2011) coin the
Little House on the Prairie myth. This myth relies on a strong connection between rural people and agriculture, yet in the twenty-first century, with the dominance of industrialized agricultural practices, rural is not agriculture; rather this myth is a cultural identity placed on the rural, an ideology of what rural should be. In the Little House on the Prairie myth, rural people and places are held in high esteem, have honor and serve as inspiration to the pioneering spirit of America. The Ingalls family exudes strength and self-reliance as they make their way out West. They are farmers and laborers; they work with their hands and bodies in harmony with the physical landscape. They are the embodiment of rural. The story does not allow a critical look at how pioneers interacted with indigenous people because the myth sustains itself on a glimmer of the American “onward and upward epic” (Theobald, 2012, p. 239).

This sense of virtue and intimacy extends to how people communicate, what Thomas et al. (2011) call The Andy Griffith Show myth, a fiction emphasizing the personal, where “everyone seems to know everyone,” and Andy or Barney will take care of the community. Mayberry is a “good place to raise a family” (p. 25). The Andy Griffith Show myth also supports the lore of urban areas as “unsafe” places where people don’t know you, and don’t care about you. In stating that Mayberry is a good place to raise a family, we conjure the other place, the unsafe, unseemly place Mayberry contrasts, which is decidedly urban. The myths of urban/rural binary create a web of dichotomous misunderstandings of both rural and urban dwellers and further serve to marginalize both.

In contrast to the wholesomeness of The Andy Griffith Show myth and the idyllic pastures of Little House on the Prairie, the other dominant myth of rural America is
“backward whiteness,” with terms like redneck, hillbilly, and hick denoting not only lower intelligence, but serving to “other” rural whites from non-rural whites (Donehower, Hogg, & Schell, 2012; Thomas et al., 2011; Beech, 2004; Isenberg, 2016). As Jennifer Beech (2004) describes in her discussion of redneck and hillbilly discourse, “redneck and hillbilly are regularly constructed as racial terms that work to identify for mainstream whites other white people who behave in ways supposedly unbecoming to or unexpected of whites” (p. 175). Perhaps this is most noticeable in what Matt Wray (2006) terms the stigmatype, a stigmatizing stereotype, of “white trash,” where both race and class are in tension together, as white is usually seen with racial privilege that the term “trash,” in reference to low socio-economic status and uncouth behaviors, challenges. (p. 3). In Beech’s use (2004) of critical pedagogy in the composition classroom, students examined the language used to describe poor, rural whites. As she and her students unraveled the terms redneck and hillbilly, they learned, “if we were to believe most documented references, poor whites seem mostly to reside in the rural South, suggesting that these terms embody or reinforce mainstream classist, racist, and even regionalist thought” (p. 174).

Julie Bettie’s (2014) work with girls in Waretown High School girls reveals the impact of white privilege, where college prep students in her study conflated the ideas of social class with race; the college prep students were assumed white and middle class. Bettie (2014) attributes this to the lack of discourse on social inequalities: “Because any clear understanding of institutionalized class inequality is missing from U.S. popular and political discourse, class was read as racial code and use to rearticulate white privilege” (p. 176). White privilege was not limited to students who were white and middle class,
as the students who were white and working class in her study were “less likely to see themselves as victims of class inequality than as victims of ‘reverse discrimination’” (p. 175). Bettie (2014) names the discourse of individualism and belief in the meritocracy as the lenses students used to assess the impact of inequality in their lives. Embedded within this discourse, as we see in the next section is a belief that working hard is the key to success, and those who do not work hard enough are not rewarded. Zeus Leonardo (2004) argues that the discourse of white privilege masks the subject of domination, and the active role whites play in recreating it on individual and institutional levels. Like Bettie (2014), he calls for a deeper examination of race and class, but Leonardo (2004) would foreground race as the lens through which students explore white supremacy and the actions that maintain white domination. Bettie (2014) agrees “in relationships across racial/ethnic groups, race/ethnicity often trumps class” (p.182). This sentiment is echoed by Leonardo (2004) who maintains the intersection of race and class cannot be cleanly discerned when the effects of white domination is not thoroughly examined. As social class and race are made invisible, the effects of white privilege are felt more profoundly, and those whites who step outside of the hegemony of whiteness, are either reigned back in or othered.

As Jennifer Beech (2004) has argued, words like redneck are a way of calling out whites who don’t have all the privilege of other whites, and much like the “hicks,” at Waretown High who were sorted as either farmers or real hicks, Bettie (2014) discovered social class and race were at work together. Theobald (2012) agrees, “To be rural in America is to be considered backward and inferior at some level” (p. 241). Thomas et al. (2011) name this image of inferiority the Deliverance myth, in reference to the James
Dickey novel and motion picture of the same name, where four Atlanta businessmen are terrorized by “mountain men” on their vacation in the Georgia wilderness, culminating in the rape of one of the businessmen under the order of the mountain man to “squeal like a pig.” Illusory fears of unsavory, backwards whites perpetuate a racialized, classist notion of rural people: “Real people carry these ideas into their everyday lives, allowing them to shape how they think about, relate to, and interact with rural people and places” (Thomas et al., 2011, p. 23). Such myths are not juxtaposed against the diversity of rural America, and in the national discourse, as Theobald (2012) posits, “the rural experience has been marginalized so effectively that there has been no rural voice” (p. 243). Whether seen as connected to nature, agriculture, safety or backwardness, rural myths are forms of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1986), for even the seemingly benign myths serve to objectify rural people and places through the gaze of urbanormativity.

**Urbanormativity**

The myths of the rural can be traced back to the definition of rural, including the U.S. Census Bureau’s official definition, as “the absence of urban” (Thomas et al., 2011, p. 27; Donehower, Hogg, & Schell, 2012, p. 9). In short, that which is not rural is what is given meaning. Thomas et al. further (2011) describe the problem of defining rural as the dominance of urbanormativity, where urban is seen as normative, and that which is not urban is seen as the other. The conflation of rural with working class has also added to the myths of the rural, and has allowed political discourse, as examined by Pruitt (2011), to use geography as a way of subverting class talk. In a country uneasy with social class, “small town America,” has become synonymous with “the working class.” President Obama consistently side-stepped this rhetorical concern in his speeches by hiding social
class, with the term, “working people.” The genius of such a term is it masks social class as it celebrates it. As Levison (2013) observes, “One important consequence of this geographic shift in where working people live is that the popular image of the white working class has increasingly merged with the popular image of rural or small town whites” (p. 59). Thus rural is mythologized as white and working class. Just forty years earlier, the dominant image of working class was tied to the factory, mill, plant, or in Archie Bunker’s case, “the dock.” In the iconic television image of Archie Bunker, seated in his armchair, bellowing out his racist and sexist opinions in Queens, NY, for everyone in America, we see an urban, white working class, far from Walnut Grove, Minnesota, or Mayberry, North Carolina. In what I call the Archie Bunker myth, Archie was beloved despite his racist and sexist views. His audience rooted for him to get ahead, though they disagreed with him. Archie’s views may have been looked down upon, but his drive to get ahead, to have a better life in America, is a story that American audiences cheered.

Place provides regional color in All in the Family, but Queens is not denigrated or seen as backwards; thus, Archie is not, even as his views are. In contrast, racists from the South have been positioned as backwards because their locations are seen as backwards, and racist views are made synonymous with southern identity. In the national discourse, I argue we see rural people regionally, and apply those myths of regionalism to our understanding of their behaviors. Simply put, as Theobald (2012) writes, “Place matters” (p. 239). When places are devalued, the people living there are devalued, too. Or is that the people are devalued, so the places they live are devalued? While “Meathead” and Gloria eventually move to California, it is not to escape New York. The privilege of urbanormativity is in how seamless we accept their moving from one urban environment
to another. The same cannot be said for rural communities. If Meathead and Gloria were moving from the South to Los Angeles, the audience would equate their leaving with an “escape,” one where they left behind the systemic oppression of racism and sexism Archie’s views espoused, and one where they would be free to live more fully in a city. Rural people and places are seen through the lens of urbanormativity, thus allowing rural identities to lose distinction of real people with identities.

**Rural Disappearance**

In 2014, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that rural areas lost 36,000 residents in 2012-2013, the third straight year rural populations declined. This decline in population, already <2,500 per given location, mirrors the decline in visibility in discourse. Donehower, Hogg, and Schell (2013) argue, “the rural is routinely absent” (p. 3). So much in fact, that *PBS News Hour* asked the question, *Is rural America a thing of the past?* (Miller, 2014). When the rural appears, in political banter of red states/blue states, organic food commercials or *Duck Dynasty*, the images of rural are enveloped in myths, largely constructed through the lens of urbanormativity. In the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, rural took a divisive turn as the part of the country duped by Donald Trump and holding fast to industrial jobs of a bygone era. Implicit in this urbanormative gaze was the idea that rural people and places are situated in the past, nostalgic for an earlier time, foolish enough to vote for a billionaire who could not deliver on his promises. These voters were portrayed homogenously as having one voice—fed up with political correctness, fueled by loss of working class jobs, and ready to halt immigration. While many were quick to blame 80,000 Rust Belt voters for Hilary Clinton’s loss to Donald Trump, the political commentators and media outlets shrank away from the reality of the
large majority of white voters across urban areas that voted for Donald Trump. Exit polls revealed that nearly 60% of whites voted for Trump, and while the emphasis was placed on the 67% of whites without college degrees, even more strikingly absent from national discourse was the 49% of whites with college degrees who outdistanced the 45% of whites with college degrees who voted for Clinton (Huang, Jacoby, Strickland & Lai, 2016). As if the votes in blue states were inconsequential of any pattern of import, the rural voters who chose Trump over Clinton were framed urbanormatively as nostalgic for their jobs, racist toward immigrants and uneducated while their urban counterparts, whose votes it was reasoned did not matter, were largely left blameless.

The power in myths is in framing truths from feelings, images or glimmers of experience; it is a way of how something “ought to be” (Theobald, 2012, p. 239). Thomas et al. (2011) note that “Fewer people are experiencing rural life firsthand, thus allowing popular culture to evolve independently of the material reality of rural places, and thereby creating a context in which myths and stereotypes can flourish” (p. 24). And the myths of rurality in America are embedded in the collective consciousness, even as these images are deeply entwined with notions of race and ethnicity, class and politics. Thomas et al. (2011) posit that rural people and places are marginalized within urban society, and this marginalization is learned through culture, reproduced, and felt within physical spaces: “The social structure is expressed through the built environment” (p. 2). The open landscape and farms that are equated with rural life and equated with simplicity are also intellectually constructed as simple spaces. Simple people. To recognize the rural calls for a critical consideration of urbanormativity and how the urban bias shapes our understandings of rural people and places so much that it is our entire understanding
of them. (Donehower, Hogg and Schell, 2013; Green and Corbett 2013; Schafft and Jackson, 2010; Tieken, 2014; Brown and Schafft, 2011; White and Corbett 2014; C. Howley, A. Howley and Johnson, 2014; Green and Corbett, 2013; and Smith and Gruenewald, 2007). Nowhere is this seen more effectively than in rural schools.

Rural people and places are marginalized through education, where they are taught to leave their rural communities to be successful. Michael Corbett (2007) documented the schooling practices in one community in Nova Scotia and learned children were taught to leave to be successful in life. To remain in the community was a sign of failure or a loss of a brighter future. Researchers have continually documented that U.S. education teaches rural youth to see themselves in other places where their talents can be used (Brooke, 2012; C. Howley and A. Howley, 2010). Carr and Kefalas (2010) have documented the tendency of the best and brightest to leave their communities as the rural brain drain. David Sobel and Robert Brooke (2012) among others have argued the solution to this social reproduction of flight is place-based education, where curriculum is focused on real, local issues and concerns, not some distant future in some other place. While not the focus of this literature review, place-based education suffers from criticism for centering place and remaining in one’s community over the other oppressive reasons that someone may choose to leave (Welch, 2011; Wallace, 2014). Despite the realities of marginalization among rural people and places, further marginalization results from the conflation of working class and rural identity, and I turn now to a deeper consideration of working class identity.


**Working Class Identity**

While the previous generation was defined by post-war politics, the post-industrial working class is defined by their work in ways the Industrial Age could not have imagined (Silva, 2013). The weakening of unions, the growth of the service economy and decline of industry have broken the ties of working class reproduction Paul Willis’s (1977) seminal work, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*, defined with certitude.

Cultural reproduction in the Industrial Age handed down jobs or trades and cemented forms of identity. In Willis’s (1977) work, where he follows 12 working class lads as they negotiate school, he argues the working class culture of the lads was what prepared them for manual labor, even as giving their labor made them subordinate in the capitalist society: “However, this damnation is experienced, paradoxically, as true learning, affirmation, appropriation, and as a form of resistance” (p. 3). The relational power of the lads to resist education, form “counter-school culture,” and replicate their understandings of the world relies heavily on the industrialism of the era. Working class jobs imply larger identities in the Industrial Age. As Willis (1977) affirms, “The essence of being ‘one of the lads’ lies within the group. It is impossible to form a distinctive culture by yourself” (p. 23). The tendencies of the lads to engage in overt physical demonstrations of masculinity in school mirrored in Willis’s view the demands of their almost certain futures, where “[r]ough, unpleasant, demanding jobs” awaited them (p.53). According to Willis (1977), this industrial working class was decidedly masculine: “Despite the increasing numbers of women employed, the most fundamental ethos of the factory is profoundly masculine” (p. 53).
In earlier imaginings, Archie Bunker is less myth and more icon, but Archie’s brand of working class has been replaced by the more regionally marginalized southerner. According to Silva (2013), in our collective imagination, dwells a working class man who may be southern or ascribed as such. He works hard and this is refrained in many a country music song. He is associated with masculinity and hard manual work (Lamont, 2000; Rubin, 1976; Willis, 1977). He has a truck. He is God fearing, family oriented, and pursues the American Dream for the betterment of his family (Lamont, 2000). And he is imagined as rural. Listen to any country music song, and the many protagonists construct their identities against the urban/rural divide as they celebrate performed working class identities.

The truth is the iconic working class male has been replaced by a fast-paced and flexible service economy, declining union membership and civic engagement, and a more secular society (Silva, 2013; Zweig, 2011). Simultaneously, the less visible and measurable aspects of industrial working class life are not relevant (Silva, 2013). The overtly feminized view of service work makes it unlikely to become the new face of the working class. In the post-industrial age, where the service economy leads to more feminized forms of work, Silva (2013) implores, what does it mean to be working class?

**The Crisis of the Working Class in the Twenty-First Century**

Recent scholarship on the white working class tells a story of crisis. Emotional anguish and clinical depression have become the new images of the working class, while the focus on manual labor has become less valorized. Case and Deaton (2016) found non-Hispanic whites to have increased middle-aged mortality rates while other racial and ethnic groups have seen a decline in middle-aged mortality. While heart disease and
cancer remain the largest killers of whites in middle age, the so called “‘deaths of despair,’—death by drugs, alcohol, and suicide” are responsible for the surge in middle-aged mortality among whites with a high school diploma or less.

Jennifer Silva (2013) also found white working class people in crisis, yet in her research, the goods traded on the economic market were feelings, something she called the “mood economy.” Silva (2013) found social class at conflict with the overall characterization of the millennial generation rooted in the resources and privileges of the middle and upper class—a college education, a secure foothold in the labor market, a safety net to fall back on. The reproduction of the American Dream and the dominant values of the middle class located in the meritocracy is an exchange of economic, social and cultural capitals, not only a material reality, yet as Silva (2013) notes, the existing literature fails to explore the “absence of choice” that defines coming of age for working class youth (p.7).

What Silva (2013) sees in her study participants is an emerging working class adult self with low work expectations, uneasiness in relationships, distrust of social institutions, and increased isolation. Silva (2013) noted trauma, addictions, loss, abuse, and neglect in her participants’ lives and in their understandings of themselves. Lillian Rubin’s Worlds of Pain (1992) also documented the effects of poverty on the working class family in her exploration of “hard-living” and “settled-living” families, both she sees as responses to the pain of poverty. The hard-living families were marked by alcoholism, violence and neglect, and more often than not, led by a patriarchal father whose masculinity exerted the only controls available: physical demonstration of power or failure to meet expected demands of work. The settled-living families, in contrast,
were those whose families were characterized by stable work, conservatism and adherence to social norms and expectations. Rubin is careful to paint a picture of multiple subjectivities residing within families and in subjects themselves. Here participants did not embody this binary exclusively; rather they embodied aspects of settled-living and hard-living, which suggested their attempts to maintain stability amid the instability of their lives.

Silva (2013) contrasts the emphasis of the market economy which defined the working class in the Industrial Age to the mood economy, this affective experience that allows the working class young adults in Silva’s study to maintain a positive sense of self amid their growing emotional distress. Silva (2013) was surprised at how adept her participants were in talking about their problems and then negotiating the blame for those problems upon themselves and their families rather than seeing structural inequalities as contributing to their situation. Silva’s participants are similar to Rubin’s (1992), who accepted their realities and worked within and against their circumstances, and who did not seek collective responses to what they deemed individual problems. This is the success of the neoliberal ideology. This disenfranchisement of the working class, this lack of collective response, speaks also to the heterogeneity of social class. Outside the realm of organized labor, which has increasingly been attacked through neoliberalism, how might working class people organize themselves? Structural limitations bear heavily upon working class people who are trying to negotiate many contested positions, most notably, the fragmented work schedules and demands of family life that keep them always in flux.
Alternatively, Silva (2013) posits that working class young men and women inhabit a mood economy in which legitimacy and self-worth are purchased not with traditional currencies such as work or marriage or class solidarity, but instead through the ability to organize their emotions into a narrative of self-transformation. In a culture that prizes self-help and therapy, the ability to speak to such experiences is a form of social capital traded by the working class youth in this study. Lamont (2000) found working class men in the Industrial Age found meaning and dignity in hard work, social solidarity and family. Silva (2013) argues that the working class youth in her study, faced with the post-industrial age, wear their suffering as a badge of their attempts to work hard and achieve the American Dream, and it is through this process they find the dignity and meaning in their lives. Entering the new field of post-industrialism, a new form of doxa, is required. The staunch beliefs, or myths, about what it means to be working class cannot be transferred in a shifting economy. In negotiating their subjectivities, the performance of working class, which Silva found her participants struggle with and against, created a different kind of working class.

For the young people in Silva’s study, post-industrial working class is defined by flexibility in the workplace, or accepting the fluctuations of the economy amid their growing distrust of their social networks. Given the histories of trauma and abuse, it is not surprising Silva (2013) locates young people who cannot rely on others. This feeds the neoliberalism the youth cling to as well, for given how little control they have felt in their lives, taking responsibility for their place in life is something they can own, even as the structures that feed their instabilities are invisible. And it is something the dominant narrative of neoliberalism willingly feeds.
Sennett and Cobb’s (1973) influential work, *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, revealed the emotional costs of class inequality: “the feeling of not getting anywhere despite one’s efforts, the feeling of vulnerability in contrasting oneself to others at a higher social level, the buried sense of inadequacy that one resents oneself for feeling” (p. 58). Although written in the early 1970s, Sennett and Cobb’s analysis could appear in Silva’s (2013) study, as she describes a similar injured working class. The 1970s saw the rise of neoliberalism and the jobs that were once for life disappearing (Cowie, 2012).

Education is often lauded as the way to bettering one’s position in life, but as Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) have noted, education is also a site of social and cultural reproduction. In Silva’s study, she defined working class as those participants in her study whose fathers did not have a college degree. She was particularly looking at those participants who grew up in working class families, and she noted that a college degree is a form of both social and cultural capital. She also kept her study participants to only those who identified as black and white as she wanted to see if there was competition between those two racial groups, but she did not delve further into other social positions, like gender, despite acknowledging that gender is of particular import in considering the working class.

**Middle Class Higher Education and Working Class Students**

Often heralded that the route to success, education is touted to all classes as a path to adult success, and education is a major factor in the lives of the working class. Hurst (2012) cites only 3% of the working class earn a 4-year degree. Hurst (2012) defines working class in broader terms than Silva (2013). Drawing from Zweig’s (2011) definition of class as the power some people have over the lives of others, and the
powerlessness some feel as result, Hurst (2012), sees this power as deriving from the workplace. Work is key in defining relationships to others in analyzing the working class, yet Hurst (2012) notes income alone does not tell us what people do or how they live. Parental education is also a problematic lens, though profound: “Although income and parental education levels may indicate relative status in society, they do not tell us much about class” (p.12). In all social classes, income serves as economic capital, and education as cultural capital, so these measures are important indicators of social class.

Again, Bourdieu (1986) proves useful in considering the accumulation of capital as a mechanism for class identification. Hurst (2012) argues that working class is more comprehensive than low income or first generation although most working class students are both. Hurst (2012) uses income, education and occupation to define working class, although most important to her, is occupation.

Using five composite characters drawn from her research, Hurst explores their journeys through college. Hurst (2012) defines working class jobs as those that are non-supervisory, manual, non-salaried, directed by others and not prestigious. According to Zweig (2011), two-thirds of Americans have working class jobs, and The Guardian reveals that 56.5% of Millennials identify as working class rather than middle class (Malik, Barr & Holpuch, 2016). Similar to Silva (2013), Hurst does not divide class into racial or gender categories. She feels her work is about what happens when working class students get into college, a place designed for and dominated by the middle class. Her book makes recommendations in four key areas for colleges on how colleges and universities could be more welcoming to working class students: 1) affordability 2) recruitment and support 3) curriculum and 4) career support. Within her suggestions,
several aspects seem significant: 1) most working class students attend college near home 2) the emphasis on using personal experience in the curriculum, often eschewed by academics, and 3) an explicit teaching of working class history and culture across the disciplines.

The emphasis on remaining near home for many working class students is a product of capital and resources. Many may not have the economic, social and cultural capital needed to negotiate college applications, financial aid and moving to another location. It can also be a sign of relations with family, where solidarity is found, even in a difficult, unrelenting dynamic. Moving away may impact the family negatively. As Jensen (2012) noted, working class children are taught to belong, not to become. Leaving family can disrupt their sense of belonging. The emphasis on using personal experience in the classroom is reminiscent of Bourdieu’s example of how the art world functions to maintain a dominant view of high art vs. the lowly tastes of the common people. As academics insist students study subject matter divorced of their lives, working class students are left to consider curriculum absent of their material lives, or worse, made to feel their lives are not worthy of academic pursuit. This complements the invisibility of working class and first generation college students who are largely unseen on campuses. Teaching the history and culture of the working classes is rare on most campuses, but as Hurst (2012) and Bettie (2010) argue, it is an important consideration in recognizing working class students as part of the academy.

It’s as if “working class” conjures an understanding independent of its intersections with other social positions. Classics like Mike Rose’s *Lives on the Boundary* or Victor Villanueva’s *Bootstraps* have inspired and shed light on working
class experiences in college, and in fairness, these works have challenged our thinking about how the class divide affects students in higher education. It is not unusual to meet academics whose entire lives or ways of thinking about the working class experience in college have been impacted by Rose or Villanueva. However, by conjuring the images of struggle or success, they have parlayed ways of thinking about working class that reinforce the American Dream and cheer for the underdog. Such narratives reward the meritocratic work ethic, and champion the underdog, the successful working class college student. The myth of the meritocracy is that it rewards the individual for achieving through her efforts while ignoring the doxa of the field. The images of boundaries and bootstraps elicit the commonsense narrative of “hard work pays off.” There’s a feeling ála Rose or Villanueva, one that taps into grand narratives of individual success, and they feel good to us. They feel American. It’s this compelling resonance, which wreaks of the kind of injustices that critical and cultural studies pedagogies seek to disturb. As Lindquist (2004) argues, critical and cultural theories analyze the social structures implicit within social class, rather than embracing the “complex affective experience” of social class (p. 190). Others, like O’Dair (2003) argue the academy should either be working class, or we should accept that college isn’t for everyone. Underlying her argument is an appreciation of the working class, an understanding that working class culture exists and is to be valued, but her insistence on a working class academy departs from other researchers. LeCourt (2006) posits that a student can be working and middle class and negotiating those identities within the given field of higher education while they learn the doxa of college. As Hall (1990) notes, identity is about a state of becoming, and Hall (1990/1996), Gee (2000) and Tracy (2013) have all argued it is a constantly shifting
space. For many working class students the experience of higher education is a site of class conflict intersecting among other valued social positions. Students are negotiating and performing, in the Butlerian sense, their classed identities as they are becoming other classed identities.

Nancy Welch (2011) questions whether the best civic and academic education for students is decidedly middle class. The problem resides in the binary of middle class/working class, which presents a choice, rather than responds to the sites of class and identity work so present in the university. Again, Bourdieu’s work (1986) on field theory offers insight here on how agents negotiated the given doxa (rules of the game) of the field (higher education) to acquire more capital. In the case of the working class student negotiating identities in the classroom, the student is utilizing her knowledge of middle classed expectations and learning some of those along the way. While this doxa may be new to her, she is likely to use another doxa in her home community. Welch’s (2011) position is that working class rhetorics may benefit students who are likely to remain in and negotiate within working class communities. LeCourt (2006) argues against a dichotomous view of class; the binary of middle class/working class which presents either/or options where the proper conjunction should be and. Working class and middle class. There is no essential working class, no unchanging, representation of working class, just as earlier, I argued there is no uniform rural America. The working class are not the homogenous iconic image of the white, blue-collar industrial worker, and in the twenty-first century, working class college students are vastly diverse across race, ethnicity and gender. We hold onto powerful cultural images even as they disappear from our world.
Earlier, I considered identity though the lens of Gee (2000), Hall (1990), Hall and Du Gay, 1996) and Tracy (2013), which maintained individual agency, though fluid. Bourdieu (1986) was less interested in the individual and more centered on actions of agents within a given field. While an individual has habitus she brings to a given field, the exchange of capital and the doxa of the field are not individual agentic decisions. Certainly, a member of the working class may adopt middle class, racial, religious, ethnic, sexual or gendered identities as part of their overall identity. For example, it has long been understood that having lots of money does not equate to having a higher social class because social class is an embodiment of taste, dispositions, experience, language, networks and so forth (Bourdieu, 1986).

**Class Based Inequalities in Higher Education**

Another important way of discerning the working class from middle and upper classes is in the social and cultural capital they trade in higher education. Ann Mullen (2011) explores the structural inequalities that position working class and middle and upper class students at different kinds of institutions: “Social background has become less important for predicting college attendance, but more important for the type of college or university one attends” (p.9). While compelling, this claim does not reflect the statistic cited by Hurst (2012) that only 3% of the working class earn 4-year degrees. She argues that higher education has not only become stratified by class, but also by gender, where women typically enroll and seek degrees in fields historically sought by women, like education. Here she finds the great puzzle of higher education system: “A social institution regarded as critical for ensuring equal opportunity is marked by powerful patterns of inequality that both reflect and perpetuate social stratification” (pp. 9-10).
Mullen’s research revealed that the decision to go to college, where to go to college, and what to study in college are largely determined by social class and gender.

In examining the experiences of 50 students from Yale University and 50 students at Southern Connecticut State University (SCSU), Mullen found Yalies expected college to be a life experience that was not purely academic, but comprised a rich social undertaking of independence, extracurriculars, and friendships. These students had time and capital to pursue personal interests and did so; they exchanged social and cultural capital through their experiences. In contrast, she characterized the Southern students “as earning a degree” (p.206). These students tended not to immerse themselves in the full experience of college. They lived off campus and were less involved in campus affairs and activities. They viewed college as an arduous path of meeting program standards and requirements to enter occupational fields. Many of them held jobs where they worked 20+ hours a week. Mullen writes, “For them, college became more a matter of manipulating bureaucracy than of cultivating the self” (p.207).

Mullen’s arguments rests on the idea that the structures of society create lived experiences enmeshed in inequality, that is then multiplied out through education. What is afforded individuals, the capital they have to exchange, is critical to where their lives take them. Since cultural domination is reproduced through the valuing of certain experiences over other experiences (Bourdieu, 1986), the students at Southern are at a disadvantage from the onset. Like Willis’s lads, the Southern students are making sense of the world, one ripe with inequality, and their subjectivities are shaped within inequalities. The idea of “getting the degree” to move onto a better life experience does not account for the myriad ways social and cultural capital can serve students.
In contrast to Mullen, Barbara Jensen’s (2012) influential work celebrates the distinctions of working class: “Working class people and their communities have their own histories, values and cultural logic—ones that are often at odds with the more uniform culture of the middle class” (p.51). The reality of economic, social, and cultural capital offered by elite institutions is profound in scope, but it is also a site of other kinds of oppression. For Vershawn Ashanti Young (2007), the insistence on standard English, or what Young calls White English Vernacular (WEV) as the preferred language use forces Black students to effectively give up Black English Vernacular (BEV) to succeed academically. In Young’s view, these contradictory Englishes force Black men to either alienate themselves from their culture and their masculinities, which Black English affords them, or perform White English to adhere to normative values about language. This choice between education and Black masculine identity, Young calls the burden of racial performance. Young’s theory of code-meshing, which calls for the blending of dialects and vernaculars with world Englishes and Standard English is an attempt to democratize and value all forms of Englishes. Code-meshing pushes back against the more dominant theory of code-switching, where marginalized groups are encouraged to move back and forth between their home languages and dialects and their school discourse to employ successful linguistic practices in both. Young is quick to note this is a myth as it reproduces inequalities and maintains the dominance of White English Vernacular.

Furthermore, the values of Yale and those espoused in Mullen’s text rest on the development of the individual. Jensen (2012) notes that the organized activities and experiences of middle class youth teach them how to negotiate across power structures
for individual achievement through a process Lareau (2003) calls “concerted cultivation” (p. 57). Middle class youth are in the process of becoming, a state Jensen (2012) defines as the move toward individual achievement. In contrast, the lives of working class children are attentive to the social and economic realities of the family unit. Jensen (2012) sees this as the communal nature of the working class, and working class youth value a sense of belonging as a result of it. In Young’s work (2007) we see this tension of becoming and belonging materialized through oppressive linguistic practices reproduced in education. These practices serve the dominant culture and keep the marginalized disenfranchised. Again, as Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) have noted, education reproduces social realities, and in this case, inequalities.

The social and economic disparities of structural inequalities in higher education are far from a fait accompli. Jenny Stuber (2011) argues that higher education replicates inequalities, but it also affords students opportunities to challenge these disparities. Stuber situates her study on two different college campuses: one small liberal arts school she calls Benton College with 2,300 students, and a large state university, Big State University, with 30,000 students. Her study shows the exchange of social and cultural capital through the social life of institutions by way of extra-curricular activities and opportunities, like clubs, internships, study abroad, and Greek life. In these sites, she argues upper class students were exchanging the forms of capital that they would carry forward after graduation into meaningful sites of their adult lives. Working class students were far less likely to participate in extra-curricular activities, preferring instead to put their energies into getting good grades. Stuber (2011) concludes that students who bring the necessary cultural capital to their institutions are those students who have benefited
from concerted cultivation (Lareau, 2003), where activities and experiences were
organized by their families to prepare them to engage in the larger social and civic life
they were graduating into. These students are more likely to have greater class mobility
upon graduation. In contrast, while getting good grades is essential to success in college,
it is not the keys to success in life beyond college. Here Stuber (2011), like Hurst (2012)
feels more engaged discussion on social class within higher education could benefit
students from working and middle and upper classes as they contest their own
subjectivities.

The question remains of how best to incorporate working class students into the
extra-curricular opportunities higher education affords them instead of presenting these
spaces as optional, given the weight of their significance to social mobility. Hurst (2012),
Mullen (2011), and Stuber (2011) illustrate the impact of social inequalities for working
class students in higher education while Silva (2013) studies this impact in the adult lives
of the working class. All of these researchers highlight the interplay and acquisition of
economic, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). They also delineate the complex
subjectivities working class student engage and contest as they pursue higher education.
Hurst (2012) and Stuber (2011) rest this pursuit on social mobility and college success,
while Mullen (2011) highlights the structural inequalities present in two different kinds of
institutions. Silva (2013) challenges us to reimagine the post-industrial working class as
members of mood economy, not a market economy.

**Conceptual Framework: Sense of Belonging and Place Identity**

This paper represents a concern with place as an active agent in making
individuals feel as if they “belong” to a place or in making them feel alienated from the
place. Place is not neutral. All places hold within them certain connotative meanings that move beyond locale, location, and sense of place. Place is important social position, where social interactions with places shape people and the places they inhabit. Hernández, Hidalgo, Salazar-Laplace & Hess (2007) distinguish between “place attachment” and “place identity”:

Place attachment is an affective bond that people establish with specific areas where they prefer to remain and where they feel comfortable and safe. Place identity is a component of personal identity, a process by which, through interaction with places, people describe themselves in terms of belonging to a specific place.

This suggests places, like identities, are not static, and human experiences of places can lead to attachment to a place, but not make it part of one’s identity. My own experience may serve as an example. I lived in Seattle for six years, and certainly developed an attachment to the Northwest. I can engage in dialogue with others who have lived in the Northwest about the experience. I understand differences in types of rain, coffee and hipsters, but I would never identify as being from Seattle. I would say I lived in Seattle. Place identity is a greater construct, one that envelops significant, identity forming, life experiences in the place. Humanist geographers have named the central place in people’s lives as *home* and the activities central to that home develop a sense of belonging to that place, a dynamism of human social interactions in a given place (Relph, 1976; Buttimer 1980; Tuan 1980).

Sense of belonging is also commonly discussed in higher education research, where researchers examine how students feel a sense of belonging in their college
environments. Much of the definition of sense of belonging in the context of higher education is an outgrowth of the work of the psychologist Abraham Maslow (1962), whose hierarchy of needs goes in this order: physiological needs, like eating and sleeping; safety needs, like shelter; love and belonging needs, like being loved and fitting in with groups; self-esteem, or valuing oneself; and finally, self-actualization, where the person’s talents and abilities are fully realized. The definition of sense of belonging I will use in this framework is developed by Terrell Strayhorn (2012) who defines sense of belonging as, “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g. campus community) or others on campus (e.g. faculty, peers)” (p.3). It is my contention that all of the ways of belonging described by Strayhorn above are interactions with the college environment itself. These are place based interactions, not just interactions among humans.

The conceptual framework of this study is also based on place identity, what Proshansky, Fabian & Kaminoff (1983) name as “cognitions about the physical world in which the individual lives,” and this includes human/physical world interactions and human/human interactions within a physical world (p.59). Place identity is a personal, cognitive experience for individuals, and environmental psychologists pursue this scholarship, but place identity is also a social experience, a site of human interactions with place, where socioeconomic realities shape human experience of that place. Here, the work of humanist and critical geographers, sociologists and economists offers context on those sites of human and place interactions.
While my concern in this paper is with place socially, Andrew Herod (2012) is concerned with the spatiality of capitalism, that is “the ways in which economic relations of capitalism, or any other mode of production, are constituted geographically and play out spatially” (p. 336). Herod (2012) argues economic geography helps us deepen our understanding of social relations. In what he names the theory of historical-geographical materialism, he moves beyond history to include geography in our understanding of economy. He outlines three important geographical constructs: absolute distance v. relative distance; place; and the socio-spatial dialectic. Absolute distance is measured distance; the distance from Point A to Point B in miles or kilometers. Relative distance, however, is the real time or costs it takes to move between the two points, and technological advances have reduced relative distance significantly in what David Harvey (1989) names as the “time-space compression.” This reduction of relative time has influenced the discourse of globalization, and it certainly has made globalization possible. Herod (2012) notes that most places are now within 48 hours’ distance from one another, and in many cases, much less, in terms of electronic transmissions. Distance is salient in understanding the relations between places, and this “time-space compression” has implications for rural people and places.

Places are not static; they are expressions of social relations (Massey, 1999). As Herod (2012) further argues, places “are continually reconstituted by social relations within which they are located” (p. 340). Place shapes social relationships, as place is inherently social and this relationship is formed through the dialectic. In his influential construct of the socio-spatial dialectic, Edward Soja (1980) writes,
[O]rganized space is not a separate structure with its own autonomous laws of construction and transformation, nor is it simply an expression of the class structure emerging from the social (i.e. aspatial) relations of production. It represents, instead, a dialectically defined component of the general relations of production, relations which are simultaneously social and spatial. (p. 208)

Geographers, according to Herod (2012), argue that “space is both constituted by, but also constitutive of, social relations and practices” (p. 342). Herod (2012) offers us a way of thinking about the interplay of production with place and social relations. According to Agnew (2011), the continuum of space and place is messy, as geographers intertwine these words, and the use of maps and scales in geography has conflated the usage of the two words. In simplest terms, place is specific, space is general. Place has been defined as a node within space (Agnew, 2011). As this paper is concerned with place identity, both in terms of a home identity and a sense of belonging in college, I move now to a further deconstruction of place.

Agnew (2011) locates three dimensions of place: location, locale, and sense of place. Locations are the sites where something is located, and it relates to other sites because of an interaction among them. While locations are dimensions of place, locales, on the other hand, are those settings where life happens: schools, churches, backyards, classrooms, and cars, to name a few. Agnew (2011) argues that locales are not tied to locations. An entire experience can happen in a car, without mention of its exact location. The proliferation of social media is another example where people are engaged in an activity in a setting, without location.
Lastly, Agnew (2011) notes that a sense of place refers to belonging or participating within a given community. This third dimension of place also transcends location as belonging to a community is not tied directly to specific location, though it can be. One might claim an identity as “country” versus “city,” and in doing so, align oneself with a sense of place that is more encompassing than an exact rural location. In fact, one can claim country as a sense of place while living in an urban location. A sense of place implies an ideology of what “country” means and also what its binary, “city” means, as we define ourselves not only as what we are but as what we are not. In this way, Soja’s (1980) construct of the socio-spatial dialectic is at work, as the sense of belonging to either the city or country is an interaction with place, social relations, and types of work.

The first year of college is a time when many students move away from home to college. This physical move is also a moving of their personal identities into a new site of interaction. The personal identity developed within the home community will interact with the college community. For rural, first generation, low income students this shift puts geography, social class, and place identity in conflict. Both the home place and the college community are central to the identity making of first year students, and understanding the transition to college for first year students is also about understanding the students’ place identities.

Summary

Rural people and places have been mythologized and marginalized. The very definition of rural as “the absence of urban,” by the U.S. Census Bureau serves as an important indicator of urban bias and urbanormativity. The myths associated with the
rural as natural, personal and backward serve to further misunderstandings about rural people and places. These myths gain potency through rural simulacra, where rural is not actually witnessed firsthand but is known through objects associated with rural. Rural education plays an important role in reproducing social and cultural inequalities, by proffering rural students and their families’ narratives of departure. Place-based pedagogies seek to disrupt these departure narratives, but they are also tricky spaces. For place-based pedagogies to be effective they must be wary of being lumped into ecological stances, and they must be attentive to social positions that challenge marginalized members to remain in the community. In a global society, the impact of rural/urban binary is echoed larger and more forcefully as Schafft and Jackson (2014) revealed in their work, *Rural Education for the 21st Century*. The context of this literature review was within The United States, but it must be noted that the marginalization of rural people and places is a worldwide phenomenon. Further research in rural studies should explore the myths of globalism, and how it also positions rural people and places at a disadvantage. Rural researchers should also extend their lens to more fully explore how social class impacts rural people and places. Most of the texts reviewed here did not directly name this tension, though it was implied in the works. Like Thomas et al. (2011), I believe the rural/urban divide should be seen as a continuum rather than a binary, and as they note, rural and urban scholars have much to learn from each other.

The working class literature in this review responded to Silva’s (2013) question, what is the working class in the post-Industrial Age? In Silva’s (2013) study, she defined working class as those whose fathers did not graduate from college, and her participants revealed a working class mood economy as opposed to a market economy. Hurst (2012)
provided a more contextual definition of working class as a mix of income, education and occupation, while emphasizing occupations where workers have little or no control over. Mullen (2011) and Stuber (2011) defined first generation as those students whose parents had not earned a college degree. Mullen (2011) and Stuber (2011) further delineated between students at different kinds of institutions by using small liberal arts college and state university in Stuber’s (2011) study, and an elite institution/state university in Mullen’s (2011). In both cases, students at the private and elite institutions fared better in terms of access to social and cultural capital. Pivotal texts in working class scholarship provided greater context of how the working class has been socially reproduced (Willis, 1977); what it has valued (Lamont, 2000; Jensen, 2012); what it has experienced (Rubin, 1992); and how it is defined in relationship to work (Zweig, 2011). Consistently, the researchers in this review limited their studies to social class and did not explore the intersections of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexuality as concomitant to social class. However, Mullen (2011), Willis (1977), and Lamont (2000) all addressed gender and social class in their works. Because social class itself embodies varied subjectivities and contesting spaces of identity, further research in working class studies could benefit from these intersectionalities. Likewise, both working class and rural studies should be studied further as intersecting points of identity. The rural studies I located here focused primarily on education and culture, but they could benefit from a deeper class analysis.

Phenomenology seems poised to help researchers explore both rural and working class studies. In most of the working class literature explored here, an element of understanding the experiences of working class students was present. Hurst (2012) used composite characters whose stories she created from the experiences of her research
participants. Silva (2013) identified the struggles of her participants thematically into a coherent narrative about their class experiences in the post-industrial age. The openness of the experience based approach allows researchers the opportunity to explore participants’ experiences through multiple modalities and to accept partial narratives and conflicting storytelling. Research in rural and working class studies is important to resisting the silencing and oppression people in these marginalized positions face. Without further research on social class and place, the social inequalities described by most of the researchers in this review, go unnoticed, hidden. Such work requires a focus, through a methodology like phenomenology, on the lived experiences of people in the places they live.
CHAPTER 3

APPALACHIA: REAL AND IMAGINED CONTEXTS

“Harry, never forget that what the prophecy says it only significant because Voldermort made it so.”—Albus Dumbledore, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*

“Appalachia—is as much a social construction as is the Cowboy, or for that matter, the Indian.” –Allen Batteau, 1990

**Introduction**

In *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, Dumbledore reveals Professor Trelawney’s prophecy to Harry: a boy born in late July to parents who have thrice defied the Dark Lord will vanquish him. While Harry accepts the prophecy as true, Dumbledore implores him, it is the actions of Lord Voldemort that have made the prophecy real, not the other way around. “Do you think if Voldemort had not chosen to kill your father, your mother and tried to kill you, that he would have empowered you?” Dumbledore says there are many prophecies in the Great Hall that have never come true: “Why is that, Harry? Because someone must act to make them real. Voldemort made you the Chosen One, not the prophecy.” Dumbledore’s words reveal the necessity for action for something to come true. In more simpler terms, things don’t just happen. It is the actions of people that make events occur.

Like Batteau (1990) argues, Appalachia as a region and a culture is an invention of someone’s actions. The multiplicity of meanings associated with Appalachia are largely inventions of outsiders: the urbanormative gaze, the white “othering,” and the fascination with hillbillies are all constructions placed on Appalachia. Insiders also write about Appalachia, and their view celebrates the diversity, culture, dialect and people of
Appalachia as distinct; this does not make it any more or less true than the outsider perspectives. Here I will begin with a brief consideration of white settlement in Kentucky as it serves to frame our understanding of Appalachia. Then I will turn to the outsider lens of Appalachia, including what I consider three central images of Appalachia, spanning from post-Civil War to modern day: the hillbilly as celebrated in television and movies, Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty and the redneck Trump voter. Like all narratives in this work, these are partial, and they tell some parts of a story about Appalachia while leaving out others. I am not making a claim to tell the big story here, but to look for themes central to our collective understanding of Appalachia as a region. After the outsiders’ view, I will share what insiders have noted about the extractive economy and the values of Appalachian people.

**American Indians and White Settlers**

So thoroughly has the American Indian been eradicated from the Appalachian region of Kentucky that the culture of Appalachia stems in recent memory from post-Civil War, yet it is worth considering Appalachia just before it was invented, to understand the forces that contributed to our current day understanding of it. Likewise, it is also essential to recognize Native peoples lived in Kentucky, and the white settlement of the region was an act of violence and white supremacy. The taking of lands was theft. Kentucky history has provided a kinder lens toward white settlement and celebrated frontiersmen like Daniel Boone and Kit Carson. By acknowledging Native peoples in Kentucky, this text does not attempt to change the outcome of the white settlement on the region and on Native people, or to decolonize, rather it is an acknowledgement of history.
that generally is told through a Euro-centric perspective and further erases Native peoples.

Ancient Indian burial mounds can be found in most every county in Kentucky, dating to the Adena Culture, (500 B.C. to 100 A.D.) a prehistoric people who buried the dead on top of one another along with tools and artifacts in what are called burial mounds (Smith, 2000). It is believed many more burial mounds existed, but were disrupted or destroyed to cultivate the land for farming. When white settlers and land speculators from Pennsylvania, Virginia and North Carolina arrived in Kentucky in the 1700s in search of land and resources, they encountered the Shawnee, Cherokee, and Chickasaw tribes, yet Kentucky history has taught that the tribes did not actually live in Kentucky. This invisibility of the Native peoples, Henderson (1999) explains is known as the *Myth of the Dark and Bloody Ground*:

The most likely source of the phrase “dark and bloody ground” was a statement made by Dragging Canoe, a Cherokee leader present at Richard Henderson’s negotiation and signing of a March 16, 1775 treaty at Sycamore Shoals that transferred a large part of what is now Kentucky from the Cherokee Nation to the Transylvania Company. As the transaction was being completed, Dragging Canoe was reported to have said that a dark cloud hung over the land, known as the Bloody Ground.

In turn, Dragging Canoe’s words were interpreted by white settlers to mean the Cherokee, Shawnee and Chickasaw were fighting over the land, and none had ownership. Such a narrative served the interests of land speculators who sought to take the land and reveals the different attitudes the Euro-Americans and Native peoples embodied toward
“owning” land. More recent interpretations argue that Dragging Canoe may have been anticipating the conflicts over the land to come with Euro-American settlers (Henderson, 1999). Yet, the myth was perpetuated in history texts, as seen in Robert Penn Warren’s book (1950), *World Enough and Time*:

In the days before the white man came, the Indians called the land of Kentucky the Dark and Bloody Ground....The Indians came here to fight and to hunt, but they did not come here to live. It was a holy land, it was a land of mystery, and they trod the soil lightly when they came. They could not live here, for the gods lived here.

Such a myth served the land speculators and white settlers very well as it gave them opportunities to seize the land unfettered, and it has remained, instantiated in history texts and lore for a century. The view of land ownership differed between the Native peoples who saw land negotiation as usage, and Euro-Americans, who saw the owning of land as permanent. This narrative of negotiating the land from the Cherokee, since it was not really theirs, also serves to empower the narrative of Indian removal, which would come with Andrew Jackson’s Indian Removal Act of 1830 and lead to the Trail of Tears, the forced evacuation of the Cherokee people from the southeastern U.S. to Oklahoma. It is estimated 4,000 of 15,000 Cherokee died (“The Trail of Tears,” 2016). Most had already been extirpated from Kentucky.

**Daniel Boone**

The iconic frontiersman of Kentucky, Daniel Boone, is largely credited with settling, or worse “discovering,” Kentucky. Boone’s own narrative is largely constructed by fiction through dime-store novels and tall tales, which reflect a public interest in
viewing frontiersmen in a certain way. (See Figure 3: Daniel Boone (1956), Irwin Shapiro). We have mainly come to know Boone through the account of John Filson whose 1784 work, *The Discovery, Settlement and Present State of Kentucke* details Boone’s explorations. These accounts present Boone as an imposing mountain man, “Indian killer,” and fearless explorer, but they belie the realities of Boone’s existence. The fact that he was captured by the Shawnee, lost two children in clashes with Shawnee, and that he respected and hunted with the same Shawnee who held him captive twenty years earlier, reveals a more conflicting narrative and interaction than the myth of Daniel Boone allows. Boone did not wear a coonskin cap, nor was he illiterate. Boone’s family despised the stories concocted about him that presented him as an imposing figure (he was not tall), who told tales of exploration (he was a man of few words, and a disappointment to those who interviewed him) centered on his fearless pursuit of Indians.

As Brown (2008) relates in *Frontiersman*, Boone was known for trying to avoid the inevitable conflicts white settler presence wrought on the region, and yet he engaged in conflict, and violent conflict with Native peoples; however, he was not known to scalp Indians, or consider them trophies, as the stories that abounded him told. Filson’s account of Boone is how we come to know him, and this myth of Daniel Boone served white settler ideologies of white supremacy and infallibility. As these ideologies made the white settlers heroic, they also served to make Native people barbaric. The image of Daniel Boone as a mountain man also served to lay an impression of the hillbilly image to come.

The Kentucky of the 1700s was the beginning of westward expansion, and the accounts of the state and its history reflect a sense of adventure and discovery for whites,
while such narratives hide the eradication of Native peoples. Kentucky entered statehood as a commonwealth in 1792, and the Civil War would push the loyalties of a very conflicted state: a site where northern, southern and western ideas were clashing.

**The Invention of Appalachia**

The historian Ronald Eller (2008) traces the emergence of Appalachia to the years following The Civil War. While the national narrative at the turn of the twentieth century celebrated industrialized progress with increased urbanization, Appalachia was a contrast to America’s burgeoning modernity. Painted as a lawless wilderness, isolated and backward, Appalachia struck a chord with local color writers and missionaries. Shapiro (1978) argues Appalachia emerged in the nineteenth century as a way to “other” whites who did not possess the shared values and characteristics of the perceived majority of whites in America. With a desire to explain how whites in this region were different from the assimilationist view of a white America, culture and ethnicity became the way of naming difference among whites (Isenberg, 2017). If Appalachians were made different, then they were different. Accordingly, Hanna (2000) posits the signs of Appalachia are what draw American society to its misrepresentations. Hanna (2000) names the recognizable signs of Appalachia: mountains, violence, poverty, snake handling, incest. In any book or movie, these signs connect to create a powerful vision of what Thomas, Lowe, Fulkerson and Smith (2011) called the *Deliverance* myth. Used as character devices, these images provide meaning without the director’s need to explain them, yet they create, then replicate, this performance of identity. Such signs denote the region, while they disparage the people and the place. Nowhere is this image more starkly repeated than in the mountain man, hillbilly.
Hillbilly

Harkins (2003) finds evidence of hillbilly in books in the early 1900s, though the use of the term was not commonly held until the rise of silent movies depicting mountain men and women as uncouth, gun-toting ruffians. Vacillating between violence and stupidity, the hillbilly image left a lasting mark in American culture (Harkins, 2003). Batteau (1990) calls Appalachia a “creature of urban imagination,” and this view is most clearly seen in the fashioning of the hillbilly image through popular culture. From Lil’ Abner to The Beverly Hillbillies and The Dukes of Hazzard, hillbillies have captivated audiences and defined the region (Strangers & Kin, 1984). The comic strip Lil’ Abner ran for 43 years (1934-1977) and introduced people across the United States and beyond to the image of hillbillies in the South, yet these images were created by the cartoonist, Al Capp, who lived in Connecticut (Harkins, 2003). Capp’s comic was so influential the characters Jethro, Ellie Mae and Granny were modeled on the characters of Abner, Daisy Mae, and Mammy from the comic strip. The television show Hee-Haw furthered the images of the hillbilly and the naïve and sexy mountain woman first shown in Daisy Mae and then furthered by Ellie Mae (Wood, 2017).

By the time The Dukes of Hazzard appeared on the screen in 1979, the idea of naïve women had extended itself to “a couple of good ol’ boys never meaning no harm,” who instead of being portrayed as stereotypical mountain men hillbillies, raced a fast car around town. Uncle Jessie in his overalls and red trucker’s cap provided a nod toward the old time hillbilly, while Bo and Luke Duke often shed their shirts and showed their muscles. The show celebrated southern pride as exhibited by the Confederate flag painted across the top of the General Lee, and penned the popular culture phrase, “Daisy Dukes”
to refer to short cutoff jean shorts. While the show relied on the stock characters of the corrupt politician, Boss Hogg, and his sheriff, Roscoe P. Coltrane, as they chased the Duke boys around town, the Duke boys represented a departure from the hillbilly image that preceded them, and they ushered in an era of “good ol’ boys” who soon became celebrated in country music. Insiders might revel in their authenticity, but outsiders likely see them as the next evolution in the negative southern stereotype: redneck. Insiders and outsiders see the construct redneck from differing viewpoints, where insiders have an affinity for it—a pride, the outsiders see it as a reinforcement of backwardness.

The modern day versions of hillbilly cinema includes reality television shows like *Duck Dynasty, Hillbilly Handfishin’, My Big Redneck Wedding,* and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*. What each of these shows has in common is they satisfy the outsider lust for abnormal hillbilly behavior. By watching the men on *Hillbilly Handfishin’* noodle large catfish, viewers are transported to realities they never have to face with people they will never meet, but they laugh at them and mock them. They are entertained not so much by the content of the shows, but by the people who are on the shows.

Other television shows take a decidedly more masculine approach, and unlike the reality television shows, do not make light of the people in the region. Rather, *Justified,* serves to celebrate the mountain man. The FX series is described by imbd.com,

> U.S. Marshal Raylan Givens is a modern day 19th century-style lawman, enforcing his brand of justice in a way that puts a target on his back with criminals and places him at odds with his bosses in the Marshal service…. Dig under his placid skin and you'll find an angry man who
grew up hard in rural Kentucky, with an outlaw father, who knows a lot more about who he doesn't want to be than who he really is.

*Justified* works by celebrating tough masculinity and calls up the image of the frontiersman, someone who is able to bend the law to suit his needs. In twenty-first century America, such individualism is celebrated, exoticized. The outlaw imagery of *Justified* evokes western, cowboy culture to the rural, coal mining town of Harlan, Kentucky. Raylan Givens is not a hillbilly; he is a mountain man of action. Unlike the Duke boys who gave rise to the redneck trope, Givens is a tribute to the past, a celebration of lawlessness, a call to the days when Kentucky was the West. Importantly, unlike the Duke boys, Givens is employed and has a purpose.

**Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty**

While television showcased hillbillies to a national audience, politics was also paying attention to poverty in Appalachia. Michael Harrington’s *The Other America: Poverty in The United States* was first published in 1962, and John F. Kennedy had read and was moved by the depiction of poverty. When Lyndon B. Johnson declared war on poverty in his State of the Union address in 1964, he was responding to the social and cultural revolutions of the 1960s, the legacy of John F. Kennedy, Jr., and his own experience with poverty. Nowhere was the Poverty Tour more poignantly photographed than in eastern Kentucky. The photograph of President Johnson squatting on the porch with Tom Fletcher is widely seen as the face of the War on Poverty. (See Figure 5: President Lyndon B. Johnson and Tom Fletcher, Inez, Kentucky, April 1964).

While the Poverty Tour sparked national interest in alleviating poverty nationwide, and Johnson earmarked money especially for the Appalachian region, several
unintended consequences resulted. Images from the Poverty Tour published in *Life* magazine depicted the poorest Appalachians, and these images, proffered by outsiders to outsiders, reinforced stereotypes of unsavory hillbillies. Rather than eliciting empathy for conditions of poverty, the images solidified “othering,” of whites who were seen as different from mainstream America. The funding for the Appalachian region, intended for the poorest parts of Appalachia, was spread across the Appalachian region, an area extending from New York to Mississippi.

![Figure 5: President Lyndon B. Johnson and Tom Fletcher, Inez, Kentucky, April, 1964.](image)

**Redneck Trump Voter**

While the images of hillbilly and poverty have largely been shaped by outsiders with laughter, disgust, awe and pity, the 2016 Presidential Election brought a newly constructed image of the redneck Donald Trump voter to mainstream media. The script
goes like this: 1) Showcase rural people saying they support Trump 2) Ask them specific questions about policies, like the Affordable Care Act, that may impact them directly 3) Reporter stares in disbelief as the people say they still support Trump 4) If it is an article, the next couple of lines will refute logically any of the statements that Trump or his supporters just made. The cycle will repeat throughout the article or interview. While the interviewer or writer for national media sources rarely outright disparages the people in the interview, their silences do. Such pieces often leave a question hanging in the air, “How could these people have voted for Trump?!?” Other news sources on social media are replete with name calling and blame toward these voters for the Trump presidency.

The CNN Money article, “Trump Gives America’s ‘Poorest White Town’ Hope” (Long, Feb. 6, 2017) is an example of this pattern as it details huge support for Trump in Beattyville, Kentucky; the widespread poverty and unemployment along with reliance on government funding in the town; and a hope that coal jobs will be revived. After each section the author explains why this cannot happen.

My critique here is not for the logic of the authors or the interviewers. Instead, these articles are presented as offering insight into the perspectives of rural voters; they are not. These articles are forms of entertainment serving to validate the urbanormative view of rural voters as out of touch with their best interests, uneducated and willing to fall for a con artist. I’m not disputing those are possible claims, but the purpose of showcasing the stories of rural voters is for viewers (through an urbanormative gaze) to revel in their stupidity at voting this way. The long standing image of hillbilly and poverty present rural Appalachians as unfit to vote the right way for their own benefit,
and such analyses are why it is essential to consider the ways in which Appalachians position themselves, and not just how the dominant outsider gaze sees them.

According to Batteau (1990) and Shapiro (1978), Appalachia, as we know it, was constructed by the national media through the use of signs, rather than the other way around. Hanna (2000) finds the insider/outsider binaries somewhat problematic in the work of Batteau and Shapiro, as it gives credence to how “mainstream, urban, middle-class Americans perceived Appalachia” (p. 181). Other researchers have pushed back at hegemonic representations by examining “real” representations of Appalachians. One area where Appalachians have pushed back is in examining the extractive, colonial relationships of its natural resources. As I have done before, I should name here that this section is an overview of Appalachia’s economic relationship with its peoples and lands, and it is not intended to provide the depth of analysis such a relationship warrants. Perhaps more than culture, dialect, or stereotype, the relationship of Appalachians with the land and its resources provides a context for understanding Appalachia.

**The Extractive Economy**

Many Appalachian writers and historians have examined the extractive relationships between Appalachian people, outsiders and its resources. In their analyses, researchers push back against outsider (mis)representations of uneducated hillbillies. Lewis, Johnson and Askins (1978) and Walls and Stephenson (1972) discard stereotypical signs and mainstream representations as the products of ideology that hide the true class and colonial relationships that have produced Appalachian poverty. Likewise, David Whisnant (1980) argues that the missionaries and developers’ obsession
with Appalachian culture has hidden the extractive economic relationships between the region and the rest of the country.

The industrialization of the United States in the years after The Civil War was fueled by the timber, copper, coal, and mica of the Appalachian Mountains, an extractive relationship which would eventually define the region’s economy through coal. Eller (2008) calls this simply, “Rich land- Poor people” (p. 9). Coal was first discovered in Kentucky in 1750 and by 1971 Kentucky had become the leading coal producing state in the United States, (“Kentucky Coal Facts,” 2016). In 2016, Kentucky was the third leading coal producing state in the U.S., with 77.3 million short tons, behind Wyoming, with 395.7 million short tons, which far outpaced second place West Virginia with 112.2 million short tons. The U.S. Energy Information Administration (2016) reported that coal accounted for 30.4% of energy usage with natural gas at 33.8% and nuclear at 19.7%. Renewables accounted for 14.9% in total (hydropower, wind, biomass, solar, geothermal).

The problem of coal is defined as a problem of the region, a stubbornness of the people adhering to fossil fuels, not one of the aftermath of colonizing practices. In the twenty-first century, coal has become a cultural construct, not only a fossil fuel. A popular bumper sticker in eastern Kentucky, reads, “If you don’t like coal, don’t use electricity.” To people outside the region, such a bumper sticker is read as a refusal to accept the inevitability of coal’s decline in the energy landscape. The title of a recent NPR article, “In Kentucky, the Coal Habit is Hard to Break,” reveals this dissonance, so the culture of coal becomes the problem, not the industrial demands that created the coal monoeconomy in Kentucky and West Virginia and certainly not the consumer demands
for coal. In short, people in Appalachia have survived for a long time in relationship to coal, but they are not unwilling to see a different economic reality.

**Twenty-first Century Appalachia**

As Appalachians move forward to new economic realities, not centered on coal, it is worth noting that the dominant outsider images of Appalachia remain firmly in the past. Are Appalachians strongly holding onto the past of the culture of coal, or are they constructed this way by those outside Appalachia, who have not witnessed a contemporary Appalachia? The hillbilly image is conjured from mountain men of westward expansion, and the redneck trope is developed from Bo and Luke Duke into a symbol of southern pride. The most contemporary image of Appalachians is as Trump supporters, and this has engendered a host of negative connotations of people who vote against their own interests and are duped by a reality television star. The image of Appalachia remains white, as bell hooks (2016) writes, “Having lived my early childhood on a Kentucky hillside where a lush natural world enclosed and contained us, I had no notion, no idea that the world outside did not see black folks being at home in the wilderness.” Batteau’s (1990) argues that Appalachia is a social construction, and one that has not changed much for outsiders, even though the region changes. Many problems plague twenty-first century Appalachia that Uncle Jesse would not have imagined. Opioid addiction, economic uncertainties, and lack of access to resources people in other regions take for granted, like internet access, are realities Appalachians negotiate daily. As Appalachia moves through the twenty-first century, the imaginings of Appalachia could construe a new image, one not mired in stereotypes of backwardness, but one emboldened by the economic remaking of the region and one that celebrates the people.
CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

“Words are, in my not-so-humble opinion, our most inexhaustible source of magic. Capable of both inflicting injury, and remedying it.” --Dumbledore
— J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*

**Introduction**

A sense of belonging is central to the human experience, and it is shaped across time and context. What makes someone feel belonging changes at different points in their lives. In this study, a sense of belonging is examined at a pivotal point in young adult development, as students transition to college and leave family and home for the first time. Because this study is concerned with the identity making of rural, first generation, low income college students from Appalachian Kentucky, it is important to learn their experiences finding a fit in college. This is true in fantasy and real life.

In the *Harry Potter* series, students at Hogwarts are wizards and witches, invited to attend the school after their 11th birthday. All of these students possess the ability to do magic. Some of them come from wizarding families, where all members of the family are magical, and these students are called, Pure-Bloods. Students who come from wizarding families where one parent was a wizard or witch and the other was not are called, Half-Bloods. Students who come from families where neither parent is magical, are known as Muggle-Born. Muggle is the term in *Harry Potter* for non-magical humans, like Harry’s Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon. Muggle-Born wizards and witches are decried by Lord Voldemort and his followers as Mud-Bloods, a disparaging term referring to the “dirtying” of pure wizard blood. In Lord Voldemort’s eyes, Muggle-Born do not belong in the wizarding world.
Regardless of their skill and ability in magic, students at Hogwarts may feel a varying degree of belonging based on their magical lineage or the responses of others to their magical lineage. Hermione Granger, the brightest witch of her age, is Muggle-Born and derided on several occasions by Draco Malfoy, a Pure-Blood Slytherin, who calls her a Mud-Blood. Rather than being devastated by the slur, even after being tortured due to her lineage, Hermione tells Griphook, a Goblin, “Mudblood, and proud of it! I’ve got no higher position under this new order than you have, Griphook! It was me they chose to torture, back at the Malfoys’!” (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, 24.87). Griphook, as a Goblin, has his own feelings about how wizards and witches have unfairly treated Goblins. Ultimately, so much in the magical world of Harry Potter, centers on who belongs and who does not.

**Rationale for Methodological Choice**

This qualitative research study seeks to understand the phenomenon, or essence, of how rural, first generation, low income college students from Appalachian Kentucky experience a sense of belonging at their institutions and how they interpret these experiences. Phenomenology, as a qualitative research methodology, examines the experiences of a group of individuals who are experiencing the same event and details their interpretations of the event for similar themes (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Descriptive phenomenology focuses on writing down the experience as relayed by the participants, to get at the essence of their experiences. Hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on the interpretation of the experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis centers on examining the experience of significant life events, like identity and transition (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).
Going to college and leaving home is a major life event, and identity and belonging are significant parts of this experience. For many college students, the first year of college is the first time they have left their home communities for a significant period of time.

Strayhorn (2012) notes that a sense of belonging takes on heightened importance in certain contexts for certain groups, like women, people of color, etc. (pp.122-123). In the case of going to college, first generation, low income, college students from Appalachian Kentucky experience this life event as an intersection with aspects of their identities that are largely marginalized, primarily by their “un-whiteness” (McCarroll, 2018), social class and geographic region. For these students, the transition to college is a significant life event where their place-identity (home) and social class are in conflict with their identity-making as a college student in a new environment.

I have chosen to look at the experience of sense of belonging rather than college transition because, like Strayhorn (2012) has argued, the central concern for marginalized students who are marginalized is not how well they can assimilate, though I agree the most successful are often quite good at it, but how much they feel the belong. Students who do not feel they belong at an institution are more likely to leave, despite a successful transition to the institution (Strayhorn, 2012). The central experience I wish to explore is how they interpret the ways they belong or do not belong at their colleges and universities. For students deeply attached to their place-identity, or home communities, a sense of alienation can happen if the college or university community is significantly different across racial, ethnic, religious, or class lines and the student does not feel a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). As a methodology, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is poised to examine the experience of sense of belonging
and place identity for students in higher education as one of the key areas of IPA research is “life transitions and identity” (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p.163). IPA research is particularly useful when significant life events happen in people’s lives and serve to shape their identities. In the sections below, I provide an overview of the philosophy behind modern phenomenology and then a consideration of phenomenological research methods and how they are applied in this study.

**Phenomenology**

As one of the five main approaches in qualitative research (narrative inquiry, grounded theory, phenomenology, case study, and ethnography), phenomenology is distinguished by its emphasis on examining the lived experiences of human beings around a phenomenon by providing a description of what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon (Creswell, 2004, pp.57-58). The focus in phenomenology is not on the individual per se, but rather “the very nature of the thing,” (van Manen, 1990, p. 177), and this is a key difference between the two qualitative research methodologies I considered for this study, narrative inquiry and phenomenology. In narrative inquiry, *the story is the thing*, and so is the individual; and in phenomenology *the experience is the thing*, though often the experience can be told through stories of individuals. As such, later I include a section on narrative inquiry to clarify how narratives are and aren’t being used in this study. Phenomenology has a long philosophical tradition, and it can have different meanings depending upon how it is discussed and used. Below I discuss the philosophy behind modern interpretative phenomenology beginning with Edmund Husserl.
Husserl: Foundations of Modern Phenomenology

As a philosophical school, modern phenomenology was profoundly influenced by the works of philosopher and mathematician, Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). Husserl argued that the work of phenomenology is understanding the human condition and experience by being in consciousness with the everyday. He called the experiences of life, the lifeworld, and human feelings, thoughts, actions, only made sense in reference to the lifeworld (Husserl, 1913; Bloor & Wood, 2006). For example, anger has no referent without the lifeworld. One can be angry at the car moving too slowly or angry at the waitstaff for getting the order wrong, but the experience of anger only can be interpreted in the context in which it was experienced because each instance of anger is dependent upon that experience. This is not to say that the physiology of anger or the feelings of anger do not have similarities across experiences; rather Husserl’s concern was with the essence of the experience itself.

For Husserl, the individual had to be conscious of the objects in the lifeworld experienced in a condition he called intentionality (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Because the researcher was human also, and had experienced anger, Husserl (1913) suggested bracketing, what he called epoché, knowledge and experience as a way of acknowledging its existence so that it did not interfere with one’s ability to interpret experiences (Bloor & Wood, 2006). Husserl’s main goal was “to find the essence of experience” (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). His work is sometimes called pure phenomenology or transcendental phenomenology, and it is here where the work of his student, Martin Heidegger, moves away from pure phenomenology to what is known as the hermeneutic turn in phenomenology (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p.16). While
Husserl was mainly interested in the essence of the experience, Heidegger saw human beings as interpreting their experiences in relation to their lives. Heidegger’s work is central in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis because it signals the move away from the descriptive, transcendental phenomenology of Husserl to the interpretative account of the being-in-world.

**Heidegger: Hermeneutic Turn in Phenomenology**

In 1927, Heidegger\(^2\) (1889-1976) published his most influential work, *Being and Time*, where he asks the ontological question, what is being? Heidegger’s work expands Husserl’s phenomenology to ontology. Heidegger saw being as temporally driven. For humans, death marks the ending of life, so being is not infinite; rather it is marked by time and context. Heidegger (1962/1927) called the “being-in-world,” or human being, *Dasein*. Where Husserl’s concern was with the individual experience of consciousness, Heidegger was “concerned with the ontological question of existence itself, and with the practical activities and relationships which we are caught up in, and through which the world appears to us, and is made meaningful” (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 17). For Heidegger, Dasein is interdependent of the world, as the experience of the world and the contexts of the world are inseparable.

\(^2\) Heidegger is widely considered one of the most important and influential thinkers of the 20\(^{th}\) century and one of the most controversial. Heidegger was a member of the Nazi party and served as Rector of the University of Freiburg for eleven months (1933-34) when Reich Law required the firing of Jewish professors, including his mentor, Edmund Husserl. Many scholars have debated whether Heidegger can or should be studied given his participation in the Nazi party. Given his profound influence on phenomenology, I have chosen to include his work while naming the problem of his allegiance to the Nazi party.
Being in the world is the result of what Heidegger calls, “thrown into being,” which he equates with *givens* of life—culture, geography, history, language, etc.—where one is born, the time period is which one lives, the language one speaks, etc. (Heidegger, 1962/1927). Truth, what Heidegger (1962/1927) called, *Alethia*, is an unconcealment, a discovery revealed through the phenomenological process with Dasein and the world. Alethia is also relative to time and perspective, two conditions that shape the truth of the experience. Heidegger noted that what might be revealed in one experience may yet conceal something, and this process of being in the world can be seen in the hermeneutic circle, where experience influences understanding of experience which then influences experience, and so on. (See Figure 6: Hermeneutic Circle). Heidegger’s departure from Husserl’s emphasis on individual consciousness of experience made what is known as the hermeneutic turn in phenomenology, where people are “thrown into” a world that is shaped by time and context. (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 18).

![Figure 6: Heidegger’s Hermeneutic Circle](image-url)
In the hermeneutic circle, the 1st interpretation of the experience is always in light of the question of being, and the 2nd interpretation of the experience is in light of the first arc and in light of time. Human existence is limited by time, and experience takes place in time. Of many contributions to phenomenology, Heidegger’s claim that being takes place in time is central to understanding interpretative phenomenology. Likewise, Heidegger noted that the fore-structure (what one thinks one knows of the experience) is always there, but it may not be possible to put aside, or bracket as Husserl suggested, the fore-structure because the individual may not be aware of the fore-structure until engaged in the interpretative stance (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

Heidegger’s contributions to phenomenology led to further hermeneutic and existential moves within phenomenology, and two French philosophers, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean Paul Sartre made important contributions to modern phenomenology.

**Merleau-Ponty & Sartre: Phenomenology after Heidegger**

Heidegger’s emphasis on the interpretative stance in phenomenology- a move that broadened the scope of Husserl’s emphasis on cognition- led to further philosophical branches in phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty (1945) moved beyond Heidegger’s “world” to assert that it was through the body that one experiences the world, rather than through consciousness, and he added the notion of *embodiment* to phenomenological study (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Sartre’s (1943) contribution of the self as in a state of becoming and developing, rather than waiting to be discovered also held further implications for phenomenology. What about what was not there yet, but was in a state of becoming? Was that not also an experience? What if it never is there? Sartre (1943)
considered the relational aspect of beings in the world and how experiences are not just an interaction between the conscious being and the object, so for Sartre, there was both being and nothingness, concepts that are yet experiences, though their states may not appear as realities in the lifeworld (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). The hermeneutic turn in phenomenology led by Heidegger’s work moved phenomenology beyond description of the essence of the experience to interpretations built upon interpretations shaped both in multi-directions by time and the world one was “thrown into.” Experiences are often shaped in human experience by both chronology and narrative, and the next section considers how narrative inquiry and phenomenology can align, and yet how their purposes are different.

**Narrative Inquiry and Phenomenology**

As one of the five qualitative research methodologies (narrative inquiry, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study) narrative inquiry research is a methodology in its own right, but since narratives are often data in phenomenological research, it is worth untangling how phenomenology and narrative inquiry share characteristics and where they depart. In this study, the narratives of college students serve as important data for examining their experience of sense of belonging. Here I will explain how narrative inquiry differs from phenomenology.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note the characteristics of narrative inquiry: emphasis on learning from participant in a setting; learning occurs through individual stories told by individuals; and the stories report personal and social experiences. This sounds very similar to phenomenology, but in narrative inquiry, the experience of the phenomenon is not the central analysis. Stories constitute the data of narrative research,
and the researcher gathers it through interviews or informal conversations. In phenomenological research, someone might tell a story in answering a question about the experience of a phenomenon, but the methodology does not focus on the narratives solely. In fact, Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009) suggest breaking up the “narrative flow of an interview” to develop emergent themes (p.91). In narrative inquiry research, the stories are “field texts,” and provide the raw data for researchers to analyze as they retell or restory the story based on narrative elements (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The focus is on the individual and their processing of the events, and connections may be made across narratives in narrative inquiry, but the emphasis in narrative inquiry is not on examining a phenomenon. It may be on examining the individual’s telling of the story or of an understanding of the person herself. For example, breastfeeding mothers may share similar stories about the difficulty of breastfeeding, the challenges of negotiating public spaces, the bonding with the baby, and so on, but narrative inquiry would examine their individual stories. Interpretative phenomenological research would consider the experience of being a breastfeeding mother. Context is also examined considered in both approaches, but its examination differs.

The narrative researcher includes detail about the setting and the context as part of the story. A story in narrative research is a first person telling or retelling of events related to the personal or social experience. The stories usually have a beginning, middle, and end. A predicament, struggle or conflict is present. Researchers both narrate the story and often identify themes that emerge from the story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The qualitative data analysis may be both descriptions of the story and themes that emerge from it. In contrast, narratives used as data in interpretative phenomenology focus
on the participant’s experiences and may not follow a predictable story arc. The phenomenological researcher centers what the experience means, not the story or the person, though understanding the context is essential to understanding the experience. As Heidegger named Dasein as being “throw into” a world, it is the researcher’s task to uncover and understand the context of the participant’s world.

In narrative inquiry, the researcher collaborates with the participant to check the story or to negotiate it. The collaboration may involve steps in the research process, formulating the central phenomena to be investigated and working on the final written restored version (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Restorying is the process of gathering stories, analyzing key elements—time, place, plot, scene, and rewriting the story to make it chronological. The researcher makes sense of the story and provides missing information (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This view of narrative responds to the common understanding of a story as having a time order, plot, characters, conflict and importantly, a point. In fiction, stories can imagine the characters without the attentiveness to humans that narrative inquiry requires of qualitative research. Within the space of research, many issues arise for storytelling and storymaking, and these are not the concern of phenomenological researchers.

Andrews, Squire, and Tamboukou (2012) name narrative research as difficult. Working within the lives of human beings to provide an account of an event or an experience is inherently problematic. The humanistic tendency to interpret the hermeneutic circle, as Ricoeur (1991) named it, foregrounds narrative research and commonsense understandings of it. In Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the interpretative stance is central to the work of the researcher, and not a limitation, but an
expectation. The researcher plays an active role in interpreting the experience of the participant, but she is careful to recognize and bracket her own understandings, so they do not determine the experience of the participant.

Additionally, the emphasis on time as a necessary construct of narrative belies a host of potential problems. The imagined story, the misremembered or unremembered stories, and the fallibility of memory all push back at the idea of unified texts. What of those narratives that do not make sense to the listener, but are of import to the teller? Many narratives are not cohesive, and this creates challenges in presenting narratives in research (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2012). In this way, narrative inquiry channels Sartre’s question, what of the experience yet to become? Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis also is grounded temporally, as the lifeworld of the participant and the researcher are so grounded, but time in an IPA analysis is about understanding the life stages and experiences of participants, not the chronological time order of the narrative they have presented in interviews.

Narratives are not neutral; they implicate their teller and listeners in the larger world. By focusing on narrative, researchers investigate not just how stories are structured, and the ways in which they work, but also who produces them. Researchers contend with silenced and contested narratives and how they represent the storyteller and story agents. Stories are compelling and very human. Phenomenology breaks from the weight of the personal by focusing not on the individual’s agency but on what was experienced. In research with small stories, where as much is left out as is said, phenomenology offers needed limits to the weight of narrative, which can often be read as “large stories,” even when they are small, fallible stories.
Interpretative Phenomenology

Interpretative phenomenology is influenced by the philosophical work of Husserl and Heidegger, though interpretative phenomenology departs from Husserl’s descriptive, transcendental phenomenology. The emphasis in interpretative phenomenological analysis is not on the essence of the individual’s experience, which is decidedly more cognitive. The experience of being-in-world situated temporally and worldly follows the thinking of Heidegger who made the hermeneutic, or interpretative, turn in phenomenology. Interpretative phenomenology distinguishes itself from branches of phenomenology concerned with the essence of the individual’s experience and describing those experiences, by emphasizing the act of interpreting those experiences situated in time in a particular context. The work of interpreting experience remains idiographic, as it focuses on the singular experience, and it remains detailed and specific (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). In the section that follows, I will explain the interpretative phenomenological research design of this study.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) Research Design

One of the five major qualitative inquiry methods, phenomenological research methods are concerned with the essence (experience) of a phenomena and the interpretation of the experience for a group of individuals (Creswell, 2004). Descriptive phenomenologists may bracket their understandings of the experience prior to describing the experience of the participant. Data may be collected from interviews, writings or journals (Creswell, 2004). Interpretative phenomenologists may utilize similar data collection methods, but the interpretative stance through which they view the data is different from a descriptive methodology. Rather than describe the experience and
reflect upon it, the interpretative phenomenologist codes for descriptive, linguistic and conceptual themes. After re-reading and listening to interviews once more for connections across the emergent themes, the researcher moves on to the next case. The researcher then searches for patterns across the participants.

Below I will explain the specific research design of this study, a flexible process for conducting Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis based on the work of Smith, Flowers, & Larkin (2009).

**Research Questions**

Interpretative phenomenology is popular in the health sciences and in psychology, where questions about how X experiences Y are explored in ways that quantitative research or qualitative research with large sample sizes cannot explore fully: “Qualitative research…tends to focus on meaning, sense-making and communicative action” (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p.44). In sum, qualitative researchers in IPA want to know how the participants make sense and understand a shared experience in a particular context (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p.46).

**Purposive Sampling**

Interpretative phenomenological studies utilize a purposively selected homogenous sample, where participants are gleaned through referrals, contacts, or by snowballing (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, pp. 48-51). A small sample size of three to six participants allows for the detailed, idiographic analysis IPA requires, though Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009) recognize IPA studies can have more participants with more experienced researchers.
Data Collection

Data may be collected from interviews, diaries, photographs, or other modalities. Interviews are semi-structured and allow the participant to respond freely. Once the data are collected, the interviews are transcribed and analysis begins, and it is here where the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis bears greater attention as it diverges from other qualitative methodologies in analysis.

Interpretative Phenomenological Data Analysis

The emphasis in IPA data analysis is on quality over quantity. Researchers engage with the participants’ experiences on descriptive, linguistic and conceptual levels. Multiple readings of the transcribed interviews, with initial noting are encouraged. The actual coding of the text takes place as emergent themes are categorized, and researchers looks for patterns across the interviews. Below I will detail each of these steps as suggested by Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009).

Re/Reading

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) begins with the reading and then re-reading of each interview. Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009) recommend printing the interviews with a wide margin, and listening to each interview to get a sense of the voice of the participant. They recommend recording observations in order to bracket them and to manage feelings and thoughts about the participants’ experience. This stage of analysis requires “active engagement with the data” (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p.82).

Initial Noting

The second stage of analysis is the initial noting of anything of interest from the interviews in the wide margins of the right of the page. This is a pre-coding stage, where
the researcher gets as familiar with the text as possible. In this close analysis the goal is
take notes and make exploratory comments on the data in three main ways: descriptive,
linguistic and conceptual. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) suggest developing a
notation style for each type of comment. Descriptive notes describe the what the
participant has stated and focus without interpretation on simply what is said, and they
present these in normal text. The linguistic notes are centered on the participant’s use of
language, including pauses, laughter, tone, etc., and these are in italics. The conceptual
comments are pre-interpretative and involve the researcher questioning what is said, and
looking for understandings of it. These comments are underlined (Smith, Flowers &
Larkin, 2009).

Developing Emergent Themes

From the exploratory comments, researchers begin coding the interviews with an
eye toward the exploratory comments on the right, by writing emergent themes in the left
margin. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) suggest breaking with the “narrative flow of
the interview” which can last a page or more, and breaking the text into discrete parts
without concern for story (p.91). This is key to the hermeneutic circle, as the whole
interview becomes parts open to interpretation building upon interpretation, to become
whole again (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p.91). Importantly, the themes are a mix of
the participants’ thoughts and feelings and interpretations of those thoughts and feelings
of the experience, and the researchers’ interpretations of interpretations of those thoughts
and feelings.
Searching for Connections Across Themes

The next steps in conducting IPA is to look for connections across the themes. Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009) recommend typing all the themes in a chronological order and forming clusters of related themes, and then utilizing several techniques to develop the connections across the themes: abstraction, subsumption, polarization, contextualization, numeracy and function. The first is abstraction, where the clusters of themes allows for the creation of a super-ordinate theme. In subsumption, an emergent theme becomes a super-ordinate theme. Polarization refers to exploring themes that are opposite in nature. Since all IPA is contextual, Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009) suggest looking specifically for contextual themes within narratives. Numeracy refers to counting specific words, and it can be of use if a word is frequently stated in an interview, but counting words should not be overemphasized in a qualitative study. Function asks researchers to consider the function of the words and phrases. Do they position the participant in a certain way- as a hero, victim, novice, expert, etc.? Once connections have been made across themes for each participant, the researcher can then turn to the all participants.

Cross-Case Patterns

Once each individual interview has been read and re-read with initial noting completed, emergent themes developed, and connections across themes developed, then the researcher can look across each participant for patterns that illustrate shared feelings or thoughts about the experience. It should be noted, however, that IPA does not place a value on having shared experiences or not having them. The purpose again is to account for the experiences of a group of purposively selected homogenous participants who have had a shared experience. This does not suggest they will respond the same or have the
same feelings about the experience. Next, I will discuss the specific research questions for this study, which examined the experiences of first generation Appalachian Kentucky college students and their sense of belonging at their colleges and universities.

**Research Questions**

In this study, I examine how first generation, low income college students from Appalachian Kentucky experience a sense of belonging at their institutions. I was also interested in how they experience their place-identity to Appalachia and their home communities, and how this place-identity aligns with their sense of belonging in their college communities. Specifically, my research questions in this study are

1) How do first generation, low income college students from Appalachian Kentucky experience a sense of belonging at their colleges and universities?

2) How do first generation, low income college students from Appalachian Kentucky experience their place-identity to Appalachia and their home communities, and how does this align with their sense of belonging in their college communities?

**Research Sites**

The research sites in this study were multi-layered, and I will explain each below.

The students in this study were recruited from a federal TRIO program called Talent Search, which is overseen by Freedom College. Students from three counties, Earth, Sunset, and Forest, are served by this program. The students receive services from the program at their high schools and through the help of their Talent Search Guidance Counselor who is employed by their high school and also serves as the guidance counselor for as many as 600 students in the entire school. I met with students at their

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3 Pseudonyms are used for the names of the counties, colleges and universities.
respective colleges and universities with an introduction from their high school counselors, and at a time when Talent Search’s official role with them ended.  

**TRIO Programs**

The Federal TRIO programs include eight programs that serve low-income individuals, first-generation college students and individuals with disabilities from middle school to post-baccalaureate programs. The programs are administered through a competitive grant application process and awarded to Institutes of Higher Education (IHEs) and other public and private agencies who oversee the administration of the services to individual students who qualify for the program and live in the service area (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

TRIO programs are so named in honor of the three original federally funded programs designed to improve the circumstances of low-income people through education: Upward Bound, Talent Search and Student Support Services (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). The first TRIO program, Upward Bound, was created as part of President Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty through the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. The mission of Upward Bound is to increase the numbers of low-income students enrolling in and completing post-secondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Talent Search was created one year later, in 1965, as an outgrowth of the Higher Education Act, which was part of President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society domestic

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4 Talent Search serves students until the end of their senior year in high school.
5 The eight TRIO programs are Educational Opportunity Centers, Ronald E. McNair Post-baccalaureate Achievement, Student Support Services, Talent Search, Training Program for Federal TRIO Programs Staff, Upward Bound, Talent Search, Upward Bound Math-Science, and Veterans Upward Bound.
policies. Talent Search seeks to identify individuals who have the potential to succeed in higher education at an earlier age than Upward Bound (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Three years later, Student Support Services was authorized by Higher Education Amendments. Student Support Services provides academic tutoring and financial aid counseling and scholarship assistance. The goal of SSS is to improve retention and graduation rates (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). The students in this program were recruited from the Freedom College Talent Search, and I will explain the site and reasons for this decision below.

**Freedom College Talent Search**

I previously worked in the Freedom College Upward Bound program when I was getting my Master’s degree, and I knew people who had continued to work for the Upward Bound program. I made some initial contact with people I knew from my previous work in Upward Bound, and they led me to additional contacts in the program. Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009) refer to this kind of connection to participants as “opportunities.” The additional contacts eventually got me connected to my research sites.

I initially wanted to recruit students from the Upward Bound, but when I reached out to them to see if it would be possible to connect with the current Upward Bound program, I learned that the Talent Search program had more students and would be easier to access. After discussing it with the program director who oversaw both programs, I decided to recruit students from Talent Search.
The students in this study were recruited for the research project from their county high school’s Talent Search program which is administered by Freedom College. According to the program director, the criteria for Talent Search is

- 2/3 of the students in the program must be “low income AND first generation” OR “low income OR first generation.” The term “low-income individual” means an individual whose family's taxable income for the preceding year did not exceed 150 percent of the poverty level amount (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). (See Table 1: Federal TRIO Programs Current-Year Low-Income Levels, p.30).

- 1/3 of the children can be from those who have an identified educational need for services. For example, a student whose dad is a coal miner and makes enough money to not qualify as low income, and whose mom has an early childhood education degree she has never used, may still require educational supports and services transitioning to college. Another example is a student could be eligible because his birth parents qualify as low income, first generation, though his adopted parents do not.

Usually, the Freedom College Talent Search program does not have students who fall in the 1/3 category, as 86-90% of the students are low income and first generation, but according to the program director, “Essentially everyone in these schools qualifies for Talent Search, or we can make a case for them to qualify.” To use Agnew’s (2011) terminology, the location of Talent Search is at the students’ high school in their county because this is where they experience the program. The administrative tasks and office of the director is located at Freedom College in Bridges County.

**Sunset and Forest Counties, Kentucky**

The students in this research study are all residents of two adjacent counties, Sunset and Forest Counties, located in south central Kentucky in Appalachia, so the counties themselves occupy an essential place in this research, and they were discussed in the interviews. I recruited students from their high school Talent Search counselors in Spring 2017. However, the interviews took place at the students’ colleges and universities. The students took pictures of their home counties, and they provided these
pictures of locations in Sunset and Forest Counties to the researcher as additional data sources. Next I will describe the demographics of each county.

**Sunset County**

The county has a population of 64,449, and the city 11,423. In the county, 94.1% of the population identifies as White along with 2.5% Hispanic, and 1.2% as Two or More Races, and 1.2% Black or African American. In Sunset City, 90.9% identifies as White Alone with 3.9% Hispanic, and 2.8% as Two or More Races, and 2.9% Black or African-American. In Sunset County, 81.4% of the population over age 25 has graduated from high school, and 15.2% of the population over 25 has Bachelor’s degrees or higher while in Sunset City, the numbers are slightly lower. 77.7% of the population over age 25 has graduated from high school, and 12.5% of the population over 25 has Bachelor’s degrees or higher. Overall, 23.7% of the population in Sunset County is considered in poverty, and 35.7% of the population in Sunset City is in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). For the purposes of Census Bureau classifications, Sunset County is considered rural.

**Forest County**

Forest County has a population of 17,465. In the county, 89.6% of the population identifies as White Alone, 5.7% Black or African American, 2.7% Hispanic, and 1.5% as Two or More Races. 73.4% of the population over age 25 has graduated from high school, and 7.6% of the population over 25 have Bachelor’s degrees or higher. Overall, 34.4% of the population in Sunset County is considered in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). For the purposes of Census Bureau classifications, Forest County is considered rural.
Big University

Established in 1798, Big University is public, state university\(^6\) located in a large metropolitan area in the state of Kentucky, with an enrollment of more than 20,000 total undergraduate and graduate students as of Fall 2017\(^7\). The undergraduate enrollment was more than 15,500, with 75% of the students living on campus. 22% of the incoming first year class of 2018 was from out of state. 16% were first generation college students. 15% identified as African-American, and 6% as Latinx. Students from 12 countries besides the United States attended Big University. The most popular majors were engineering, biology, business, education and nursing. 18.6% of the incoming class were majoring in engineering. Big University has three campuses and twelve colleges and schools. The operating budget of the university is $1.2 billion dollars with an endowment of $719 million dollars. The university receives $133.6 million dollars from the Commonwealth of Kentucky, and $77.6 million dollars from the federal government. The university specifies its mission is to become a “preeminent research university.” The 2018-9 cost of tuition, fees and room and board, for on-campus, in state students was approximately $20,700. Out-of-state students paid $36,300. In state commuters paid $12,200.

Mary Lincoln College

Mary Lincoln College is small, nonselective, Christian private school with an enrollment of 2000-3000. was founded in January 1903 as a training school, and educated children in elementary and secondary school. In 1923, it became a junior

\(^6\) Big University joined the state system in 1970.
\(^7\) Total enrollment for 2018-9 was not available at the time this was written.
college, and in 1985, a private, four-year baccalaureate degree college. The total enrollment in Fall 2017 was over 2,500, with nearly 40% of the students living on campus, and 60% commuting from home. Students from 34 countries besides the United States attended Mary Lincoln College, and there were students from 30 states across the United States enrolled there. The annual budget was $59.8 million dollars, and the endowment was $56 million. 63% of the student body identified as White, and 8% as African-American, and 16% as Other. Only 1% identified as Hispanic. The 2018-9 cost of tuition, fees and room and board, for on-campus, students was approximately $34,500, and the cost for commuters was $24,900. As a private school, MLC does not charge a different price to out-of-state students.

**Research Participants**

The twelve participants who agreed to participate in this research study were all recruited from the Freedom College Talent Search program at their high school in either Forest or Sunset county in their senior year or through contact with them at their college or university. The participants ranged in age from 18-21. The University of Massachusetts Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study prior to the recruitment of students. (See Appendix A: IRB Approval). All of the students signed an informed consent letter (See Appendix B: Informed Consent Letter).

The study results reflect the full data collected from P1-P7, identified by pseudonym and in more detail in Table 5 below. Four participants did not complete the four interviews (P9, P10, P11 and P12). P9 and P10 were busy and not able to make two interview visits. They did not officially withdraw from the study, and both maintained contact until the end of the study. They are quoted within the study to support
experiences of P1-P7, though they did not fully complete the study and were not the focus of the study presented here. P11 asked to withdraw due to the demands of keeping up with her academics at Big University and her desire to focus on being successful there. P12 stopped returning text messages after the second interview, so I voluntarily withdrew her. P8 was not a first generation college student, but he completed the study. He is not included in the results as I limited it to first generation college student experiences. For the purposes of this study, which focused on the experiences of first generation, low income college students from Appalachian Kentucky, I limited the full IPA analysis in the results to the data from P1-P7 with some support from P9 and P10.

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<th>Participant</th>
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<th># of Photos</th>
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**Data Collection**

This data for this study was collected in four, approximately one hour long, semi-structured interviews with participants at their college or university library over the course of the 2017-18 academic year. (See Appendix C: Interview Questions). Two interviews took place in Fall 2017 beginning in mid-October and mid-November, and in
Spring 2018, in mid-March and early April. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed. Participants also provided photographs, taken on their own time, during the course of the year. (See Appendix F: Photo Project Letter to the Participants). Since place identity is an experience of feeling a place is part of one’s identity, I encouraged the participants to share the photographs of places at home where they felt made them belong or identify with their hometowns, and places at colleges where they felt a sense of belonging. As it is common in IPA methodology to collect artifacts or photographs to understand the individuals’ experiences, these photographs were an additional source of understanding the participants’ sense of belonging and place identity. They shared these with me in the April interview session, and they emailed or texted the pictures to me. Participants text messaged me [their preferred way to communicate] interview dates and times, and I also found it was an important way to ask clarifying questions about their interviews.

Students were asked to discuss their sense of belonging at college and any college transitions and experiences that were meaningful to them. I also asked about their home community and how they felt about it and how they thought others perceived it. I discussed outsider views on Appalachia with them. I asked about the differences they experienced between college and high school and what challenges and opportunities they are exploring in college. At any time, participants could choose not to answer a question or to take the interview in another direction, which they often did. This was communicated to them in the interview protocol before each interview. Once the interviews were completed, they were transcribed and then analyzed. Next, I explain the IPA process I used in analyzing the data.
Interpretative Phenomenological (Data)Analysis

The interview data was transcribed by my research assistant who was paid for her work through my employer as part of a mentoring position. The research assistant only participated in the transcription process as her role in this project was limited to that work specifically. The data were coded for themes related to sense of belonging, college transition and place identity initially by using NVIVO 12. After a significant amount of time of uploading the interview data into NVIVO 12, I found it more productive to take the advice of Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009) and code by hand, with one significant difference, explained in the section below.

Each participant offered two and in some cases, three or four photographs of their sense of belonging in college and their place-identity in Appalachia. The photographs and any writing and commentary the students made about the photographs were also coded following the IPA process as explained above. In the findings chapters, I include the photographs in the sections with their relevant themes.

Bracketing

Bracketing refers to the researcher’s attempt to put aside their feelings and thoughts about the experience of the participants (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). This is especially salient when the researcher has had a similar experience to the participants. My way of approaching bracketing was by writing an autoethnography of my place identity, which I shared in the opening of this dissertation. This reflective process allowed me to see my parallels and differences with my participants. Like the participants, I am from Appalachian Kentucky, and I was a first generation college student. I did not participate in a college readiness or TRIO program, but my parents,
particularly my mother, were instrumental in creating a college-going identity for me. I did well in school, and I enjoyed it. My father worked in the coal mining industry as a welder, and at the time I lived in Appalachia, the coal industry was not in decline. My parents paid my state college tuition bill out of pocket each semester, and I graduated in four years. I did not consider finances an issue in college, though I was not wealthy. In contrast for my participants, the costs of higher education and their own family financial circumstances weigh heavily upon them. I attended a state college because it was affordable, and I had a scholarship of about $1000 a semester that helped offset costs. I was not eligible for any financial aid other than loans, but I never had to take out any. I share all this here because in my college experience, I have more differences with my participants than similarities.

There is also the issue of age and distance that greatly helps me see my lived experiences in a very different light than my participants. I do not feel I share the same experience as they do. I have not lived in Appalachia since I was 24, and I lived there from the time I was 7 until 24, so a total of 17 years. I have now lived in western Massachusetts for 20 years, so while I embody a place identity as Appalachian, I do not share the same experiences the students in my study have. For example, my accent is gone for the most part, and some people in New England believe they hear it at times, but to the students in my study I did not sound Appalachian. Nor do I think I sound Appalachian. What I did share with them and what helped me gain entry to them was that I grew up in this region, and I understand the feeling of marginalization that comes with it. This is not to say that my feelings of marginalization work in the same way as theirs. Since it has been a very long time since I have felt this marginalization personally,
and I can say that my sense of it now (and since leaving Appalachia years ago) is more secondary. I am bothered by the lack of understanding and empathy people have for others, but it is not felt directly in my current life.

**Re/Reading**

Instead of printing all of the interviews, I chose to read and listen to each interview in its entirety and make some initial noting in my notebook as I listened and followed along on my computer screen. I then proceeded to highlight in different colors themes as they emerged.

**Coding and developing emergent themes**

This stage of the IPA process was recursive for me rather than linear. Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009) name the IPA process as a flexible one. I chose to embrace going back and forth as part of my process rather than to see it as a lack of adhering to the stages. I opened another document and began cutting and pasting the emergent themes in the interviews into groupings by each participant. I was careful to make note of descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual codes, though I was less interested in linguistic coding and used it more as a way to determine the tone or how the participant was feeling about what they were saying.

**Searching for connections across themes**

Once I had developed a number of emergent themes by participant, I began to look for connections among those themes and group the significant repeated themes into superordinate themes with themes delineated underneath them.
Cross-case patterns

Then as I searched across the cases for patterns, I was able to move these sections into the document. At this point, I printed the document and began this process over again by re/reading, and making notes, and looking at themes and patterns. I found this process to be recursive rather than linear once I had completed the first full round of IPA.

Limitations and Delimitations

As a researcher I made some choices that delimited this study. The participants in this study were all recruited from a Talent Search program, which began for them in elementary school. Some could argue this affects whether the study offers a sense of the true experience of students in Appalachian Kentucky, as these students clearly benefited from this program, a program most youth in Appalachian Kentucky do not receive. Each also had developed a college-going identity based on their experience in the program and through the emotional support they received from parents and grandparents.

This study was limited to seven students from two high schools and is specific to the experiences of the seven students in the study, with minimal support from two other participants. Due to the small number of participants and the specificity of the participants’ experiences, the study cannot be generalized to other rural, first generation, low income students from Appalachian Kentucky. Students who do not develop a college-going identity and/or do not receive emotional support from parents and grandparents about attending college are likely to have a different experience. It is also not commonly expected in qualitative research to generalize to other populations.
Conclusion

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was selected as the methodology for this study because it is appropriate to use when exploring the experiences of a fairly homogenous group who are sharing a similar experience. IPA is commonly used to explore the experiences of life stages, identity and transition. The students in this study were recruited from a college readiness TRIO program called Talent Search, and they were all first generation, low income college students from Appalachian Kentucky. I interviewed them four times for approximately one hour each visit. They also provided me with photographs of how they felt they belonged on their college campuses and how they felt they belonged at home. Once the interviews were transcribed, I used the IPA approach to analyze the data. I present the data from these interviews in two findings chapters. In Chapter 5, I explore two superordinate themes: College-going identity and Ways of Belonging in College. In Chapter 6, I examine another superordinate theme: Tensions with Belonging and Not Belonging in College. In Chapter 7, I share the findings related to Place Identity.
CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS: COLLEGE-GOING IDENTITY AND SENSE OF BELONGING IN COLLEGE

“Yer a wizard, Harry!”
— Hagrid, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*

Prologue

On his 11th birthday, Hagrid comes to 4 Privet Drive to collect Harry to enroll at Hogwarts. Harry is shocked to learn he is wizard and will be going to school with other wizards. His Muggle family did not tell him his parents were wizards, so Harry grew up unaware that he was famous in the wizarding world for being the only person who survived the killing curse, Avada Kedavra! His Aunt Petunia was not a wizard, and she was envious of her sister, Lily, who was a wizard. Petunia even wrote to Dumbledore asking to be admitted to Hogwarts, but she was told she was not a wizard and could not attend. Harry’s friend, Ron, came from an old wizarding family, and he grew up knowing he would attend Hogwarts and had learned about it from his family. In many ways, Harry Potter is a first generation student at Hogwarts, in that his parents were wizards, but they had been killed by Lord Voldemort, so he did not benefit directly from their knowledge of Hogwarts or wizarding. While Harry did not have a Hogwarts going identity, he did find a strong sense of belonging at Hogwarts.

Introduction

Before sharing the results of the data analysis, I return here for a moment to the definition of sense of belonging in college, which Strayhorn (2012) defines as, “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the
group (e.g. campus community) or others on campus (e.g. faculty, peers)” (p.3). This study has examined how first generation, low income students from Appalachian Kentucky feel a sense of belonging at their colleges and universities with the understanding that students who are first generation and low income in Appalachian Kentucky are less likely to have enrolled in higher education than their same age peers who are continuing generation students from middle to upper middle class backgrounds in other geographic regions. Strayhorn (2012) argues that students who have been marginalized, or excluded from some experience, may have more need to belong:

I frame sense of belonging as a basic human need that takes on heightened importance in certain social contexts where some individuals are prone to feel unsupported, unwelcomed, or lonely or in some social contexts where certain individuals are more likely to feel that way (p.4). [Author’s emphasis, not mine]

Strayhorn (2012) also notes that little is known about the “differences that exist in terms of college students’ sense of belonging, as well as social identities and campus environment or conditions that create a sense of belonging for such students” (p. 2). The aim of this study was to contribute to what we know about rural, low income, first generation college students from Appalachian Kentucky and their sense of belonging in college, but to also examine how their place identity impacts their sense of belonging.

The purpose of this study was two-fold: 1) to understand how first generation, low income Appalachian Kentucky college students experience a sense of belonging at their colleges and universities, and 2) to understand how their place-identity as Appalachian Kentuckians shapes their identities and their college experiences. In this study, I examine how rural, first generation Appalachian Kentucky college students experience a sense of belonging at their institutions. I was also interested in how they define their place-identity
to Appalachia, and how this place-identity aligns with their sense of belonging in their college communities. Specifically, my research questions in this study are

1) How do rural, first generation college students in Appalachian Kentucky experience a sense of belonging at their colleges and universities?

2) How do rural, first generation college students in Appalachian Kentucky experience their place-identity as Appalachians and their sense of belonging/alienation to higher education?

Since going to college is a major life transition and affects one’s identity, I chose to use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to analyze the data, as explained in detail in Chapter Four: Methodology. Emergent themes were coded, and superordinate themes were developed from the emergent themes. Then the cases were compared to one another for patterns. The cross-case patterns and superordinate themes are discussed in the next three chapters. Chapter 5 focuses on how the students experienced a college-going identity and their experience of belonging at their colleges and universities. Chapter 6 focuses on the tensions with belonging and not belonging at college, and Chapter 7 on the student’s sense of their place-identity. In Part One, Act I, I examine how students were prepared to see themselves as college-bound, and in Act II, I look more closely at the ways in which they felt they belonged at their chosen colleges. In the second findings chapter, Part Two, Act III, I look at the tensions that arose for them around belonging and not belonging at their colleges, and in the final act, Act IV, I return to place-identity, the central focus of this study.
Part One, Act I

Setting the Stage for Belonging: Developing a College-Going Identity

An important aspect of developing a college-going identity is early academic success. Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) note, “It may be some students are ‘groomed,’ for college from their earliest years, by school personnel and others” (p.10). Early academic success plays a role in granting an identity as “smart” or capable. Talent Search begins its work with students as early at 5th grade, where the early goal is to get students to begin seeing themselves as college-bound. Many students revealed in their interviews that this was also either supported or unsupported by their families. I refer to this grooming of young people by both school personnel and family as, setting the stage for belonging in college. Familial emotional support for attending college was present with all of the students in this study, and this was expected since the students are all participants in Talent Search, a program aimed at getting students to college. The findings below explore the experiences of students whose families were supportive and/or unsupportive of students attending college and their experiences with school personnel, particularly their Talent Search counselors.

Family Support and Going to College

All of the students in this study reported varying degrees of emotional support from their families to attend college. Their families recognized changing economic circumstances in Appalachia and the necessity of a college degree for future economic surety. Often this was learned from their family members through an experience of

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8 The findings chapters follow the structure of Harry Potter and the Cursed Child, Parts One and Two, with Two Parts and Four Acts.
having missed an opportunity at college themselves or by seeing others succeed in careers with college degrees. Parents and grandparents played a pivotal role in influencing the students in this study to attend college, and sibling and extended family members also influenced participants to seek a college education, even as their own experiences with college varied.

**Parental support**

All of the students in this study benefited from parental or grandparental support in developing a college-going identity. When pressed, Courtney explained,

> There was never a point in my life that like I thought about not going to college because it was always really encouraged through my family. It wasn’t ever an idea of not going, it was just, “Where do you want to go? What can you do? What financial package works best for you? What gives you the best deal? Where will you fit in, like feel comfortable?”

Carly echoed Courtney’s experience: “My mom and dad were very like, super supportive, they wanted me to go to college. My grandparents, they wanted me to go to college, it was always like planted in my head like, ‘You should do this, it's gonna give you better opportunities.’” Carly explained that her dad was a police officer and had an opportunity to pursue a degree earlier in his life, but he did not: “he always told me I want you to have better opportunity than I did.” The theme of wanting more for their children was constant among reasons the parents supported their children’s pursuit of a higher education. With some difficulty, Carly explains in more detail what motivates her mother to push her towards college:

> My mom has always encouraged me to go to college because she didn’t, and she knows that, I guess she knows, that it has not helped our circumstances. She realizes that not having a degree has lessened her opportunities for jobs and that has therefore affected our experience growing up.
Eliza’s experience mirrored that of Carly: “My parents didn’t want me to go through what they went through and do the jobs they do….They wanted me to have a better life and have it easier than they did.” Eliza’s mother was so committed to her going to college, she was willing to work another job to make it work financially. Eliza believes her mother saw the opportunity to get her to college after trying earlier to get her sister to go. Her sister started working at 16, and she was not interested in going to college. But when the family’s financial circumstances changed, her mother strongly encouraged Eliza to go to college:

My mom saw that like, you know, she would be able to get me to college. She was up in a better position financially. She married my step-dad, so he had more income where she was a single mother from time I was seven, up until seven. So that's when my sister was mainly getting ready to graduate from high school and would have been going into college.

Jenna’s father was even more direct: “You're going to college, you don't have choice.”

He was motivated by having missed the college experience and the economic benefits of having a degree, and he very much wanted this for his daughter.

**Grandparental support**

All of the students in this study indicated that their families were emotionally supportive of their decision to attend college, even if some family members were not able to provide guidance in terms of navigating college policies and procedures. Two students received this support from grandparents whom they lived with and who supported their future careers. Dylan grew up with his maternal grandparents after his mother was killed in a car accident at age nineteen, when he was just a baby. He lived with his grandparents and his mother’s siblings, who were his aunts and uncles, as one of his grandparents’ own
children. He referred to his grandparents as mom and dad\textsuperscript{9}. As Dylan noted of his grandparents’ influence on his decision to go to a four year college:

They did everything they can. Really, I mean, if I had any doubts about coming, they took care of it. They were on it. They were reassuring. From the beginning. Even before we were thinking about college, they were thinking about college, obviously. Before I was thinking about college, I was thinking about going to community college. I wasn't gonna ... I came here to wrestle. I wasn't gonna come wrestle until after the state tournament, and then he [grandfather] asked me where I was going to wrestle, and I can't ever tell him no. Ever.

Dylan’s comments reveal that his grandfather was the one who was mostly thinking about college and Dylan’s future, and he named that he would not have been in college without his support.

Laurel also lived with her maternal grandparents. Her mother lost custody of Laurel when she was eight or nine years old because of drug addiction. Her father also struggled with drug addiction and was not consistently in her life. Laurel interchangeably called her grandparents her mom and dad, but she also noted that they had discussed this naming:

My grandma wanted to make very clear that I had a mom and a dad, but that they were stepping into their roles. But that she still wanted me to have a relationship with them because she felt like take, she didn't want to take their place. She just wanted to provide what they weren't providing.

Part of the support they provided Laurel was instilling a college-going identity in her when she was quite young:

They told me that I was going to college since I was like in elementary school, like all they ever talked about. They're like, you have to make good grades. Like they'd give me incentives when I was in elementary and

\textsuperscript{9} Dylan gave me permission to refer to his grandparents as grandparents or parents, where it was needed in the writing of this study. For the purpose of writing to an audience where the role of grandparents is examined, I have delineated Dylan’s grandparents here. I want to acknowledge to the reader with great respect to Dylan and his family, that they are also his parents.
middle school. I don't know why they didn't do this when I was older, but they would give me like $100 if I got all A’s on my report card.

Laurel was clear that they wanted to her to go to college because none of their children had gone to college out of high school: “She got a chance with me that she didn’t get with my mom.” They also saw in Laurel that she could do it, and they told her she was “really smart.” For Laurel, however, she feels it was also about money and future career prospects:

I think it has a lot to do with money. They want me to not have to struggle like they have been financially. I think that they, not that they don't think I'm smart or don't think that I'm capable of doing something out of my life, but I think the primary motive behind them wanting me to make something of myself is because they want me to be able to have my own money to like, have all the things that they were never able to provide me or provide themselves. They wanted me to be a doctor for so long because doctors make a lot of money.

Whether the students lived with their parents or grandparents, the students in this study shared the experience of having emotional support to attend college. The parents and grandparents helped create a college-going identity by reinforcing the importance of a college degree to the students’ future and by also believing in them, and telling them they were capable of being successful in college. Like most experiences, however, the experience of family can be complicated, and not all family members are supportive, even if the student is in the care of a supportive family unit. The students below also had experiences of trauma and abuse from family members.

**Familial relationship trauma and lack of support**

Laurel shared a story of spending Christmas with her father and his new wife and family to explain how the lack of a father-daughter relationship has impacted their adult relationship:
Well, one year for Christmas he wanted me to come spend Christmas down there with them and so I did. It sounds kind of like superficial I guess, but he got them like more presents than what he did me and I was like, “You haven't been there this whole time. And then like, you want me to come and spend Christmas here, and I didn't even get at least an equal amount of presents or presents that were as nice as what they did.” I understand they didn't have a lot of money. I wasn't expecting much, but…

Laurel did not like being treated unfairly by someone who had not been present in her young life, but she explained clearly what she felt was lacking in the relationship and what she was not willing to accept:

Yeah. I got really mad. My grandma says that I just kick people out of my life too easily. I don't want to have someone in my life who's not going to try. Whether that's family or whether that's friends or whether that's anybody. A relationship is not just a one-way street. And if you're not going to put that effort in then I'm not either is how I feel about it with anybody.

Laurel also has had the opportunity to know her father as an adult. She was working at a restaurant as a server and her father got a job as a server there, too: “We became really good friends.” She doesn’t accept that he wasn’t there for as a child when she needed him, and their relationship now is more friend like than actual father-daughter because he has not played a supportive, guiding role in her life.

Other students expressed similar feelings of not being supported by parents due to personal life decisions that impacted their upbringing, and they all shared with Laurel a strong sense of not being willing to put up with being disrespected. Jenna shared that her mother “would rather party” than be there for her and her siblings:

Me and my mom were never very, like we were close, and then her and my dad divorced. She cheated on my dad and that was a big ordeal. They divorced when I was eight years old and then I was close to her for a little while.
While Jenna’s father has been highly supportive of her, and she is very close to him, she revealed that they also went through a difficult time when he remarried because of the way his new wife treated his children:

There was a time when we weren't very close because of the wife that he had. She was just not a good person at all. She cheated on my dad, too. She would talk down to us, and my dad would believe everything she said just because she was the stars and moon and the sun.

After they divorced, Jenna felt much stronger about her relationship with her father: “I got my dad back, so me and my dad are closer than we've ever been.”

Her relationship with her mom was more troubled: “My mom used to hit me. We didn’t want to go there really at all because she was out every night with different guys.”

During the time her father was married to her step-mother, Jenna felt she did not make it easier by “talking crap” about her mother: “That's just one of those things, like I can talk about my mom like that, but you can't. So we resented her.” As an adult now, Jenna has softened a bit toward her step-mother. She realizes her step-mother was taking care of her and her siblings while her dad was away Monday-Thursday working on the railroad:

And I kind of give her a little bit of credit. I wouldn't tell anybody else this. Kind of give her just a little bit of credit because I understand what she was taking on. Because she was. When she married, she's 11 years younger than my dad. And so, whenever they got married, she was like 24 years old, 24 years old, taken care of three kids that are 9 and 10 years old. That's a job.

She also describes her mother as immature, and noted that she has had to be more mature than her mother throughout her life. Jenna took on the responsibilities of taking care of her younger brother:

When she hit my brother, I took care of him every single day. I was only 11 years old, but I gave him a bath. I fed him every day, I would watch movies with him trying to put him to sleep every day, it was just kind of
like I was his mother. I did the things that my mom was supposed to do because she wouldn't.

She has also had to rescue her mother from a night of drinking where she pulled a knife on Jenna’s father’s new wife. Jenna was called to come get her mother from the bar, but her mom wanted her boyfriend to get in the car. Jenna ended up calling the police on her mother because she would not stay in the car. Because of that incident and their subsequent arrest, Jenna’s mother will not let her see her younger brother right now, and his well-being is a concern for Jenna:

My brother needs to be taken from her, but they're not going to do anything because my mom knows everyone in Sunset City. She's dealt with social services. She used to hit us, and social services were called all the time.

Both Jenna and Laurel have experienced parents who have not been a part of their lives in a positive, supportive manner, but they have also benefited from having supportive family members. While the trauma they have experienced due to neglect and abuse has made an impact on their lives, they have also had a lot of love and support, a fact that is important for the reader to understand. They have shown a lot of resilience in the face of great difficulty. Next, I examine the experience of family members with college, as family members support has made a significant impact on whether or not a student attends college.

**Family Experiences with College**

Even within a supportive family unit, some family members are more primary supports than others. Dylan noted that his grandfather was the most determined for him to pursue his college degree: “He's been [to college]. He went to school. I think for three years and then went to the Army….My mom she dropped out of high school, I think.”
His grandmother did not push college on him: “She didn’t really mind [what I did]. Get a job and survive. Whatever.” Dylan believed his grandfather’s support of him attending college was based in large part in his experience of attending college himself, and he saw that his mother’s indifference toward it was also based on her experience of not having attended college. Dylan’s example illustrates how the experience of going to college can impact a parent or grandparent to encourage a child to go to college. The section below specifically looks at the experiences of the participants’ parents and grandparents in going to college and that of siblings and other extended family members.

**Parental and Grandparental Experiences with College**

Laurel’s mother attended college, but she did not complete a four year degree. Her mother is supportive of her being in college, but they don’t talk very often. Courtney shared that her parents attended college but did not graduate. The demands of life and family played a role in their decision to leave college:

*They found jobs or they had kids, and they had other responsibilities. My mom was going to be a nurse and then she had me, and I was in daycare. It was just so hard to do classes and then have a young child, so she ended up dropping out. So neither of my parents graduated from college, but both really encouraged me to go to college.*’

Carly’s mother finished high school, but she did not attend college. Her father took a few college courses because he was a police officer, but nothing beyond that. Eliza’s father completed a two year degree, but her mother did not attend college. Faith’s father has not attended college, but her mother just began, and is currently a freshman while Faith is a sophomore.

Jenna’s father missed out on college experience, and it made him determined to see his children go to college. Jenna revealed,
He actually had a full ride. He had a man that personally came to him at his graduation and said, you have a full ride to any college you want to go to in the, in the entire country, we will pay for your pay for your school, but he didn’t go.

**Siblings and Other Relatives Pathways into College**

Dylan noted that his brother and sister both attended Mary Lincoln College. His brother attended for one year, and then transferred to a state university, and his sister graduated from MLC. Dylan did not think this made any direct impact on his decision to attend MLC. He said, “Not really. It was the wrestling team.” Laurel’s maternal aunt is currently in college and getting her Master’s degree.

Faith’s older brother was accepted at West Point, but “fell in love and didn’t go.” She cited him as a constant source of encouragement about attending college: “You need to go. You need to do what I didn’t. I had the opportunity. Do what I didn’t do.” Faith wondered if he regrets his decision, and she has asked him multiple times about it, but he remains steadfast that his family is what is most important to him: "I wouldn't have met Alexandra and then we wouldn't have had my boys. My boys are more important to me than the money." Despite his strong feelings about his family, he did add, "I do wish I had a better opportunity for them, but, they are my life." Faith’s other brothers started college, but they had better job opportunities on the road, so they took those opportunities over college. Faith’s older brother’s influence upon her is similar to the impact Carly is having on her younger sister, Cassidy.

Carly discussed how being in college has influenced Cassidy’s college-going identity. Her sister has struggled academically in school and is now attending a private, Christian school that is very helpful to her. Carly has noticed that her confidence has
increased there, but she has also noticed that by Carly being in college, it has affected her sister’s ideas about whether she can go to college: “I think Cassidy has that feeling. Before she would be like, ‘I’m too dumb to go to college,’ and now it's, ‘Can I go to college?’” Carly talks to her about it and supports her. She shared a story about her sister’s recent visit to one of the state universities that illustrates the significance of having an older supportive sibling in college for children whose parents did not go to college:

She is in eighth grade, and they went to this Christian convention thing at State University. My sister loved it. That was her first experience of a couple of days without mom staying with her friends. My mom had actually told me this because she, she loved the fact that she wants to go to college now. And she told my mom, I may want to go here, like, this may be my college. My mom was like, “Carly, she said she told me that she wants to go to college now.” And so, like going from “I’m too dumb to go to college” to “I'm going to go to college, but which one do I go to?” is huge.

Cassidy has been asking Carly questions about college since that experience, and she even told her that she did not know if she would go to Mary Lincoln, like her sister.

Carly responded by speaking directly to belonging and its significance in choosing a college:

Mary Lincoln is not for everyone. And I said, you have to find where you want to go. And she, I guess she just feels like since I love it so much that she should or whatever. And I'm like, you've got plenty of time to think about it, and this is where you're going to be going. And I feel belonging and love here, but you may not, you may need to go somewhere else. And I think she's just now starting to like grasp that she doesn't have to go here if she may get to go to State. So, it's very neat to see that kind of interaction.

I asked Carly if she had considered how much of an influence her college going identity would have on her sister and she replied,
I never really thought about it. Like in that aspect I knew that like, I mean she always looks up to me no matter what it is. Like if I have a favorite animal that becomes her favorite animal in two weeks. But she, she's always been like that since she was small. She always looked up to me and so I've always known that, but I didn't really think about the college aspect and because I mean I'm just living my life, you know, but I didn't think about, you know, like if I didn't go to college, where would she be at? Would she have even went to that convention?

Eliza’s older sister never considered college even though their mother encouraged it: “she works at a factory job, a nightshift, and she does work quite a bit. Pretty hard.”

Eliza noticed that her sister, Josie, never seemed to want to go to college. “But she always had a job, from the time she was 16. She’s never been without a job.”

**Talent Search Support**

Throughout this study, all of the students gave tremendous credit to their Talent Search counselors for guiding and supporting them through the college search and application process. Repeatedly, students said, “I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for Ms. ___.” When asked to explain what that meant, they said their counselors did everything for them, things they did not even know existed. The counselors made sense of things the students did not understand at the time. Beyond the challenges of transitioning from the K-12 system to a college system that all students- even those with exceptional privilege face-, rural, first generation, low income students from Appalachian Kentucky need support mechanisms to get them to college because the emotional support provided by their families is not enough to navigate the difficult waters of college admission.

Laurel explained it this way, “I wouldn’t be at Big University if it weren’t for Ms. Alice. It’s going to make me cry.” Laurel went on to explain that Ms. Alice told her about the scholarship she has that pays all of her costs, and it was Ms. Alice who supported her
with any questions she had in her first year, and through her appeal to win back her scholarship after the academic difficulties she faced in the first year:

I almost lost it last year because transitioning into college is really hard. And Ms. Alice helped a lot through that, too. Like when I did lose my scholarship, she helped me appeal it. She calmed me down whenever I had to go home and tell her that I lost it. Anytime that I have any questions about anything related to college stuff, even though she's like not at school every day, if I just text her, she gets back with me and within one to two days. She's great, and she was always there like in school if you ever needed to talk about something that went on in your life or. So, she’s also just like the life counselor, too.

Carly told the story of how Ms. Laura had to work very hard to get her to even talk to someone from Mary Lincoln College at all:

Ok so, I am sitting in math class and, Mr. White gets a phone call and it’s for me. And he's like "Hey Carly, can you please go downstairs, there's someone that's wanting to talk to you about Mary Lincoln College." And I was like "No." I said "No, I'm not gonna be able to afford that. I need to finish my work so that I don't have homework.” I was always on top of stuff. So, then my guidance counselor, Ms. Laura, calls back up to Mr. White’s room and says, "Put Carly on the phone." Ms. Laura says, "Carly, come downstairs now. There’s a really great package for you at Lindsey Wilson, and I know you're interested there. I know you think you can’t afford it and everything, but come down here and tell me that.”

When Carly got downstairs, she learned from the admissions counselor that she could go to Mary Lincoln for $3000 out of pocket. Ms. Laura had everything written out on a piece of paper for her. She told the counselor, “There’s no way, like my family lives paycheck to paycheck. I cannot do $3,000 out of pocket.” Carly emphasized the financial burden that much money would create for her and her mother, but Ms. Laura arranged for her and her mother to tour Mary Lincoln. During the tour, the counselor then let her know that it would cost her $0 out of pocket to come to Mary Lincoln:

I do have loans, but they're not near as much as other people pay. I'm very grateful to be here. This is where I wanted to be, but I didn’t think it was possible. That’s why I shut it out. But, I’m glad that Ms. Laura was there
to say, “Come down here and look at this,” because I would not be here if it wasn’t for her.

Carly said she almost started crying because she didn't think there was any way that she would be able to go to Mary Lincoln:

They made it possible, and now I'm an RA. I’m a peer mentor. All these great things and if Ms. Laura did not tell me to get my butt down there, I would not be here today. I've told her several times, you know, I would not be here. And like, that's true, like for sure because she was the one that got me down there and got me to talk to her. Now, I actually got another scholarship so I'm going here for $2,200 a year. I'm just blessed that I get the opportunity to go here and then I can pay them later.

Eliza shared even more specifics on how Ms. Alice supported her through the process. She credited Ms. Alice with helping her fill out the necessary forms, like FASFA, and for knowing where to go: “Ms. Alice was like the biggest part of me going actually to college.” She also appreciated that as a high school student she could ask her questions and visit her office: “it was just so comfortable in a room and you felt at home, like you could just talk to her if you want to. It was a lot easier to talk to her than like anybody else.”

Jenna’s experience was similar to the other participants. She began by stating, “I love Ms. Alice.” She talked extensively about her problems with her family and how Ms. Alice helped her through them. Ms. Alice also helped her apply and be accepted at State University, where she was also accepted into the honors program. At 4.5 hours from Sunset City, Jenna was drawn to getting away from home and the issues there, but then within two months, Jenna says, “I feel like I grew up. I was just like, that’s super immature of me, and I can’t be that far away from my family.” She felt she needed to take care of them. Ms. Alice was surprised, but she helped Jenna navigate the process of being admitted to Mary Lincoln, a school she chose for its strong education program.
Summary

The students in this study all received parental and grandparental support in creating a college-going identity. The effects of familial trauma and a lack of support made an impact on two of the students, but both students also received a lot of parental and grandparental support in creating a college-going identity. The experiences of parents, siblings and other relatives influenced the students in study in terms of how they saw themselves as going to college or not. One student in this study is also influencing her younger sister to develop a college-going identity. All of the students in this study benefited from participating in Talent Search, and all of them said their Talent Search counselors were responsible for them being able to enroll in college. They also noted that their counselors were emotionally supportive of them in personal matters, and they felt connected to their counselors. While a college-going identity is important in getting students to imagine themselves in college, the next experience I examined was the ways they felt they belonged at their colleges and universities.

Part One, Act II:

Sense of Belonging in College

The students in this study began their college search in terms of whether or not they felt they belonged there. Time and time again, in this study, students would say, “And I knew this was the place for me.” The section below more closely teases apart what the students mean by belonging in college and what factors contributed to their understanding of whether or not they belonged. In the following chapter, in Part Two: Act III, I examine the tensions students felt with belonging at college and the feelings of
not belonging at a college where they previously felt they belonged. In the final act, Part Two: Act IV, I return to place-identity and the students understandings of belonging. To start here, I begin with the finances of belonging, not because I place a premium on this as a researcher. Rather, financial considerations were the first thing, and sometimes the most important thing, that impacted the students’ sense of belonging.

**The Finances of Belonging**

Laurel was convinced she would not be able to enroll at Big University because she would not be able to afford it. It was her “top choice,” and the only school she seriously wanted to attend in the state. She went to a summer camp in high school and was able to tour the campus, and she knew it was the place for her, but still she never put it on her lists: “I was not going to be able to afford to go there, and they don’t have any scholarship that I can acquire.” Then she learned through Ms. Alice that she was eligible for a significant scholarship that would cover all of her college expenses. She could not believe that the school that was a dream to her could actually be possible. Laurel also seriously considered going to school out of state, but her grandparents convinced her this was not a good idea:

> I wanted to go to college out of state originally, but we wouldn't have had the money to move me there in the first place. My grandma brought that up. She was like, “you can't go anywhere too far that we couldn't drive and then you have to think about like, how are you going to get back? Because I wouldn't have been able to take my car because it wasn't going to be able to withstand going back and forth between states”. It definitely couldn't even stand going back and forth between here and Sunset City.

Once the financial pieces were figured out at Big University, Laurel knew she could go to her top choice. Eliza also decided on Mary Lincoln College because of her financial package: “To be honest, they gave me a full scholarship, which is something I wouldn’t
have gotten anywhere else.” Eliza was looking at the state colleges, because she thought she would like a bigger school, but they did not offer her a full scholarship, and this was not something she could pass up. “I just think like I don’t have to pay for anything. It was such a weight off my shoulders and my parents.” She observed, “I love the place anyway, but the fact that they were gonna give me free everything was huge.”

**The Private/Public School Financial Switch**

The Talent Search counselors explained that the state colleges are not usually the best bet for students without any money, and they have learned to steer low income students toward the small private schools who are able to give more money. In some cases, the amount of money the students pay for state school tuition is greater than what they would pay at the private schools. In past years, Talent Search would focus on the state schools as safer financial choices for students. Eliza said the state colleges could only offer her $8,000/year, but Mary Lincoln gave her a full scholarship with all expenses paid upfront. Laurel also mentioned that the flagship university is a “bunch of rich, white kids,” and didn’t appeal to her because of the implications of wealth and the lack of diversity, but she did find her place at Big University, another state school. Laurel was clear that she would not have been able to go to Big University without the specific scholarship she obtained because she was from Appalachia:

I knew that I wouldn't be able to pay for it. Like I could only, I only got like 29 on my ACT, I couldn't get any higher and most of the full scholarships here that are academic based you had to have a higher ACT score. [With my Appalachian Scholarship] you get all this aid and then they pay up from whatever aid you get. But they like, even though I don't live on campus now, they still give me a stipend to live off of campus and to pay for books. Like I still get money back to help pay for all of this. And it pays for all my classes and stuff as well, so it makes it able to do it.
While the Appalachian Scholarship at Big University allowed Laurel to achieve her dream of her top choice, the scholarship left little room for error. Faced with a difficult transition to the university and academic difficulties, Laurel found herself in danger of losing her scholarship in her first year.

**Appealing to Belong: No Room for Mistakes**

Laurel had decided she would go into debt and take out loans over returning to Sunset City. She felt she belonged at Big University, but she had made some mistakes in the first year that should not have forced her to leave. Her gpa dropped below the required 2.5, and she did not complete enough of the courses she had enrolled in for financial aid purposes. Though disappointed, she was not interested in leaving Big University:

I didn’t want to move back in with my grandparents because I wanted to maintain friendships of people I have met here, and I wanted to stay in my sorority. Here I have an entire community of people, both people who go here and people who don't, that I can reach out to.

Still, it was worth it to appeal the decision. Laurel, Ms. Alice and her therapist all wrote letters on her behalf for the committee to review. Laurel was hopeful. She had documented her depression and gotten a note from her therapist: “So I had proper documentation, so I was pretty sure that I would get it back, but it was still very stressful.” She was able to get her scholarship back, but dealing with the financial aid office created even more stress:

The student financial aid office here is not very cooperative, which is like a really big stressor, especially when it comes to FAFSA time. I have to, where I live with my grandparents and I'm on scholarship, I have to communicate with them. My financial aid counselor sucks. She never emails me back. She waited until August of this year to tell me that I had to do something for my FAFSA, which is the dependency override
because my grandparents had custody of me, not guardianship and those are different even though they're the same thing and you still have that.

Laurel had to submit an additional paper because of the differences in the terms to be able to enroll and receive her scholarship. Her feelings about her financial aid counselor continued, “She just doesn’t communicate very well, which I think is an obstacle, especially for first generation students who have to rely on financial aid.” The lack of assistance is particularly difficult given that those who most need it may not be able to secure it, and given the parameters of Laurel’s scholarship, I asked if she had a counselor who was versed in and knew her scholarship, but this was not the case. I then learned that the Appalachian scholarship was no longer being funded by the institution for students in 2019, and this is problematic for students like Laurel, who are from Appalachia, and do not have the academic scores to secure top merit scholarships or the financial pathways to pay out of their own pockets. Laurel’s sense of belonging at Big University was intertwined with her financial realities, but she was among the students who “fell in love with the university.” In the next section, I will explore the experience of what it means to fall in love with a college or university, and later in Chapter 6, I will examine what happens when the honeymoon is over.

I Fell in Love with It (the College)

Carly knew she loved Mary Lincoln College the first time she stepped on campus. She was not looking for a completely different environment than her home of Forest County:

Like I just had this feeling of this is small, and my hometown is small. I don't really like big city stuff. They had a Walmart. My hometown doesn't have a Walmart. So, I mean that was cool to me, but just to know that there's a Walmart there and it's a small college was really cool. People were just so friendly.
For Carly, the experience of belonging was feeling like she was at home with just a little bit more of something her home did not offer.

Courtney had the opposite feeling initially, without visiting the campus. She had applied at Mary Lincoln, but it was one of six schools she applied to, and the one she thought of as being too close to home, and the school she did not want to attend. Then she was accepted.

I got in, and then I never thought of it again [laugh] until like winter of my senior year, I was told to come to Mary to interview for the Begley Scholarship, which is the full tuition scholarship. I fell in love with the campus, fell in love with the people.

Faith also had an experience similar to Courtney’s. She had already started college at the local community college, and she had not even considered Mary Lincoln. On a whim, her cousin, Neal, who attended Mary Lincoln, brought her there to check it out:

And I had a cousin, he goes here too his name is Neal. We were just riding around [Sunset City] one day, and he was like "Hey, why don't you come tour the campus?" I was like, "well that's kind of, you know, odd. Why would I just randomly go towards a campus that I have no intention of going to"? He was like, "Oh, you might change your mind."

Like Courtney and Carly, Faith knew instantly: “I kind of fell in love with the college because it just feels so homey, it just feels like you’re at home.” She also felt connected to the people she was meeting on the tour: “Instantly the people were so amazing. It’s so easy to make friends.” The tour guide started talking to her and asked if she wanted to go to Mary, and Faith said, “I hadn’t really thought about it but it’s a really nice campus, and I can see myself going here.” The counselor told her they don’t normally allow students to register two weeks before classes start, but they made an exception for her: “I was
starting classes within a week with everybody else here, and I was like "What even happened?"

**Service as a Way of Belonging**

Courtney did not get the Edwards scholarship that would have offered her full tuition at Mary Lincoln, but the counselors suggested she apply for the community service program and scholarship, which she did get. As part of the program requirements, participants dedicate 344 hours each year to serving the community, and Courtney has found her sense of belonging by participating in this program: “I'm actually part of the students’ staff. It's a wonderful opportunity and a wonderful national organization. We focus on civic engagement and diversity, international perspective, and community building.” Similar to Courtney, Laurel’s experience of joining a sorority was about serving others.

**Greek Life/Sorority as a Way of Belonging**

Laurel found herself at the school she wanted, Big University, but it did not stop her from having a difficult transition: “I'm really bad at time management and motivation.” Joining her sorority was helpful because it made her meet new people: “I don't think that I would have remained in college if it wouldn't have been for doing that, because it forced me to meet people.” The sorority gave her a support network that became invaluable when she struggled in her first year with adjusting to college:

A lot of people that I clicked with really well helped me through some really hard times last year because my car broke down all bunch of times. I was really broke for a really long time and had no money. It was just really hard, and I hated living in a dorm. It was super depressing not being able to have your own space, being so far away from home and not having the money to just or like being able to go home because I have to have a job up here. I can't just like ask my parents for money.
Laurel spoke at length about the values of the sorority and how those values are shown through friendship: “One of our values is a sincere friendship, and another one is personal and intellectual growth. Through them being sincere friends to me, they allow me to grow personally and intellectually.” She felt if she had to make friends completely one her own, it would be too difficult: “I would have been in my dorm room all day.” The sorority had required events and people to push her toward going. Because she felt supported by her sisters, she said that she did see them as family. She was also quick to point out that Greek life at Big University is “completely different than other places” and not “the whole stereotypical sorority girl thing.” She was quick to point out that she knows Greeks can have a bad reputation, and that her purpose in being in a sorority is more than her own gain:

I'm not into that, but it's different here. Everyone's really supportive of each other. It gives me a purpose and now I'm bigger than like that I'm a part of something bigger than myself that's like really important to me to believe that like I'm doing good and contributing to a larger society I guess. And I don't really have a lot of time to be super active and like anything else really. So, I just kinda devote all my extracurricular energy into that one place.

I asked how Laurel was able to make sense of the class divide in the sorority, where money can play a huge role in how members are perceived. She acknowledged a class divide because some people have more access to money through their parents than others. She paid for her sorority dues from her scholarship money, and she noted that she would not be able to do it if she did not have the scholarship:

There are other people in the organization who are like that, too, who either are on scholarship and work to pay for their sorority or their scholarship pays for their sorority or they work to pay for both. There are some people who their parents pay for school, but they don't pay for the sorority, so they have to pay for it themselves. So, there's all different levels of class, and there's a lot of people who were in my sorority who
came from the same background as me with not a lot of money and wanted to join this organization to broaden their horizons and to put themselves out there in college, which is something that I did.

Laurel furthered her point about the diversity of social classes in her sorority by naming that they intentionally keep their dues low: “My sorority is one of the cheapest ones on campus. We work really hard to try to keep our dues down and to keep them at the lowest.” She did not feel a lot of classism within her sorority, and this is substantial note, as she often did not have money for dances or special events, yet she felt supported by members. She explained,

In my sorority and my experience, there's not a lot of classism, but that might be different with some of the other ones because dues are as high as $1,200 a semester where mine is only $400. So that might be someone else's experience if they were in a more expensive chapter.

The sorority has also given Laurel a sense of purpose on campus, and this year, she was elected Vice President of Membership, a role she relished for “the feeling of contributing to something bigger than yourself.” As part of her new role, Laurel traveled to St. Louis to represent her university’s chapter of Pi Beta Phi:

It was really cool to be in a room with over 300 women who were all initiated into Pi Beta Phi. We all share the same values. Like Pi Phi has seven core values and we all share those values and we've all lived through that same Pi Phi experience. And it was just really interesting to see like where all these women went in their lives, yet they're still giving back to the organization that gave back to them.

The experience of listening to members who were as old as 90 gave Laurel a sense of belonging not just to her university but to the sorority, and she saw this as a lifelong experience of serving to the sorority, and an opportunity to get to know other members of her chapter’s executive council:

It was a great opportunity, not just this like learning about Pi Phi as a whole but still learning about like the sisters that went with me on that trip
who I serve on executive council with. Because of that trip I made a really good friend and we got closer on that trip. I got to talk to my counterpart who is an alum who helps me with my position. Like I got to spend time with her on a more personal level and get to know her as an actual human being as opposed to the person who always tells me to do stuff.

Laurel also recognized the sorority made her more social and helped her develop and maintain friendships. She talked about watching movies with her Big and sharing chicken noodle soup with another friend she met at an event. These seemingly small tasks of friendship were made more manageable through the vehicle of the sorority because it offered a purpose beyond her own needs. While Laurel was experiencing a sense of belonging through her experience in her sorority, and Courtney was similarly sharing in a sense of belonging through service to a national community service program, other students found a sense of belonging in the way they were welcomed at their small college by faculty.

**Faculty Create Belonging**

Faith and Jenna spoke to how they felt supported and welcomed by their faculty. As Faith explained,

> If they don't see you for a couple of days, they'll email you, they'll call you, they'll get a hold of you to find out what's going on, and why you're not going to class, to make sure that you're doing well, and that's what I like.

These gestures make Faith feel like they care about her and her success. She said she had considered how faculty at other colleges might not do this, “If I would have went somewhere else, it wouldn't be like this. The professors wouldn't know me, and they wouldn't care. I'm really happy to be here at Mary. It’s homey.”

Jenna’s first visit to Mary Lincoln illustrated this. She met the director of the education program, and she was surprised to learn he already knew her name: “And I
thought that was just like amazing. I don't know what, I guess it made me feel important or something. I'm not really sure, but it was, you know, I felt like I was actually wanted there.” This contrasted for her at the state university she had planned to attend. She said she talked to the same person three or four times, but he never remembered her. Jenna also experienced this detachment when she took some classes through a state university: “the professors are so hard to get ahold of.” She enjoyed being part of something at Mary Lincoln where the classes were smaller, and the professors knew her. Dylan also looked for the right fit at Mary Lincoln, but he was looking at the wrestling program and coaches to see if he could belong there.

**Sports as a Way of Belonging**

Dylan was clear that his decision to go to college was influenced greatly by his father and his high school wrestling coach:

[Wrestling] is why I'm here. I was going to go to college. I was going to go to just stay home and get a job or something but had to come wrestle. My high school coach, too, and the team. He wanted me to come and open up a door so that other kids from my team, my high school, would come here.

Four schools were actively recruiting Dylan to wrestle in college. When I asked him about his decision to choose Mary Lincoln over the others, he explained his choice in terms of feeling welcome and like he belonged at Mary Lincoln. He noted,

[Mary Lincoln] put more effort into making me feel welcome than Valencia College did. I never really talked to the others. I never really. I wasn't ... I mean I'm sure they weren't interested either, but I'm not sure they ever talked to me, I never talked to them either. He also felt the coach played a significant role in recruiting him: “They treat everybody the same. They talk to us, not as a coach, but everyone's friendly. Everyone's friends on
the team. I mean they wrestle with us too. They beat us up.” The sense of friendship and
collaboration was an important factor in Dylan’s decision to choose Mary Lincoln College
over Valencia College, the other college he was seriously considering:

I was talking to Valencia for a while, and then the coach came when I was
at a big tournament. And I was top seed and was in a semi-finals match. I
lost and he left. Right after he left I had the consolation finals for third and
fourth. I beat that kid in like 30 seconds. I didn't hear back from Valencia
for a while.

Dylan felt the coach from Valencia was not interested in him, so he lost interest in the
college and their wrestling program. The other two colleges who were recruiting him
were “just too close” to home, according to Dylan. Even though one of the colleges,
Mountain College, was not much closer than Mary Lincoln College, Dylan perceived it
as closer. He said he wanted “a little freedom,” but realized as he was saying it that now
he goes home every weekend. The fourth college, Johnson College, was not of interest to
him at all, though he could not really say why. Like Dylan, Jenna also factored in
distance when choosing Mary Lincoln because the distance was far enough away from
family without being so far she could not drive it on a weeknight.

**Resident Assistants (RA) as Ways of Belonging**

Molly, Carly and Jenna all had experiences of belonging in their RA positions.
All three of them enjoyed the idea of helping other students transition to college and
being a resource to fellow students. Molly found comfort in the basement of her
residence hall where the RA desk was. Here she made friends and socialize with students
outside of the engineering school, a place she initially felt she belonged and wanted to
belong. In talking with the RAs, she met people who were happy and who were in other
majors. This helped her think that she could make a major change and be happy, too.
When she made the decision to change her major from engineering to physics, and leave the engineering school and the scholarship she had, it was the RA position she just accepted that provided the necessary financial assistance to make the loss of the scholarship manageable. She noted,

One of my most fun experiences in college is getting to be friends with these people that are around me not only help us but to be friends with us and to kind of get us through college, and I'm happy to be that for somebody else next year.

After her own experience of not believing she could go to Mary Lincoln, Carly feels compelled to help other people explore what they may feel they cannot do. She takes prides in motivating others, and is even considering what this work might be like for her in the future. She had a lot of confidence in her role as an RA:

For me it's the relationships with the students, because it's hard to get juniors and seniors to come to your room on a Wednesday to have hot chocolate and smores. But it happened. I had like 20 something girls in the apartment that night and I think it's because, I have a warm personality.

Jenna chose a picture of herself in front of the residence hall to share with me about her feelings of belonging at Mary Lincoln. The role of RA gives her purpose and allows her to help other students. All three students felt a connection to being in a leadership role and helping their peers.

**Diversity as a Way of Belonging**

One of the repeated themes from four of the students in this study (two at Big University and two at Mary Lincoln) was how important diversity was to making them feel as if they belong at their colleges and universities. Three of the four also acknowledged that it may come across as strange that it matters so much to them as they themselves do not appear diverse. Molly explained why it was so essential to her, “I
think that's very important to me as a person, not just for myself, but for other people … the college system as a whole because I feel like that provides more retention rates and just better success overall.” She went on to explain that a diversity focus made more people feel included and from this inclusion comes empowerment for her:

Having the female aspect accentuated in STEM is important. And I really liked that, and I feel empowerment from that. Being in groups [that support LGBT community] and having such a wide LGBT community here has been really empowering to me because there wasn't anything like that really anywhere else where I lived. Seeing those aspects in college are like my part of the puzzle piece for diversity.

Laurel echoed Molly’s views on how important it was for her to be in a diverse environment: “It's super diverse and that's something that I wanted coming from somewhere that is not diverse whatsoever.” Laurel described “super diverse,” like this,

Like there's just this diversity in all contexts, like racial diversity, cultural diversity. There's like different backgrounds, like socio economic classes. There's different groups, all of that. Not just both at the University and the City as a whole. Like there's just people from all different walks of life who have all different perspectives, and I really cherish that. Most of the people back home that like I went to high school with were white and Christian and either really, really rich or really, really poor, but both so white and Christian. I'm white and I was poor, but definitely not Christian and like we didn't share the same values.

Molly also acknowledged that diversity impacted her fellow classmates: “Diversity makes everybody feel at home. I really like that, and I really value that. It was easy to see how diversity was a part of Molly and Laurel’s college experience at the largest university in the state, but Eliza and Jenna also spoke to the diversity of their experience at Mary Lincoln as key for them.

Both Jenna and Eliza believed the diversity of Mary Lincoln and the emphasis on diversity made everyone feel welcome there. Eliza shared a story of how she was
watching an older woman, whom she felt was likely Pentecostal, in the dining hall eat with very tall young men, whom she had decided were on the basketball team. Some of the men were Black and some were from other countries, and she would see them together all the time. Eliza was surprised to see this woman with the young men because of the age difference between the woman and the men. Eliza’s views on the woman’s perceived religion also made her think they would not be sitting together: “She always wears ankle length skirts and sandals. Pentecostal, maybe. And that’s why I thought this was even more peculiar is that I felt like she was Pentecostal. It’s just not something you would see.” Eliza was surprised to have her views on this woman and her religion challenged. The relationship of this woman and the young men made an impact on Eliza:

It’s that they’re [the woman and her husband] entirely accepting of people from entirely different countries, and I just thought they didn’t. They were just people from a tiny town, Springfield, you know. And they were so welcoming of these tall basketball players and people from other countries. Lindsey was just kind of a welcoming place if that sort of thing is a thing here that makes the place welcoming.

Eliza also attributed this openness and welcoming attitude to Mary Lincoln: “Diversity is just very accepted here.” She contrasted the feeling with what she experienced in college to her high school experience with diversity:

At my high school there was like 1200 kids. There might've been 20 Hispanics, 10 Blacks, two or three Asians. That was it, but like here, it's like everything, stuff that I would have never been exposed to. Yeah, diversity is a huge thing here.

In college, she felt a celebration of diversity in the clubs and programs, but she did not experience that in high school:

I mean they had a table set out earlier, like you know, I guess it was like a club, like an LGBT club, you know, like that would have never happened in high school ever. They're very open about it. They had their club table set up there and there was a club for everything. So, I mean yeah, they're
much more open about where it was a huge secret in high school. And you
didn't talk about it.

Seeing others accepted made Eliza feel accepted, too, and this was a feeling Jenna
repeated to me:

I think that the diversity here makes everyone feel super welcome. Like
there's different, there's different races, different ethnicities, there's
different sexualities, there's so many different things that people can be
here, and they feel at home here. And I think that's something that helped
me to, um, which I mean I'm a straight white female so, you know, I'm not
very diverse, but still seeing that everyone else is so welcome makes me
feel more welcomed.

All four of these students cited diversity as being central to their feelings of belonging at
their colleges and universities. Their feelings about diversity were also shaped by having
high school experiences where diversity was not celebrated. They felt they received
benefits, even if they were not part of a diverse group, from being in environments that
were diverse and where diversity was exalted.

**Summary**

The students in this study all searched for ways to belong at their chosen colleges and
universities, and this process started very early in their decision-making about where they
would attend college. Sense of belonging is an important aspect of understanding the
experience of college students, and it is based on different characteristics. Financial
realities played a significant role in where the students felt they even had an opportunity
to belong. The students at Mary Lincoln did share a similar sense of belonging in terms
of “falling in love” with their institution based on a “homey feeling,” with small classes
and faculty who knew them by name. Students at Big University shared a concern for
diversity. Students also found ways of belonging through sports, sororities, and work as a
Resident Assistants (RA). While all of these experiences cannot be summed up evenly, it is important to note that they reflect the definition set forth by Strayhorn (2012), as “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g. campus community) or others on campus (e.g. faculty, peers)” (p.3). All of the students in this study were able to express a sense of belonging to their college communities; however, there were times they felt a sense of unbelonging, or they experienced tensions around their sense of belonging. In the next chapter, I will explore the tensions that arose for the students as their sense of belonging was challenged throughout the year. Finally, I will return to place-identity and examine the interaction between sense of belonging in college and place-identity.
CHAPTER 6

FINDINGS:

TENSIONS WITH BELONGING AND NOT BELONGING IN COLLEGE

“Hogwarts isn't actually that pleasant a place when you don't fit in.”

— Albus Severus Potter, *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child: Parts One and Two*

**Prologue**

*Harry Potter and the Cursed Child: Parts One and Two* is set 19 years after the end of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. Harry and Ginny Potter are married with three children: James Sirius Potter, Albus Severus Potter and Lily Luna Potter. The book starts with Albus’s first adventure to Hogwarts at Platform 9 ¾. His older brother James has been at Hogwarts for two years, and was sorted into Gryffindor, the house that Harry, Hermione and all the Weasleys were sorted into. Albus expresses concern to his father that he may not be sorted into Gryffindor, and this causes him a great deal of stress because he wants to fit in with the rest of his family. Harry reveals to Albus that if it matters that much to him, the Sorting Hat will take his preferences into consideration as it had with Harry when he was sorted. Harry reminds his son that he is named for two wizards, one a Gryffindor, Albus Dumbledore, and the other a Slytherin, Severus Snape, and adds, “he was probably the bravest man I ever knew” (1.2.37). As Albus fears and to everyone’s astonishment, Albus is sorted into Slytherin House, becomes best friends with Scorpius Malfoy, the son of Harry’s Hogwarts nemesis, Draco Malfoy. Thus begins Albus’s journey of “not belonging” at Hogwarts. Despite its magical setting, the sense of belonging that Albus wants to feel is very much akin to the desire of college students to belong to their chosen colleges and universities, and the tensions he faces with being the
son of the famous Harry Potter, *the boy who lived*, along with his status as a Slytherin instead of a Gryffindor shape much of the book, *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child: Parts One and Two*. Below I will explore the tensions the students in this study faced with belonging and not belonging at the college and university.

**Introduction**

By the spring semester, the excitement and love of their chosen colleges and universities was tempered by academic, social and emotional realities. I frame this section as tensions with belonging and not belonging because only one student felt outright that he no longer belonged at his chosen college, but all of the students were negotiating real tensions with their sense of belonging at their colleges and universities and along with their place-identity. In Part Two, Act III, I examine the tensions with belonging and not belonging at their chosen colleges and universities. In Chapter 7, Part Two, Act IV, I look more closely at the students’ sense of belonging to Appalachia, or their place-identity.

**Part Two, Act III: Tensions with Belonging and Not Belonging**

I begin here in Act III, with the feeling of not belonging Dylan experienced with the wrestling team and then I move to spaces where belonging and not belonging are an interplay with one another, changing on the context of a given situation. More than any other student I interviewed, Dylan was more certain by spring semester that he was leaving Mary Lincoln College, and he did, after he completed his first year. Over the course of our interviews, he moved from excitement about attending Mary Lincoln to mixed feelings of fitting in with his team combined with his desire to go home as soon as
classes ended every Friday. By the beginning of Spring semester, he had really had enough of not belonging.

**Sports as a Way of No Longer Belonging**

After the initial excitement of being recruited by and choosing Mary Lincoln College wore off, Dylan began to see the wrestling coach in a different light, and by the end of our interviews, Dylan had a decidedly different perspective than he initially had on the wrestling coach and team:

> It was alright at first, then it got pretty radical after the first month or so. The first practice he proclaimed verbal dominance over all of us, which is cool, understandable, I guess. But after that I feel like he just objectified us constantly and made it known that it didn’t matter what we did because there was a class of Titans coming the next year that we would basically be subjected to be practice dummies for. And I didn’t want to go tell him [I was leaving] because the dude was legitimately insane. Lol. He was always screaming mad and saying crazy stuff.

Dylan played football and wrestled in high school, so I asked him if he felt the locker room talk in college was more intense than he had experienced in high school before. He said no, and he was quick to add that it was never done in “an uncaring way” before. He explained about the “verbal dominance”:

> I mean nothing bad, just what you would expect from a room of testosterone filled, sweaty, toxic masculinity. Lol. [He] just was like angry the first day “I’m gonna make sure that this is the hardest thing you’ve ever done. I guarantee that someone will cry, and someone will bleed at least once a day.”

Dylan also explained that after the first semester, he stopped eating lunch and interacting with the wrestling team as much as he had before. The guys on the wrestling team “only talk about wrestling. All day long.” Dylan wanted to have different experiences and
conversations with friends than just wrestling. Despite having a scholarship, Dylan felt unvalued on the team and referred to himself as a “practice dummy”:

It’s where they bring a lot of guys in for, just be practice partners, but there’s a lot of state champions coming in next year. And there’s a lot of people leave anyways. So, I think he’ll [the coach] be fine with it, I mean he might not even realize. I mean, I don’t know.

He did not sense that the coach cared either way, as he felt the coach was mainly focused on the incoming class. When I asked if he planned to tell the coach he was leaving, he said he was not going to confront the angry coach who did not care. Dylan did not want to interact with him unless he had to do so: “He’s too energetic for me. Like jittery, talks real fast, [he needs to] relax, makes me a little nervous.” He did tell the assistant coach, and he seemed to respect him a great deal: “The assistant coach who does all of the real coaching, I like him. He’s cool. I think here soon he’ll take over the program. Maybe then I might come back. Maybe. Probably not.” By this point, Dylan was ambivalent about the possibility of playing for a coach he actually liked. Finally, he did not appreciate the lack of sportsmanship the head coach encouraged among the team:

There’s not a lot of respect for other teams either. Like coming from him. I was at a varsity match. So, I wasn’t wrestling, I was watching, we were wrestling Johnson University, and he wouldn’t let our wrestlers shake their hands or their coaches’ hands. And you’re supposed to. I mean I’ve always. I don’t know. There’s rivalry, but still I didn’t like that.

Dylan did not have a positive experience with his coach, and this had a significant impact on his sense of not belonging at Mary Lincoln. He said on multiple visits and in text messages to me that his experience with the coach and the wrestling team is why he decided to leave Mary Lincoln College.

Dylan also had to confront his grandfather about his decision to leave, and he was concerned about how he might feel about him not wrestling in college any more: “And
so, I brought it up last weekend. He's like, no, you're going back to Mary. I’m like no I’m not.” Dylan said his grandfather was concerned that “there's too much trouble for him to get in at home.” Eventually, his grandfather was supportive of his decision, but he did want him to stay in college. He also reached out to his high school wrestling coach and Talent Search counselor to let them know he was leaving Mary Lincoln College. Both were supportive of his decision not to wrestle as long as he stayed in school somewhere.

Dylan toyed with the idea of going to one of the state colleges with a group of friends from home or enrolling in the local community college. He named that if his friends had gone to Mary Lincoln, he would be more apt to stay there. He also felt that his friend Fudge had much easier classes because they were online, and this appealed to Dylan very much: “Everything was online. Didn't have to have any interaction. I don't like being out. I like just staying in the room. That's why I like my online classes.” Dylan said that being at Mary Lincoln made him feel anxious, and to escape the anxiety of being there, he would return home where things were slower.

He was also eager to begin working, something his closest friend, Fudge, was doing. He was able to buy things and sustain himself, and Dylan wanted that as well. So as his interest in wrestling was waning, and his relationships with teammates and the head coach was also on the decline, his friendships at home were stronger than ever. The allure of home and the people at home was more appealing than being at a college where he did not feel the people he was part of reflected his own values. I will return to these tensions for Dylan in the final act, Act IV, where I discuss his place-identity. In the section below, I discuss how the other students in this study negotiated tensions with their sense of belonging at their institutions while they chose to stay. The most prominent
themes of feeling like they did not belong had to do with their academics, and many students expressed how being first generation college students affected them in ways they did not anticipate.

**First Generation College Students and Belonging**

Laurel was a sophomore when I interviewed her, and she had a particularly trying first year at Big University. She made friends through her sorority, and she really felt like she belonged at Big University socially. She even went so far as to say it is the only place in Kentucky she could really see herself living any more. But Laurel’s ability to enroll and stay at Big University was tied to a “full ride” she received through the Appalachian Scholarship. This scholarship covered all the costs of attending Big University, and it gave her a living stipend. In her first year, however, she fell below the required 2.5 gpa and lost the scholarship. As Laurel explained, “It’s almost a setup in some ways. I don't mean the institution tries to do that, but if you don't do well your first semester and you have a scholarship like this, it's almost impossible to keep it.” In fact, Laurel has a point. Scholarships are intimately connected to whether first generation, low income students from Appalachian Kentucky feel like they belong at their institutions.

**Impact of College Scholarships on Belonging**

Laurel told me that Big University had discontinued the Appalachian Scholarship she received for incoming students in 2019-2020, but she would continue to receive for four years, as long as she continued to meet the requirements. Laurel’s understanding was that the Appalachian Scholarship was being replaced by a larger number of scholarships in significantly lower amounts. The idea was to reach more students in
need, but Laurel thought it was a huge mistake for the university to not prioritize full scholarships for low income students from Appalachia. She shared a story of her friend, John, who was not a great student in high school, but he had an excellent score of 32 on the ACT. With a low high school GPA and a high ACT score, he still would not have been eligible for an academic scholarship at the level of funding he needed. In Laurel’s view, most of the academic scholarships at the large state universities were given to students with exceptional academic backgrounds from high schools where students were prepared for college. She and John did not have those kinds of experiences in high school. Laurel was quick to note that John is thriving at Big University, but he would not have had the opportunity to access Big University without his scholarship. At Big University, he was an active member of the LGBT community, an experience he did not have in high school:

He's doing phenomenal here and is super active in the LGBT community on campus and that's great. Back home he didn't really get the support. Like he didn't have that sense of community because there's not a community back home for LGBT people. They're more oppressed and told, no, you don't need to express that.

Molly also referenced the significant impact of her full tuition scholarship on her ability to attend Big University. She had applied for the Appalachian Scholarship, but because she had received other scholarship money, they told her they gave the scholarship to someone who had even greater need: “I respected that, but at the same time, if I would have had the choice between full tuition or full ride, I would have taken the full ride.” She also had a friend whom she felt should have applied for the Appalachian Scholarship because she did not have any scholarships, and the loans she
received were not enough to pay for the costs of attending Big University. Her friend had to return home. Molly argued,

I think that we should have more need-based scholarships because these people are just as deserving. They may not have had the highest GPA or anything like that. What I've learned so far is that the average students in my high school are succeeding even better than I am right now because they know to work for it, and they had already had an appreciation for that aspect.

Both Laurel and Molly felt strongly that without full financial support, they and friends of theirs who were also poor could not afford to attend Big University. They also felt a lack of academic preparation for college should not exclude students from Appalachia from attending Big University. Even with financial support, both Laurel and Molly, as first generation college students, were not prepared for the academic expectations that lay ahead.

**First Generation Students and College Culture Shock**

Laurel noted that her first year was marked by “a culture shock, not just in terms of ethnicity or religion, but also college culture. I don’t have anyone to tell me study tips or how to do time management.” Laurel saw this as directly part of being a first generation college student:

Whenever you come to university as a first-generation student, the first semester is really hard. It’s really hard for anyone coming from any background, but specifically for first generation students because they don't have those resources from people who have been through that experience.

Molly, who also attended Big University, on a full tuition scholarship felt this tension:

The term “first generation” didn't mean anything to me until I got here because like it didn’t really separate me. It didn't. We were all the same in grade school. It was just a term. And I didn't think it was going to be important to me. But when I got to college, I realized that how different it was for me comparatively to other people who had parents [who had graduated from college].
In the competitive engineering school she was enrolled in, Molly discovered that many of the students there had parents and siblings who had previously graduated from the school or who were still in the school. They had one another, and this helped those students feel a sense of belonging there:

> I wish I had that support, too. It’s not that my parents don't give me support. They just don't know how, and I feel like I never really knew how important that was and how different that made me and other first generation college students until I got here. I realized that I didn't have all of the extra support that other people had.

Molly shared with her family that she was struggling financially, but she did not share that she was struggling academically. Her father began putting money aside for her, and she felt both loved and guilty because she knew this was a sacrifice for the family. Her family is not able to support her financially at college. Even with this level of support and sacrifice, she chose not to share with them the other ways she struggled at school:

> I feel like it's not necessarily something they can help me with and I just, I want to figure it out on my own because I feel like they're not going to be there with me the whole time anyways.

Molly knew they were supportive, but also that they did not have the experience of college, and this was the kind of support she needed. Her words also indicate that she felt a strong sense of being on her own with this problem, a feeling that will be explored in more detail in an upcoming section. While Molly was making sense of her academic struggles, she was also aware of how she was a role model for her younger siblings and cousins.
Being a Role Model

In addition to not having the emotional support and navigational advice of college educated parents or siblings, Molly felt the stress of having to be a role model to younger siblings and cousins:

I'm actually feeling the effects of being the first one in my family to go to college. I feel like I'm laying down a foundation for my siblings and for my cousins, and I don't really know how to feel about that. It's really scary for me because I feel like I have a lot more to lose than other people. I feel like if I don't make it or I slip up or I have to go home for a semester, then it's all over for me because with what money am I going to come back with?

Another way Molly experienced the tension of being a first generation student was the high cost of failure. Molly distinguished between how failing in high school could be done with a safety net, while failing in college was costly:

In high school it was okay if you failed a little bit because everybody has to go to high school. You can't not go, unless you drop out. In college nobody cares if you are here. It's not mandatory. This is completely optional. So, I feel like I have to do extra that I wasn't necessarily aware of. If I fail, then I don't get a second chance. I have to either fork over a lot of money or leave because this isn't mandatory.

The pressure to be successful in the engineering school and to pave a way for her siblings and cousins was compounded by the high cost of failure. These anxieties were exacerbated by financial stress.

Financial Stress of First Generation Students

The pressure to be successful and the financial realities of not being successful weighed hard on Molly: “I have to do things so carefully and so calculated over the next
She admitted she was anxious about being successful in college because it was not only about her:

I feel like everything I do has to be calculated not only for me but for my family too. Because when I graduate I want to help support them and I want to give back to my parents because what they've done for me over the years. And I feel like I can't do that if I slip up.

Molly shared with me that it made her feel supported by her parents that her dad was putting away money for her. She said he recently sold one of their cars and was using some of the money from that to help her: “It means a lot to me. My parents are trying to help me the best way they can.” Molly wanted to be able to help her parents financially when she graduated, but the stress of success weighed heavily on her ability to do this.

She realized that a college degree has become a nearly a necessity for financial success:

When I graduate and get financial stability, I'm going to help them out because they deserve it. They didn't know that the world was going to come to when my dad dropped out of high school and my mom didn't go to college. It was fine for them back then, and it's not their fault. They didn't know college degrees were going to be so important. If people knew that, they would be in college, but the world changed so fast and so quickly. It’s just become so mandatory, almost mandatory now. Well, they aren't mandatory, but it's basically it is.

Laurel faced constant financial stress. When she filed her tax returns she learned she owed the government $750 because some of her scholarship money was taxed.

Hoping she had made a mistake, she contacted a friend’s dad who is an accountant at a “very prestigious company.” He confirmed that she owed $750. Laurel could not believe it:

They gave me this scholarship because I'm poor. And like, oh yeah, but that's also like $10,000 that we're going to tax you on at the end of the year, and you have to pay that back because the scholarship is considered taxable income. Nobody ever told me it would be taxed.
The friend’s father ended up paying the taxes for Laurel: “That’s like pocket change to them.”

Even with a “full ride” with a stipend, Laurel needed a job to survive. She explained that besides the tuition, the college housing takes most of her money, about $6500 of the $8000 she is allotted. The rest goes to books and supplies. She wished she did not have to work, but the expense of having a car that needed repairs and needing money for living expenses required her to do so. She explained the financial stress and the decisions it forces her to make:

My car just broke down. Well hasn’t broken down yet but it's about to break down. My grandparents came up and saw me over spring break and like, “Oh we're going to have to take your car back because it's making a weird noise, and I think it's the motor.” So, I'm driving their car, and they took mine back. They just took it to the shop today. They are going to have to pay for this $1000 repair if it ends up being the engine. So that means that if I run out of money I'm not asking them to help me. They told me to still ask them, but I'm not asking them for money. This makes me stressed out because if I do come into a situation to where I'm broke, I don't have anybody really. I do have people to ask, not people that I want to ask at all because it's like extended family members. I'd usually rather just ask my grandparents like, “Hey, can you put $20 in my account?” But they're fixing my car. Then I'm not gonna ask them.

Laurel had to strike a balance between working enough and not working enough. She left the restaurant where she worked because they had upped her hours to 30, and she had just been promoted to a supervisor at the clothing store where she now works 20-25 hours per week, “which is still a lot sometimes.” But the alternative of “being broke and not eating” is not ideal either. Still Laurel found some unexpected advantages in working as it helped a lot with her time management: “I have less free time to myself where I’ll be sleeping, and it gives me structure.”
Both Molly and Laurel spoke to the financial challenges of being first generation college students who are also low income. Despite substantial scholarships, they were also negotiating challenging financial needs, and ultimately both were employed by the end of the year. Next, I will share how academics created tensions for first generation students in this study.

First Generation College Students and Academic Belonging

Molly was enrolled in the highly competitive, male-dominated school of engineering at Big University. She was among the 18.6% of the incoming class who had chosen an engineering major of the seven available options. She and her cohort were able to meet the requirements of the school: at least a 3.8 high school gpa out of 4.0, with a mid-range of 27-32 on the ACT, and importantly, a pre-college curriculum that included chemistry, calculus or pre-calculus. Molly began her first semester very excited about being in the prestigious school at a large university. Early on, the school let students know through faculty and other students that most of the incoming class “would not make it in engineering.” Soon Molly felt challenged academically in ways she had not before, and her gender stood out to her even more.

STEM and Gender

Molly felt a strong sense of “empowerment” as being one of a few women in a STEM field like engineering. In many of her classes she was the only one or one of the few women in the room. She saw this opportunity as a way to inspire other women in the field. She also named that being a woman in a large lecture class made her stand out to the professor, a fact she saw as an advantage. Actual contact with faculty was limited for first year students.
Molly noted that there were not many women in the engineering school, so she joined an engineering sorority because she thought “it would be beneficial to have that support group and get to know people as a freshman.” Things started off very well in her candidate period, but by the end of the first semester she was “failing,” and this made her feel depressed, “I just felt really isolated and alone.” This was not because of the sorority, but as Molly states,

I wasn't really accepted because academics are very important to the engineering sorority. It’s like one of the most crucial pillars of that [the sorority]. So, for me not to do well, I felt like I had let people down, and I almost dropped out because of that. I felt like it wasn't helping me. It was just making me feel worse.

Beyond the pressures she felt as first generation and low income, Molly also felt a social pressure from her engineering female peers because she was not meeting the academic standards of the school of engineering. In the second semester she was on academic probation, and her status with sorority was changed to inactive. Molly faced tensions with her long held identity as someone who was good at science and was going to be an engineer.

**STEM and Identity Challenges**

Molly shared with me that the biggest running joke among friends who had dropped out of the engineering school was, “if you can’t succeed in engineering school, you just go to business.” She was quick to note this was not seen as a positive transition: “I think they think that because they are too ‘dumb’ for engineering school, they have to go on to something else that they don't necessarily like, but they'll settle for it.” Molly had a backup major, physics, and she did not feel like she would be “settling” if she changed her major to physics: “I love physics, and I think it's great. It's similar to
engineering, and I'll be happy no matter what field I go into in physics.” Physics seemed to her about possibilities.

She also felt that students who were very successful in engineering school did not share her outlook: “I think that students, especially those who are doing well in engineering school, don't think about it like that. They don't think that other people can be interested in other things because engineering is their life.” Part of what Molly was experiencing was students whose identity was being shaped as an engineer. They were seeing themselves as engineers, and they adopted the habits and behaviors expected of engineering students: “They [the engineering students] think that every engineering school student also has engineering school revolved around their life. And it's almost what it takes to succeed is to do nothing but eat, sleep and breathe engineering school.” Molly and some of her less successful peers were not willing to adopt this identity, after trying it out for the first semester: “Some students just don't want to do that, and that's perfectly okay. I don't want to deprive myself of nutrition and sleep and social life to be an engineer.” What Molly took from these behaviors was that engineers “devote themselves to one thing.” She wanted to have a broader college experience: “You can do physics and do other things in your life. You don't have to spend all day thinking about calculus.” One important way identity as an engineering major was solidified at Big University was through intense studying and focus, and as a result, academic success. Those who studied intensely but were not successful would not “make it in engineering.” Even if Molly wanted to remain in engineering, she did not have the academic success to do so.
STEM and Tensions with Belonging

Molly explained that a 2.5 GPA was needed to keep in good standing with the engineering school, but she needed a 3.0 for her full tuition scholarship. By the second semester, she realized she wasn’t going to be able to keep the full tuition scholarship:

I don’t think I can do that because last semester was so low that I need a really, really good GPA this semester. I can definitely get a 3.0 this next year. But even that won’t help me because it's cumulative. I hate that word now. I just do. I hate that word.

She also informed me that only two of the six people from her high school who enrolled in the engineering school at Big University were still in it. She attributed success in the engineering school to the students being more competitive and having a more rigorous high school preparation: “There's a small sector that know everything and know how to do everything the first time they come in.” The end result of the discrepancies in high school preparation was felt in the success of the first semester: “I think that our class is the highest expected dropout rate. I feel like there is a lot of people either scraping by or like there was like excelling, there really wasn't any in-between.” Molly had to make sense of her identity as an engineering major and how she was failing at it:

People would not believe that I was failing at home because that just wasn't me. It took me most of the semester. You realize that it's not just me, because people don't really talk about that, and I think that's a shame. If you talk about it, it makes it easier, and it gives you a sense of not only belonging but a sense of togetherness.

Molly reflected heavily on what was different from her very successful high school STEM experiences and what she was experiencing in college. While she was very successful in science and math in high school, she noted that the emphasis was on the experience and the relationships that were built, not on the competition. She told me a story about a robotics competition where she was the captain and the team worked
together to solve every problem they faced. Ultimately, they placed 33rd out of 50 teams, but she described the feeling of working together:

I felt like we won something that day because we had been engineers, and we had worked together as a team. We used all of the principles that we're supposed to in order to be successful. It's not necessarily the winning aspect and that made me come back. We never really won. Technically, it was the process along the way, and it was feeling the stuff I did had an immediate impact.

She explained that the robotics competition allowed them to apply what they were learning from physics, math and other sciences courses:

We get to see it work before our eyes. And that's what inspired me, is seeing the real-life applications of what I did. I saw how it could help people with my wheelchair project. That's what made me want to come back to STEM. I saw how it could help other people.

The joy Molly found in STEM was illustrated in words she used repeatedly: help, helping others, applying science, working with other and inspiring young girls: “I get so much joy talking about STEM to other people.” Molly did not find joy in competing with classmates or in failure, but it took her some time to figure out what she needed to do about it all. In part, she was negotiating her identity in STEM with another identity as student in the engineering school at Big University, and these were not congruent. Molly began to see that her superior success in high school did not equate to superior college success.

**Academic Challenges and Study Skills**

Both Molly and Laurel had been very successful in high school, but they faced academic challenges and needed to develop their study skills for college. One of Molly’s observations about college was that her high school peers who were more average were academically more successful than her:
A lot of students who were average in high school are succeeding very well right now [at other colleges and universities]. And it doesn't surprise me, but it makes me a little sad. I'm very happy for them, but it makes me a little sad inside because I almost wish I would've struggled more because I had been coaxed into this false sense of security [about my ability to be successful]. They [high school teachers and counselors] didn't know either, so I'm not blaming anybody. I'm not gonna blame people for praising me, but I just felt like I got too comfortable with the position I was in high school and I just, I almost set myself up to fail because I didn't know that it was going to be so different.

For Molly, that difference came down specifically to study skills. High school was “easy” for her, and in college she realized, “It takes a lot of trial and error and a lot of failure to realize that what you're doing is right. It's just maybe off to a rocky start, and I wasn't used to that.” Learning to accept poor grades was hard: “It took me a long time to realize that there are going to be bad grades, and it isn’t going to reflect poorly. I haven't had enough time yet to get the good grades.” Molly learned to adjust her expectations of grades:

I mean on my first calculus test I got a B, and I cried I was so happy for that B. I realized I can do this. I just needed a little more time than everybody else to get situated in. A lot of it was study habits and trying to figure out when I needed to study, so I just did a lot of like self-evaluation on academics and tried to see what worked for me and what didn't.

In fact, Molly realized in this process that she never learned how to study. She was approaching complex material by “skimming it over and looking at it” because she never really needed to study in more depth before. She explained, “I had to learn what it meant to actually look at something and comprehend it. I probably should have tried a little harder to do that a little faster and used more methods.”

With an additional year to figure things out, Laurel chose a different approach after losing (appealing and regaining) her scholarship: “I took a lot less classes.” In her first semester, she took 18 credits, which she learned was way too much for her because
of the outside demands of the classes. For example, her American Sign Language course required 8-10 hours of deaf community hours, but Laurel noted that first generation students do not know what college classes will require of them when they begin college. Reducing her load to 12 credit hours a semester means she will need an additional year to graduate, but it’s a trade worth making, according to Laurel:

I'll have to pay for the fifth year myself. But I look at it as I am only going to be in college for a short period of time, and there's no rush to get out into the real world because this world is real enough for me at the moment. I'm barely making it here, so I'm not ready to go full on adult yet. So, I was like, if I have to pay for a fifth year of college to keep myself from going mentally insane, I'll take that.

Laurel also worked hard to create a successful class schedule with afternoon classes that are back to back. This motivates her to attend class: “It forces me to be like, “okay, you're already here, so you might as well just go to your class.” I'm really bad about skipping class. I hate going to class.”

Laurel was approaching her study skills challenges by setting herself up for the most success. As a commuter, she knew she needed afternoon classes to get there on time. Molly was also managing competing demands of back to back exams and making decisions about retaking certain courses for higher grades. Big University allowed student to take a course up to 4 times without showing the retakes on the students’ transcripts. She found support in her peers. As Molly was trying to make sense of her grades, she shared some advice she had received from an engineering student: “I talked to one of the people in my sorority who is like 24, so she's been at this for a while. She said you learn how to learn how to be unhealthy, like not sleeping a whole lot.” At this point, Molly was still considering staying in the engineering school, but her peer’s advice did
not fully resonate as something Molly wanted to do even as she was considering how she might do it:

I need to start being really smart in how I go about my daily habits to make sure I'm still healthy as a human being while trying to excel in engineering school because it seems to me now that you have to give up some of those aspects of your life that are healthy.

Molly said one senior electrical engineering student told her he hates his life because of all the work. Molly saw this as a warning that engineering school really takes a lot out of students, especially if they are not “strategic about it”: “I'm trying to watch for that because it's really easy to get overwhelmed, and I guess it's only gonna get worse, but I'm still going to try for it.” By this point Molly was willing to give it her all, but physics was still on her mind: “I can always go into physics which is next door neighbor to engineering school, but it's not as rigorous.”

First semester was particularly bad for Molly: “I struggled a lot. I did a lot worse than what I thought I was going to because in high school that was built up, ‘you are going to do great in college.’” Molly had the opposite experience: “I came out with a 2.0 which put me on academic warning. I am on academic probation with my sorority.”

Molly thought she was doing everything right, but she was not getting the results she anticipated. She explained,

Partially like it was just me learning what college was like expecting of me, so it did not go as well as I thought I would. Over Christmas break I was really reflecting on that and trying to figure out what I was going to do next. I didn't know if I wanted to drop my sorority or not. I didn't know if I wanted to continue with engineering or not. I wasn't going to drop out, but I was trying to figure out what would be best for me, whether it'd be switching majors and kind of giving myself a fresh start or not. I'm still kind of debating that now, but things are going a lot better this semester.
For Molly, “a lot better” meant that her grades had improved, and she had a better understanding of college expectations; however, right as she gained footing in these areas, the financial piece came into play again as she began to worry about how to survive during the summer. Molly carried the stress with her into the spring semester and commented, “I don't want to completely just give up and drop out because I mean everybody has a semester where they struggle. It's just a bad semester.” The tensions of wanting to succeed academically amid the financial realities greatly affected Molly, but it also motivated her:

I was very determined. I was very depressed, but I don't know. My brain is hardwired to like not to give up just yet. I don't want to go home yet. I don't think that it's time for me to give up yet. And I've been taught growing up that I was going to go to college. So, I feel like if I don't continue on with college, what else am I going to do anyways?

By Spring semester, Molly had a game plan that involved changing majors, and this affected how she felt about herself and her belonging in college.

**Changing Majors to Belong**

Molly had a decidedly different feeling about her when we met for the last time. She was excited to tell me she was changing her major:

I decided to change it. It's not that I don't love engineering, and I'm not passionate about it. It's just that the engineering school was too much, and I feel like in order to be a successful student in engineering school you have to eat, sleep and breathe engineering.

Molly felt she did not belong in the school of engineering because of the practices of the school and the habits of mind of the students: “I just wasn't ready to give up my whole life. It's what makes them successful to be so work driven and that's fine for them, but I just don't want to spend my whole life like that.” As she began to see herself as not part
of the engineering school, she believed she had a place of belonging in the physics
department:

I think with physics I could either go into research or education. I'm not
sure yet which one I want to do because I really like working with kids,
but I also really liked doing the theoretical parts of it. With physics I have
to do a lot more diverse classes. I have to take six to eight hours in a
foreign language and I can immerse myself in other things that aren't in
my major. That's really important for me because I like being well
rounded.

She did have a sense that choosing physics as a major over engineering was “an easier
path”: “It’s like getting off the interstate and going into, not necessarily the countryside,
but some place that is not so fast-paced.” Although Molly did not really know what to
expect in the physics department yet, and she had not met with an advisor there, she did
know some ways the major was different than the school of engineering:

Physics is through the School of Arts and Sciences. Engineering school
has physics too. So, I'm pretty sure my courses will transfer over,
especially since engineering school has overqualified versions of courses.
Our calculus is way harder than regular calculus and stuff, so I'm pretty
sure it won't transfer one way from physics to engineering, but it'll transfer
from engineering to physics.

Much of her decision making about her major came from a discomfort with the
engineering school and its expectations. She said she was trying to decide between
engineering and physics as majors before she came to Big University. Her excitement
was heartfelt: “I feel like once I get in physics, I'm not going to look back.” Molly did
have some reservations about changing her major:

Another big part of it was trying to convince myself that I'm still going to
have a job because being in engineering school this year, almost trained
me to think that if I wasn't an engineer, I’d be homeless. Nobody told me
that. I just felt like that was the thing, because once you're an engineer,
you felt like higher and prestigious and stuff like that.
The engineering school pressed upon the students that lucrative jobs awaited them upon graduation, and this kind of financial security was very appealing to Molly. She explained, “What helps me the most is having security in what I do, and sometimes I don't take opportunities because I don't have that 100 percent.” The future of her career prospects in physics was not clear to hear, but she admitted she had to accept that she was going to be successful at something, and that might not be engineering. Molly noted that making a change like this could be easy for some people, but she had trouble changing paths: “I guess the biggest part of me changing was learning that I can change.” She said that she tended to stick to something even if wasn’t working as well as she would like because she would not want to lose any progress she had made in it.

Laurel also tried to make sense of her major and where she belonged when I interviewed her. She was majoring in psychology with a minor in women’s and gender studies, and the day we met to discuss it, she was thinking of making another change to a double major in sociology and psychology. She was not entirely happy with the psychology major since she was not interested in being a clinician or researcher. She had become very interested in pursuing a degree in deaf studies because of the course she took on American Sign Language. She talked about how people who are deaf are ostracized, and this injustice bothered her. She was most interested in exploring a graduate degree in sociology. Laurel embraced a new role in her sorority as a way of developing her leadership skills and meeting people, and this position had rewards and challenges for her.
Managing Time and Commitments

Laurel was glad to have the opportunity to have a leadership position in her sorority as the vice-president of membership, but it ended up requiring more time and commitment than she expected: “I knew it was going to be huge responsibility, but there were a lot of things about this position I was not told and it's actually like a lot of work constantly.” Membership events took more time than she had imagined, and given that she had not experienced a role similar to this one, she did not know how to judge the commitment needed: “I planned all of recruitment and everything up to that as well as events for keeping the morale up and dealing with people who want to resign or people who are bringing morale down.” Laurel was also juggling school and work demands, and she felt overwhelmed by it at times: “It just gets really stressful sometimes, and sometimes I get overwhelmed. I refuse to look at my planner, and then I forget things because I didn't look at my planner.” Laurel felt that the experience was good practice for her in terms of managing her time effectively.

Seeking Academic Support

Students in this study had many reasons why they did not need to seek support even when they could tell me they were struggling, and they needed it. In terms of academic support here, I mean all phases of academic assistance from meeting with professors, teaching assistants, advisors, tutors, peers, etc. Molly did not have specific questions for tutors, and she felt those sessions were really geared toward specific problems students were trying to solve. She attended and found supplemental instruction to be of value because it was more akin to test preparation sessions. She also made her way to an academic success coordinator who helped her chart her next steps:
I saw an academic success coordinator to talk about my future and talk about what that would look like with my different GPA because I'm worried about losing my scholarship right now because my last semester was really bad. She helped me with that, and I realized, I really needed that. That was most beneficial to me this semester.

Molly explained the coordinator’s role to me in detail, “She said her job was to essentially make sure that I graduated no matter what.” This message resonated with Molly and made her feel supported. She went on to say the coordinator told her that she could help her with academic concerns, counseling needs, financial aid, etc. Molly noted that the coordinator worked in the financial aid building, but she was not clear on what her affiliation was to financial aid, but she was happy to have found her.

Laurel shared that the experience of losing her scholarship thrust her into search for help:

I knew that it was coming. I was really hoping that it did help, that my grades were significantly better the second semester, and that I had reached out and told people like, “Hey, I'm doing really bad. Like what do I do about that? How do I fix this?”

Laurel sought assistance with the Appalachian Scholarship advisor and met with her on three or four occasions at the end of her first semester. This person referred her to psychological services, where Laurel met a therapist in training:

I didn't like my therapist at all, but I went enough times to have her write something for me. And then I also had my doctor write something stating that I was diagnosed with depression and anxiety, and those things affected me going into my first year of college.

Laurel was very vocal about the depression and anxiety she faced in her first two years of college, and she was one of four students who spoke openly about addressing their mental health needs during their first or second year of college.
Mental Health/Depression/Stigma and Belonging

Unlike Laurel’s experience of talking openly from the onset of our interviews about her mental health, Jenna raised the issue with me in our last interview: “I was actually recently diagnosed with bipolar disorder with bipolar depression.” She went onto explain how she had dealt with depression since she was a child, and it had been made more difficult by the deaths of close family members and friends. She found comfort and guidance in seeing a therapist in her college town: “I started going to a therapist here, and they said, ‘Okay, this is what's wrong. This is what we can do to fix it.’ So, I love to go there. That helps a lot.” I asked about seeking services on campus, and Jenna stated that she did not want others to know who know her. She was comfortable with people who do not really know her at Mary Lincoln knowing about it:

I'd feel more comfortable talking about it with people that I don't really know here. But at home definitely that's not something that you really talk about. The only people that know my boyfriend and my mom. So. And I have six brothers and sisters. My Dad doesn't know.

Jenna described her father as someone who did not believe in mental health conditions or disorders: “My Dad is the kind of man, like there's no such thing as ADHD. You know, a good beating, a good butt whooping will fix a child's ADHD.” She explained that he does not see doctors or therapists because “he doesn't believe in that kind of thing, so it's just easier for me to keep it to myself with him.” Jenna also revealed that she just told her boyfriend about the diagnosis and the therapist a week earlier, and she chose not to tell him because “my boyfriend is actually a lot like my dad.” He also doesn’t believe in therapists, and told Jenna, “I don't think that it'll do anything for you, but if you think it'll work, then I support you and I'll be here for you the whole way.” Jenna said these are the
reasons she did not seek or want to seek therapy at home: “Everybody knows everybody.”

**Resident Assistant (RA) Position and Belonging**

Three of the students in this study (Molly, Jenna and Carly) were all working as or recently hired as Resident Assistants (RAs) when I interviewed them. All three showed a strong sense of belonging to the experience of being an RA. For Molly, this experience began as she found a place to belong with the RAs on the lower level of her residence hall. It was here that she learned about students from majors besides engineering, and she saw in them a possibility for herself. When she lost her scholarship, she sought other opportunities to maintain her enrollment at Big University, so she applied for an RA position. In our final interview, she was excited to share the news that she had been selected to become an RA in her sophomore year. The position provided a sense of belonging for Molly, but importantly, it alleviated some financial stress:

It pays for my room and board, and my meal plan for fall and spring both. I feel a little better because I am almost replacing the scholarship. It's definitely not as much money, but I can still attend school. I will be struggling a little more, and I won't have as much, but I can still stay here. If I didn't get the RA position, I wouldn't have the money.

Molly went onto say her roommate was going back home after the first year, and they were friends since second grade. She's going home to a community college because she didn't have any scholarship coming in. Molly could relate to her as she knew she would be going home, too, if she had not gotten the RA position. Still, the loss of the full tuition scholarship hurt her: “I'm happy the position, but I'm still stressed out about losing all my tuition money.”
Molly’s friendships with other RAs are what inspired her to apply: “Most of my friends are RAs, and I've been friends with most of the RAs in my building for a while now. And when the application came out, like all of my friends were applying, and so did I.” Molly thought she would like the position because she likes the people who she knows who are RAs: “I figured that if I could be around that environment all the time, it'd be great. It would also help me pay for school.” She applied along with around 400 students: “I was really stressed out because that's a lot of people, and they're really accepting like 30 positions.” She assumed she would not get a position, but thought it was worth a try. She later learned that she was one of the applicants who scored the highest on the rubric they used to evaluate candidates: “I was just elated because I didn't know that I would do that well!”

Jenna also spoke of her admiration of students who worked in residence life, specifically her Resident Director (RD): “She just means so much to me. She's been there for me through a lot. I'm applying to be an RA next semester too.” Jenna said her RD encouraged her to apply by telling her she valued her: “How would you feel about becoming an RA? I need girls I can trust.”

**Conclusion**

The students in this study felt tensions with their sense of belonging and not belonging at their colleges and universities. Only one student felt he no longer belonged at his college because of the way the coach treated him. This student left the college, but he has continued to be enrolled in classes at a community college. All of the other students felt tensions around the issues of being first generation, low income, and financially stressed. Scholarships were key to students’ continued sense of belonging at
their schools. Students at Big University struggled the most academically as they adjusted to the expectations of the university. One student felt a lot of tension with her chosen major of engineering and regained a sense of belonging by changing her major to physics. Four students in this study spoke about their need and experience of mental health services. Three students discussed seeking academic supports. Students also found employment and leadership opportunities as RAs on their campuses, and this created a sense of belonging.
CHAPTER 7

FINDINGS:

PLACE IDENTITY AND BELONGING

“I am what I am, an’ I’m not ashamed. ‘Never be ashamed,’ my old dad used ter say, ‘there’s some who’ll hold it against you, but they’re not worth botherin’ with.’”

--Hagrid, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*

**Prologue**

Readers are first introduced to Hagrid, the half-giant, half-human groundskeeper at Hogwarts, when he is charged with taking infant Harry Potter to his Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon’s house following the death of his parents by Lord Voldemort. Professor McGonagall expresses concern to Professor Dumbledore, “Do you really think it wise trusting Hagrid with something as important as this?” To which Professor Dumbledore replies, “Ah, Professor. I would trust Hagrid with my life.” Hagrid is a trusted and loyal friend to Harry, Ron, and Hermione, and his hut is a key setting for many conversations among the young wizards. It also serves as the last post of human activity before the Forbidden Forest, a site off-limits to Hogwarts students, but one frequented by Hagrid. Throughout the series, readers are made aware that Hagrid is not considered equal to the other teachers, even when he teaches Care of Magical Creatures. Readers learn Hagrid was expelled from Hogwarts when he was a student there, for bringing an acromantula into the school, which was thought erroneously to be killing the students. Hagrid was not permitted to use his wand, though he concealed it in a pink umbrella and artfully used it against the Dursleys to bring Harry to Hogwarts on his 11th birthday. As a giant, he was not fully trusted by all the humans in the series, but he had an innate understanding of magical creatures—far more than anyone else in the books. He was described by Rowling
as much in the ways he did not belong at Hogwarts as he is in the ways he is forever bound to Hogwarts. Rowling said she knew from the start of the series that it would be Hagrid who carried Harry’s body from the Forbidden Forest back to Hogwarts at the end of the last book in the series.

**Introduction**

The previous two findings chapters examined how rural, first generation, low income students from Appalachian Kentucky experienced a sense of belonging in college. Chapter 5 began with an examination of how a college-going identity was formed in these students and then explored how they experienced a sense of belonging in their colleges and universities. Chapter 6 then looked at the tensions the students faced with belonging and not belonging at their colleges and universities. In Chapter 7, I explore the place identity of rural, first generation, low income students from Appalachian Kentucky. Briefly here, I will return to the distinction between place attachment and place identity to frame this chapter. According to Hernandez, Hidalgo, Salazar-Laplace and Hess (2017),

> Place attachment is an affective bond that people establish with specific areas where they prefer to remain and where they feel comfortable and safe. Place identity, however, has been defined as a component of personal identity, a process by which, through interaction with places, people describe themselves in terms of belonging to a specific place (p.310).

This chapter considers both outsider and insider perspectives on place identity, as the relationship students have formed with the places they are from are influenced by other lenses. I start with outsider lenses instead of ending the chapter with them to give the students’ own perspectives of their place identity the final words. All of the students in this study identified as being from Appalachia, and specifically the counties of Sunset
and Forest. Students from Sunset county also preferred to say they were from Sunset City, or just Sunset, but they accepted a dual identity of being from both. When it mattered to them it was more of an insider issue, of making a distinction for people who were familiar with the areas.

**Part Two, Act IV: Place Identity and Belonging**

In this section, I examine both the insider and outsider lenses of Appalachia with the students in this study to understand how they perceive these lenses. While not exhaustive, I chose to focus on the three areas where the students experienced marginalization and oppression from outsiders: whiteness, social class and place. In exploring terms used to disparage people from the region of Appalachia, I focus here on hillbilly, redneck, white trash/trailer trash and Trump supporter, all of which are terms used to disparage whites who lack money and position. In Chapter 8, I will return to these and explore the implications of both privilege and marginalization present in the whiteness laden in these terms. I recognize the reader may immediately wonder about the idea of white students being marginalized by race, so I think it is important to name here for clarity that I mean their lives have been shaped by the power of whiteness, which is so powerful it can call out their social class as unsavory. Thus they maintain white privilege, but they are called out by whites for being poor. The second section below examines the pain of poverty, both in terms of how the students experience being poor and how they are viewed as poor. Again, in the discussion chapter I return to implications of poverty in creating identity. Finally, place itself is examined as a way of feeling marginalized and also of belonging. As before I will return to a discussion of place as a site of marginalization and belonging. Below, when I refer to insiders, I mean people who
identify as being from Appalachia, and when I use outsiders, I mean those people who do not identify as being from Appalachia.

**Hillbilly**

All of but one of the students in this study said they perceived the term hillbilly in a neutral way, and none of them took it seriously as being negatively directed at them. Dylan said, “When I think of the hillbilly thing, I think hunting and fishing.” None of them identified with the term, and all of them saw it as a joke of some sort, a throwback to the past in some way or another. Molly explained,

> I do know some people are very proud to say that they're hillbilly, especially some of my family in Tennessee, but I don't know, hillbilly just seems like a very joking term to me. I don't think I've ever seen it used in a serious context.

Molly saw it as a term for some kind of “southern joke,” and she did not think the term had a different meaning to insiders or outsiders. Eliza also had a similar experience of the term as a joke:

> I mean people would probably call me hillbilly, but they don't ever mean it. It is usually among friends from other states, and it's just kind of a joke between us. You know, it doesn't bother me at all in any sort of way.

Molly noted that people from outside Appalachia may buy into the stereotype more than insiders: “I think that outsiders assume that everybody in a certain area is a hillbilly. Obviously, these are extremely overexaggerated examples, but I know people who look like that and have long beards and wear the hats and the overalls.” She noted that the issue is that the people from the outside will stereotype everyone in the region as looking like this: “I think that people just assume that there's more people who look like this in Appalachia than what there really are. Not everybody has really crappy teeth and carries a pipe around all the time.” Carly also had the impression that outsiders would “think of
someone with no teeth and no hygiene. No shoes, just rugged all around.” Eliza had not experienced anyone that fit this stereotype: “I know people around here don't actually look like this. I've never seen anyone in all my years wear just overalls with no shirt.” In contrast, Carly thought that people from Appalachia would see hillbilly as the equivalent of being from the country. Eliza also saw that insiders would see hillbilly as a term of pride: “People here take it as a sense of pride. They say, that's just how we are.” Jenna even had the experience of being called a hillbilly by someone when she visited New York City, and she was not bothered by it:

They were like, you're a hillbilly. Pretty much just because the way I talk. I don't think that my accent is very southern, but then you know, you get to other places and they're like, wow. Yeah, you sound like a redneck and you know, it doesn't bother me. I understand I have a southern country accent, and half the time I don't say my words right, but you should hear my dad talk. That's usually what I say, you should hear my dad talk because he's a hillbilly!

The students discussed the distinction between hillbilly and redneck. For Molly, hillbilly was synonymous with “backwoods,” while “rednecks seem to be with their friends doing stupid things.” Molly was also careful to say she had not thought of these terms before, “But I think they both have negative connotations, especially outside of Appalachia and Kentucky, in general. I hear redneck used more at school, especially when people are immature and try to be funny and stupid.” Laurel felt the terms were really the same: “I feel like a redneck is a hillbilly. Carly agreed with that the terms were similar, but she wasn’t sure if everyone would see it that way.

**Redneck**

While the students were aware of the negative connotations of redneck outside of Appalachia, they were also aware that within the region, redneck was a source of pride.
Molly explained, “On social media, they'll use it as a term of, hey, look at me. This is something so redneck I've done. And then they have a picture of something made out of scraps with very unsafe engineering.” Jenna supported this view by describing her dad as a “duct tape will fix everything kinda man. Yeah, definitely a redneck.” Jenna explained,

People don't see it as negatively as a hillbilly. It's almost like when I think of a picture of a hillbilly, I think of like a homeless man. Homeless country, man. I think of a redneck I can think of my Dad, he has a good job, but he's still country as all get out, and you know, he fixes a lot of things with duct tape. That's what I think of. It's not really a negative term. I don't see really either of them as negative, but I think I've redneck is more sophisticated I guess than a hillbilly.

Dylan thought it was a term of pride: “They’re southern, but more open about where they are from, proud of it.” He said his brother even had a Confederate Flag in his room when he was younger, and Dylan saw this as a sign of southern pride: “I don’t take anything by it. I think it’s just a piece of history.” Eliza saw redneck as a way the people in Appalachia describe the people and the place of Appalachia:

I should say that people use the word redneck more as to describe the culture. Hillbilly isn't used as much. Hillbilly, uh, to me the connotation seems more like, you know, the ones that don't wear a shirt underneath their overalls or something like that. Redneck. Like my mom says, Oh yeah, I'm a redneck and all that sort of stuff all the time. I mean, she probably shouldn't. It probably seems like it'd be the same word, but I think it's used quite a bit differently around here.

Eliza also felt that the word and description provided a comfort to people that they would not feel from an outsider calling them “redneck.” And she found this term to be less offensive than hillbilly.

Still, not everyone was comfortable with the term redneck. Laurel described redneck in the opposite way as she rejected this identity:
I went to school with a lot of rednecks. To me, redneck would probably be someone who's very Christian, and listens to a lot of country music and works on a farm or with some type of farming equipment. And in my opinion is probably ignorant and doesn't accept other people's very well. They can also be very bigoted.

Laurel furthered her point by saying “I would be more offended if someone called me a redneck than I would probably any other term just because, like I'm not.” To be clear here, Laurel was not condemning others who identify as a redneck, but she was rejecting this identity as not her own. Neither hillbilly nor redneck had the negative impact of the next term on the students in this study.

White Trash and Trailer Trash

All of the students in this study had negative views of the terms white trash and trailer trash. They were most familiar with the term trailer trash, and for those who lived in mobile homes, this term was very hurtful. Molly expressed the pain of the term trailer trash, as she pointed out that white trash functioned very differently from hillbilly and redneck:

I do see this differently than other two because the other two do not sound as harsh with their words. They can be used in a funny context or joking context or even a proud context, but people wouldn't necessarily call themselves white trash in a proud or joking context. I feel like this is kind of more of an attack. I have been called trailer trash by other people, which is really offensive because I don't understand what living in a trailer means to be associated with trash. But I dunno, I just feel very negative implications when I hear white trash.

Molly had a story about being called trailer trash that served to explain her experience with this pain:

My bus driver was very mean to the kids in my neighborhood supposedly. She called us that behind our backs because her daughter also rode the bus and her daughter was friends with my sister, and my sister said her daughter had been calling me and my sister and our neighbor trailer trash
and not to talk to us or hanging out with us because we lived in a poor neighborhood with a lot of mobile homes. We did live in mobile homes.

Molly saw that living in a mobile home had nothing to do with being “trash,” but she could not understand how others made such a hurtful connection. She was aware that living in a mobile home was not somehow her family’s fault or moral failing:

It’s just like a long line of circumstances that have led to people living in a mobile home. And I know a lot of wealthier people generally live in mobile homes too, especially if they're live alone and stuff because it conserves on money and room. I don't think it should necessarily be associated with trash because there's a lot of different stories. And I don't think anybody deserves to be called trash. Especially people that you don't even know that just live somewhere that may not look as aesthetically pleasing as a home or like it's not as big or fancy.

Molly and I discussed the prevalence of tiny homes on the television show, Tiny Houses on HGTV, and how these homes are really trailers. The public perception of these homes and the people who buy them are different from the perception of people who live in trailers. Molly explained, “It's like you're perceived as you, you don't have to do this, but it's just for fun. It's just for vacation or something like that. It's like you have a side house and you have something larger over there.” The idea of fun and vacation tied to an adventure is the embodiment of the tiny house, but outsiders would not see living in a trailer in the same way.

Laurel described white trash as, “someone who doesn't really care about the situation that they're in and just breeds their own misery because they don't attempt to get out of that situation, like a lot of drug addicts.” She gave an example, “When I think of white trash I think of people who sit and drink beer in a trailer park and do meth.” She also felt that it was not limited to rural areas and people might call some people in the
large city she lived in, “white trash.” Laurel was clear that unlike redneck and hillbilly, no one would chose to call themselves white trash: “Why would you want to call yourself trash?”

Carly saw something different in the term white trash- a choice to present oneself in a certain way:

When you first said that word, I was thinking of a choice, because in some situations, it's our luck of the draw where we grew up, but I think sometimes when people say white trash, it's because of how they present themselves, which in other ways, you know, people present themselves as rednecks or hillbillies. But what about those people that don't have the choice of no shoes or clothes or stuff like that? But then I think of white trash as like, it's your choice to choose what you're presented as I guess.

For Eliza, the term white trash held racial implications. She explained, “It's hard not to get into like racial issues, but saying white trash contrasts with black trash. It's like the hood version of the white version of the hood. Eliza was clear that not everyone growing up in white America has the same advantages: “People don't have the same opportunities as they grow up in white parts of America.” Unlike redneck which Eliza felt could embody a sense of pride among insiders, white trash was derogative. Eliza also felt it was not limited to a specific region: “I would think white trash would be more all over the country, where they could see anywhere.” The last term the students discussed with me was Trump Supporter, a moniker that held deep connotations.

**Trump Supporters**

All of the students in the study held strong opinions on Donald Trump and the term Trump Supporter. Molly said, “When I think of Trump Supporter in this region, I think people are really frustrated.” She felt this frustration came from immigration concerns and the current economic situation of the white working class: “The white
working class wants to work for their money, and they don’t want to see stuff just handed to other people per se.” She felt the white working class believed in Trump as someone who could “give their jobs back.” She further explained these tensions, “When I think of it, I just think of a lot of anger and hatred toward all of these problems that have been festering for years where they haven't been addressed, and I feel like it's kind of a left wing, like an extreme response to that.” She felt Trump Supporters were willing to let a lot of other important things go, if they got what they wanted - immigration reform and white working class jobs. These “other things,” mattered a lot to Molly, and she did not support Donald Trump for President: “I personally did vote in this election, and it was my first election I voted in, and I did not vote for Trump.” Molly was able to understand, however, that other people did support Trump:

But I understand that good people do vote for either party. And I'm fine with that. As long as you are mature about your ideas and you are open to seeing other people's. Like my significant other is a Trump supporter, and he only supported that for the economic issues that were faced. And I do agree he's a wonderful person when it comes to budgeting money. But I feel like he just brought so much hate in this country and we kind of capitalized on that as a whole. And it's really upsetting to me.

Molly avoided political conversations with her boyfriend: “We usually don't talk much about politics. There are some differences because he comes from very Christian conservative background.” Molly did not feel a lot of tension with her boyfriend about his support of Trump: “I mean the only thing he liked about Trump was the economic part, and he didn't really agree with anything else.” Like her boyfriend, she identifies as Christian: “We do have a lot of similar ideas there, and he’s pretty respectful on other terms that we don't necessarily agree on. And we're both pretty young and ignorant about politics anyways.” Molly went on to explain her views this way,
If you have somebody in power that doesn't really want to listen and wants to make their own decisions, it's not going to be very pretty. But I do appreciate some of the things. I feel like there's something good in every holder of office and something bad. I do appreciate that he's bringing back more jobs and more opportunities for people to work and to get money into a better standing. But I do not appreciate the feelings he has towards other people in the negative connotations that he has.

She was hopeful that “something good” could come out of his presidency because that “can’t be changed at this point.” Dylan shared that most people at home voted for Trump because “they didn’t like Hillary.” He chose not to vote:

I should have. First of all, I didn't want to leave my house really. But they just thought of Trump as like a spacer. He was just, he was wanting to be president because people were saying he wouldn't be president. Like he didn't really have any ideas, or anything he really wanted to do. He just wanted to do it, to do it. That's why they wanted him in there instead of Hillary until somebody else comes along. That's better. That's what everybody's saying. Lesser of the two evils. But like I said, I didn't really pay attention to the campaign.

Laurel was not conciliatory about the election. She said of Trump Supporters, “They didn't even know what they're voting for.” Laurel described herself as “very liberal,” and her grandparents as conservative. Both of them voted from Trump. Laurel described how this impacted their relationship:

There were many times where my grandparents and I got into some really, really huge arguments, like arguments where I would like leave the house. Like one time I literally almost left from back home to come back to Louisville early because I was like, I'm not having this conversation with you. Like we're not gonna sit here and argue about this because I will argue back like I don't care if you're my elder, like if you're going to talk to me disrespectful and accuse me of things because I'm a liberal, then I will deal with it right back to you. Like I'm sorry. My grandma even today will still talk about Hillary Clinton getting investigated by the FBI. And I'm like, what are you talking about?
Laurel had already spent a time thinking about why her grandparents supported Donald Trump, so when we discussed it, she had a lot to say. She named that they always respected him as a businessman and watched his television show, *The Apprentice*. She described her grandparents as very conservative on everything but social issues, like LGBT rights:

They are a little bit more progressive on that. Not like exactly where I'd like for them to be, but I have a transgender good friend back home who came around both before and after their transition, and my grandparents still messed up and would call her by the wrong pronoun or by the wrong name. Like they would immediately correct themselves and apologize, but they tried.

Laurel felt Trump’s brashness appealed to her grandparents because they are not into being politically correct. She also felt her grandparents are not nationalists, but they are very much into companies being in the USA and felt immigration policies were not strict enough:

There's a very high like Mexican population in my town, and a lot of them do jobs that people in my town don't want to do, but they still claim that they're taking their work. They'll go and work on the farms and do things on the fields or they'll work a little gas station, so we do this or that. Just trying to make a living for themselves. And everyone's mad at them because they took their jobs and don't pay taxes. They just don't get the complexity of it because they're never exposed to people from other cultures.

Laurel felt a lack of diversity within Sunset City, and white privilege played a part in people’s lack of understanding and empathy for immigrants:

They're not exposed to having a war zone in your home. Although there is extreme poverty in Sunset City, most of them still have food and clothes and shelter. I'm not going to deny that some of those people probably did have a life that is comparable to some people who are immigrating here, but I didn't ever think about fleeing my own country to find a better place for myself.
The other issue Laurel felt that was strongly influencing people’s positions was that “they're surrounded by people who are just like them.” She saw this as a huge issue: “I think is a major issue in like Appalachia and Kentucky. Most people are white privileged and are Christians. They have these privileges that they don't see because they don't understand privilege and oppression.”

Laurel also saw that Trump’s message was more important than his ability to make good on his promises. He paid attention to people who have largely felt left behind:

Donald Trump said that he supported the middle class and the people who worked. Obviously all of it was talk, but that's what's important to these people. They can turn on Fox News, and he is the person that's up there talking about how he's going to help them out, how he's going to make their lives better. He never used anything to back that up, but people don't need that whenever their lives are so shitty, and the economy doesn't help them. Whenever they're doing everything that they can to feed their families, and it's not enough. They don't need somebody to back it up. They just need someone to say that they're going to help them and they're like, okay, let's go for it.

Donald Trump’s position as a well-known celebrity also played a key role in garnering support, according to Laurel. She said this celebrity status made people feel like they knew him and what he was about, and when people feel like other presidents have not done any specifically for them, they are willing to risk it:

Why not go for this person? He’s not a politician. He’s outside. People think people think that politicians are dirty, but they don't have perceptions of businessmen as I do, like I know these men are just as dirty, if not dirtier than politicians, but they don’t have that perception. They just know, okay, we need something different, and this person says he's going to help me.

Laurel felt the perception of being helped mattered more to people who were not going to read actual proposals or watch debates on the House floor. She felt people were not
getting a real take on the issues as it was filtered through *Fox News* and other sources were considered, “fake.” Laurel saw this as a very real issue:

My grandma literally the other day was trying to tell me that NASA denied climate change because she saw it on Facebook or heard it on *Fox News*. I don't know where she saw it, but like that's completely inaccurate. I've pulled up the NASA webpage and she said, that's fake news. I was like, what is the difference between real and fake to you now?

Laurel saw that her grandparents and people around them were influenced by the same stories filter through the same conservative media stations:

These people are constantly seeing the same propaganda on Facebook because they're around all the same people who have the same ideology, and there was never any substantial evidence to back any of it up. But they don't need the evidence. Evidence isn't important to them. They're not very facts based.

What was important to them was the principles they lived by given to them in church every Sunday: “Obviously, they're going to church every Sunday and like living their life based on these principles that are very outdated in my opinion. Facts do not have anything to do with their decision-making process.” Laurel summed up Trump’s support like this:

When you take a man who’s different, a fresh face that says he's going to help workers, it doesn't matter. They could pass 150 million bills, and give billionaires so many tax cuts and people would still be like, he's for me because that's what he says he is and that's what they see on *Fox News*.

Eliza tried to strike a balance: “I can have respect for both sides, definitely. But to me Donald Trump is his own thing in his own right, like, you know, if you're Republican, fine, if your Democrat, fine, but Donald Trump is just way out there.” Still she could not believe the results of the election:

So, the night of the election I stayed up and watched the votes come in, and it was this unreal thing. It takes a step back for everything where I
have such a strong opinion on like, you know, diversity. Oh yeah. It was kind of like an unreal feeling. I don't know what this is going to do, but it's a scary thing. I wasn't particularly for Hillary Clinton, but it was the better of the two options to me.

Eliza felt others found “comfort in Trump because they don't understand other cultures and people from other countries.” Like Laurel, she felt the Trump Supporters thought the “Mexican are going to take our jobs,” and like Laurel, she disagreed with that idea and thought his supporters did not understand that Mexicans are not taking their jobs. She also had empathy for people from other countries who were trying to escape a bad situation, and she felt Trump was responsible for closing down these opportunities for people. Eliza was careful about sharing her politics:

Some people do share my views, my friends, they're more open minded like that. But I mean going into the stereotype if I'm with a group of old men and they're sitting there talking about Trump, you know, that's like a big stereotype. I know. But yeah, if I'm sitting with a group of 60-year-old white men and they're talking about Trump and all the great things is good. I'm not going to speak up.

Eliza was also aware that people from outside the region would not understand why people in Appalachia support Trump, and she felt this was in part because people from outside of Appalachia and the South don’t understand people there: “People from the north don’t quite understand why we do this. It just seems foreign to them. It’s kind of a different place here.” Eliza did not support Trump at all, but she could understand how others got to a place of supporting him, and she felt this had a lot to do with the ideals people are raised with, and what matters to them. She explained her surprised at learning her grandmother did not support Trump:

It greatly surprised me to find out that my grandmother did not like Trump. She would not have anything to do with my mother dating Black men. My mother once or twice dated a Black man. My grandmother said, “I will not have you doing that in my house.” So, my grandmother's
apparently very racist, but she does not like Trump. She detests Trump. I don't know if she just didn't like his narcissistic attitude or something like that. But like I was saying, a lot of people didn't grow up like that. They think they get raised in this mindset and that's how they fall back on things that he supports like, gun rights. You know, even if Trump doesn't come out and say he supports this and he's going to do this, I think people will group together those sorts of things around here and kind of tie those things to him even if he doesn't say them.

Jenna also felt that people will attribute things to Trump even if he doesn’t say them or support them, but she looked at from a more conservative perspective. She explained,

Just like the man that just recently hit the group of people with this car. That was my definition of an idiot. And he was a Trump supporter. So, people that are not Trump supporters look at him and say, this is how they all are. They're all crazy. They're all stupid, you know?

Jenna’s feelings on the election were also informed by her religious views:

I personally do not think Hillary Clinton should have been in office. Do I think that there should ever be a woman in office? It depends on the woman, but I'm very much traditional conservative, Republican, and I think that just like a man should run the church, a man should run the country. But if there was a woman, I'm not like, you know, against equal rights or anything like that. Like there's a woman that is fit to be president, okay, let's have a woman president. But people see the extremes as how they all are. Just like what? Like I was starting to say, the liberal supporters, Trump supporters look at him and think, oh, well you're all stupid. Like I can have a conversation with you and tell you that I'm a Trump supporter. And then listen to your opinion and I can still have my opinion, but I'm not going to push you to put you down for yours. And I think there is no reason that people should put other people down for their opinion.

Jenna referred back to a picture we had examined together where a man was holding a Trump sign:

From a conservative view, this could be a nice. He's an older man so I am looking at it in a positive way. He is just trying to get other people to vote for Trump also. He is just advocating for Trump, but if you see it from a liberal point of view, they might see a dumb, stupid man shoving Trump
down everyone's throat. It is all about perspective, and it's a lot about how you were raised.

Jenna explained that she was raised to be conservative and apolitical, but she was starting to view politics in a different light: “We don't keep up with politics, and I'm seeing it. Now that I'm getting older, politics are just going to shape how my children and my grandchildren lives are going to be.” She added that her dad was a “huge Trump supporter,” and called Trump “the smartest man that’s ever been in office.” Jenna did not agree with him: “I personally did not think Trump should president, but I think he's a lot better than Hillary Clinton.” Jenna did not like that Trump was rude to everyone: “I figured he would have has us bombed by now because he's very open about his opinion. I don't think he really knows how to talk to other leaders. I didn’t feel he would be best for our country.” She also had strong feelings about being equating as stupid for supporting a political candidate:

I don't get into politics. I just think it makes me mad. I am a conservative Baptist girl from Sunset County, Kentucky. I'm not going to tell you that you're stupid for being a liberal from New York who is Catholic. I'm not going to tell you, you are stupid because that's what you believe. I don't think you should tell someone how stupid they are just because of what they believe. To be honest with you, I don't even know what I believe, but you know, I'm not stupid.

Laurel felt Trump’s message was about reviving Christianity: “Make America great again is based on taking America back to a time whenever Christian fundamentals and Christian ideologies were in every single household.” She thought this was not even possible, though she was not in favor of making Christianity stronger. She imagined what they were thinking,
Well when I was a kid, we used to pray in schools, and we used to go out and ride our four wheelers all the time and play with the cows. Like that's what's in their heads. They're thinking of the time whenever they could spank their kids without it being like abuse.

Like Jenna, she saw this as part of traditions enmeshed in Christianity, but she did not feel it was a positive thing: “Even educated people back home are like that because of those Christian ideologies.” She felt that because Trump said he was a Christian, it resonated: “Donald Trump always talking about God this and God that, and people want it to be like it was when they were a kid.” But to Laurel, the complications of life in the 21st century were not simple, and she was aware that it was not possible to turn back time. Life is different now. She explained,

People want it to be like when their parents raised them, and everything was simpler, but we've brought these complications onto ourselves, so we can't just go back. That doesn't fix anything. Like there's so many more complications than just not praying in school.

Laurel also saw a connection between Trump’s slogan of making America great again, and a call for a return to whiteness. She felt that because her home county was not very diverse, people didn’t not think about others who are different from them:

They don't know people who would be affected by Trump. I know people from my hometown that I could point at and be like, you are racist. My grandparents are racist. My grandpa very much more so than my grandma. They would never be racist directly to your face. Like my grandpa was very respectful to many black people and people of different races than himself, and he has been respectful to them to their face. But they have these perceptions about race that freaking Fox News perpetuates. I hate Fox News more than anything.

Laurel went on to explain how she feels Fox News perpetuates fear amid stereotypes and misinformation, and it is all based on the fear of the other: “They're so afraid of things that are different than themselves. Whether that be someone who is non-binary, someone
who is a different color, or someone who listens to a different kind of music.” Laurel felt “they were holding onto how things are from where they are from.” To her, this explained the resistance to immigration. It was something that was different from their childhood experience, so they rejected it. Laurel found herself in an argument with her grandmother after a white nationalist killed a protester with his car:

I called my grandma and I was like, you have to tell me you don't agree with this? You're not okay with what is going on. She was like, well, he's right [Trump’s comments that there are good and bad people on both sides]. It's like, no, he's not right, grandma.

To Laurel this was another example of “protect yourself first,” and she went on to explain how she feel conservative ideologies are based in taking care of self, not others. She affected a conservative voice:

“I don't want to donate my money to other people who are too lazy to get off their ass and get a job and pay for their own healthcare.” “I don't want to pay for a single mother of three. She shouldn't have had three kids if she didn't want to take care of them, but it's not my problem.” Like it's all your problem and your own issues, and that's why people like Donald Trump because he doesn’t really care about what other people think.

The conversations with the participants about Trump and politics led into deeper conversations about other forms of oppression they feel they face from outsiders.

Language

At least four of the students spoke of being perceived negatively by outsiders for having an accent. Laurel was the only student who spoke so candidly about the experience of it, and she said outsiders “perceive people from rural Appalachia as ignorant and redneck,” and one way they accomplish this by “looking down on me
because of the way I talk.” This kind of oppression she experienced in classrooms when she felt fellow students expressed surprise by the way she talked,

First thing out of their mouth is, “Wow! You have really strong accent. Where are you from? Your accent is so cute.” Like thanks. I'm glad that you see me as cute and not as a respectable person. That is, it can be intellectual, right? And being more than just like a cute southern girl.

Jenna spoke of her trip to New York City, and how she was called a hillbilly by someone she met because of her accent. All of the students who named this sense of being looked down upon because of their accent also felt it was wrong to put down someone else’s use of language. Laurel named her pride in her accent even as she acknowledged someone else could not appreciate it.

Race

When I asked Laurel about the experience of race in Appalachia, she started with, “If someone, from rural Appalachia was African American they would have it so much worse than what I did.” She went on to explain there were probably 5 students in her school of 2,000 who identified as African-American. Laurel was very in touch with her own privileges and oppressions: “I know that I'm privileged in the fact that I'm able bodied, white and young. But I'm also in the LGBT community, and I'm poor.”

Eliza also was concerned with racism in Appalachia, and she experienced it from her father when she dated someone who was Hispanic:

It kind of upsets me to see people not being accepted. My mom thinks very similar to me, but my dad is very, very close minded about things. I dated someone who was Hispanic for three years and he did not want to meet him, didn't want anything to do with him.
She did not feel her father’s reaction was out of the norm, though it disappointed her. She told a story about being at Walmart in her hometown and overhearing people using racial slurs at someone in line, and she wondered how racism could be so prevalent that it can be accepted, even among those who are people of color: “You sometimes see weird mixes, like sometimes the rednecks will hang out with the half black kid who also carries a confederate flag.” Eliza thought some of it might have to do with someone who is Black not identifying as strongly as Black because of where they are living: “As they grow up in a place like this, they may not even really see themselves as Black, whatever that would mean to them.” She returned the story of the woman in the Walmart line,

I think they were a little mad at her because it was one of those like speedy checkout lines for 10 items, and she had a couple more. I mean, I was a little upset at first to, you know, like, “oh great, this is the one who's got like 40 items in her cart.” They were mad about it too, but then they started talking about her race and like using these racial slurs and that’s too far.

Eliza did not intervene in the situation, and she did not think the woman heard the people using the slurs. She said she feels like these kinds of situations happen, but it is still taboo to use racial slurs, but she hopes for more than that,

It would be great if people didn't have to deal with oppression at some point. But yeah, resisting my father and his views, it's just my way of not carrying that on so someone else doesn't have to deal with that down the line. At some point I would want someone not to have to deal with that. It might take a long time, but I don't want that way to keep going on the way things used to. Used to be, you know?
Poor

All of the students had ways of explaining how being poor affected their lives and how they negotiated the experience of being poor. Laurel, who was in a sorority, explained that being in poor in college affected her ability to participate in activities:

Whenever there’s a party on the weekend that has a theme, and I don't have any clothes to wear, I don't get to go out with my friends and go to the mall and go buy clothes. I have to go shop at certain places because I don't have the money. I haven't bought clothes for myself since sophomore year.

She also explained that being poor and navigating the financial aid office in college was not easy, especially given that her grandparents have custody of her:

The financial aid office is a freaking maze. Whenever I try to do my dependency override on my FAFSA because my grandparents had custody of me, and not guardianship, it's like a big deal. Those two things have literally the exact same meaning, except one says that my mom let my grandparents have me and the other one would be if she wouldn't have.

She explained further that in the financial aid office, the distinction of custody versus guardianship means that her parents financial information is used to consider her aid, while if her grandparents had guardianship over her, it would not be. Even with her parents’ financial information added, she believed she was eligible for full financial aid. More importantly, to Laurel, this did not make any sense: “They have not helped me with a single thing in my life, and I will not go to school before I have to put them on my FAFSA because that's not representative of anything. My grandparents have done that.”

The pain of having to share very personal life history to secure college funding was bothersome to Laurel:
This lady had the audacity to call me and say that some people are afraid of their parents and that if I was not afraid of my parents or had zero contact with them that I could not get a dependency override. So, every year I have to lie to the student financial aid office and tell them I never talked to my parents just so that I can put this on there even though like that's what the whole dependency override is for.

Laurel explained that the financial aid person was “rude” to her and that the process to continue her status as being in the custody of her grandparents was exhausting:

I do have my own reasons for not being on good terms with my parents and that's none of her business, and she should not judge me because just because I'm not physically afraid of my parents. My parents have hurt me in plenty of ways, and that's not her right to sit there and tell me that I should have to suffer for that. I have to fill out a paper every single year to get this stupid form even though I have a form that says my situation hasn’t changed. Then I have to write a paper talking about how my situation hasn't changed, even though my freshman year, my guidance counselor, my grandma, and my therapy counselor wrote three letters describing that situation and why I should have the dependency override every year. I still have to retype all of that out and turn it in.

Laurel also felt the financial aid counselor was uncaring: “My financial aid lady is the rudest, most disrespectful person I've ever met in my life. And it's like I don't even want to ask her questions.” Some of this she attributed to coming from a small town: “It's really hard to like go from a small, underfunded public high school in southcentral Kentucky where there's like 15 to 20 people in a class, and then coming here where you have 300 people in a class.” The anxiety was related to being rural, first generation and low income:

I just feel like from where I'm from and I don't have any family to tell me, this is how it's going to be. This is how you email your professor. This is when you should go see a professor. This is when you should do that. I don't talk to my professors very much because it makes me nervous. Like it gives me anxiety.
The financial aid office created a special sense of anxiety because of the weight of the interactions with this office. Laurel saw the financial aid office as holding all the cards to her ability to be enrolled at Big University, and unlike the professors in her classes, she could not ignore financial aid:

I don't have the money to pay for this. Like if my scholarship is not straight every single semester, then I have to make sure that it gets fixed, and there's so many hoops you have to jump through in order to get on the phone with someone, just to talk to someone. They're just so understaffed. They have like five people for all the university students. Like it's so hard. Like the money aspect is probably like the biggest thing, that's 100 percent like my largest stressor.

Laurel was also financially stressed in every other aspect of her life that involved money, from food, rent, gas, car repairs, etc. She felt she needed to work more hours at her positions, but that was counterproductive to being successful in college: “I quit my serving job because it was too stressful and like just too taxing on my body. And I was always exhausted from working all the time, like 30-hour weeks.” Laurel used money from financial aid to make ends meet with rent, but she struggled with other basic necessities: “I don't have groceries at my house because I don't have any money.” Of all the financial stressors besides college tuition, rent and food, her car was a constant source of financial stress: “If my car breaks down, I can call AAA, so I can get it towed, but I can't fix it. My grandpa has to come up and he has to fix it himself because they don't have the money to take me to go get it fixed either.” This was very different from the financial situation of other students, Laurel had noticed,

Whereas like my little one [sorority sister], is also from Sunset City, and like I told you, there's no middle class. Like there's the rich and the poor. She was in the rich aspect. She drives a Hummer and whenever it breaks
down, she calls her dad and her dad gets it towed, and it gets it fixed. He tells her when to pick it up.

Laurel spoke to the great difficulties and additional costs poor people face when making decisions about car repairs:

My car broke down because I had gotten dirt in the line from running it on empty because I was too broke to get gas. My grandpa literally had to come up and put some stuff in it. If I would've taken it to a shop, it would have taken five minutes for them to do that. Of course, I would had to pay more money, but it would've been so much more convenient. I had to find a way to and from campus and to and from work for a week and then had to feel bad about not being able to get my friends gas money whenever they were driving me everywhere.

**Socialized to be Poor**

In our first interview, Carly told me straight out: “Faith and I are both from Forest County, and I’m pretty sure it was actually the poorest county in the United States in 2017, so we come from the bottom.” She went onto say that, “growing up we always got socialized like a poor county.” She explained,

It just seems like everyone around you sees you as being poor. No matter if you are from a low class family, or if you are from middle class or high, if you live there, when people first hear that you are from Forest County, it goes, “they’re poor” or I mean most of the time that's what I get from people. Not necessarily all people think that, but that's just the stigma that is put from where I live put on.

Carly had also experienced this feeling outside of the region firsthand when she visited New York City. She explained how they were at pizza shop and the person there asked where they were from, and after she told him, Kentucky, he responded by saying, “Oh, Kentucky, you must own horses.” Carly told him not everyone in Kentucky owns horses, but just as he had made that assumption, she also felt there were other assumptions being made about her and her friends:
They think of Kentucky as the poor state, so maybe they view Appalachia as a poor region because of counties that are within it. That was just very interesting the way that the whole time, like him and the other guy that were in there that were working, they were like snickering and talking. Um, I guess maybe they seen themselves as better because they were not from a poor region.

Carly explained that this kind of dehumanization is often proffered as a joke: “Sometimes they’ll joke around, and they’ll say, oh, that’s where all the hicks or rednecks are from, and you can’t speak English.” Carly saw this as working against both people who were struggling and those who were not because both groups were being seen through this stereotype.

Molly wondered about the dehumanizing effect of looking down on someone was poor: “When you have the shelter and clothes and stuff, and you look at this homeless person, how do you feel about them? Do you feel like they're equals with you?” She shared a story with me about articles on dumpster diving and homelessness that she read in high school, and how she and her classmates learned things about these experiences they had not imagined: “It does teach you that sometimes even no matter where you are and what your socioeconomic status, you do dehumanize other people that you feel are lesser than you.” She likened this experience of being dehumanized by being poor to that of many people in Appalachia:

I feel like we as a specific group in Appalachia do get dehumanized in a sense as we aren't as important, and we aren't going to contribute as much to society as other people, but in fact I met so many wonderful people, wonderful people in my life not only from Appalachia but from everywhere in Kentucky as a whole that are doing rights movements and our lobbying and are trying to get laws passed for the not only of Kentucky, but United States as well. And they're really big into
environmental issues and education. And, I think it's wonderful to see that we are just as capable as every other state or every other area.

The sense that the place of Appalachia was marginalized led the students to further consider what places are preferred.

**Place Identity**

The students in this study felt that rural areas were not as valued as urban areas; consequently, people in rural areas are not as valued as those in urban areas. Molly explained,

> Cities may have more resources, but it's more so the resources and the people that get things done sometimes. The rural areas are just as capable of progress and change. It's just when they do make that change and make that progress and contribute, the population overlooks it because if you don't like somebody, you kind of tend to ignore what they do, whether it be good or bad. You kind of wait for them to do something bad and make fun of them. But if they do something good, then oh, it's not important. I feel like it's kind of the same thing with rural areas sometimes. Not all the time that sometimes if we do make change and do good and it's like, well great, so we did so many more things.

Carly named that there is pressure from within rural areas to leave for a better life experience. She explained, “Sometimes people think that if people don't move from where they grew up at, maybe they're not exploring other opportunities.” She was quick to add that the sense of being poor was a key part of this. She compared herself to someone living in New York City:

> They're going to automatically think like he's got more money. He can live there. That's like an expensive place to live and he's making it. You know, she's in Kentucky and yeah, she struggling to pay her bills and stuff. But this guy, he's in New York City and maybe he struggling to pay his bills, but he's there.

She saw this as both urban preference over rural areas and a stereotype of Appalachia.

She said there is a feeling that people in the north are more financially stable:
I think people, they have this idea that if you live in a rich city that you must be rich just because the city is producing or are producing things that only financially able cities are able to produce. And then if you're in the country where I'm from, you know that they can't produce anything. That's kind of how I think about it.

Carly said she did not have as many opportunities growing up, and it makes her think about her future and the future of children she might have. She explained, “I think I want to stay in the Appalachia, but I think I want to move out of Forest County just because I'll know what it's like growing up there, and I would want more opportunities for my children.” She named some of those opportunities as educational, like the ability to take college courses in high school. Carly also loved her home state of Kentucky, but she felt the tensions of wanting to be somewhere and also wanting more opportunities in her life:

I love Kentucky. I love the nature, love everything like that. Maybe Tennessee, but I don't see myself moving far off, stay kind of close to where my family is. But I'll still want to be flexible in the aspect of me being successful. I don't want that to affect how successful I'm going to be.

Home is Not the Same

Part of Eliza’s transition to college and the making of her dorm room as her home was that her experience of home was changing: “It's a very weird feeling because like, you kind of lose that sense of home stuff. It's kind of weird, like this is my bedroom, but it feels, it feels weird.” What she noticed was that the home she knew was changing, too. She noted, “It's weird also to come home and see people you went to high school with or your friends like that didn't go to college working at Kroger or something like that.” She was also aware that she was missing things that happened at home. She said it felt like,

You really do have two homes, and you're so split. It's like I catch myself saying, you know, I'm going to go home to someone here on campus, and I mean my dorm room, you know, and also say home like going home. It is weird.
Eliza remarked that going home to see her parents she has realized she has missed what has been happening in their lives. While her bedroom and house appear the same as she left them, she noted, “It's like everything just kinda keeps going without me.”

**Going Home**

Dylan looked forward to the weekends, “I go home really as soon as I can on Friday.”

Mary Lincoln had become a stressful environment for him as he made the decision to leave the wrestling team, but he really had no guidance on how to leave the team and talk to the coach. In looking back on this, I also realize this may have been one of the first times in his life he experienced this kind of adult activity of wanting to leave something he joined, and he may have wondered how to do that. Home represented a worry-free environment: “I just like being. Just no worries on my back porch just napping with my family, my buddy, Juice… we've been together since we were eight.”

**Close Friends and Family at Home**

Juice was a very close and important friend to Dylan since they were children. While Dylan left home at went to Mary Lincoln, Juice stayed in Sunset City and went to the local community college. Dylan often talked of relaxing at his grandparents’ house and taking naps on the porch: “Juice walks into my house and just chills there even when nobody's there. He just walks in to take a nap. I mean that's his house, too.” After his first semester at Mary Lincoln, Dylan had discussed going to one of the state universities with a group of friends from home. Dylan said his closest friends were at home:

I have friends here [at Mary Lincoln]. But now, I mean I've cherished my friendships back home. I'm a friendly person. I'm not gonna not be friends with somebody because I’m not around as much but I would rather be home with my other friends.
Dylan shared that the freshmen on his wrestling team all went home on the weekends, but the upperclassmen stayed on campus: “The upperclassmen say we are going to grow out of it.” Dylan did not really buy that. He went home to “relax” and see family, and he did not see how that was something he would grow out of wanting to do. He said that things move slower at home, while at school he is always busy: “I mean you’ve always got something to do here, whether it be conditioning, weight lifting, practice, homework, papers.” To Dylan, family was very important, and his family was very close. He talked about his sister bringing her children, who also consider him a brother, to his grandparents’ house on the weekend. He looked forward to seeing them and spending time together. Molly also went home to see family and friends, and like Dylan, to relax:

It's not that college is a bad thing, it's just that it's like all the time, there's always something to be done and when I go home it's like I can breathe, and I can relax, and I can spend time with my brother and my boyfriend and my friends that are still in high school.

**Home is Where I Belong**

Jenna felt a strong sense of place identity to Sunset City, and this was connected to having nothing to do there, much like what Dylan said of his hometown:

Yeah, I want to live there. I know this sounds very strange and I said this multiple times actually this week, which is weird, but I like having nothing to do, if that makes any sense. It makes no sense at all. Like a really small town, small towns and there's nothing to do. Like you have so much time you can do pretty much whatever you want. There's just maybe not a lot of entertainment things to do, but you can find something to do and I just, I love it. I love it here.

The opportunities of being somewhere else were not as appealing to her, and not because she did not understand the value, she valued “not having anything to do. I love just sitting
on the back porch and watching the sunset and that's like one of my favorite things to do.”

**Belonging in Two Places**

Molly and Laurel talked about the experience of belonging in more than one place, both at their university and back home. Molly experienced this because she had friends and her boyfriend still in high school in her hometown, and she felt connected to her family. Laurel experienced the belonging because of her close relationship with her grandparents. Molly was surprised by this:

I miss home now more than I thought because of my connections there with a lot of my friends who are still in high school, and my boyfriend still in high school. My family's there and I do miss my family and I like being there when I'm there because it's fun. I don't like being in one place for too long being home for short periods of time is refreshing. It's nice to go back and not want to leave for once because like since I didn't get out much I always wanted to go away from home, but now, I want to come back for periods of time.

She also felt her understanding or identity making of the word home was more “fluid”:

I feel like I have different homes because when I go home, I say home is in Big City. When I stay, I say go home is in Sunset, so I feel like I have a couple different homes and I don't know. I think that's okay because yeah, I feel like homes where I'm comfortable and uncomfortable in several different areas, and it depends on the people that I'm with too, like people make up my home, I guess.

Molly also felt that part of her understanding of the fluidity of home was that “length of time doesn't necessarily matter for me.” She realized that she has lifelong friends she doesn’t speak to anymore because they have grown in different directions, and she now has friends of a few months who make her feel very comfortable. She talked about
missing high school because it was a positive experience and a place that made her feel important:

I do miss high school because of the positive experiences I've had with it. And I've always loved school. I've always loved grade school because it was every day was fun because it was honestly really easy for me. But it was like rewarding for me. I just felt a sense of immediate reward. I miss high school sometimes because of all the things I was involved in and all the freedom I had to kind of dabble in that and it'd be okay. I miss high schools, but I'm glad I'm moving on with my life, too.

Laurel did not ever want to live in Sunset City again, but she was very drawn to being where her grandparents were, and she cited them as the reason for his visits back home. Still she had mixed feelings about belonging in both places: “Whenever I'm home I just want to come back to Big City. Whenever I'm in Big City, I just want to go back home. So, I don't really know.” Jenna also echoed the sentiment of feeling at home at Mary Lincoln while feeling at home in her hometown: “It was kind of strange because it's like you can feel at home in two different places.” While students were negotiating life in two places and feeling attachments and identity making in both places, Laurel was also faced in her first year with the prospect of having to return home.

**Facing Home**

After a particularly rough first semester of college, Laurel attributed her failure to not knowing the system of college and not having the supports in place that she needed. She lost the Appalachian Scholarship:

Yeah, it really sucked. I cried. I figured that I would lose it. I knew that it was coming, but I was just really hoping that it wasn't going to happen, and it did. I ended up failing three classes last year, and I withdrew from two. You have to pass so many of the classes that you take. So, I wasn't thinking that those withdraws would count against that, but they did. So that's what brought me down and yeah, it really sucked because I did not want to move back home. Like I love it, but I will never… I'd never want
to live there again. Ever. Like if I ever live in Kentucky, it's going to be here just because that's not for me anymore.

Laurel’s only connection to Sunset was her grandparents, and she said when her grandparents are gone, she will visit family. She spoke of the tensions she faced with thinking she was returning home:

It's beautiful, but I hate it. I just hate the perspectives and the mindset that people have there. There's people here who have those mindsets, too. I'm not going to ignore that. No, I meet a lot of people here who grew up in Big City and react the same way and have the same ideologies as a majority of the people in Sunset do, but here you can find more of an opportunity to meet someone different.

It was important for Laurel to remain in a place that offered her diversity of experiences and perspectives, and she felt increasingly out of place in her hometown of Sunset. Laurel felt at odds with her hometown over many things when she was growing up, and this tension grew as she experienced life in Big City, where she found people with different ideas and perspectives who were from different cultures. While the students felt a sense of belonging in their home and college environments, belonging was not without its challenges.

**Religion and Sexuality**

Molly had a very supportive church family, and they meant a lot to her. As a member of the queer community, she also felt at odds with her church because the church was not in favor of same sex relationships:

I love my church family, and I wouldn't trade them for the world. They're so amazing and sweet and supportive. It's just something that they don't know, and I'm okay with keeping that from them. I'm more of a people pleaser, and I don't want to necessarily hurt anybody, and I don't want to pay for it. So, I feel like this is a good medium for me.
Her university life, however, allowed her the freedom to express her identity in the queer community:

During welcome week, my roommate and I were sitting together, and they said to stand up if you don't identify - if you're part of the LGBT community. And I stood up and I didn't even feel awkward because of the people that I didn't know around me.

What was difficult was the people she knew from high school in the group:

It was the people that I knew that were in the crowd that I actually did know, and I was familiar with and that I grew up with. It's just people that could trail that back to high school, and that's just not a part of me that I want to be in high school. That wasn't a part of my identity that I wanted to have in high school.

Molly explained how she could put these pieces of her identity in different categories without feeling like she was being untrue to herself. For her, religion was not about excluding people: “My faith should be about love and compassion and accepting and kind of giving my life for a greater cause.” Molly explained that this included all kinds of identities and experiences. She likened it to the feelings she had about the queer community: “I feel the same way when I go into the queer community because it's such a strong knit group of supportive people that are compassionate about who they are and love who they are and other people.” Molly wanted to take any of the hatred out of these experiences: “I try to exemplify the best of both and leave behind the negative connotations that people may have gathered over the years of being in one place for the other.” Still Molly knew the church had very strong positions on an identity that was very important to her.

She knew they did not agree with homosexuality, but she added that they would likely want to change her if she acknowledged being in the queer community at church. She knew she would lose their support if she did not want to change. She was willing to work within these competing spaces because she found meaning in both of them:
Like if I were to come out and enter the church and say “I'm this way. Will you still accept me?” And they would say “Yes,” but they'd want you to change as well. But I feel like even if I did come out, I may lose the support of the church as a whole, but I would still gather the support of them as people and they would still love me nonetheless. And I kind of take that into consideration. And I largely don't try and intermix the two because I don't want to hurt anyone's feelings or kind of like upset anyone or offend anyone, especially bringing the church into the queer community unless it's a positive connotation or bringing the queer community of the church because, I don't know, I still care what people think of me and that aspect and I want to keep kind of like a peaceful regard and don't want to be worried about losing the love and support of some people while others would not.

Jenna also found herself at odds with her church over their attitudes toward the queer community, even though she did not identify as part of the queer community:

I've gone to church ever since I was little. Almost every Sunday dad made sure we were in there, but I've just recently started questioning exactly what they're offering about. I've actually just really started paying attention, if you want me to be honest with you. I think that as I'm getting older, I'm starting to form my own opinions. And of course, not all of them are with my dad's. My dad is very homophobic. He's very against, other people that are not like him. And I'm very against that. I'm all for, you know, if you choose to be a different sexuality than me, you know, you go you, I don't want to really want to see it, but I don't want to see straight people making out either. You know, what I'm saying? We're not talking about it. I have lesbian friends and my dad doesn't want them in the house or anything. Like he's very against it and that bugs me a lot because they're like my only friend, so I don't have very many friends. Some of them are lesbian and then he started talking to them about it or that he's starting to become more okay with it. Like they've stayed at my house a couple of times. But he just, you know, he's very old fashioned.

Jenna and Molly were working within their religious systems to make sense of their understandings of what it meant to be in the queer community and part of a church, or what it meant to be a friend of someone who is queer and to also be in a church that preaches against it. Other students outright rejected religion as a form of oppression.
Religion as Oppression

Laurel was the most vocal of all the students about the oppression of religion. She said, felt Christianity dictated a lot of what people in Appalachia thought, and she felt this was often oppressive to women since the southern Baptist church taught parishioners that men were superior to women. Eliza had an experience in church that illustrated what Laurel observed. She explained,

I had to go to Sunday school, but the man that taught it conflicted from my views in many ways. He would try and skew it, so it really kind of hurt me and confused me at the same time. In his view, women were subservient to men, and he would pull out all these passages from the Bible and it would, it really kind of confused me because, you know, I am Christian, it's like I don't really want to believe that. And he could be very racist, very bigoted, and it was hard to take that from someone who was supposed to bring me closer to my religion.

Eliza also noticed the way he controlled his wife: “I remember him talking about how he wouldn’t want her to wear certain things and tell her she couldn't go some places.”

Eliza’s mother taught Sunday school to three and four year olds, and she sought out her mother for comfort. Her mother did not agree with the teacher, but she still wanted her daughter in Sunday school. She called him “a good man,” and this really troubled Eliza:

Yeah, I mean I may not have seen it so much in the rest of the church, but there was like one girl that was a little bit older than the group that he would always send to go fetch things for him, small servanty kind of tasks. It was kinda like I expect you to do this.

Eliza challenged the teacher’s wife one day on her teachings that people in the Middle East were all trying to kill us. Eliza took the risk to say, “They're not all, you know, like that. That’s kind of, you know, extremists, and then there's just regular people.” She said the teacher’s wife did not respond positively to her questioning the teaching that day, so she chose to keep it to herself afterwards. Eliza still considers herself Christian, but she
was more interested in a personal relationship with God than a “drink the Kool-Aid situation”: “Here it's like everybody knows everybody on it. Everybody comes together to worship and it's insane. It is a little culty to me how they do it.”

Dylan identified as a Christian, and he went to church on holidays. He explained his religious views as, “I'm a Christian, but I don't preach it to other people. I don't go to church usually. His grandfather goes to church every Sunday and other members of his family attend regularly. Dylan did not choose Mary Lincoln because of its religious affiliation, but he was fine with it having a Christian affiliation. Christianity did not speak to Dylan because he noticed the hypocrisy of people in the church: “They're always just pushing their agenda. A lot of family that are members are always just pushing, pushing their agenda on people.” Dylan also noticed that while they were preached to about right and wrong, the people doing the preaching were not always following their own words: “They might push what's right and wrong and don't always want to do what they consider right.” Dylan also said the church he attended was very small: “Southern Baptist. The thing is a little bitty white church. I mean like 20 people.” Dylan emphasized that a relationship with God did not require the church: “You don't need the church to have God.” He felt religion was more of a personal relationship with God, much like Eliza did.

The place where it all takes place is in the church, and in Appalachian Kentucky, there are a lot of them. I noted to Eliza that I had noticed many churches for such a rural area:

There's like a hundred or so in every county. Well here's a logical question, why? Why are there so many? I don't know. It probably is like a place of comfort for the people here in such a deep rooted thing that, you know, rather than have a few in every county that it's kind of like a more
community thing to have their church, you know, with only a few people in it and it is kind of a staple of the community.

Jenna also noted, “I think there are in Sunset alone probably 30 churches. That’s no joke. And that's, you know, a 25-mile radius. That’s crazy.” Laurel emphasized this: “There's more lawyers and churches in Sunset than any town should ever have.”

Laurel felt the weight of religious oppression and spoke more about it than the other students, though many students talked about religion: “Organized religion is, in my opinion, the single worst thing to ever happen to society. And that's not just Christianity, that's all organized religions because people like to use it as a front to push a political agenda.” Laurel biggest issues with organized religion were that it halts human progression:

When we're trying to progress as a society, when it comes to science, when it comes to social factors, like gay marriage or even like biracial marriage, like who were the ones who didn't want that to happen? The Christians. Surprise. Like it's just the whole stagnant thing. They want things to stay the same. They want things to be a certain way. They have always been. But you can't just do that. Life is ever moving. Life is always going. We're always developing.

She gave a recent example of this kind of thinking. She called her grandmother after a recent school shooting and talked to her about gun reform. Laurel does not believe anyone should have guns. She said her grandmother agrees to an extent, but then Laurel explained how her grandmother saw the school shooting in the context of how people today are sensitive to everything:

She was talking about how back in the day people were not offended so easily and I was like, well, back in the day the people who were going to be offended by whatever was said, were extremely depressed and were probably afraid to say something and that's the difference. Like back in the day, when there weren't any gay people, it's because the gay people were too scared to say that they were gay. Back in the day when nobody got an
abortion just because they were getting an abortion in an alley and probably suffered from severe trauma if not severe medical problems because of that. Right? We've progressed as a society where people have a voice now through the Internet, through social media, all of those things which are a double edge sword in themselves and are also causing a lot of problems for society. But it's, it's just different. And that's the thing about small towns is they don't want to move forward with everyone else. They want to stick back in the way that it's comfortable because progress isn't comfortable. It's supposed to push you outside of your comfort zone and make you think of things in ways you haven't thought of them before and people from smaller, more rural areas tend to not want to do that probably because of religion, mostly because of religion, in my opinion.

Laurel said she had rough times in her relationship with her grandparents because of religion, and her stock response in high school was, “You cannot argue the Bible with someone who does not believe in the Bible.”

Eliza noted that her college has a Christian affiliation, and she identifies as Christian, but she was thinking about how non-Christians might feel with all the Bible verses posted everywhere on campus. Jenna’s dad was committed to having his family in church every Sunday, and Jenna does not really like the church because of family drama: “There's not very many Christians that I've met personally that aren't judgmental people and that makes me question a lot.” After her friend passed away at age 14 of cancer, Jenna found herself questioning her beliefs more:

I was saved when I was eight years old and I believe in God, but I still have so many questions that I don't think anyone can really answer that I just have to kind of figure out. And everybody's just like, yeah, faith. I'm a very logical person. I'm a math major for crying out loud. I got a lot of logic and reason and not a lot of it makes sense.

Jenna found herself questioning the idea of faith, and the reliance upon faith in her church. She said she needed more than just faith. She needed to have some sense of how it works, just like her math problems: If you gave me a math formula, I have to know
why it works. And that's the same thing with religion. I have to know why it works, why it happened.” Other students found faith to be very important.

**Religion as Belonging**

Carly and Faith spoke of the ways their church mattered to them. Carly spoke about her grandfather’s influence on her spiritual journey:

> I think one of the most important things to me is that my grandpa also went there, and he was like one of the most like godliest man that I ever knew. And so, every time I like see that church I think of him. One of the reasons being when I was baptized he was a deacon at the church. So, he actually got to be like in the water with me and the preacher. And so just like, a lot, like, a lot of different things about that church just like makes me think of him. And he passed away four years ago and so having those memories when I was younger really just stands out when I see this church.

The students in the study who found meaning in their churches also found significant meaning in the chapel on their campus. Carly said the chapel at Mary Lincoln “was her home away from home.” Anytime she is having a hard time or a rough day, she goes to the chapel: “I love to sing in there because the acoustics are amazing. Any time I need some along time, I just take a trip to the chapel.”

The students in this study were aware of the many things they did not know and could not be prepared for in going to college, and they had advice for first generation, low income students from Appalachia who were planning to go to college.

**Advice to First Generation, Low Income Students Planning to go to College**

**Dylan:** Put a lot of thought into where you want to go to college, and don’t let others decide for you.

**Laurel:** Don’t give up. Even if you are broke and can’t eat for a few days. There are so many resources on campus to help you. I’m really bad at keeping my problems to myself. I’d say being open minded is enough. People who come from where I come from can be
very closed minded to other people's perspectives and opinions, and I say listen to others, really listen to them.

**Carly:** Don’t let your inner self defeat you. Keep pushing no matter what anyone else thinks of you. Seek the help that you can receive and the grants and scholarships and everything because that's made like a world of difference for me. And if I wouldn't have had that one person to push me and say, listen to what this person is saying, you've got a good scholarship, then I wouldn't be here. So, I'm this person telling you, listen to what they have to offer and then make your decision. But don't be determined before they present what they have for you. For sure.

**Eliza:** It is really freeing, but it's a lot. It's weird if you've never had that kind of freedom before to know, okay, I'm going to have to find a way to pay for my own groceries. I'm going to have to find a way to get my own gas. I got to be driving here by myself. You know, I can go and see my parents on the weekend, but this was kind of that big step into I'm handling all this on my own now.

**Jenna:** College is not like the movies. It is a whole lot of work. It's a lot more work than high school because I remember like pretty much all four years of high school I did nothing. And that like high school doesn't really prepare you for college as much as it should. I think that's not really something that Talent Search can help with. But that is definitely something that high schools in general can help with is preparing you for college and making you have to study. Letting you do more things on your own, being more independent with your education because in college you don't have someone over your shoulder. They don't care. So, it's a lot different in that aspect and a lot of students need to learn that it is different. It’s not like the movies.

**Conclusion**

In Chapter 5, I examined college-going identity and ways the students felt they belonged in college. Chapter 6 explored the tensions students felt with belonging and not belonging in college. Chapter 7 explored the students’ sense of place identity to Appalachian Kentucky, and how they felt a sense of belonging to their colleges along with the tensions they were feeling at home. The students in this study shared their understandings of terms used to marginalize them by people outside the region of Appalachia. They felt they were looked down upon because of they were seen as poor, but also because they lived in a rural area. They discussed how they felt about being seen as poor and how their place identity in Appalachian Kentucky is influenced positively by
their connections to friends and family. They also talked about the significance of
religion in shaping the attitudes and beliefs of people in the region, and they examined
how they felt about religion. In the discussion chapter, I will explore all of the findings
from Chapters 5, 6 and 7 more deeply in connection to the literature reviewed for this
study.
CHAPTER 8

DISCUSSION:

SENSE OF BELONGING AND PLACE IDENTITY AMONG RURAL, FIRST GENERATION, LOW INCOME COLLEGE STUDENTS FROM APPALACHIAN KENTUCKY

“Death's got an Invisibility Cloak?” Harry interrupted again. "So he can sneak up on people," said Ron. "Sometimes he gets bored of running at them, flapping his arms and shrieking.”

― J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*

**Introduction**

This study was centered around the symbolism of Harry Potter’s invisibility cloak, and how it empowered Harry in the fantasy series bearing his name. The invisibility cloak was used here to represent the absence of scholarly attention or rural, first generation, low income college students from Appalachian Kentucky. One important goal of this study is to make those students visible. In this discussion chapter, I analyze the key themes identified in the findings as stated in Chapters 5, 6, and 7, in the context of the literature presented in Chapter 2. The topics below emphasize the importance of sense of belonging and place identity in understanding students’ lived experiences in college at an important development stage in their lives. Hurst (2006) acknowledges that the impact of community contexts is a lesser understood aspect of how working class students negotiate social class in the college context, and I would add here that the context of place is active in shaping identity. This phenomenological study sheds light on the experience of sense of belonging and not belonging in college within the context of the participants’ identities as rural, first generation, low income college students from Appalachian Kentucky. This study contributes to the wider body of research on working class and first generation
college students by examining identity, as not limited only to social class. This study implicates the ways in which students “identity make” across place, a lesser theorized aspect of working class identity. The study also contributes to an understanding of how social class inequality is replicated and maintained in higher education, though this contribution is tertiary.

In this study, I examined how seven rural, first generation, low income college students from Appalachian Kentucky experienced a sense of belonging at their colleges and universities. I was also interested in how they experienced their place identity to Appalachia and how this place identity informs their sense of belonging in their college communities. Specifically, my research questions in this study were

1) How do rural, first generation, low income college students from Appalachian Kentucky experience a sense of belonging at their colleges and universities?

2) How do rural, first generation, low income college students from Appalachian Kentucky experience their place identity to Appalachia and their home communities, and how does this align with their sense of belonging in their college communities?

Below I will discuss the research questions in the context of the literature reviewed in this study along with relevant findings from the study. Afterwards, I will discuss the implications of these findings and the limitations of the study. Finally, I will make recommendations for future study and conclude this study.

**Identity**

This study was designed around the central concept of identity as an active agentic experience as understood by Hall (1990/1996), Gee (2000) and Tracy (2013). In particular, how do rural, first generation, low income college students from Appalachian
Kentucky negotiate their identities around multiple intersections? Place identity is perhaps even more salient than the triumvirate of race, class and gender, for some people.

**Rural Identity as Master Identity**

Karen Tracy (2013) names master identities as those relatively stable and unchanging aspects of identity that may change over time, e.g. race, gender, etc. Hernández, Hidalgo, Salazar-Laplace & Hess (2007) recognize place identity as a part of one’s identity that is developed through interaction with places, so that one defines one’s self as “belonging” to this place. Often, this place identity is discussed as “home,” or the place where one feels at home, but this is developed through more than living there. The students in this study embodied a rural identity, even though many of them lived in an Urban Cluster, with a population of approximately 25,000 people. As definitions of rural illustrate, people can identify as rural even if they do not actually live in a rural area. This suggests that rural identity is more than an attachment to area, it is an interactive construction of identity shaped by the community, the people, and the culture. To say, “I am rural,” means more than location, it engenders what Agnew (2011) calls a sense of place, the belonging to a community. The students in this study alternatively referred to this identity as “country.” As the third dimension of place (location and locale were the others) sense of place transcends location as belonging to a community is not tied directly to specific location, though it can be. Rural encompasses more than a specific location. In fact, one can claim country as a sense of place while living in an urban location because the identity of country also constructs the identity of its opposite, city. Soja (1980) referred to this interrelationship as the socio-spatial dialect, where social realities construct meaning in relationship to spaces. Thus, the adoption of a rural identity
becomes an interaction with people and places they inhabit. Perhaps this is even more clear when the construction of this identity is a specific to a location, as in Appalachian Kentucky.

**Appalachian Identity as Master Identity**

Batteau (1990) argues that Appalachian identity is a social construction of outsider imaginings; one that has served to other poor whites as a peculiar race of its own and to make sense of white poverty (Isenberg, 2016). Through images of hillbilly, redneck and white trash, Appalachians are seen as lesser than whites in other regions. Terms like redneck and white trash are not only used to other poor southern whites, the terms construct the sense of a white self that is both superior and opposite of the poor southern whites\(^\text{10}\). (Donehower, Hogg, & Schell, 2012; Thomas et al., 2011; Beech, 2004; Isenberg, 2016). Redneck and white trash function as foils to whiteness. While white privilege is still afforded to these foils, they are disparaged by social class and region (McCarroll, 2018). Still students in this study only outright rejected white trash and trailer trash as hurtful. Molly openly wondered how living in a trailer made someone trash. The term trailer trash is a clear example of how social class and region marginalize students from Appalachia.

The hit television shows, *Tiny House Hunters*, *Tiny House Big Living*, *Tiny Luxury*, and *Tiny House Living*, all on the HGTV channel, reveal this social class divide in popular culture. House hunters on these show are seen as eco-conscious and adventurous as they search for tiny trailers with compostable toilets and aluminum siding.

\(^{10}\) Like Sartre (1943) noted, there is no “other” without a “self.” In his analysis of the phenomenological experience of shame, Sartre explained that shame is experienced not just by the self, but the self in relation to the other.
If they have dogs and cats and three children, the show does not disparage them as poor, or as making a poor decision, it celebrates their lack of materialism and their willingness to sacrifice. The reason the audience sees the homes in these shows as tiny homes and not trailers is because the connotation of the word trailer is a place where poor people live. The homes on these shows are seen differently because the people who are buying them and creating them are seen differently than the people in Appalachia. A summary of a recent episode of *Tiny House Hunters* reveals this:

A Dallas resident is downsizing to have more freedom for cycling and homemade brewing. With a budget of $25,000, he looks for a modern tiny home with a hint of hippie style that's big enough for his bikes and equipment.

Social class markers are laden within this description. He is seeking freedom to ride his bicycles and brew beer, both leisure activities that are decidedly more of the hipster middle class than the poor, in this depiction. However, this description also has all the makings of so called, “trailer trash,” if the middle class markers of “modern,” and “hippie,” are removed. A trailer with lots of bike in front of it and a brewing station inside could easily be seen through the lens of trailer trash as not a marker of freedom and innovation, but as trashy. What really matters is not the dwelling, but how the people who live there are valued or unvalued. The reaction to *Tiny House* is yet another version of the *Deliverance* Myth, posited by Thomas et al. (2011), where the images of backward whites serves to disparage even the places they call home.

Trump supporters have become the equivalent of being seen as white trash or trailer trash and/or redneck. In the former, whiteness and social class are the lenses through which the othering takes place. In the latter, political power, a privilege not afforded the elite white class in the electoral college becomes a tool of oppression (Pruitt,
2011). The students felt a sense of being called out on the national stage as the region who voted against their own interests. Hochschild (2016) explored this same paradox with Tea Party voters in Louisiana. She wondered how people can be opposed to and vote against policies that benefit them the most. What she discovered is “emotion in politics” outweighed the logic of facts and statistics. She saw that stagnant working class wages coupled with a fear of immigrants taking jobs, or worse, receiving government assistance, led many Tea Party voters to vote against policies that would benefit them.

Still other researchers argue that Appalachia is a culture of people who share a system of values based on religion, familism, localism, rurality, and fierce independence (Jones, 1994). The historian Ronald Eller (2013) sees Appalachia named as a region by urban journalists post-Civil War, which served as a counter point to progress in the twentieth century. bell hooks (2016) notes that she is respected as a black feminist, but not as an African-Appalachian writer. The land she feels connected to is perceived as white, and her voice is not heard.

All of the students in this study identified as being Appalachian and Kentuckian. This master identity was more ingrained in them than the idea of rural identity, though they did see themselves as being from a rural area. The Appalachian Kentucky identity embodied outsider images that marginalized them, which suggests this master identity was not only the interaction of people with places, but of people with other places. While the Appalachian Kentucky identity was positioned by others in ways that oppress Appalachian Kentuckians, rural identity is also positioned by the more preferred urban locations and by images of the rural.
Rural Identity Positioned by Urbanormativity and Rural Simulacra

Hall (1990/1996) uses the term positioning to refer to the power negotiated in identity making, where one social position is generally negotiated against another and positions the other. In the case of rural and urban, the latter is considered normative while the former is not. The U.S. Census maintains the definition of rural, as “the absence of urban” (Thomas et al., 2011, p. 27). The definition reflects the normalization of urban, what Thomas et al. coin as urbanormativity. One in five, or 59 million Americans, live in rural areas, but four in five Americans do not. The effect of this is that most Americans are unfamiliar with firsthand experiences with rural areas (Donehower, Hogg & Schell, 2012). The study revealed that students had learned to associate urban areas as positive centers of human activity, where careers were possible and opportunities lie (Brooke, 2012; Carr & Kefalas, 2010; Corbett, 2007; C. B. Howley, A. Howley, & Johnson, 2014). The findings revealed that rural students consider living elsewhere because life is positioned as belonging elsewhere. (Corbett, 2007; C. B. Howley, A. Howley, & Johnson, 2014, Carr & Kefalas, 2010). Rural is positioned as less desirable through the lens of urban and the repeated images of rural that serve as outsider understandings of it.

Baudrillard (1994) noted the use of simulacra, essential a copy of the real thing, that through repeated exposure becomes the real thing. In the case of rural places, people believe they know them through their ideas of them rather than their experiences of them. This holds real implications for places like Appalachian Kentucky where images of hillbilly, a term students in this study did not identify with, construct a simulacra of the place and its people. In the literature, rural myths abound but center around ideas of
wholesomeness, purity, adventure, and backwardness. It seems rural is either an authentic wilderness or a place to be feared (Thomas et al., 2011).

**White Identity Positioned by Other Whites**

In this study, only one of the students, Laurel, discussed white privilege, and it was in relationship to the privileges whiteness afforded her as opposed to people of other races. All of the students in this study identified as white, but none of the students in the study mentioned whiteness or their own experiences as white when I asked them to discuss race in Appalachia. They spoke of the experiences of people of color in Appalachia and their observations of those experiences. This is not unusual or specific to the students in this study. A pilot study I completed in a northern state yielded similar results with white students. Students only talked about race as if it applied to people of color. The invisibility of whiteness afforded them some privileges that social class and region complicated. As Julie Bettie (2014) wrote in, *Women Without Class: Girls, Race and Identity*:

> [A]n aspect of whiteness is that whites often do not immediately experience themselves as members of a racial/ethnic category “white,” but as individuals, and, without a cultural discourse of class identity, they do not readily experience themselves as member of a class community, either. (p.161)

Bettie notes that the working class girls could perform middle class white identity and not be seen as ‘too bourgeois,’ but the Mexican-American girls were seen as giving up their racial/ethnic identities by adopting middle class identity performance. Similarly, the students in this study were not seen as giving up their identities as Appalachian by going to college, because whiteness affords them a sense of individuality, but the social class divide between home and college effectively makes them give up aspects of their
identities. It is not articulated in the same way as it was with the Mexican-American students in Bettie’s study; however, plenty of Appalachian youth who do not have parental and grandparental support for attending college have been told they can’t go to college or they can’t leave the family. The students in this study did not experience that, as their families were all committed to having them go to college, but they did all experience an othering based on being “poor.”

“Poor” as a Discourse Identity vs. Working Class Identity

The students in this study spoke of their social class as “poor,” and not by the identifiers of “working class” or “middle class.” At times some of them would say lower social class in speaking generally about their place identity, but none of them called themselves working class because I don’t think they identified with the poster image of the blue collar worker. I should add here that all of the students in this study along with their immediate families would meet the Zweig’s (2011) definition of working class: “those who do not have much control or authority over the pace or content of their work, and they are not a supervisor, and they are not the boss.” Zweig’s definition of working class relates to the power given the worker, not the worker’s income levels. Zweig (2011) estimates 62% of the labor force in the United States is working class by this definition.

The students in this study were all working class, but they did not define themselves as working class. For this reason, after relating the findings in Chapters 5, 6, and 7, I refer to their social class by the word “poor,” which is what the students themselves used. I think this word holds connotations worth consideration here as the emphasis on being poor vs. being working class is very different. For one thing, being
poor is not defined in relationship to work, as working class is. Being poor for Carly, Molly, Faith, Jenna and Laurel was an identity marker, it meant something about how they were seen by others.

**Poor Identity as Performed Identity**

Judith Butler (1990) argues that people do not choose gender; rather the repeated performance of gendered identities constructs gendered identities. Similarly, the repeated action of poor identity creates a poor identity. Carly told me on our first meeting that she was “socialized to be poor,” and that all the messages she knew of her county growing up was that they were poor, and at times, the poorest county in the United States. What might seem like a simple demographic fact, actually creates an identity when repeated through images and experiences in childhood. Laurel spoke the most about her experience of being poor and the pain of being poor. Nearly every decision she made had to consider money, and this created anxiety for her. From making decisions about food, rent, car expenses and financial aid, Laurel’s life revolved around money, but in the way of survival, not materialism. The effect this had upon her was that she could never be fully comfortable in a given situation. A sorority formal meant that clothes were needed. A job meant that she needed gas for her car. A broken car meant she needed gas money for someone else. It wasn’t that Laurel herself was not at ease with her university experience, but rather, all of her interactions required enough money for survival, which created anxiety for her.

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11 Performance here does mean an act or show, but rather a repeated action that is performed.
Poor Identity as Positioned Identity

Just poor identity can be a performed identity constructed through repetition, poor as an identity is also positioned. Earlier, I discussed how terms like redneck and white trash other whites and serve as a way to disparage them. Being viewed as poor is yet one more way to other whites who are seen as not having made the right life choices. In the dichotomy of self and other, the “poor” other has made the wrong life choices, while the “scraping by” self feels empowered at their plight: “At least, I am not them.”

First Generation College Student as Interactional Identity

Tracy (2013) defines an interactional identity as one that is defined by a specific role in a given context. Three months before I interviewed them, the students in this study were not first generation college students. This is an interactional identity that represents the relationship between the student and the college. Outside of this context, it does not exist. Tracy (2013) explains that interactional identity can be part of a master identity, but is not independent of it. This makes good sense in thinking about the identities of the students in this study, as first generation is relational and dependent on their other master identities, but it is a way that colleges and universities position students. It is not value free to be first generation. The students experiences reveal that they felt positioned as poor by others.

First Generation College Student and Cultural Capital

Bourdieu’s (1986) ideas of the exchange of capital, particularly cultural capital in the case of higher education are relevant to first generation students. Cultural capital refers to those aspects of culture that are given based on upbringing. Hope told me her
greatest challenges in adjusting to college were all the things she did not know, and all
the things her family did not know to help her. They lacked the cultural capital to explain
the college processes to her. She had to figure things out on her own. All of the students
in this study were first generation, which the U.S. Department of Education (2018)
defines as those students whose parents have never completed a bachelor’s degree, but
increasingly, this definition is widened to include students who do not have familial
support. First generation college students need guidance in navigating the college going
process because family members may not be able to provide direction, and the challenge
of being first generation has been well established in higher education literature.
(Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004; Rubin, 2012; Strayhorn, 2012, Duncan
& Murnane, 2011; Fisk & Marcus, 2012). However, the impact of being first generation
on individual student experiences in higher education is significant.

Students who do not know the systems of higher education need additional
support and guidance in navigating it because higher education is vastly different the
systems of K-12 education. At the same time, first generation students must also address
their sense of independence. Both Molly and Laurel, who struggled with first generation
college students issues at Big University, wanted to handle it on their own. They likely
had been able to handle things on their own up to this point. They were intelligent, and
served as leaders and helpers in their families, so it is difficult for them to be a situation
they cannot manage without adult support. To be clear, the students felt emotionally
supported by parents and grandparents, but there were things they experienced at the
university, where they needed adult support in making sense of it. Molly gave as an
example the challenges she was facing with deciding whether or not to stay in the school
of engineering. She felt she could not talk with her parents about the kinds of questions she was facing about her major because they had a lot invested in her success. She served as a role model to younger siblings and family members, and if they knew she was struggling, she was not sure how that would be received. She also felt that her lack of understanding about the kinds of study skills and preparation she would need in college were things she had to handle on her own. It was not that she did not want to tell them about it; importantly, what could they do to help her?

At Big University, the students relied on peers instead of asking professors for help, and they imagined the staff at their university would not be helpful, but when Molly sought help by the end of the first semester, she found the opposite to be true. She connected with someone in academic support who helped her make sense of her options. Laurel, however, had the opposite experience with her financial aid counselor, and this added to her anxiety of talking to adults in authority. The first generation experience of students in this study spoke to some important differences in how small colleges and big universities serve their student populations.

Mary Lincoln College addressed the significant need for guidance and support for first generation college students, and the five students in this study from Mary Lincoln all spoke highly of the staff who assisted them. Carly told the story of how she came to Mary Lincoln, after first writing it off as too expensive. As she said, there was no way she could afford it. Once her Talent Search counselor, Ms. Laura, convinced her to talk to the admissions staff, they really helped her figure out the finances in a workable manner. She was able to come to Mary Lincoln. From the very beginning of the students’ experience at Mary Lincoln, the students were walked through the financial aid process and given
significant aid that the state universities could not match. The Talent Search staff said that increasingly they were directing students to apply at private colleges because of the differences in aid. Smaller colleges may also bridge the cultural capital gap.

Students who attended Big University did not have the experience of a supportive environment, but that did not deter those students from persisting. They needed support, but the advantages of being in a diverse environment outweighed the challenges of navigating college. They were also willing to give up the support they needed to gain the diversity they also needed. It mattered more to Laurel to have the benefits of being in a diverse environment with people who were open-minded than it mattered to her to have a supportive staff person assisting her. For the most part, after nearly losing her scholarship, Laurel was able to navigate the university. The question does remain if the university system could have better supported students like Laurel and Molly. State universities have grown increasingly more elite in the students they serve.

Still it is important to examine Molly’s experience in the engineering school in more detail. Molly’s experience highlighted the patriarchal values inherent in the college of engineering. In orientation, all of the students in the engineering school were told most of them would not make it. Such a message is a challenge to compete to a middle or upper middle class male student, but for a rural, first generation, low income female student from Appalachia, this message is a sign that you do not belong here.

While the engineering school offered student groups that Molly found empowering, like the women’s group and queer community group, her classroom experience was not set up to create such an interdependent environment. First and second year students were kept at a distance from the faculty in the engineering school,
and graduate students led classes with over 100 students in them. When Molly found that she needed help, it was not socially acceptable to ask the professor, as that would have been admitting weakness, something that had greater implications as a female in a male dominated college. Again, this systems works in favor of socially privileged male students with cultural capital, knowledge, and resources, but it does not help those students who may need the most help in the college.

Instead, Molly relied on other students for support and continued to study as much as she could. In the end, her preparation for the college of engineering was not the same as some other students who were succeeding in it, and she was on academic probation after her first semester and looking at retaking calculus for a higher grade. She decided the overall way of being in the college of engineering was not reflective of what she wanted for her college experience. She wanted to have other experiences, besides the round the clock studying she figured out she would have to do, and she did not want to go to school year round, as was required by the college. Her decision to leave the college of engineering was hastened by her academic performance in the first semester, but overall, she found it was not the right fit for her. She no longer felt she belonged in the college of engineering.

First Generation College Student and College Going Identity

Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) studied high school students in West Virginia and determined that some students were ‘groomed’ for college by early academic success and support from teachers and parents (p.10). This was true of students in this study. By the time I met them, they all had a defined sense of identity as college students, and none of
them talked about college as if it was a place they did not belong, regardless of the experiences they were having.

The significance of developing a college-going identity cannot be understated. All of the students in this study saw themselves as going to college, though many were quite unsure of how that would happen due to costs of higher education. This college-going identity was instilled in them at an early age by parents and grandparents, and repeated often, “You are going to college.” Eliza, Carly, Jenna, and Faith were encouraged to pursue a college education by parents or siblings who saw their own opportunities diminished because they did not have college degrees. Faith’s brother inspired her to attend college because he had declined an offer to enroll at West Point, a difficult choice he chose not to regret but one that he wondered about, but inspired him to encourage Faith’s pursuit of a college degree. Dylan and Laurel were inspired by their grandparents to seek a college education because they believed the economic future would require it. Molly and Laurel were encouraged by family to enroll in college because of they were seen as smart.

All seven students were impacted by the work of their Talent Search counselors who opened doors to colleges by taking them on college visits and who encouraged the students throughout the process of developing a college-going identity and in applying to college. The family support and belief in the students was central to their willingness and ability to engage with Talent Search, who supported the students on their paths to college. Time and again, the students said they would not be in college if it were not for their Talent Search counselors. Laurel’s experience is particularly illustrative of the impact of Talent Search. She had visited Big University on a college tour one summer, but she had
decided it was not possible for her to attend school there because she did not have any money, and she was unlikely to earn an academic scholarship. Her counselor, Ms. Alice, told her about the Appalachian Scholarship, which was not merit based, but need based for Appalachian college students. She applied and received the scholarship, which covered all of her tuition and fees and provided a living stipend. In her first year, after a difficult college transition, Laurel realized she was going to lose her scholarship, and it was her Talent Search counselor, Ms. Alice, she turned to for guidance in appealing the decision.

According to Savitz-Romer and Bouffard (2012), college-going identity is a process and includes four distinct phases: 1) Identity diffused- student is unaware of post-secondary options and/or overwhelmed by them. 2) Foreclosure- student has decided not to attend college but has not considered it by getting information or talking to anyone. 3) Moratorium- student explores idea of going to college without committing to it. 4) Identity achieved- student sees themselves in college and works to make this happen (pp.70-71). All of the students in this study had achieved a college-going identity. While a college-going identity set the stage for a sense of belonging in college, the students varied in the ways they felt a connection with their institutions.

First Generation College Student and Sense of Belonging

I used Strayhorn’s (2012) definition of sense of belonging to examine the experience of the students in this study. He writes that sense of belonging is a basic human need, but in the context of college, sense of belonging refers to “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and
important to the group (e.g. campus community) or others on campus (e.g. faculty, peers)” (p.3). Strayhorn (2012) argues that students who have been marginalized, or excluded from some experience, may have more need to belong:

I frame sense of belonging as a basic human need that takes on heightened importance in certain social contexts where some individuals are prone to feel unsupported, unwelcomed, or lonely or in some social contexts where certain individuals are more likely to feel that way (p.4). [Author’s emphasis, not mine]

In the case of rural, first generation, low income college students from Appalachian Kentucky, the students are marginalized by social class and region, but each also experienced other points of oppression, depending upon their social positions. I posit that sense of belonging does take on heightened importance for these students in college.

First of all, they are from rural areas and are attending college in another part of the state. They are not expected to be in college or in that part of the state. I was surprised by the number of times the students in the study mentioned that other students from Appalachia at Mary Lincoln had never heard of Sunset or Forest county, even though it was 1.5 hours away. Secondly, as they are first generation college students, they felt enormous pressure to be successful but do not necessarily know how to do so, nor do they know they don’t know how to do so until it happens to them. Thirdly, they are poor, and they are seen through a lens of poverty because the region they are from is constructed this way socially. This narrative does not allow for them to be in college and successful in college. In popular movies and television shows, the region is often portrayed as uneducated. Molly’s experience becoming an RA is illustrative of how sense of belonging can change in college.
Molly had been inspired by the RAs she met in the basement of her residence hall to apply for a position. Since she had decided she was leaving the college of engineering to major in physics in the college of arts and sciences, she was concerned about how she would pay for college. She had lost the full tuition scholarship after her first semester, and an RA position could help her financially by covering her room and board and meal plan. Molly was one of 400 students who applied for 30 RA positions. She was not hopeful, but she felt it was worth applying. She later learned she had received one of their highest scores on the interview rubric they used to evaluate candidates. She was excited to get the position, and eager to start a new phase of her college experience.

Molly’s experience of leaving the college of engineering, changing majors and becoming an RA reflects the multiple ways in which students can experience belonging in one area, then retreat from it, and experience belonging again in yet another area of their university experience. Molly did feel a sense of belonging at Big University, and her major choice and a campus position were two ways she connected to the university. Strayhorn (2012) notes that students can find belonging in an activity or club and then make another choice and have belonging in a new activity. Molly’s experience highlights how belonging is not static; it changes, and something that was once a site of belonging can become a site of alienation.

**Appalachian Kentucky Place Identity as Habitus**

Bourdieu (1986) described habitus as an embodiment of practices and dispositions. Habitus is larger than identity in that is collective. The students in this study largely supported Hochschild’s (2016) findings in their explanation of why people voted for Trump. Both Laurel and Molly spoke of how Trump’s message resonated with the
white, working class voters. Laurel noted he said he supported the middle class and the people who worked:

Donald Trump said that he supported the middle class and the people who worked. Obviously all of it was talk, but that's what's important to these people. They can turn on Fox News, and he is the person that's up there talking about how he's going to help them out, how he's going to make their lives better. He never used anything to back that up, but people don't need that whenever their lives are so shitty, and the economy doesn't help them. Whenever they're doing everything that they can to feed their families, and it's not enough. They don't need somebody to back it up. They just need someone to say that they're going to help them and they're like, okay, let's go for it.

Laurel noted that Trump’s message was more important to people than whether he could actually accomplish what he promised. While this seems counterintuitive to an outsider, it makes a lot of sense to me. The people in Appalachia have never been a priority on the national stage, except when their political votes matter or they can be blamed for voting the wrong way. They have largely experienced exploitation for the extraction of coal, the fossil fuel which at one time was the main source of electricity use in the United States. As the historian Ron Eller (2013) names, what is the price of being the subject of exploitation? Earlier in the literature review, I spent time considering rural myths and how those serve to shape the people who live in rural places. Next, I consider the myth of coal which is a symbol that defines Appalachia, and the people here have shaped a habitus that involves coal whether it is part of their actual lives or not.

The way we know the rural is by our images of it. In the literature review, I spoke of the image of corn associated with Iowa, which conjures images of a flat landscape with row upon row of corn. The majority of Americans know Appalachia as connected to coal for good reason. Kentucky and West Virginia have long been top coal producing states,
and the Central Appalachian Basin holds reserves of bituminous coal, which is valued for its higher carbon content.

In a socioeconomic structure built on extraction and exploitation of resources of the region, many in Appalachia relied on the coal industry for sustenance, but this was a colonizing relationship. When Hilary Clinton said she was going to put coal miners out of work, the statement became a lightning rod for social class and political divisions. Despite the realities of coal being in decline nationally in favor of natural gas, and of eastern coal production being outpaced significantly by western production since the 1990s, the coal miner is a product of Appalachia. In 2018, President Trump announced his State of the Union address that he had “ended the war on clean, beautiful coal,” his audience was Appalachia.

When politicians deride coal and the people who have mined coal, the long history of fossil fuel consumption in the United States and reliance on coal for electricity make outsiders seem as if they have no part in fossil fuels. In fact, they feel they don’t have a part in it because their ideologies tell them they do not. Their emotions (back to Hochschild) tell them something that logic and facts actually contradicts. The direct connection to the mining, production and aftermath of taking a fossil fuel is far removed for those not actively involved in extraction or production, whether that is coal, natural gas or oil. Still, with a flick of switch to turn on the electricity or heat, people have taken part in using fossil fuels, and that switch was often fired by coal.
In 2017, Kentucky was fifth in coal production\textsuperscript{12} in the United States after Wyoming, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Illinois. When pro-coal slogans shout, “Coal keeps the lights on!” in reference to supporting coal, the rallying cry is seen as representing Appalachia. And it does and does not. None of the students in this study were connected to the coal industry, yet they were framed as part of the coal discourse because they were from Appalachian Kentucky.

**Implications**

This study highlights a concern for students who do not have a college-going identity instilled in them at an early age. Those who need more encouragement or who struggle academically or socially in school may not believe they have the ability to go to college, which when coupled with financial constraints, may make college an impossible choice. As Savitz-Romer and Bouffard (2012) write, “Young people of the same age and in same settings vary widely in where they are in this process” (p.70). College going identity is a developmental process, and an important implication for practice is that teachers and counselors working with youth should make college an option for all students, even those who say they do not want to go to college.

\textsuperscript{12} In 2017, about 757 million short tons of coal were produced in 24 states. Five states produced a total of about 538 million short tons, or about 71\% of total U.S. coal production. The five largest coal-producing states with production in million short tons and their share of total U.S. coal production in 2017:

- Wyoming—316.5—41\%
- West Virginia—92.8—12\%
- Pennsylvania—49.1—6\%
- Illinois—48.2—6\%
- Kentucky—41.8—5\%
The Talent Search counselors were employed as guidance counselors at the students’ high schools, and they worked with students across the high school. Their case load could be as high as 600 students per one counselor, and one important implication of this study is that students who may not be in a specific college readiness program may not receive the same level of encouragement to develop a college going identity or access to college visits and information.

State colleges and universities have historically served the students in their states with low cost tuition; however, due to continued cuts in federal and state funding to public higher education, the poorest students are the most affected. Increasingly, state colleges and universities attract middle to upper middle class income students from in and out of state, who can afford the costs. This shift reinforces the middle class culture of the institutions as the culture is made as much by the values of the institutions as it is by what values the students bring to their institutions. This raises the question of whether public state universities are committed to serving all students in the state.

Many people associate legacies with elite private institutions, the preference given to students whose family members are alumnus, but as state universities continue to become more elite, by the nature of the students they serve, they also have legacies. Molly witnessed many students in the college of engineering whose family members had also graduated from the same program they were enrolled in.

Being academically superior in a less prepared high school does not equate to the same level of success in a highly competitive program like engineering, where students were coming from more prepared high schools. Molly wished she had known this coming to her university, as she may have chosen a different major and been able to keep the full
scholarship she lost. This holds implications for guiding first generation students who are strong academically in their choice of majors. All high schools are not the same.

Academic failure is not really an option for first generation students because one bad semester can derail students from moving ahead with their degree. Given the costs of higher education, and the role scholarships play in maintaining student enrollment, students and their families need to carefully consider a plan for success, especially in the first semester. One way to ease students into the expectations of higher education is for students to take 12 credits in the first semester, rather that the recommended 15 or 18. This is not uncommon for first generation students to do, and Laurel explained that one of her challenges was that she took too many credits in her first semester and could not maintain the expectations.

Higher education reproduces social class inequality, and this study holds implications on an individual level on how that can happen. One way this was seen in this study was when poor students lost their scholarships for not being successful in college. The students both reported they did not have any contact with a counselor who oversaw their scholarship, though there was a staff person designated for this purpose. I am not suggesting the scholarship should not have any criteria, but Laurel won her appeal in large part because of the depression she was able to document to the committee, not because she was poor and needed a second chance.

When Molly and other students were told they would not make it the school of engineering, they did not. Of course in the patriarchal narrative, Molly is to blame for not being prepared enough or be willing to compete enough. You have to work hard if you want it! The truth is the deck is stacked against Molly and Laurel, and the system of high
education reinforces their oppression. Their resilience in the face of the great difficulty is a testament to their drive to go to college and earn their degrees.

**Limitations**

A limitation in this study was made by the design itself. The students in this study were recruited from a TRIO program, Talent Search, whose mission is to get first generation students to college. All of the students in this study were committed to being in college, and their experience may be representative of other Appalachian Kentucky youth who complete Talent Search, but I am not suggesting it is representative of all Appalachian Kentucky youth. Likewise, their experiences were their own experiences, and they shared these experiences with other students from a similar hometown and social class background, but it is important to acknowledge that they were individual people with shared experiences. Finally, all of the students in this study had familial support in attending college, and this also would not be true of all Appalachian Kentucky youth.

As a researcher, I created some limitations simply by my own circumstances. I was not living in the area, and I had to travel to the research sites on four occasions in 2017-8. One limitation I faced was scheduling the students within my travel window since I was not local, and I was working around the academic calendar of my employer. At least one of the students who was initially in the study could not meet with me during two of these visits, so she was not able to complete the study though she was willing to do so.
Recommendations

Further studies on Appalachian Kentucky students should consider students who have not developed a college-going identity and lack parental and grandparental support for attending college. One of the reasons I chose to follow students in Talent Search was to have participants in college, and this necessitated students who were willing and able to be in college.

White students should have an understanding of how their own racial identity impacts them and others, particularly people of color. Students could analyze the construction of whiteness, and they should consider systems of white supremacy and how those systems have impacted them, and what that means to them and to people of other races. To be clear here, I am not suggesting courses that celebrate whiteness (we already have plenty); rather, I mean an education on the diversity of experiences within whiteness, how whiteness is complicated by social class, religion, ethnicity, region, sexuality, gender, etc. Such a course in Appalachian Kentucky would consider the specifics of the region.

Teaching the history of whiteness is essential to developing a critical understanding of racial identity within white students, but unfortunately, honest discussions on race in our national discourse are highly charged and can paint negative pictures of whiteness studies. The image of white identity is ascribed to hate groups and white supremacy. Arizona State Representative Bob Thorpe worked to ban a course at Arizona State University called, “Whiteness and Race Theory.” Thorpe’s position is that such courses divide people based on race. Other courses, like “The Problem of Whiteness” at the University of Wisconsin- Madison have also been attacked the state
legislature for offering a course that “suggests white people are racist.” Systems of oppression and domination are not easily changed, and while many colleges and universities are offering courses on whiteness, the political pushback at examining whiteness is enormous.

**Conclusion**

Place identity was a salient aspect of how the seven students in this study saw themselves and their sense of belonging in college. They were are aware of oppression based on social class and region, but less versed in how whiteness frames their oppression. For about half the students, religious oppression played a role in limiting their identity expression and made them question parts of their faith. Two students found comfort in their religion. Future studies would examine students without a college going identity who are not enrolled in a college readiness program. These students are the least likely to enroll in college. Critical place-based courses could help rural students makes sense of their place identity and relationship to their home communities, whether they continue to live there or not. Such efforts have to consider the realities of the rural economy to help people in rural communities thrive.
APPENDIX A

CONSENT LETTER

INTRODUCTION LETTER

EMAIL SCRIPT

CONSENT LETTER

Consent Form for Participation in a Research Study
University of Massachusetts Amherst

Researcher: Brenda Hardin Abbott, Doctoral Candidate
Kysa Nygreen, Associate Professor of Education, Faculty Sponsor

Study Title: Dropping the Invisibility Cloak: Rural, First Generation College Students in Appalachian Kentucky

1. WHAT IS THIS FORM?
This form is called a Consent Form. It will give you information about the study so you can make an informed decision about participation in this research.

2. WHO IS ELIGIBLE TO PARTICIPATE?
Students from McCreary County, Kentucky, who will be attending a four-year college or university in Fall 2017 and who participated in Talent Search in high school are eligible to participate. You must be at least 18 years old to participate.

3. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?
The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of students from McCreary County, Kentucky, in their first year of college.

4. WHERE WILL THE STUDY TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?
The study consists of two parts. The first part will take place at the university where the participants are enrolled for the upcoming academic year, from September 2017 until May 2018. It will consist of 4 one hour interviews: two interviews in the fall semester and two interviews in the spring semester. The interviews will be arranged individually with each participant. The interviews will take place in a quiet, public place on campus, and some may be conducted electronically. The second part is a photo project, where you will take three pictures of your home community, and write about those pictures. This part of the
study will be conducted on your own in McCreary County. You will share these photos and writings with me during one of the two interviews in the spring semester.

5. WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?
If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to discuss your college transitions and experiences and your home community of Kentucky, in a total of 4 one hour interviews. The questions I ask you will be about the differences you experience between college and high school and what challenges and opportunities you are exploring in college. At any time, if you do not want to answer a question, you may skip it.

Also, you will be asked to take three pictures of your home community and write three reflective writings about the pictures; each of which will be approximately one page in length or less. In the third or fourth interview, you will discuss these pictures and your writings with me.

This study will include 10 participants, and the only screening processes I will use are to make sure you are from the counties in Kentucky participating in this study and have participated Talent Search in high school, and are attending a four-year college or university in the fall. If more than 10 participants express interest, I will randomly select participants.

6. WHAT ARE MY BENEFITS TO BEING IN THIS STUDY?
You may not directly benefit from this research; however, we hope that your participation in the study may benefit you personally by giving you a greater self-awareness of your transition to college and allowing you to tell your story.

7. WHAT ARE MY RISKS OF BEING IN THIS STUDY?
I believe there are no known risks associated with this research study; however, a possible inconvenience may be the time it takes to complete the study.

8. HOW WILL MY PERSONAL INFORMATION BE PROTECTED?
The following procedures will be used to protect the confidentiality of your study records: 1) You will be given a pseudonym and any identifying information that might reveal your individual identity as given in your narratives will be altered to prevent such determinations while maintaining the integrity of your narratives. 2) Pseudonyms will be used in the audio recording of your interviews. 3) The audio recordings will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's office at Bay Path University or in the secure online site, BOX, if the data is electronic. 4) After three years, the audio recordings will be erased. Signed consent forms will be stored securely in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's office at Bay Path University, and they will be kept separate from data collected from interviews. 5) All electronic files containing identifiable information will be password protected. Any computer
hosting such files will also have password protection to prevent access by unauthorized users. Only the members of the research staff will have access to the passwords. 6) At the conclusion of this study, I may publish my findings. Information will be presented in summary format and you will not be identified in any publications or presentations. Although all these procedures are in place to protect your confidentiality, there is always a small risk of that confidentiality can be breached or that you may feel identified in the text.

The data from this study will be analyzed and presented to my dissertation committee and invited members of the College of Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. The data and results may also be presented at national conferences, such as the American Educational Research Association (AERA). The data collected here will be published as a dissertation, and it may be published as an article or in a book thereafter. The audiences would likely be academic scholars interested in narrative inquiry, higher education, working class studies, and inequality.

9. WILL I RECEIVE ANY PAYMENT FOR TAKING PART IN THE STUDY?
You will be compensated with a $25 Amazon gift card at the end of each semester (Fall 2017 and Spring 2018) if you participate in this study.

10. WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?
Take as long as you like before you make a decision. We will be happy to answer any question you have about this study. If you have further questions about this project or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact me, Brenda Hardin Abbott, at 413-695-**** or [email redacted]. You may also contact my faculty sponsor with any questions, Dr. Kysa Nygreen, at [email redacted]. If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may contact the University of Massachusetts Amherst Human Research Protection Office (HRPO) at (413) 545-3428 or humansubjects@ora.umass.edu.

11. CAN I STOP BEING IN THE STUDY?
You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. If you agree to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate.

12. WHAT IF I AM INJURED?
The University of Massachusetts does not have a program for compensating subjects for injury or complications related to human subjects research, but the study personnel will assist you in getting treatment.
13. SUBJECT STATEMENT OF VOLUNTARY CONSENT

When signing this form I am agreeing to voluntarily enter this study. I have had a chance to read this consent form, and it was explained to me in a language which I use and understand. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. A copy of this signed Informed Consent Form has been given to me.

__________________________________________  ________________________  ______
Participant Signature:  Print Name:  Date:

By signing below, I indicate that the participant has read and, to the best of my knowledge, understands the details contained in this document and has been given a copy.

__________________________________________  ________________________  ______
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent  Print Name:  Date:
Dear Student,

My name is Brenda Hardin Abbott, and I am a doctoral candidate in the College of Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. I am interested in the life experiences and stories of Appalachian people and places, and I have a lot of pride in growing up in Appalachia. I am originally from Breathitt County, Kentucky, and I was the first in my family to go to college. I chose Eastern Kentucky University, and it had a major impact on my life. Now, I am trying to learn about the experiences of students, who are now making their way from Appalachia to college.

One way to learn what people think is to hear stories about their experiences, and I would like to talk with you about your experiences in your first year of college. I would also like to invite you to participate in a project where you take pictures of the places that are important to you and write about them. I would also like to interview you during your first year of college and learn what your experience of college is like. The main activities of this research project will be

- **Photo project** - You will be asked to take three pictures of places important to you and to write a short paragraph about those places.
- **Interviews** - You will be asked to participate in two interviews in Fall 2017 and two interviews in Spring 2018. These interviews will be approximately one hour each, for a total of four hours.

The interviews will be audio recorded so that I may listen to them later and transcribe them. I will use a pseudonym for all participants in the audio recording, and I will store them in a locked file cabinet in my office at Bay Path University for three years or in an online secure site, BOX. After that time, I will erase the recordings. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you specifically in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. The information you share with me is confidential. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have given consent to participate. You may decline to answer any questions or to create any texts. There are no known risks or benefits to you for participating in this study. However, you might benefit from a heightened awareness of your understanding of place and your transition to college. This research will possibly be shared in the following ways: during my oral examination for my dissertation research; my dissertation proposal or dissertation; conference presentations; and in journal articles and/or book chapters. If you are selected to participate in this research project, you will be compensated with a $25 Amazon gift card. In September of 2017, I will contact you via email to see if you are still interested in participating in this study, and I will set up an interview time convenient for you in mid-late September.

Sincerely, Brenda Hardin Abbott
EMAIL SCRIPT

Dear ___________.

Thank you for your interest in participating in my dissertation research on students in their first year of college. I am writing you to see if you are still interested in participating. To remind you, the research would involve two interviews with me in the Fall 2017 semester, the first of which would be in mid-late September, and two interviews in Spring 2018 semester, and a photo project. Please respond to me by Wednesday, September 6th, so I know if you are still interested in participating. I hope your semester is going well so far, and I look forward to talking with you.

Best,

Brenda Hardin Abbott
Doctoral Candidate
University of Massachusetts Amherst
bhabbott@educ.umass.edu
413-695-****
APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PARTICIPANT INTERVIEWS

Interview 1: Fall 2017, mid-September

Script: As you might remember, I am interested in talking with you about your experience in college. I think it’s important for people in rural parts of Kentucky to have the opportunity to go to college, and I’d like to learn from you about your experience in your first year. To start with, I’m going to ask you some questions about your family, hometown, high school, and your first month at the university. If you don’t want to answer any questions or you’d rather to talk about something else that’s important to you in this experience, I want you to feel like you can guide the interview. In this first interview, I am really getting to know you. I’ve asked to record these interviews because I will transcribe them later. My memory is not good enough to remember everything we talk about! This interview will last one hour. Do you have any questions for me? Are you ready to start?

1) Tell me about yourself.
2) Who are the important people in your life? Who is in your family? Do you have any siblings? What kinds of jobs do your parents do?
3) Tell me a little bit about where you grew up. How would you describe it people who have never been there?
4) What was high school like for you?
5) When did you know you wanted to go to college? How did you decide to go to X University? Did you apply anywhere else? What factors were important in your choice of a college?
6) In what ways were you supported in your decision to go to college? Who helped you and how did they help?
7) What concerns you about being in college?
8) What are you majoring in? How did you decide upon it, and is it different from other major you considered?
9) How does your family feel about you being in college? Friends? Other relatives?
10) What was your experience like of moving into the residence hall in August? Who came with you?
11) Tell me about your first month so far. I’d like to think about that in terms of your classes and your social life. What was the first week of college like for you?
12) How comfortable do you feel on campus? What makes it feel that way?
13) Have you made friends on campus? Do they remind you of high school friends or are they different from them? How? What do you do with your friends?
14) Are you working? On campus or off campus? How much do you work? Does it impact your experience of college? Why have you chosen to work?
15) Is there anything else you’d like to mention that we didn’t discuss?
Interview II: Fall 2017, early November

Thank you for meeting with me. It’s good to see you again. In this interview I want to move a bit away from who you were when you came to college, which is something we discussed a lot in the first interview, to understanding more of what you think about college now that you are 3 months into it. I’d like to understand what has been working well for you and what has been challenging. As before, I will record our conversation, but I am hoping the questions are broad enough for you to talk from your experience. After the interview, I will talk with you about the photovoice project, which is the next part of the research. The interview will last an hour, and the explanation of the photovoice project will be another 15 minutes or so. Do you have any questions? Are you ready to begin?

1) Tell me about these first 3 months of college. What stands out to you?
2) Is there anything that you are really proud of or happy about that has happened in these first 3 months?
3) What kinds of challenges or difficulties have you faced in college? How have you negotiated those?
4) When something really good or bad happens in college, whom do you contact to talk or text about it? Why that person?
5) Have you joined any clubs, sports teams, or gotten involved in any activities on campus? What made you decide to do that?
6) Have you gone to a professor’s office hours? Sought tutoring services? Visited the writing center? What kinds of academic supports have you sought?
7) Have you gone home in the past 3 months? How many times? What makes you decide to go home?
8) Where are your college friends from? Have your college friends gone home in the past 3 months?
9) Do you ever see your high school friends? Are they at the university, home or what are they doing?
10) How would you describe college classes to seniors at your high school? What do you think college faculty want or expect from you?
11) Try on your advice giving hat for those seniors again. What would you tell them about what has been the most difficult thing you have had to learn about college?
12) What are you most looking forward to now that Thanksgiving break is coming up?
Interview III: Spring 2018, early February

It strikes me that when we began this project together, you had not had any college experience, and now you have completed a full semester. In this interview, I am going to ask you to talk first of all about your photovoice project, and then to think more about your hopes and aspirations for the spring semester. I’d like to collect the pictures and the writings you did at the end of the interview. As we have done in the past, I will record the interview for transcription later. The interview will last an hour. Do you have any questions? Are you ready?

1) To begin with, can you describe your community?
2) One way your community is described by others is as rural. What does rural mean to you? Does it have any significance in how you see yourself or others?
3) Do you like living in a rural area? What do you like about it? (If you don’t like living in a rural area, why not? Where would you like to live?
4) Some people refer to this part of Kentucky as Appalachian. Does that have any meaning to you? What does it mean?
5) If you are describing where you are from, what do you say? McCreary County? Other?
6) Does being from your County have any specific meaning to you? How has it shaped how you see yourself?
7) Can we look at each picture? What inspired you to take this picture? (Do for each picture).
8) What do you feel the picture represents about your home community?
9) Would people from your hometown recognize the place in this picture, or is this a picture that only you would recognize?
10) What do you think people outside of your community would see in looking at this picture?
11) How do you think people outside of your community perceive of your community? Who are these people you imagining holding these perspectives?

Now I’d like to switch to thinking about college, but before I do, is there anything you’d like to add about your community or the pictures and writings you did?

12) Have you thought about your first semester of college? How would you describe it to someone who doesn’t know you?
13) Was there anything that happened in the first semester that made you feel like X University is the right institution for you? Was there anything that made you feel like X University was not the right institution for you?
14) What makes you feel like you belong here? Is there anything that makes you feel like you don’t belong here?
15) What sense do you have of how your home community perceives your college experience? Are people supportive of your decision to go to college? How so? If people are not supportive, how do they show this? What motivates them?
**Interview IV: Spring 2018, early April**

Thank you again for meeting with me, and for meeting with me 3 other times. In our last interview, I am hoping to get a sense of what you have learned about yourself as a first generation college student, what inspires you to continue your education, what makes you doubt yourself, and importantly, how you manage this mix of experiences. As before I will record our conversation so I may transcribe it later. **Do you have any questions? Are you ready?**

1) If you were going to speak to other first generation college students from McCraey County, what would you tell them about your first year of college? Do you have any advice for them?

2) Is there anything you are really proud of that happened this year?

3) What do you wish you had done differently or attempted?

4) Who has helped you navigate through your college experience this year? How have they supported you? (Family, friends, faculty, staff, etc.)

5) What motivates you to come back for your second year of college? Are there any forces that are pulling you away from college?

6) How did the institution help you transition to college this year?

**These next questions are about your identity and how you identify.**

7) When you think about your identity, what social positions are most important to you? (Examples- race/ethnicity, social class, religion, region, ability, gender, sexuality) Why are these important?

8) What social positions have not played a major role in how you see yourself.

9) Does your identity fit with your experience as a college student? How so?
APPENDIX C

PHOTO PROJECT

This photovoice project is designed to help you reflect on the ways in which geography has influenced your life. As well, it will get you thinking about your own regional understandings, your everyday (spatial) behavior, and what it is you know about your hometown. This assignment asks you to consider your feelings about your hometown rather than actual data you have obtained, though you can use such information in your maps if it is common to you. For example, Kentucky is a leading bourbon manufacturer, and I know this as someone who grew up in Kentucky, so I might include it in my mapping if relevant. The research here is based upon the assumption that people’s lived experiences of the world are meaningful and worthy of study. As a researcher, I am most interested in the stories people tell about their lives and how these stories evoke meaning for all of us. While race, class, gender, ethnicity, religion and ability are social positions well identified in sociocultural research, the lens of “place” or geography also has important implications to our understanding of ourselves. Take this conversation I have frequently with people who are not from Massachusetts:

“Where are you from?”
“I’m from Massachusetts.”
“Boston?”
“No, western Massachusetts.”
“Where’s that?”

We all hail from somewhere, have attachments to places that define us in many ways as we define those places to ourselves and to others. In part, place is a social identity we wear in making sense to others. While I do not live in Boston, and western Massachusetts is very different culturally from Boston, most people who ask me if I am from Boston are bringing a set of expectations of what Massachusetts is based on Boston. Benjamin Bailey, a professor in the communications department at UMASS, argues, “Something is only an identity if others can identify it. While there is a personal element to claiming an identity, it is only a social identity if someone else can recognize it.” If I say, I’m from “the valley,” insiders will understand something of what that means. I am registering more than a geographic location, or place, to my listener. I may be sharing a set of expectations about race, ethnicity, religion, politics, sexual identities, gender, language or social class- images, if you will, my listener has based on their understanding of place and my experience as a member of the place. Yet these expectations of identity may be far from the reality of my lived experience. Thus, place is an important site of interrogating who we are, where our identities lie.

For the photograph activity, if you have lived in several places, please select the one place you consider your hometown.
The first part of the geographies of self is to take three pictures that represent your hometown. You can choose any location, inside or outside, to show the researcher where you are from. Some questions to guide your thinking:

a. **Lenses:** How is it you see the world?
   • Social geography-How have your social positions: race, class, gender, ethnicity, religion, nationalities, ability, etc. influenced your way of life?
   • Human geography – How did the political, social and economic system you grew up in influence who you are today?

In the second part of this activity, you will reflect on the photographs of your hometown and yourself. What do you think is meaningful to share? Each prompt below (or one of your choosing should respond to a photograph you took).

b. **Reflections:** Choose one of the prompts below to reflect on an aspect of your hometown. (4-6 paragraphs)

   - My favorite place to hang out in my hometown is…
   - What will surprise you about my hometown is…
   - The most memorable person I have met in my hometown is…
   - You really know you are in my hometown when…
   - You haven’t been to my hometown until you have eaten…
   - We are most proud of…
   - The best picture spot in town is…
   - What we do for fun in my hometown is…
   - The most interesting historic site in my hometown is…
   - The funny thing about my hometown is…
   - A great place to stay in my hometown is…
   - My favorite café in my hometown is…
   - The best way to spend an afternoon is…
   - It’s worth getting up early in my hometown to…
   - It is worth staying up late in my hometown to…
   - The best day I ever spent in my hometown was…
   - The one thing I should warn you about my hometown is…
   - One thing that always brings me back to my hometown is the sound of…
   - One thing that always brings me back to my hometown is the smell of…
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257


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