

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: THE COLLEGE CHOICE PROCESS OF FOUR STUDENTS FROM RURAL APPALACHIAN KENTUCKY

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This study examined the extent to which the college choice process of four students from one high school in rural Appalachian Kentucky aligned with Perna's (2006; 2010) nested process model of college choice. I used qualitative case study methodology and inductive analysis to describe how four high-academic achieving students of varying family income backgrounds in the particular context of one community in rural Appalachian Kentucky decided to enroll in an institution of higher education. In brief, three of the four students enrolled in the closest, most familiar institution after relying on an adult other than their parents for guidance in selecting a college. The remaining student, despite her low socioeconomic status and family income, enrolled in a selective private university in Kentucky after an expanded college search. School practices that supported students' access to higher education are highlighted.

This research adds to the theoretical knowledge in the field of college access and choice, which indicates that different student populations experience the college choice process differently, but has yet to fully include research on rural students. My analysis revealed a number of influential factors for these four students' college choice decisions that were in Perna's (2006; 2010) model, such as guidance counseling, college costs, and financial aid. The analysis also showed the meaning of identified factors for students given the context of their community in rural Appalachian Kentucky. Additional influential factors that were found for these students, such as the role of athletics in increasing demand for higher education, and factors that were not present, such as parental support during the college choice process, added nuance to the model. By learning how and why some students from rural Appalachian Kentucky are able to go to college, we can begin to understand how to increase the low level of educational attainment of individuals in the region.

THE COLLEGE CHOICE PROCESS OF FOUR STUDENTS FROM RURAL  
APPALACHIAN KENTUCKY

By

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

I am an anomaly. I am a first-generation college graduate from a poor family in rural Appalachian Kentucky. I defied the odds when I applied to, enrolled in and graduated from a four-year private college. Of course, I did not realize this at the time. Only since learning about inequitable access to higher education have I begun to appreciate the good fortune and personal fortitude that allowed me to earn a college degree. As a result of this realization, I often wonder what enabled me to overcome the limitations of my background, and how my path to higher education is similar to the experience of other students from this region. As an educator, I also wonder how we can support other rural students from Appalachian Kentucky on the pathway to college so that their success in life is not left to chance.

Where I come from, educational attainment is unacceptably low. According to the Appalachian Regional Commission, while nearly 30% of the nation's adults are college graduates, only 13% of adults in Appalachian Kentucky have attained that level of education (Pollard & Jacobsen, 2011). This statistic is quite troubling because research shows that low levels of educational attainment "lead to large public and social costs in the form of lower income and economic growth, reduced tax revenues, and higher costs of public services such as health care, criminal justice and public assistance" (Belfield & Levin, 2007, p. 2). Because of their lack of education, many individuals in Appalachian Kentucky are unemployed or work for minimum wage. As a result, they cannot afford health care and other basic necessities, let alone luxuries that many Americans take for granted. In fact, many problems facing Appalachian Kentucky, such as drug abuse and generational poverty seem inextricably linked to the

level of educational attainment in the region. Increasing educational attainment in Appalachian Kentucky could increase individuals' access to good jobs and higher pay, which could in turn help decrease the public and social costs of low levels of educational attainment. Thus, increasing the educational attainment of the inhabitants of Appalachian Kentucky should be a top priority in combating the region's problems; however, this task is easier said than done.

I doubt that the low number of degree holders in the region surprises anyone who is familiar with Appalachian Kentucky. For one, there are few employment opportunities in the area, and especially few jobs that require a college degree. The region's economy relies on declining and low-wage industries such as natural resource extraction, agriculture, manufacturing, and service sector opportunities (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2013). Recent estimates of unemployment in Appalachian Kentucky range from 8% to 12%, well above the national average (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2013; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). Further, the unemployment rate measures the percentage of adults who are unemployed and currently seeking employment (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013), which underestimates the real percentage of adults who are not working. In Appalachian Kentucky, only 61% of individuals aged 25-64 are in the labor force (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2013). Adding the individuals in the labor force to the number of unemployed individuals still leaves 27% of adults in Appalachian Kentucky who have given up their search for employment and/or depend on welfare benefits from the government. Because of these conditions, many individuals who wish to stay in the region have no need to pursue higher education, and individuals from Appalachia who

do earn a college degree often leave the area for states and cities that offer expanded occupational opportunities.

The underdeveloped economy of Appalachian Kentucky impacts school funding and the resources available to students and families. Children from poor families and communities have fewer and less enriching early learning opportunities, which in turn limits their ultimate educational attainment (Books, 2004; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Pressman & Pressman, 2008). Additionally, rural schools can offer fewer high-quality teachers and curriculum choices (such as Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses), so students are less prepared for the rigors of college (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Khattri, Riley & Kane, 1997). Finally, students may interpret the shortage of well-paying jobs requiring college degrees in Appalachia as a message that higher education has little extrinsic value (Duncan, 2001).

While increasing the level of education in Appalachian Kentucky is a complex task, an initial step is helping more students from this region gain access to institutions of higher education. Students access higher education by enrolling in a particular institution after engaging in a college choice process. According to Hossler and colleagues (1989), this process is a “complex, multistage process during which an individual develops aspirations to continue formal education beyond high school, followed later by a decision to attend a specific college, university, or institution of advanced vocational training” (p. 7).

For decades, research in higher education has examined inequality in college access and choice, but this research has focused on minority students in urban schools. Countless studies have documented how traditionally underrepresented, underserved

student populations, especially African American and Latino/a students in urban schools, have lower high school graduation and college attendance rates than other student groups (Belfield & Levin, 2007; Carneiro & Heckman, 2003). While I do not undervalue this work in the least, as a native of Appalachian Kentucky, I cannot help but recognize how the plight of disadvantaged students in urban schools closely mirrors that of the students in the rural schools in which I learned and taught.

Yet, scant attention has been paid to disadvantaged students like those in Appalachian Kentucky, although current work is emerging on the educational experiences of rural students (Irvin, Meece, Byun, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2011). The studies that do exist suggest that rural students are disproportionately more likely to drop out of high school and/or fail to pursue higher education than their urban or suburban counterparts (Haaga, 2004; Hu, 2003; Irvin, Meece, Byun, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2011; Provasnik, KewalRamani, Coleman, Gilbertson, Herring, & Xie, 2007). Further, while both rural and urban groups have historically faced and continue to cope with poverty and low educational attainment (Khattri et al., 1997), there are significant differences between poor rural and poor urban populations. For example, Klesta (2009) asserts, “compared to its urban counterpart, the rural poor are more often white with a higher proportion of married or two-parent households and higher labor force participation” (p. 2). Poverty is more widespread in rural communities, especially those that are geographically isolated (Irvin et al., 2011). Thus, although poor rural and urban students may face similar challenges to educational attainment, they are different populations and should be studied as such.

Moreover, the theoretical models in the college access and choice literature are exclusively based on studies of urban and suburban student populations (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Hossler et al., 1989; Perna, 2006; 2010). While these models help us conceptualize the college choice process in general, the specific college choice process of rural students has never been fully investigated. Consequently, we have little empirical knowledge of how the factors researchers have identified as limiting college access and educational attainment for disadvantaged urban populations might apply to disadvantaged rural students as well. Thus, I undertook my dissertation on the college choice process of four rural students from Appalachian Kentucky so that we can begin to understand how rural students access higher education, and how that compares to our current theoretical knowledge.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

In the field of higher education, many researchers are examining issues surrounding college choice and access for high school students. College access refers to students' ability to enroll in a higher education institution (HEI) upon high school graduation. Many researchers conceptualize college access as the outcome of a web of factors that individually and collectively impact students' enrollment in post-secondary education (e.g., Cabrera and LaNasa, 2000; Hossler et al., 1989). Because of this conceptualization, the field of college access includes copious research on topics as diverse as college preparatory courses in middle and high school, parental beliefs and values about higher education, tuition costs and financial aid, student educational and occupational aspirations, and many other factors.

College access theorists have synthesized this expansive body of research into various models to explain how students are able to access higher education. All of these models characterize college access as the outcome of a “complex, multistage process during which an individual develops aspirations to continue formal education beyond high school, followed later by a decision to attend a specific college, university, or institution of advanced vocational training” (Hossler et al., 1989, p. 7). Thus, in the literature, the college choice process is the means by which individuals access higher education.

In this chapter I will discuss the salient factors for college choice that researchers have identified. I will then review literature related to college access and choice for rural students and students from Appalachia. Finally, I will present my conceptual framework and research questions.



## **Salient Factors in the College Choice Process**

Researchers have studied how individuals and groups engage in the college choice process in order to understand factors that both foster and inhibit students' access to college. They have identified multiple factors that influence students' college choice process decision-making. These factors include student background characteristics, parental encouragement, K-12 schools, HEIs, and broader sociocultural and economic factors.

**Academic achievement and preparation.** The most salient factor related to student's access to higher education is academic ability (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Ellwood & Kane, 2000; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2004). In college choice research, academic ability refers to students' combined academic achievement and academic preparation (Perna, 2006). Simply put, if students cannot meet the academic requirements for college admission, including high school graduation, acceptable grade point average (GPA) and standardized test scores, they cannot access higher education.

In the literature, academic achievement has been operationalized as grades or standardized test scores. In almost all of the studies related to achievement, students have self-reported their GPA and/or scores on large-scale national surveys. These largely quantitative studies have used statistical modeling and have found that students with higher grades and test scores are more likely to plan on attending college and to apply to and enroll in college, especially four year institutions (Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Hossler & Stage, 1992). One such study used longitudinal data from 681 public school students from southeastern Michigan taken

over a period of ten years (6<sup>th</sup> grade to two years following graduation). Hierarchical linear regression revealed that student GPA from as early as sixth grade was a predictor of future college enrollment (Eccles, Vida & Barber, 2004).

Some researchers have combined multiple academic achievement variables in large-scale quantitative datasets to better capture how student ability influences the college choice process. For example, Berkner and Chavez (1997) developed the college qualification index, which includes GPA, class rank and standardized test scores in a more complete measure of students' academic ability. The researchers then analyzed National Education Longitudinal Study: 1988<sup>1</sup> (NELS: 88) data to determine the minimum score on their college qualification index that allowed for enrollment in a four-year college. They report, "minimum values were GPA=2.7, class rank percentile=54, NELS test percentile=56, combined SAT=820, composite ACT=19" (Berkner & Chavez, 1997, p. 22). Thus, students at or above these levels of academic achievement have generally been able to access higher education, while students below these levels may face constraints barring them from college.

Taking this line of research further, Cabrera and LaNasa (2000) used Berkner and Chavez's (1997) college qualification index and NELS: 88 data to determine how academic achievement, and ultimately, college access, differed by socioeconomic status (SES). Cabrera and LaNasa (2000) examined NELS: 88 to determine what percentage of students successfully completed what the researchers term "the three critical tasks on their path to college" (p. 23). These three tasks are: meeting the base level of college qualification (as defined by Berkner and Chavez (1997)), graduating

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<sup>1</sup> The National Educational Longitudinal Study: 1988 is a survey of a nationally representative cohort of students that began in 1988 when the students were in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Samples of respondents were surveyed again in 1990, 1992, 1994, and 2000.

from high school, and applying to and enrolling in a four-year college or university. The researchers first looked at the entire group of 8<sup>th</sup> graders, regardless of SES, to replicate Berkner and Chavez's (1997) findings. They found that students who achieved even the base level of college qualification in high school were more likely to enroll in a four-year institution than those who did not reach that level.

Cabrera and LaNasa (2000) then examined the NELS data for 8<sup>th</sup> graders from the highest and lowest SES quartiles to see how these groups fared on three critical tasks. They found that 71% of low-SES students were not qualified for college by the time they left high school, while only 30% of the high-SES students were not qualified. Similarly, of the college qualified students, only 66% of the low-SES students actually applied to a four-year college, while 82% of all students, regardless of SES, and 87% of high-SES students applied to these institutions. Thus, Cabrera and LaNasa (2000) not only confirmed earlier findings that academic achievement is related to enrollment, but also found a positive relationship between SES and academic achievement, and SES and enrollment.

Another facet of academic ability is academic preparation, which differs from academic achievement. Students may have very high grade point averages across easy classes that will not prepare them for the rigors of college. Additionally, students may have low standardized test scores but still meet other college readiness standards. For this reason, many researchers have included measures of academic preparation that seek to isolate the quality of a student's high school curriculum in their models of college choice.

The most well known measure of academic preparation is Adelman's (1999; 2006) academic intensity measure, which counts the number of courses students take in certain subjects and the number of Advanced Placement (AP) and remedial courses they take. Using NELS: 88 data, Adelman (1999) established levels of academic intensity that correlated with college-going behavior. The minimum academic intensity level for matriculation to college was: four English classes and four Math classes, including at least trigonometry; two classes each of Science, Social Studies, and Foreign Language; two Advanced Placement or other college preparatory classes; one class of Computer Science; and no remedial courses. Adelman (1999) found that 95% of students who met this level of academic intensity earned a Bachelor's degree eight years after graduation. He asserts, "The academic intensity of the student's high school curriculum still counts more than anything else in pre-collegiate history in providing momentum toward completing a bachelor's degree" (Adelman, 2006; p. xvii).

Also using national data sets, Riley (1997) and Horn (1998) separately examined the link between mathematics classes and academic preparation. This correlational research using NELS: 88 data found a link between mathematics courses and college enrollment. Essentially, taking Algebra I by the eighth grade and taking more math classes, through at least Algebra II in high school, increased a student's chance of enrolling in college (Horn 1998; Riley, 1997). While the research on academic preparation and college access has influenced the curriculum offerings and graduation requirements in schools throughout the nation, schools that serve low-SES

student populations tend to have lower academic intensity than other schools (Adelman, 2006).

In recent years, dual enrollment programs, in which high school students take an advanced class for which they receive both high school and college credit, have expanded in popularity (Bailey, Hughes, & Karp, 2003). These programs are often administered at the local level between a school district and a nearby higher education institution, and are seen as a cost effective way to expand the academic intensity and curricular offerings for students (Bailey, Hughes, & Karp, 2003). For much college access research, participation in a dual enrollment program is seen as commensurate with Advanced Placement courses or other college credit-granting programs (Adelman, 2006), and is included within existing variables.

Although dual enrollment programs have existed for many years, research on the effectiveness of these programs is just beginning to emerge. One reason for this late emergence is that longitudinal data are required to study the impact of dual enrollment on college-going behaviors. The early picture, however, is that dual enrollment participation does increase students' access to higher education (Geise, 2011; Hoffman, Vargas, & Santos, 2009; Karp, Calcagno, Huges, Jeong, & Bailey, 2007). Karp and colleagues (2007) used internal, administrative datasets from the Florida Department of Education and the College Now Program at City University of New York (CUNY) to examine the effects of dual enrollment participation on high school graduation and college enrollment. Their statistical analyses revealed that dual enrollment participation was positively associated with graduating from high school,

enrolling in college and enrolling in a four-year college, remaining in college for a second year and college grade point average (Karp et al., 2007).

In her recent dissertation, Geise (2011) examined the outcome effects for students participating in Ohio's dual enrollment program, PSEOP. Geise (2011) used data from the Ohio Board of Regents to match a group of PSEOP participants with a group of non-participants using ACT scores. Her statistical analysis confirmed earlier research that PESOP participants enrolled in college at statistically significantly higher rates than non-participants of similar academic ability. She also found that PSEOP participants were more likely to be female, less likely to be African American, and more likely to have mothers with some college education (Geise, 2011). She found no significant difference in SES or father's education for PSEOP participants as compared to non-participants. Thus, research on dual enrollment participation would seem to indicate that, like AP participation, taking college courses in high schools helps students to access higher education.

In sum, research in academic achievement and preparation for college access has looked at students' GPA, ACT scores, and participation in academically intense high school curriculum. This literature indicates that students' academic readiness at the time of high school graduation influences their ability to access college. Moreover, their achievement and preparation may determine the type of institution in which they enroll and their ability to persist to degree completion.

**Socioeconomic status.** Almost as salient as academic ability is students' supply of financial resources and socioeconomic status. Research definitions of SES are somewhat varied, but they generally combine measures of family income, parents'

education and parents' occupation (Perna, 2006). Other measures, such as items in the home that reflect family wealth like books (Terenzini, Cabrera & Bernal, 2001), or students' awareness of family income relative to peers (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004) have also been included in composite measures of SES. Many researchers in college access and choice use a composite measure of SES because it is more statistically stable than the singular measure of family income (Perna, 2006; Terenzini, Cabrera & Bernal, 2001). As Perna (2006) notes, "SES may be considered a measure of wealth, reflecting a long-term and more stable assessment of resources" (p. 133) than family income alone.

Still, whether family income or SES is used as a measure, the literature consistently indicates that students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to apply to and enroll in post-secondary education, especially four-year colleges (Bedsworth, Colby & Doctor, 2006; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Hossler, et al., 1989; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006; Walpole, 2007). Terenzini and colleagues (2001) assert that students' SES impacts nearly every aspect of their college decision-making process, including their educational and occupational aspirations, their search for potential institutions and their eventual enrollment. Additionally, some studies have suggested that students from low-income families are less likely to aspire to attend college in the first place (Kao & Tienda, 1998; McDonough, 1997; Terenzini et al., 2001). Many researchers posit that SES impacts how students think of their future potential in terms of education and occupation (McDonough, 1997; Terenzini et al., 2001; Walpole, 2007).

The majority of the research examining the link between college choice and SES was based on national datasets and statistical analyses, though at least one seminal project used qualitative case study (McDonough, 1997). In her study of female high school seniors in California, McDonough (1997) found that socioeconomic status (SES) and cultural capital influenced these urban students' college choice process. McDonough (1997) interviewed twelve students at four high schools that represented "a mix not only of high and low social class status contexts, but also high and low college guidance operations" (p. 14). She also interviewed each target student's best friend, parents, and guidance counselor in order to understand how varied contextual influences impacted students' college choice decisions.

Using the metaphor of a mobile, McDonough (1997) noted that college influences are weighted differently for each individual. Where parents were influential for all students, how they mattered or how much they mattered with respect to friends or school experiences differed. For the high SES students in the study, "the seamless nature" (McDonough, 1997, p. 146) of their families, peer groups, and schooling experiences "almost always fit together perfectly to focus the students' aspirations on going to four-year colleges, hopefully the best their achievements would allow" (McDonough, 1997, p. 146). On the other hand, for the low SES girls in the study, the spheres of influence at times conflicted with one another, which resulted in either lowered or unmet aspirations as these students enrolled in community colleges. Thus, these students' unique sociocultural contexts provided knowledge and promoted behavior that either fostered or hindered their eventual college access and choice.



McDonough (1997) also found that family SES and the costs associated with college contributed to students' unique college choice mobile. For example, while high SES students assumed or knew their parents would pay for college, low SES students did not make that assumption and seemed to temper their college choice because of cost. Further, while all students factored geographic locality into their college choice decisions by expressing a desire to be close enough to home to facilitate visits, the students' definitions of "close enough" differed in terms of SES. For example, the students from high SES families considered a day of air travel an acceptable distance, whereas low SES families thought in terms of ground transportation or even having the student continue living at home.

**Financial aid.** Beyond family financial resources, the financial aid available to students from states, HEIs, or the federal government also factors into a students' college choice decision. As Cabrera and LaNasa (2000) note, while all students take tuition costs and financial aid into consideration, "low-income students' decisions to attend college appear to be highly sensitive to tuition and financial aid levels" (p. 12). Many researchers study tuition costs and financial aid as interrelated phenomena because the two are interrelated in students' actual college choice decision process. For example, in order to determine how price and aid impact student enrollment, St. John (2003) used national longitudinal data to quantitatively determine the effect of increasing tuition and/or aid on enrollment. He found that increases in financial aid were more likely to increase enrollment than decreases in tuition, and that low-income students' decisions were especially sensitive to changes in financial aid. Other research has found that financial aid from states increases college enrollment

generally, and in four-year institutions in the state providing aid, specifically (Dynarski, 2004).

**Cost.** Research that considers the effect of cost on students' eventual enrollment decision indicates that increases in tuition lead to declines in enrollment (Heller, 1999; Kane, 1999). Moreover, students may enroll in two-year rather than four-year institutions because of tuition and other costs (Perna & Titus, 2004). Students' search for potential institutions during their college choice process may also be influenced by their own and their parents' perceptions of the cost of higher education (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000).

Opportunity costs associated with post-secondary education are also relevant to students' college choice decisions. For many students, the opportunity to earn wages in the years immediately following high school is an attractive disincentive for college enrollment, which may be more attractive to economically disadvantaged students (Hahn & Price, 2008). Further, researchers using statistical analyses of national data sets have found a positive relationship between unemployment rates and college enrollment (Heller, 1999; Kane, 1999). In her interpretation of this research, Perna (2006) posits, "as the unemployment rate increases, foregone earnings (i.e., opportunity costs) are assumed to decline, and the likelihood of enrolling is assumed to increase" (p. 135).

**Future aspirations.** Research consistently shows that a college degree leads to higher salaries for individuals (Baum & Payea, 2010; Carnevale, Rose, & Cheah, 2011; Rumberger & Thomas, 1993). Organizations working to increase student college enrollment frequently publicize the higher salary rates for college-educated

individuals (e.g., *Education Pays* by the College Board). However, much less is known about how this knowledge influences students' college choice process. In her review of the literature, Perna (2006) describes only one study in which expected increased wages led to increased enrollment in two-year colleges (Rouse, 1994). While students' expectations of benefits associated with college are absent from the literature, it seems rational to assume that many individuals would elect to further their education only if they valued it as a means to some end. For many individuals, the benefits of higher education may be reflected in the predisposition stage of the college choice process. As Cabrera and LaNasa (2000) hypothesize, in middle or early high school, "many students come to value a particular occupation and begin to see attending college as crucial in securing their occupational goals" (p. 7).

Similarly, other researchers have included individual habitus in their examinations of students' college choice. The concept of habitus was introduced by Pierre Bourdieu (1977) to refer to the attitudes, beliefs and experiences that arise from and determine one's social world. As Perna (2006) states, habitus "conditions an individual's college-related expectations, attitudes, and aspirations" (p. 112). She continues, "Habitus reflects the internalization of structural boundaries and constraints and determines what is possible for an individual" (Perna, 2006, p. 112). Individual habitus and students' perceptions of their future opportunities are shaped by characteristics such as gender, race and ethnicity as well as students' access to cultural and social capital.

**Demographic characteristics.** Because habitus is a difficult concept to operationalize and measure, much research in college access and choice has focused

on students' demographic characteristics of race, ethnicity, and gender. In their review of extant research, Hossler and colleagues (1989) found that the background characteristics of gender, race and ethnicity only weakly correlated to college choice. As they report, "while some evidence suggests that women may receive less encouragement to attend a [post-secondary institution], the large increase in enrollment rates among women would suggest that gender no longer plays a major role in...student college choice" (Hossler et al., 1989, p. 20). Further, the authors note that multiple quantitative analyses of national data sets found the effect of race and ethnicity to be negligible when researchers controlled for SES (Hossler et al., 1989). Perna also (2006) reports that the research on students' background characteristics is ambiguous, with some studies indicating that female, black and/or Latino/a students have higher college choice outcomes than males or other racial and ethnic groups, while some research indicates the opposite. At the most, research using statistical modeling indicates that the college choice process may differ for students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, which may be justification enough for considering it in future research on college choice.

**Parental encouragement and support.** Common sense alone would indicate that parents and/or guardians are influential figures in students' college choice process. Cabrera and LaNasa (2000) state, "Parental encouragement has two dimensions. The first is motivational: parents maintain high educational expectations for their children. The second is proactive: parents become involved in school matters, discuss college plans with their children, and save for college" (p. 8). Examinations of national data have found that high school graduates enrolled in four-year colleges

report consistent parental encouragement to go to college (Conklin & Daily, 1981; Flint, 1992). Further, more active parental support, defined as either help in selecting high school classes, saving for college, visiting colleges or some combination thereof, has also been shown to positively influence students' college-going behavior (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Hossler, Schmit & Vesper, 1999; Miller 1997. More recent research using national datasets and statistical analysis has shown that parental involvement and encouragement in middle school also predicts post-secondary enrollment (Perna, 2000).

Another way that parents impact students' college choice behavior is by endowing their children with social and cultural capital. According to Coleman (1988), social capital is the system of relationships and accompanying knowledge one can use to access privileged social spaces. In terms of college choice, social capital includes parents' relationships with K-12 schools and HEIs as well as their relationships with individuals from these institutions. Parental involvement in schools has been consistently linked to improved higher education outcomes for students (Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998; Perna, 2000; Perna & Titus, 2005; Plank & Jordan, 2001). Using hierarchical linear modeling and follow up NELS: 92 data, Perna and Titus (2005) sought to understand the relationship between parental involvement, social capital, race/ethnicity and eventual college enrollment. They found a positive relationship between the frequency of parental involvement in students' academic matters and the likelihood of enrollment in post-secondary education (Perna & Titus, 2005).

Cultural capital refers to the knowledge and skills that students gain from their family background and social environment. Schools and society reflect and reward the dominant culture, so individuals from backgrounds that provide or privilege alternative cultural models are disadvantaged. Perna (2006) asserts, “Cultural capital...may provide students with access to resources that promote college-related behaviors and outcomes...[and] may be manifested in terms of cultural knowledge and the value placed on college attainment” (p. 138). In their review of college access literature, Cabrera and LaNasa (2000) note that students with less dominant cultural capital tend to express lowered educational aspirations and expect fewer returns on an investment in higher education. Perna (2006) further suggests that cultural capital may manifest as the value parents assign to higher education. In the college access and choice literature, this construct is measured by gauging the encouragement parents provide to students related to higher education.

**School resources.** Perna (2006) also points out that parents are not the only source of social and cultural capital for students. In fact, peers or adults other than parents may impart these forms of capital to students. By including target students’ best friends in her study, McDonough (1997) showed how peers’ college aspirations and choices influenced the target students’ decision-making process. In that same study and subsequent work McDonough (1997; 2005) illustrated the influence of guidance counselors on students’ college choice process. By qualitatively comparing the nature of college guidance counseling available at four different types of high schools in California, McDonough (1997) demonstrated that the information students receive about colleges varies widely. Further, when parents lack the requisite social

capital to help students think about college, school guidance counselors are expected to fill the void, and thus, have a huge impact on students' college choice process (McDonough, 1997).

Additional college choice research indicates the saliency of the learning experiences students have before they enter college (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Hossler et al., 1989; Pressman & Pressman, 2008). Thus, the resources available to K-12 schools, especially those schools serving disadvantaged populations, influence the students who leave these schools to enter HEIs. Cabrera and LaNasa (2000), assert, "differences in college attendance rates among varied SES groups can be explained in part by the quality of the high school they attended" (p. 41). Further, schools are products of broader social and economic structures, and the lack of resources at some schools reflects the larger forces of poverty and inequality in American society (Tierney, Corwin, & Colyar, 2005, p. 2).

**Higher education institutional factors.** A final influence in students' college choice process is the number and location of HEIs in a student's region or state. Perna (2006) notes, "The composition of a state's higher education system (e.g., availability of different types of colleges and universities) contributes to the distribution of students at different types of colleges and universities in a state" (p. 143). In states or communities that are geographically isolated, students' access to HEIs may be limited. When students in these areas begin looking for information about higher education, they may be unable to visit colleges or to access information about potential institutions. Other research has found that students typically enroll in HEIs that are

close to home or that they consider easily accessible to home (Desmond & Lopez Turley, 2009; McDonough, 1997).

**Summary.** As shown above, researchers in college access and choice have identified a number of factors that influence students. They have also put forth various theoretical models to explain *how* these factors shape the college choice process (e.g., Hossler et al., 1989; Cabrera and LaNasa, 2000; DesJardins, Ahlburg & McCall, 2006; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006; 2010). Econometric models conceive of the college choice process as largely a cost-benefit analysis that hinges on financial aid (DesJardins et al., 2006). In contrast, sociocultural models focus on how an individual's social status and demographic background impact his or her aspirations for educational attainment (McDonough, 1997). However, most theorists recognize that students' college choice decisions are naturally complex and depend on economic and sociocultural forces. Therefore, combined models of college choice that can explain both types of factors in students' college choice decision are currently favored in research.

Three different combined models are prominent in the college access and choice literature—the stage model, the process model, and the nested process model. The stage model posits that college choice consists of three distinct stages: predisposition, search and choice (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Hossler et al., 1989). Predisposition is defined as the “developmental phase in which students determine whether or not they would like to continue their formal education beyond high school” (Hossler et al., 1989, p.16). The search phase involves determining the most important qualities one desires in a college or university and weighing the attributes of different

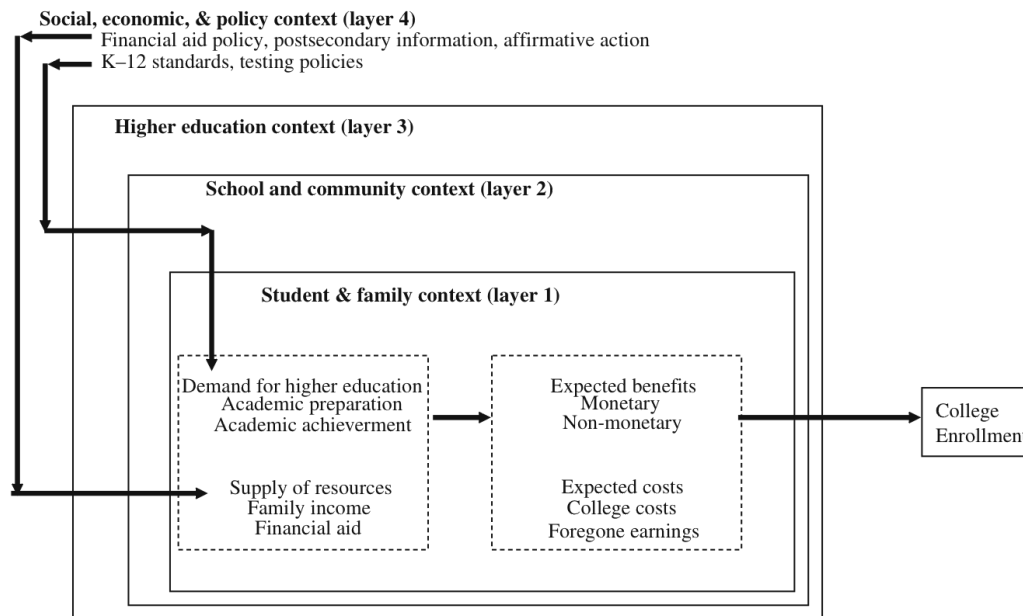


institutions, and ends when a student begins applying to institutions that meet his or her criteria. The third phase, choice, consists of a student's final decision to attend one college or university. For traditionally aged students who enter college immediately after high school, predisposition usually spans grades 7-10, search occurs between grades 10 and 12, and choice is complete by the summer following high school graduation. The stage model does not address how individuals who enter college later in life may experience the stages, so its applicability is limited (Perna, 2006). After reviewing the research on college choice to date, Hossler and colleagues (1989) assert that student ability, parental education, parental encouragement, and socioeconomic status are the strongest factors in college choice. However, they list at least twenty factors that may influence students' predisposition, search and choice stages.

In the decades since the stage model was developed, college access and choice research has refined and expanded this basic combined model. Cabrera & LaNasa (2000) took Hossler and colleagues' (1989) list of correlational factors and arranged them into three broad categories: 1) various parental factors, including encouragement, college experience, and socioeconomic status; 2) various student factors, including academic ability and qualifications, educational and occupational aspirations, and knowledge of higher education institutions; and 3) factors related to higher education institutions, including student perceptions of colleges and universities, and tuition, cost and financial aid. Cabrera and LaNasa's (2000) process model of college choice then arranges these factors into a complex, interacting web with arrows that tries to account for relationships between the different factors within and across the three broad categories. While the process model more closely approximates the complexity

of college choice decision-making, its relationships are one-directional and it does not fully address the context that shapes these factors in the first place.

The currently favored model in the field of college access and choice is the nested process model (Perna, 2006; 2010). The nested process model treats college choice as the outcome of a cost-benefit analysis that is shaped by a student’s unique sociocultural context. Perna (2006; 2010) groups the salient factors from the college choice literature into four broad categories: 1) a student’s demand for higher education, which is related to his her scholastic achievement; 2) the student’s supply of monetary resources, including family income and financial aid; 3) the expected benefits of post-secondary education; and, 4) the expected costs of furthering one’s education. Perna’s (2006; 2010) nested process model further situates these college choice factors in four layers of context: 1) individual and family context 2) school and community context, 3) higher education context, and 4) social, economic, and policy context (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1-The Nested Process Model of College Choice (Perna, 2010)**

The nested process model (Perna, 2006; 2010) is the first college choice model to explicitly consider the role of context in an individual's college choice decision. "By emphasizing these layers of context, the [nested process] model recognizes differences across students in the resources that shape college choice" (Perna, 2006, p. 116). The inclusion of context as well as the multiple factors identified in the college access and choice literature makes Perna's (2006; 2010) model the most complete model for understanding how students experience the college choice process. This model is also the only model to take into account the experience of non-traditional students, which makes it applicable to multiple research populations.

### **College Access and Choice for Rural Students**

As aforementioned, the research cited above, and, thus, the theoretical models derived from it, is overwhelmingly focused on urban and minority students. Within the field of college access and choice, there is literature focused specifically on rural and Appalachian students that is relevant to my study but is not necessarily included in the theoretical models of college choice. Even the nationally representative datasets do not take geographic location into account. Thus, relatively little research has examined rural students' college-going beliefs and behaviors. In the following section, I review this literature as it applies to my focal population.

In an early piece, Khattri and colleagues (1997) used existing national data to compare poor, rural and poor, urban students on three outcomes: graduation and drop out rates, academic achievement (as measured by NAEP scores) and college aspirations. Though their conclusions were limited by the inconsistent definitions of rural and the types of data in the studies they reviewed, the authors noted several

findings. For one, poor, rural students showed higher rates of high school graduation than poor, urban students and slightly higher levels of academic achievement. However, the schools that poor, rural students attend have significantly reduced curricular offerings and educational resources. Thus, the academic preparation available to students in these schools is reduced. Additionally, fewer poor, rural students pursue higher education than poor, urban students, although equal percentages of both groups eventually graduate from college. An obvious caveat of this article is its relative age, as well as its reliance on older national surveys and data sets, especially because it deals with rural and urban populations, whose numbers and characteristics have changed in the past fifteen years,.

Hu's (2003) comparative analysis of college aspirations among urban, suburban and rural students is an especially strong piece of work in the quantitative literature on college access for rural students. By looking across the responses of students in 8th, 10th and 12th grades, Hu (2003) expands the typical analysis of National Educational Longitudinal Study: 1988 data and finds that this methodology yields different results for students from each of the three groups. Typically, in this type of research student responses are compared at only one grade level; usually, not all groups are compared. Hu's (2003) expanded analysis reveals that rural students have lower levels of educational aspiration, access, and enrollment than either their suburban or urban counterparts. Hu (2003) also notes that comparing students at the 8th grade shows a different picture than when students are compared at the 12th grade. For example, urban 8th graders report lower rates of college aspiration than the other groups; but by the 12th grade, these students show higher rates of enrollment. Thus,

looking at only one grade may present a skewed picture of how locality impacts college access. Because Hu's (2003) work is quantitative and based on a national data set, it can only speak to the larger level of urban, rural, and suburban. However, it is evident to even casual observers that rural North Dakota is substantially different from rural Kentucky. Hu's (2003) research cannot separate rural groups for analysis by location. It is unclear if his finding that rural students have lower levels of aspiration, access and enrollment will hold when we look only at rural, Appalachian youth.

Recent research on rural students has found that school characteristics were predictive of poor, rural students' ultimate educational achievement (Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2012; Irvin et al., 2011). Generally, college access and choice literature indicates that aspects of school context such as guidance counselors and curriculum strength may indeed shape students' college decisions (Gonzalez, Stone, & Jovel, 2003; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006; Perna & Titus, 2005; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Only recently has research begun to confirm that these same characteristics apply to rural students.

Irvin and colleagues (2011) examined the relationship between school context characteristics and educational outcomes for over 6,000 students from both high- and low-poverty rural communities. Using data collected directed from students and teachers, as well as data from the NCES Common Core of Data, the researchers quantitatively analyzed the significance of a number of school variables on students' grades and college aspirations. They found that for students in high-poverty rural communities, school characteristics such as number of grade levels, location and student population were predictive of grades, but not aspirations. For students in low-

poverty rural areas, these school variables did not influence educational outcomes. As Irvin and colleagues note, these findings run counter to other research that suggests location and other school factors may impact rural students' educational aspirations and outcomes.

Byun and colleagues (2012) used NELS: 88 data to analyze the background characteristics, pre-college schooling experiences, and college completion of rural students at four-year institutions. Using various statistical analyses, the researchers found that rural students tended to be poorer, whiter, and more often first-generation college-goers than their suburban or urban counterparts. They also found that the academic intensity of the curriculum at rural schools was lower than that at other schools, even though student academic achievement was commensurate. Finally, the analysis revealed that rural students were more likely to enroll in less selective, public institutions than urban or suburban students.

### **College Access and Choice for Appalachian Students**

Another relevant subset of college access and choice literature consists of a few studies that focus on students from Appalachia. A quantitative study conducted by Ali and Saunders (2006) utilized social cognitive career theory to explore how rural students' self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations and goal representations influence their career and academic interests and aspirations. The researchers used hierarchical multiple regression to identify variables impacting the college plans of the Appalachian students in their study. The students' perceptions of parental support and their academic self-efficacy were the most influential variables, which confirms some findings from general college access research. Still, and as the authors note

themselves, these variables only explained a small amount of the variance observed. While not uncommon to this type of research, large amounts of unexplained variance point to the absence of important factors in the analysis. Thus, future research should build on this study to develop a clearer picture of college choice process of rural Appalachian youth.

In a similar study in North Carolina, Dellana and Snyder (2004) explored how students' future plans for education depend on the variables of "quality of counseling, race, gender, grade level, and academic performance" (p. 27). Using multiple statistical analyses, the researchers found that academic performance (as measured by students' self-reported grades) and quality of counseling (either by a teacher and/or guidance counselor) had the greatest impact on students' educational plans. They also found gender differences with regards to perceptions of counselor quality, but no racial differences at all. While this article's focus on counseling is appropriate given the knowledge that guidance counselors influence college choice, it does not go far enough in its exploration of how multiple factors impact rural students' college aspirations and why they do so. It is also geographically limited and may not be generalizable to wider populations. However, as with most of the previously discussed quantitative studies, this research may serve as a fertile starting ground for more descriptive studies that explore the linkages between school variables, personal traits, college goals and enrollment decisions.

Using a fairly typical research method for examining how particular variables impact students' college aspirations, Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) administered a survey to nearly 250 students in rural West Virginia and used statistical analyses to

determine the significance of particular variables on college enrollment. The researchers used Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which combines micro-level, individual characteristics and macro-level, contextual influences, to capture the complexity of the decision to pursue higher education. They found that academic preparation and parent variables were significant for the aspirations of these rural students. Further, the authors discovered gender differences in the college choice pathways of the students. This finding is an interesting addition to the literature on college access in general. Though this study is quite rigorous, it would have benefitted from a longitudinal approach that measured if the students who expressed intentions to attend a HEI actually enrolled. Although the authors do identify longitudinal studies as a direction for future research, it is not one the researchers, or others, appear to have pursued at this point.

In his report for the Appalachian Regional Commission, Haaga (2004) compiled Census data to characterize education in the region of interest. The resulting picture is not positive. In almost every category of educational attainment, Appalachian adults fare worse than their national counterparts. However, the percentage of young Appalachians graduating from high school has partially offset the high number of older adults that failed to earn a high school diploma, so the literature contains some hope for the region. While Haaga's (2004) piece is crucial for understanding why policies aimed at increasing college access for rural populations are needed, it cannot speak to the reasons for this historically low level of educational attainment. Other research is needed to explore these reasons and to help craft effective policy and practice for this rural region.



Finally, in an interesting piece of qualitative research, Bryan and Simmons (2009) interviewed ten first-generation college students attending an institution of higher education in Kentucky in an attempt to identify and describe important factors that account for their academic achievement. The researchers coded interview transcripts and discovered seven themes that cut across the reported experiences of the participants. Many of the themes echo variables in quantitative studies of college choice. For instance, the students cited knowledge of college procedures, intervention/outreach programs, and family characteristics as key factors in their ability to attend college. The bulk of this article consists of thick, rich description of the seven themes that weaves the students' voices into the narrative, and provides a level detail that is absent from other works in this body of literature. These well-developed themes could help quantitative researchers identify variables worth examining in future studies, just as quantitative studies helped Bryan and Simmons (2009) recognize important themes in Appalachian students' early college experiences.

As a whole, the literature does not provide a clear picture of the factors that impact rural Appalachian students' college choice and access, or how rural Appalachian students' think about college choice decisions. By studying a sample of rural students from Appalachian Kentucky who have completed their college choice process, we can begin to understand if and how the experience of rural students aligns with the research in the field of college access and choice.

## **Gaps in the Literature**

My dissertation addresses three gaps in the college access and choice literature as discussed above: 1) the lack of research on rural Appalachian students' college choice process; 2) the preponderance of quantitative analyses of national datasets in the field; and 3) the lack of consideration of the role of several dimensions of context in the college choice process. The primary gap in the college access and choice literature is the lack of research on the college choice experience of rural students in general and rural Appalachian students in particular. Much research in college access and choice is premised on the assumption that different student populations experience the college choice process differently. Studies of college choice among ethnic and racial minority groups, low-income students, first-generation students, and urban students fill the literature. Moreover, these studies have been used to construct conceptual models of college choice that are generalized to all students.

In part, the research focuses on ethnic and racial minority groups, low-income students, first-generation students, and urban students because they have been traditionally underrepresented and underserved by schools and society. Another reason is that these groups exist in numbers sufficient to allow for disaggregation from national datasets and quantitative analysis. Similarly disadvantaged groups with numbers that cannot be disaggregated from the data, for example, Native American or Pacific Islander American, are less frequently studied. However, we know enough about college access and choice to know that small, disadvantaged groups likely face unique barriers to higher education. Research that focuses on the experiences of these, and other, small groups is necessary if the theoretical models of college choice are to

account for all students. As a small, and often disregarded population, rural students and their college choice experience should be studied so we begin to understand why they are likely to access higher education at lower rates than other students.

The second gap in the literature that my study will address is the reliance on quantitative analysis of national longitudinal datasets. While this work has provided many valuable insights about the various factors that impact students' college enrollment, it cannot tell us much about *how* these factors influence students or how individual students engage in the college choice process. Qualitative research is necessary to understand how multiple factors interact within a process (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative studies of the college choice process could provide additional insights about how students experience certain factors and how these experiences shape the college decision process. Indeed, some existant qualitative studies in the field of college choice and access have revealed how the factors identified by quantitative work actually play out in students' decision-making process (McDonough, 1997; Tierney & Colyar, 2006). However, this qualitative work has focused solely on students in urban settings, and should be expanded to different student populations.

Constructs that are hard to quantify, but important to the college choice process, such as students' perceptions and values, can be examined using rigorous qualitative methods and added to the conceptual models in the field. In short, quantitative analyses of national datasets can only tell us so much about the college choice process of any student population. Qualitative research can offer different types of insights about individual students' college choice experience and is needed to

enhance our overall understanding of the process. I addressed this gap in my dissertation by employing qualitative, case-study methodology (Yin, 2009), and by striving to unpack the complex college choice process of four rural students from Appalachian Kentucky.

The final gap in the college access and choice literature that my study addresses is the largely ignored role of context in students' college choice. Only one model of college choice—the nested process model—places college choice within its larger sociocultural context. Perna's (2010) nested process model of college choice posits that college choice is shaped by sociocultural contextual influences at both individual and broader levels. As Perna (2006) states, "college enrollment decisions reflect an individual's 'situated context,' and pathways to college enrollment differ in ways that reflect the diversity in individual circumstances, as well as the ways that individual circumstances serve to define and constrain students' college opportunities" (p. 140). The context in which students make college choice decisions is important because it influences how they view themselves, the available opportunities for future success, and their ultimate decision set. Examining how context influences the college choice process of a specific student population could further enhance our theoretical knowledge.

### **Conceptual Framework**

In order to address these three gaps and contribute to the literature in college access and choice, I sought to examine the college choice process of four rural students within the context of Appalachian Kentucky. Because the nested process model (Perna, 2006; 2010) recognizes that students' college choice is shaped by their

varied access to resources at the individual, family, school, and societal levels, I used it as the conceptual framework for my study. Its inclusion of the salient factors for college access and choice drawn from the literature as well as contextual factors makes it well-suited to my study.

Perna's (2006; 2010) nested process model can be seen above in Figure 1. Recall that Perna (2006; 2010) groups the salient factors from the college choice literature into four broad categories: 1) a student's demand for higher education, which is related to his/her scholastic achievement; 2) the student's supply of monetary resources, including family income and financial aid; 3) the expected benefits of post-secondary education; and, 4) the expected costs of furthering one's education. These college choice factors are nested within four layers of context: 1) individual and family context 2) school and community context, 3) higher education context, and 4) social, economic, and policy context.

At the student and family level, college choice and enrollment are influenced by students' demographic characteristics, such as race, and the cultural and social capital available to a student, such as parents' knowledge of college process (Perna, 2006; 2010; Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, & Perna, 2008). The next layer of context is the school and community, which focuses on the structural supports and barriers to college choice like the availability of guidance counseling and college literature (McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006; 2010). The third layer of context concerns the location and characteristics of higher education institutions, which includes academic programs and marketing and recruitment (Chapman, 1981; Perna, 2006; 2010). The fourth layer of context is the broader social, economic and political environment in

which students, their families, their schools, and institutions of higher education operate. This final layer of context includes broad influences on college choice and enrollment, such as legislation and population patterns (Perna, 2006; 2010).

By studying rural Appalachian students who have completed the college choice process, I can begin to understand if and how their experience aligns with the research in the field of college access and choice. Appalachian Kentucky is a challenging context for students who want to go to college because of its low level of educational attainment and high level of poverty. Yet, despite the barriers to success, many students from the region do choose to enroll in post-secondary education. By learning how and why some students from Appalachian Kentucky are able to go to college, educators and researchers can begin to understand how to increase the region's level of educational attainment. Explicitly, the main research question for my dissertation was:

1. How does the college decision-making process of a sample of rural students from Appalachian Kentucky align with Perna's (2006; 2010) nested process model of college choice?

In order to answer this question I also answer the following sub-questions:

- a. What are the characteristics of a sample of rural students from Appalachian Kentucky who are planning to attend a 4-year college or university in the fall of 2012?
- b. How did four case students decide whether and where to go to college?

- c. What factors are associated with the case students' decisions of whether and where to go to college?
- d. How did the students' enrollment decisions vary by gender, academic achievement, socioeconomic status, and family education level?

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

To answer my research questions, I conducted a case study of four students who graduated from a rural high school in Appalachian Kentucky in May 2012 and were enrolled in a four-year college by August 2012. I used case study methodology because it is well suited for answering “how” and “why” questions (Yin, 2009) that allow a researcher to describe and/or explain a phenomenon in depth. As Merriam (2009) notes, case studies are particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic. They provide thick, rich description of a single phenomenon, situation or event (Merriam, 2009), and help researchers answer questions that arise from and aim to speak back to existing theoretical propositions (Yin, 2009).

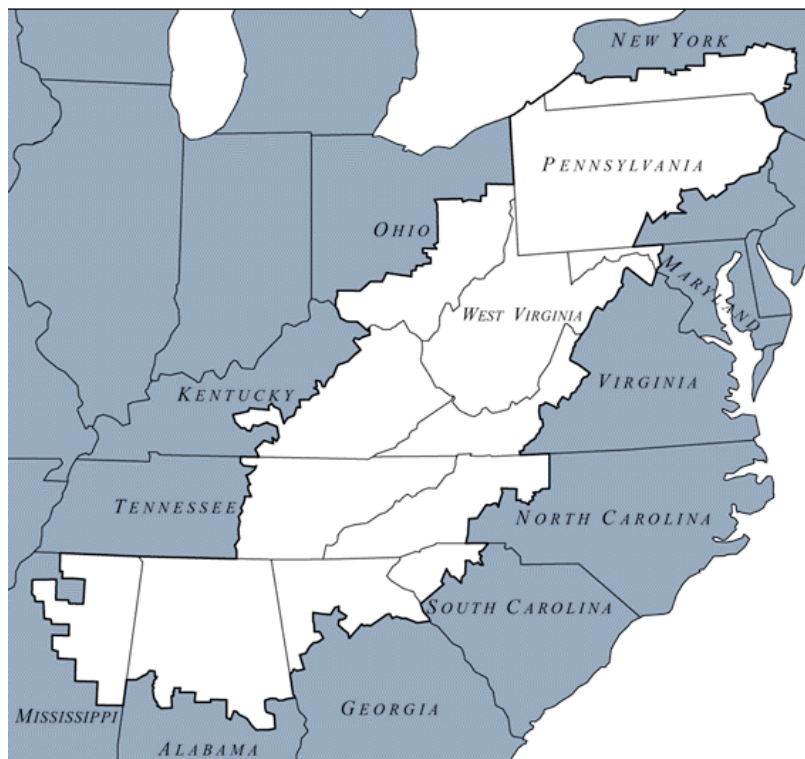
Case study methodology was appropriate for my dissertation because I sought to answer descriptive research questions about a specific phenomenon using an extant theoretical framework. While other methodologies can also answer descriptive research questions, case study is well suited to the study of phenomena that cannot be separated from real-life contexts (Yin, 2009). Because my study sought to understand the students’ college choice process as it occurs in the context of rural Appalachian Kentucky, case study was a fitting methodology for my work. My study also sought to make theoretical contributions to the existing literature on college choice by seeking analytic generalizations by studying a new population—rural students from Appalachian Kentucky.

#### **Context: Rural, Appalachian Kentucky**

The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), established by Congress in 1965 as a part of the War on Poverty, provides the most commonly used definition of



the Appalachian region. Since 1965, the ARC has used economic need and proximity to the Appalachian Mountains to classify counties as Appalachian (Williams, 2002). The entire Appalachian region consists of nearly 26 million individuals in 420 counties across 13 states (See Figure 2) (ARC, 2008). Appalachian Kentucky is comprised of 54 counties that are home to 1.2 million residents (ARC, 2013). In terms of demographics, Appalachia is predominately white (84%), but Appalachian Kentucky is even more so (95%) (ARC, 2013). Nationally, whites make up about 64% of the population (U.S. Census, 2010).



**Figure 2-Map of Appalachia (ARC, 2008)**

Even though Appalachia is classified by a mountain range and boasts much forestland, the region includes rural, suburban and metropolitan areas within its borders. For the purposes of the Census, rural and urban areas are defined by population density. Any Census block with 2,500 or fewer individuals is considered

rural. Approximately 42% of Appalachia's entire population is rural; 61% of Appalachian Kentucky's population is considered rural (ARC, 2013; U.S. Census, 2010). Comparatively, 15% of the national population lives in rural areas (U.S. Census, 2010).

As previously described, Appalachian Kentucky is economically distressed, with unemployment rates between 10 and 12% and a poverty rate of 25% (ARC, 2013). In fact, in almost every category of economic wellbeing, Appalachian Kentucky fares worse than the region as a whole, as well as the entire nation. For example, in Appalachia generally, the regional unemployment rate is commensurate with the national unemployment rate of 9% (ARC, 2013; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). Similarly, the national poverty rate is 15% (U.S. Census, 2010), while the poverty rate in Appalachia is 18% (ARC, 2013). The most common industries in Appalachia are mining, manufacturing, farming and forestry, while the least common industries are finance, federal government, and professional/technical services (ARC, 2013). While manufacturing is also a top industry nationally, other industries like health services, retail trade and professional/technical services share significant portions of the market (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). In Appalachian Kentucky, coal mining is the top industry, but it is in decline (Roemaker, 2001). Other top industries in Appalachian Kentucky include farming and manufacturing (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013).

### **School Site Selection and Context**

To limit confounding variables and because my resources as an individual independent researcher were limited, I decided to select a sample of college-going

students from rural, Appalachian Kentucky from a single county school district that contained only one high school. To select the school, I considered three school context criteria from the college access and choice literature: college-going rate, number of guidance counselors, and access to college level curriculum. Research indicates that many aspects of school context can shape students' college decisions (Gonzalez et al., 2003; Irvin et al., 2011; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006; Perna & Titus, 2005; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Some of the salient school factors that have been identified in college access and choice literature are: guidance counselors (McDonough, 1997), teachers acting as mentors (Stanton-Salazar, 1997), college preparatory curricula such as Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Gonzalez et al., 2003), and college-going peers (Stanton-Salazar, 1997) and the resulting social network of friends and adults that have access to college information (Perna & Titus, 2005).

Before I could analyze individual school context criteria, I identified which county school districts in Kentucky were considered both rural and Appalachian. Kentucky includes 54 Appalachian counties (ARC, 2008). Because Census blocks do not correspond to politically defined areas like cities and counties, I had to look elsewhere for a list of rural districts. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Common Core of Data, a national database of all public schools and school districts, classifies all schools as rural, suburban or urban (Provasnik, KewalRamani, Coleman, Gilbertson, Herring, & Xie, 2007). Using the NCES Common Core of Data's (2012) map of Kentucky school districts, I identified 34 rural county school districts in Appalachian Kentucky. My reliance on the Common Core of Data is

consistent with other research on rural students (Griffin, Hutchins, & Meece, 2011; Irvin et al., 2011).

Next, I examined the college-going rates of the school districts in each of the identified 34 rural, Appalachian Kentucky counties (Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, 2008). The Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education (2008) identifies five levels of college going for the state's school districts: Low=0.00-39.9%, Medium-Low=40.0-49.9%, Medium=50.0-54.9%, Medium-High=55.0-59.9%, and High=60.0-69.9%. I wanted to identify the rural county school districts with a medium to high college going rate so that I could study students who had successfully completed their college choice process. According to the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education (2008), three rural, county school districts in Appalachian Kentucky have a high college going rate—Frost<sup>2</sup>, Fairbanks, and Lake. However, only Frost and Fairbanks county districts had a single central high school, which was a necessary condition for my study.

In order to select one school as a research site, I considered the three aforementioned aspects of school context. School level data revealed important differences in the availability of guidance counselors and college level curriculum at the two potential schools. Fairbanks County High School (FCHS) has two guidance counselors, one of which is specifically assigned to the senior class. Frost County High School has only one guidance counselor. Further, Fairbanks County offers a dual-enrollment program where students can receive both high school and college credit for a single class, but they do not offer traditional Advanced Placement classes.

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<sup>2</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

Because research in college access and choice tells us that both guidance counselors and college preparatory curricula are important influences on students' college decision-making process (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Gonzalez et al., 2003 McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006), I selected Fairbanks County High School as my research site.

Fairbanks County is located in the westernmost part of Appalachian Kentucky. Its population is 14,672 with a population density of 58 people per square mile. Only 2,700 of these individuals live in Juniper, the county seat. The Kentucky River runs through Fairbanks County, and its geography is unique as the place where the hills and mountains meet the flatter farmland of central Kentucky. As you drive through the county you see farms and homes and a few scattered service stations or shops until you enter the county seat where you see gas stations, fast food restaurants and stores like Family Dollar or the IGA grocery. There is a factory that makes work clothes, a hospital, a public library, and two elementary schools—one in the town center and one further out in the county. Just three miles down Main Street, the middle and high school sit on the same campus in the shadow of a mountain.

The median family income in Fairbanks is \$28,324; unemployment is 11%; 27% of people there live below the poverty line (ARC, 2013; U.S. Census, 2010). The county is 97% white; 7% of adults in the county have a college degree. Many people in Fairbanks work and shop one county over where a small city, Seaver, has two big box retail stores, larger clothing stores and chain restaurants, as well as another hospital, a university, and a U.S. Army depot.

## **Access**

Because I had no prior relation to Fairbanks County High School or its students, I contacted the principal and superintendent via email to explain my research aims and gain access. Through our email exchanges, we arranged a meeting where I could fully explain my study and its participants. Both administrators thought that my study could highlight the effective practices in their school district, so they allowed me to proceed and introduced me to the senior guidance counselor. The principal told the senior guidance counselor to help me contact the graduating class of 2012 and to generally work with me as I completed my study. Once I explained my purpose, the guidance counselor and her administrative assistant were eager to help me reach the 2012 graduates.

Because I wanted to characterize a larger sample of college-going students from rural Appalachian Kentucky, I used email addresses provided by the guidance counselor to send a questionnaire (see Appendix A) to 2012 FCHS graduates. After subsequently mailing the text of the email as a letter to graduates' homes and advertising and holding a pizza party where graduates could complete the questionnaire, I had eight respondents out of 165 graduates. One reason for the low response rate could have been that my identity as a researcher, or an outsider seeking somewhat personal information, dissuaded many of the students from participating. There is a fairly strong tendency to hold outsiders at arms length in rural, Appalachian Kentucky. It is also possible that I sent the questionnaire at a time when students were preoccupied with college preparations, vacations, or summer jobs. However, I did

analyze the eight completed questionnaires to select six potential case study participants from the respondents,

### **Participants**

**Case students.** I sought a sample of case study participants that varied in terms of academic ability, socioeconomic status, and gender. I took participants' academic ability and SES into account because these factors have consistently been shown to influence college choice in the literature (Adelman 1999; 2006; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Hossler et al., 1989; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006). For the purposes of this study, I used both GPA and ACT scores as the measure of academic achievement. In Kentucky, all juniors in public high schools are required to take the ACT as part of the state's testing package; very few students take the SAT. Thus, I used ACT scores because all questionnaire and case study participants had taken the ACT. Because of my low survey response rate (4.8%), the variability in academic achievement levels of potential participants was extremely low.

However, the survey respondents did vary in terms of SES, which is another salient factor in the college access and choice literature (Bedsworth et al., 2006; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Hossler, et al., 1989; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006; Walpole, 2007). Because poverty and low educational attainment are rampant in Appalachian Kentucky, SES had the potential to be a significant factor for college-going students from this area. I used student reports of relative family income, parental education, and parental occupation to gauge SES. Six of the eight survey respondents were female, which corresponds to the higher rates of college enrollment for females both nationally, and at FCHS (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013).

I asked six of the eight survey respondents, two male and four female, to participate in the study. One male and three females agreed to participate. My sample size decision is drawn from seminal qualitative research in college access and choice. McDonough's (1997) study of the college choice process of girls in California high schools used 12 participants across four high schools. Tierney and Colyar (2006) used a sample of five students in their examination of the college pathways of urban students from two high schools in Los Angeles. Thus, my sample of four students is consistent with other qualitative studies in the field. My four case study participants are characterized in the table below.

Table 1

*Characteristics of the Four Case Students*

	Lydia Nelson	Katherine Isaacs	Kyle Vandiver	Sara Smith
College Enrollment	Public, 4-year Regional University	Private, 4-year Private University	Public, 4-year Regional University	Public, 4-year Regional University
Gender	F	F	M	F
Ethnicity	W	W	W	W
Free/Reduced Meals	No	Free meals	No	Reduced price meals
Parent Education (Mother/Father)	Masters/High school graduate	High school graduate/High school graduate	High school graduate/Less than high	Some college/Some college



			school	
GPA	3.92	3.58	3.97	3.66
ACT	27	26	30	27
Number of Dual Enrollment Courses	5	6	6	5

**Other participants.** I included the case students’ parents as participants because of the salience of parents in students’ college decisions (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Hossler et al., 1989; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006). However, only three of the case students’ parents agreed to be interviewed—the Nelsons, the Smiths and the Isaacs. Kyle’s parents did not want to participate in the study, but since he was the only male who agreed to be in the study, I accepted him without parent participation.

I also included four other individuals as participants because students cited them as influential in their decisions of whether and where to go to college. These participants were two dual enrollment teachers at FCHS, Dr. Hoover and Dr. Taraki; the FCHS principal, Mr. Dean; the FCHS guidance counselor, Mrs. Olin; and the superintendent of Fairbanks County Schools. All five of these school personnel participants were natives to Appalachian Kentucky with decades of experience in Kentucky schools or universities. Mr. Dean, a native of Fairbanks County, graduated from FCHS, taught math there, and eventually became principal. He has been principal of FCHS for nine years. Mrs. Olin is from another rural county in Appalachian Kentucky, but she attended a nearby university and taught in the area until becoming a counselor at FCHS in 1995. Dr. Hoover has been a math professor at

Regional University for eleven years and has taught dual enrollment math classes at FCHS for the past three years. Dr. Taraki has been teaching college composition and literature for twenty years, but she has been at Regional University for twelve years and has taught dual enrollment English for FCHS for three years.

### **Sources of Data**

**Questionnaire.** One source of data for my study was the aforementioned questionnaire that I used for participant selection. However, I also intended to use the questionnaire data to answer my first research question about the characteristics of a sample of rural college going students from Appalachian Kentucky.

My questionnaire (see Appendix B) was drawn from Chenoweth and Galliher's (2006) study of the college aspirations of 250 students in rural West Virginia. The researchers developed a questionnaire to understand how students make the decision of whether to go to college. I reviewed Chenoweth and Galliher's (2004) questionnaire and identified items that would help me answer my research question and identify participants. I did not include all of the items on Chenoweth and Galliher's (2004) questionnaire because my study included interviews to explore students' college decision-making process as well.

Because the low response rate to my questionnaire did not allow for any statistical analysis, I spoke with the guidance counselor about how else to get a sense of the graduating class and about any pertinent data to which she had access. It became clear that she had access to student demographic information (gender and ethnicity), ACT scores, GPAs, post-graduation plans, and Free and Reduced Price meals (FARMS) eligibility. FARMS is a federal program that subsidizes meals for

children in schools (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2013). FARMS eligibility is based on income guidelines set by the United States Department of Agriculture; thus, the FARMS data would serve as a proxy measure for student income.

Because of the sensitive nature of these data, I constructed a spreadsheet template in which the guidance counselor could populate the data for each student, erase student names and insert a random identification number for students. I would never see or know students' ID numbers. I applied for an IRB addendum explaining this revised procedure. Because I would never be able to link individual students to their data, the IRB determined that I would not need individual permissions from students for the guidance counselor to share the compiled data. The Superintendent agreed with this decision. When the addendum was approved, I sent the counselor the spreadsheet template so she could record students' college plans, gender, ethnicity, FARMS, GPA and ACT score (see Appendix C). She inserted a random number in place of each student's name and returned the file to me. I used this data on all 165 graduates to analyze differences between the college-bound students and non-college bound students.

**Interviews.** My dissertation used open-ended interviews with case study participants, their parents, the guidance counselor, the principal, and two dual enrollment teachers to generate data. I interviewed the school guidance counselor and principal in their offices at FCHS. I interviewed the dual enrollment teachers in their offices at Regional University. When I arranged interviews with the case students, I asked if I could come to their house, or if they would prefer to meet somewhere else. Only Kyle told me that he preferred an alternate location because his mother was ill

and did not want people in the house. I interviewed Kyle at the public library in Fairbanks County and was never able to arrange a follow up interview with his parents. I interviewed the other three case students and their parents at their respective homes.

These interviews focused on students' experiences during their college choice process, which students had completed a few months before I met with them. My goal was to treat the interviews as conversations to put participants at ease and encourage them to share their college choice experiences with me. I piloted my broad interview questions with two college sophomores from Kentucky, with whom I worked in the summer of 2012. I made note of confusing questions, places where follow-up probes might be helpful, and topics that were either uncomfortable or less relevant for these individuals. It seemed that the pilot students were comfortable talking about themselves and their experiences. I also discussed potentially difficult questions for parents (e.g., "How will Sara's college be paid for?") with my own parents and adult colleagues.

I felt all four case students were generally comfortable describing their college choice process and related influences to me. I tried to put the students and parents at ease by sharing my own background as a native of Appalachian Kentucky. Because I was aware of the Appalachian inclination to distrust outsiders, I code-switched and used colloquialisms when talking to participants, although I did so more with parents and students than with the school personnel. My main concern during all interviews was to listen intently to participants and ask probing, follow-up questions such as, "What do you mean by that?" or, "Can you give me an example?" or, "Tell me more

about that” or, “What was that experience like for you?” With these open-ended probes I hoped to convey that I was interested in their experiences, and that I wanted to access their thinking in as much depth as possible. The interview protocols for all participants can be found in Appendices D-G.

In almost all cases I interviewed the students separately before interviewing their parents. I wanted to limit any pressure they may have felt to respond to questions in a certain way because their parents were present. However, in Katherine’s case, I interviewed her and her parents simultaneously because they did not have time to do both interviews back to back and did not want to meet with me a second day. Two or three times in Katherine’s interview, her response or thinking seemed to differ from that of her parents and I noted those instances and followed up with Katherine electronically to ensure I had captured her thoughts accurately. I have also followed up with the other case students via Facebook messaging with questions that have occurred to me throughout data analysis.

**Artifacts.** The final data source for my dissertation was artifacts from the guidance counselor and any artifacts from individual students’ college choice process, such as letters of recommendation and application essays. The guidance counselor shared an informational folder she prepares for parents of FCHS seniors, the 2011-2012 calendar her office created for seniors, and materials from the Kentucky Higher Education Assistance Authority (KHEAA). KHEAA is a governmental agency devoted to “expanding educational opportunities by providing financial and informational resources that enable Kentuckians to attain their higher education goals” (KHEAA, 2013). I collected these artifacts to get a sense of the college information to

which my case students and their families had access during their college choice process. A subset of these counseling artifacts is included in Appendix H.

### **Data Analysis**

I analyzed data during and after the data collection process. The questionnaire data were informally analyzed as they were submitted in order to identify potential case students. I used the data on the 2012 graduating class from the guidance counselor to explore associations between students' college-going plans and variables such as gender, academic achievement, and socioeconomic status. I used SPSS 19 to run Chi-square tests of independence on my categorical variables and independent samples t-tests on the academic achievement variables.

I analyzed qualitative data using the constant comparative method. I transcribed all interviews and wrote reflective notes after each interview. I also wrote periodic, analytic memos (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994) to explore my initial analyses of each student's college choice process and how the data related to my conceptual framework. I analyzed the college choice process of my four case students by looking across all transcripts, memos and data to identify themes arising from the evidence. Examples of themes were, "Financial Aid," "Parental Influence," and "Always Going to College." For example, the following excerpt from Katherine's interview transcript fit under multiple codes:

I chose to go to Private University because I like the atmosphere of it. I got an athletic scholarship and an academic one too. I mean, I knew what I wanted to do, I knew I was going to college, so it was one of those things of where do I

want to go. So I got a couple offers and I liked here the best, so. I mean, I love it, so...

The multiple codes I applied to this excerpt included “Always Going to College,” “Institutional Characteristics,” and “Financial Aid.” I used these codes to inductively array the data for each case (Miles & Huberman, 1994), and revised the codes after reviewing all data. For example, my original code of “School Influences,” which was drawn from Perna’s (2006; 2010) model, was later split into multiple, more specific codes such as “Dual Enrollment Program” and “Guidance Counselor.”

I conducted a cross-case analysis using the same inductive coding process I used for the individual cases. For the cross-case piece, I looked across the four individual analyses, all transcripts, memos and artifacts. I started with codes repeated in the individual case analyses, and added codes drawn from my conceptual framework and the data such as “Cultural Capital.” I also specifically looked across all data for confirming and disconfirming data that challenged my codes, and revised codes as necessary.

### **Positionality**

As a researcher and native of rural, Appalachian Kentucky, I acknowledge that my college choice experience was similar to that of my four case students. As previously described, I used my background during interviews to establish rapport with participants. Further, because Appalachian Kentucky is a context I know very well, I had knowledge that helped me interpret abbreviations, colloquialisms, local social norms, and how school districts and personnel in the state operated. However, I have endeavored to put my experiences aside and to not go beyond the collected data

as I conducted my analysis. Still there were times where my familiarity caused me to struggle to note for a general reading audience what was remarkable in the students' experience. In the future, conducting multisite research and comparing two disparate contexts might help capture the experience of these four students more fully.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study. First, although I sought only analytic generalizations, some might be tempted to generalize the experience of these rural students in Appalachian Kentucky to broader populations. However, it would be erroneous to assume that the experience of these four students is representative of rural students from the same or other locations within Appalachian Kentucky or otherwise. The claims made in this dissertation apply only to the participants in this study.

Second, the response rate to my questionnaire was so low that I was unable to fully answer one of my research questions: How did students' enrollment decisions vary by gender, academic achievement, socioeconomic status, and family education level? I was able to analyze school wide data to examine how college-going students from FCHS compared to non college-going students from FCHS on gender, academic achievement, and socioeconomic status. Future research that sought to characterize the enrollment decisions of a sample of rural students from Appalachian Kentucky would need to secure more complete data either through a questionnaire or some other means.

Finally, I relied on students' recollections of their college choice process rather than direct observations of them engaging in the decision-making process. Because I was unable to observe and interview students while they were going through the



process, my data may be more about the narrative students crafted about their college choice process than the process itself. It would be better to follow students through the process as early as possible to see what influences them and how they make sense of those influences as they arise.

### **Table of Key Terms**

The following key terms and contextual features came up frequently in my conversations with participants and the subsequent analysis and discussion. I present them here to guide reading of the remaining chapters.

Table 2

#### *Key Terms used in this Dissertation*

Key Term	Definition
College access	Refers to the ability of students to enroll in a post-secondary educational institution (Tierney & Colyar, 2006).
College choice/college choice process	The process by which an individual develops a predisposition to attend college, searches for potential institutions, applies to institutions, and then chooses one institution in which to enroll (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Hossler et al., 1989).
College enrollment	Formally registering for college. College enrollment is the outcome of a successful college choice process (Perna, 2010).
Dual enrollment program	A partnership between Fairbanks County High School

	<p>and Regional University that allows qualified students with a composite ACT score of 21 to receive both high school and college credit for taking a college-level course taught by a Regional professor on the high school campus.</p>
<p>Free and Reduced Meals (FARMS)</p>	<p>A federal program that subsidizes school lunches for students from homes with incomes at either 1.30 or 1.85 times the poverty threshold for their size household (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2013). For example, a family of four with an income of \$29,000 qualifies for free meals, while a family of with an income of \$41,000 qualifies for reduced price meals.</p>
<p>Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP)</p>	<p>A federal discretionary grant program intended to increase college access for low-income students. Grantees are required to provide comprehensive mentoring, outreach, and supportive services to all students in a participating grade level (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).</p>
<p>Kentucky Educational Excellence Scholarship (KEES)</p>	<p>An automatic scholarship offered to students attending an institution of higher education in Kentucky. The program uses GPA and ACT scores on a sliding scale to determine the amount of scholarship money that students will receive. The maximum KEES award is \$2500 for</p>

	each year of college (Kentucky Higher Education Assistance Authority, 2013).
Poor	In this paper, a broad descriptive term generally referring to individuals of low socioeconomic status and/or low-income backgrounds.
Rural	Any defined territory that is not classified as urban (U.S. Census, 2012). Rural schools are defined in the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data as any school that lies within a defined territory that is at least 2.5 miles from an urban area (Provasnik et al., 2007).
Socioeconomic status (SES)	One's economic and social position in relation to others. In college access and choice research, SES is based on measures of family income, parental education, parental occupation, and items in the home that reflect wealth such as books, appliances or other material possessions (Terenzini et al., 2001).

## Chapter 4: Sample Characteristics and Individual Cases

### Who Went to a Four-Year College?

In order to answer research question 1a: What are the characteristics of a sample of rural students from Appalachian Kentucky who are planning to attend a 4-year college or university in the fall of 2012? I analyzed the school-wide data provided by the guidance counselor. Recall these data replaced the questionnaire data when the response rate was too low to allow for statistical analysis. The school data included students' college plans, gender, ethnicity, FARMS eligibility, GPA, and ACT scores.

The analysis revealed that 90 of the 165 FCHS graduates planned to go to a four-year college or university, while the other 75 graduates had other plans that ranged from community college to military service. Fifteen students indicated they had no immediate post-graduation plans (See Table 3). Further, 67 of the 90 (74%) college bound graduates planned to attend Regional University.

Table 3

*Students' Post-Graduation Plans (N=165)*

	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<b>Four-Year College</b>	90	54.5
<b>Work</b>	28	16.9
<b>Two-Year College</b>	17	10.3
<b>Military</b>	9	5.6
<b>Trade School</b>	6	3.6
<b>None</b>	15	9.1

I compared the two groups of graduates (college-going and non-college going) on gender, ethnicity, Free and Reduced Meals eligibility, grade point average, and ACT score (See Tables 4-6). Because gender is a categorical variable, I conducted a Chi-Square test of independence to examine the association between gender and students' college-going plans. I found no significant relation between these variables,  $\chi^2 (1, 165) = 3.31, p = .69$ . As seen in Table 4, the percentage of females planning to attend college was 61.7%, (50 out of 81) while the percentage of males planning to attend college was 47.6% (40 out of 84). I also planned to conduct a Chi-Square test of independence to examine the association between ethnicity and students' college-going plans. Because 98% of the graduates were White, this comparison was not meaningful.

I then conducted a Chi-Square test of independence to examine the association between students' college-going plans and Free and Reduced Meals eligibility. I found a significant relation between these variables,  $\chi^2 (1, 165) = 5.89, p = .016$ . As seen in Table 5, among those eligible for Free and Reduced Price lunch, 47% (47 out of 100) had college plans, while among those not eligible 66.2% (43 out of 65) had college plans. For this sample of rural students from one high school in Appalachian Kentucky, FARMS eligible students are less likely to plan on attending college after graduation than their peers not receiving FARMS. This result suggests that students' post-graduation college plans are associated with family income, as measured by participation in the Free and Reduced Meals program.

Table 4

*Gender*

			POST-GRAD PLANS		Total
			College Bound	Non College Bound	
GENDER	Female	Count	50	31	81
		Expected Count	44.2	36.8	81.0
		% within GENDER	61.7%	38.3%	100.0%
		% of Total	30.3%	18.8%	49.1%
	Male	Count	40	44	84
		Expected Count	45.8	38.2	84.0
		% within GENDER	47.6%	52.4%	100.0%
		% of Total	24.2%	26.7%	50.9%
Total	Count	90	75	165	
	Expected Count	90.0	75.0	165.0	
	% within GENDER	54.5%	45.5%	100.0%	

Table 5

*Free and Reduced Meals Eligibility*

			POST-GRAD PLANS		Total
			College Bound	Non College Bound	
FARMS	Eligible	Count	47	43	90
		Expected Count	54.5	35.5	90.0
		% within FARMS	52.2%	47.8%	100.0%
	Not Eligible	Count	53	22	75
		Expected Count	45.5	29.5	75.0
		% within FARMS	70.7%	29.3%	100.0%
Total	Count	100	65	165	
	Expected Count	100.0	65.0	165.0	
	% within PLANS	60.6%	39.4%	100.0%	

I also analyzed the graduating class in terms of two academic achievement variables—grade point average and ACT scores (See Table 6). I conducted an independent samples t-test to compare the average GPA of college-bound students and non-college bound students. As expected, students planning to attend a four-year college had statistically significantly higher grade point averages ( $M = 3.26, SD = .57$ ) than did those not planning to attend college after graduation ( $M = 2.74, SD = .59$ ),  $t(163) = 5.72$ ,  $p = .0001$ . I also conducted an independent samples t-test to compare the ACT of the two student groups. Once again, college-bound students had statistically significantly higher ACT scores ( $M = 20.8, SD = 4.14$ ) than did students who were not planning to attend a four-year college or university ( $M = 16.4, SD = 4.13$ ),  $t(163) = 6.77, p = .0001$ .

Table 6

*Academic Achievement*

POST-GRAD PLANS		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
GPA	COLLEGE BOUND	90	3.26	.568	.0599
	NON COLLEGE BOUND	75	2.74	.586	.0677
ACT	COLLEGE BOUND	90	20.8	4.14	.4359
	NON COLLEGE BOUND	75	16.4	4.13	.4765

Given these statistics, for the sample of rural students from one high school in Appalachian Kentucky who are planning to attend a 4-year college or university in the fall of 2012 a larger proportion of girls plan to continue to a four-year college (though the proportion of girls is not significantly different than boys). Additionally, the sample of college-bound students has a higher average GPA and average ACT score than non-

college bound students. Finally, the eligibility for Free and Reduced Meals is associated with a lower rate of expected college attendance.

The analysis of school-wide data is also helpful in understanding how the four case students compare to the entire sample of college-going graduates from their school. The four case students in this study were not selected as a representative sample of the college bound graduates from FCHS. However, they do show some of the variability of the sample on certain background characteristics. Recall from Table 1 in Chapter 3, that all four case students are white; three are female; two, Katherine and Sara, were eligible for Free and Reduced Meals. Katherine received free meals, while Sara paid a reduced price for her meals. The one area in which the four case students do not vary is their academic achievement. All four students have GPAs and ACT scores well above the means for the college-bound group. Despite the lack of representativeness, the cases of Lydia, Katherine, Kyle, and Sara can reveal much about the college choice experience of four rural students from Appalachian Kentucky.

### **The Individual Cases**

**Case Student 1: Lydia Nelson.** Like most of her extended family, Lydia Nelson grew up in Fairbanks County. She lives with her mother, father, and younger brother in a beige two-story Cape Cod house on a large, hilly lot. The house is two miles away from the elementary school where her mother teaches Kindergarten. Lydia's father drives 45 minutes to his job as a supervisor of the auto parts department of a car dealership. Given the context of Fairbanks County, I would describe the Nelsons as quite well off. As a two-income household, with one college-educated parent employed by the school system, the Nelson's have a high level of status and stability in the community of Juniper.



Lydia describes her family as middle class. She refers to herself as “a teacher’s kid,” a term used by students at FCHS which she says means her parents have good jobs and her family can afford luxuries like multiple cars and dinners at restaurants. It also means that Lydia has been encouraged to do well in school and attend college “her whole life.” She reports, “I’ve never thought that I was not going to go to college. My parents have always pushed college. My mom says, ‘If you don’t go to college what are you going to do?’” As Lydia’s dual enrollment English teacher, Dr. Taraki, explains it, “Her mother is an educator, an elementary school teacher. Her father didn’t go to college, but he has a good job. [Lydia] has been in an environment where education is important and she knows the importance of it, and she’ll do fine at college.”

Whether because of her parents’ comments or her own understanding of the potential benefits of a college education, Lydia does seem to realize that college is key to the type of future she wants for herself. Lydia recognizes the link between college and potential careers.

In my hometown, if you went to college you work at the school or hospital, or if you didn’t [go to college] you work at Carhartt<sup>3</sup> or McDonalds. Some people are satisfied with being the manager of McDonalds, and not to put anyone down, but that’s not me. I want something better...not better...but different.

Although I failed to follow up on Lydia’s reluctance to say better, her hesitation seems to stem from her desire to “not put anyone down,” to not belittle a person with a low-skilled, low-paying job. Given the number of people in such jobs, Lydia probably knows and respects multiple people in low-skilled, low-paying jobs. There is also a common

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<sup>3</sup> Carhartt is a company that produces farm and work clothing and has a factory in Fairbanks County.

pressure in rural, Appalachian Kentucky to downplay one's own status or aspirations, so as to not insinuate that one's elders who worked hard but did not pursue education were not good enough. In short, saying you are going to do better is an insult to your forebears. Lydia may have been reacting to that pressure when she avoided a pejorative description of low-skilled workers.

Lydia continues describing the link between college and careers:

In everything I've ever wanted to do, you'd have to go to college to do it. When I was little I wanted to be a teacher like Mommy and then I wanted to be a lawyer for a long time and then I wanted to be a graphic artist. Everything I've chosen, though, needs college.

While Lydia's various occupational aspirations have always depended on a college education, in her junior year of high school she decided to become a speech pathologist. Lydia made this decision after shadowing a speech pathologist who works closely with her mother at Fairbanks Elementary School. When Lydia began seriously considering potential institutions in her senior year of high school, she only looked at colleges that she knew had academic programs to match her career goals. She said, "I knew what I wanted to do, so I didn't apply to a lot [of schools]. I want to work in an elementary school as a speech pathologist or speech teacher, so I'm going into communication disorders." Because of her desire to work in schools, Lydia focused on universities reputed to have strong education programs as well as programs in communication disorders. Lydia said, "Regional University has the best teaching programs, and I want to do [speech] with the schools, so that influenced my way of going." Lydia's impression of the College of Education at Regional University is likely

based on her mother's experiences as an alumna of the Teacher Education program there. In fact, both of Mrs. Nelson's degrees are from Regional.

Lydia's perceptions of the benefits of a college education are about more than just potential careers. For Lydia, there is also a less tangible benefit to one's overall lifestyle that is a result of going to college. During our conversation, she described the lives of two of her uncles as "a reference point" for how college would help her attain more than most of the adults she sees in her hometown. She says:

My uncle who lives here has no college, the other went to college and lives in [a larger city in Kentucky]. I look at their lives. My uncle [who lives in the city] has a family and kids. The other lives in trailer, unmarried with four kids. I can just tell what I want by looking at their lives.

Lydia's description of her uncles aligns with the experience of most extended families in rural, Appalachian Kentucky. In a region where very few adults have a college degree, and many families include large numbers of aunts and uncles, many students are able to see a first-hand comparison of how education, or lack thereof, may shape their relatives' lives.

As an aspiring speech pathologist who believed that college is beneficial, Lydia began searching for potential higher education institutions in the fall of her senior year of high school. Her first criterion was a Communication Disorders program that would help her reach her career goal. However, Lydia also limited her college search to schools that offered scholarships she believed she would receive. In Lydia's words, "I only applied to ones I knew I would get scholarships for. I think it was just two. Regional and State." Lydia admitted knowing that these two schools offered Communication Disorders, and

she could not recall if it was the program or her perception of available scholarships that drove her application decisions. Even though Lydia's socioeconomic status is relatively high and her parents reassured her of their ability and willingness to help pay for her education, Lydia reported a desire to go to a college that would cost her parents as little as possible.

I didn't want to put too much of a burden on my parents. I know my brother has to go to college too, and he's right behind me in high school. So I wanted them to have to come up with as little as possible for me.

Although Lydia could not state the direct cost of attending Regional, her desire to reduce her parent's financial burden may stem from a perception that college is generally expensive, especially for two children at the same time. Lydia may have also limited her search to financially generous institutions because she wanted her brother's college search to be less constrained. If she could go to college for free, or almost, then maybe her brother could go anywhere he wanted.

Lydia described working throughout her senior year of high school to "get every penny [she] could." First, in the fall of her senior year, she applied to two in-state schools that offered full tuition scholarships for she was eligible. Lydia only applied to in-state schools because Kentucky offers automatic merit aid using a tiered scale tied to grade point average and ACT score, called the Kentucky Educational Excellence Scholarship (KEES), to all students attending an in-state college or university. The KEES program is a strong incentive for Kentucky students to only consider in-state institutions. By enrolling in a Kentucky college or university, Lydia was assured \$2400 for each year of college.

When Lydia applied to and was accepted at Regional University, she was offered the Regents Scholarship that would cover four years of tuition. Even after receiving this substantial financial aid, Lydia began to look for other scholarships that would cover even more of her college costs. For instance, even though she had considered applying to the Honors Program at Regional before, learning that the program paid for students' books convinced her to submit the additional application. She said, "I didn't know the honors program would pay for your books when I looked at it, and when Dr. Taraki said, 'They pay for books, you should do it,' I was like I have to do it now!" Lydia also estimates that she applied for 10-12 local scholarships; she won three. Her goal in applying for these multiple types of aid was to attend college for as little money as possible, in part because she believed college was more expensive than her parents could afford, but also that she should take primary responsibility for funding her education. As a result of Lydia's determined search for financial aid, the Nelsons are only paying out-of-pocket for the meal plan that Regional requires for all freshman students.

When asked what was essential in her decision to go to college and to Regional in particular, Lydia reminds me that her parents encouraged her to go to college all her life. She also noted, "At school we are really pushed by some of our teachers...toward college. They assume that we will go to college if we are in all these honors classes, so they gear us up for college." More specifically, Lydia cites her English professor, Dr. Taraki, as "a really big influence on [her] decision" to go to Regional. Lydia took Dr. Taraki for three dual enrollment English classes during her junior and senior years of high school. The dual enrollment program is a partnership between Fairbanks County High School and Regional University that allows qualified students to receive both high

school and college credit for taking a college-level course taught by a Regional professor on the high school campus.

In the fall of her senior year, Lydia took English 101 with Dr. Taraki. While the focus of that class is “to help students become critical thinkers and independent learners,” Dr. Taraki often spoke to students, both individually and as a group, about college. Dr. Taraki described her conversation with Lydia about Regional and the Honors Program there.

With Lydia, I was like where are you going to go to school? She considered two or three places. I told her if she went to Regional she would get in the Honors program. I told her, ‘Those are your people.’ I told her, ‘It is an environment that will foster your passion. They pay for your books. It helps out financially, too.’ I told her that any scholarship she would apply for she would get. I told her it was close enough to home to visit. I made sure she applied and I told her to apply to other places too, and then decide from your options. Give yourself options, to where you feel like you made this decision, you chose to go to Regional, to the Honors program.

In fact, even though Lydia had toured Regional on a school field trip and applied to the college before this conversation, she was not aware of the Honors Program before Dr. Taraki told her about it.

Dr. Taraki said I would like it at Regional, I could do the Honors Program, and basically she pushed me in that direction and I’m really thankful for her and am happy that she pushed me in that direction. I wouldn’t have known about the Honors Program and wouldn’t have tried for it, could have been somewhere

completely different if she hadn't said, you will love it and you will fit in great there.

Even though Dr. Taraki is a professor at Regional, her knowledge of the Honors Program is based on her own children's experience. Dr. Taraki has two children, both of whom graduated from FCHS and participated in the Honors Program at Regional. Her son is currently a junior in the program. Dr. Taraki developed a relationship with Lydia when she taught Lydia's first dual enrollment English class in her junior year. In that class, Dr. Taraki noticed Lydia's "studiousness" and "desire to learn" and began thinking that Regional could be a good fit for Lydia, just as it was for her own children.

In Lydia's senior year of high school, Dr. Taraki's role in Lydia's pursuit of the Honors Program went beyond conversation. As Lydia explains, "She helped me with anything I needed. She gave me the number for the director of the Honors Program. She found the application information for me and brought it in. She wrote me a wonderful letter of recommendation." When asked if this interaction was typical of Dr. Taraki's relationship with students, or unique to Lydia, Lydia replied, "I think she wanted to see me do well. She took me on as her own. I had taken all three of her classes." In this comment, Lydia seems to recognize that Dr. Taraki's experience as a mother who sent children to college influenced how she interacted with Lydia as her teacher. Dr. Taraki's interaction with Lydia also illustrates how students may acquire valuable social and cultural capital about college from adults other than their parents.

In Dr. Taraki's view, her interactions with Lydia were just an outgrowth of the work she tries to do with all of her students. She said, "I try to know the students

personally, let them know you aren't just a student to me." This sentiment echoes Lydia's comment that she felt Dr. Taraki treated her like "one of her own."

Dr. Taraki also described how she uses her dual enrollment English 101 class to support students' college choice activities.

A lot of times, if [students] are not from a family that has experience with higher education, they don't know that they have to have things done by January. To them in their senior year, that feels like an eternity away. I made sure that in the fall semester [of their senior year] the guidance counselor came in and went over dates with them for when things had to be turned in. And I tried to get them to finalize their decisions and commit somewhere.

Here again, Dr. Taraki describes her and the school's role in the transmission of social and cultural capital to students whose families may lack direct experience with higher education. Even students like Lydia, whose mother has a Masters degree, still seemed to benefit from the knowledge and experience of their teacher.

Beyond Dr. Taraki, Lydia mentioned her guidance counselor as an influential figure in her college choice process. She said, "Mrs. Olin just wanted to see us all do good, she was trying to come in and pep talk us all the time." Further, Mrs. Olin, "had applications for Regional sitting in her office and students could do them for free," so Lydia completed an application and submitted it on a visit to Mrs. Olin's office in November of her senior year. "I filled it out, and [Mrs. Olin] sent it in for me. She paid the mailing costs and everything. She would mail in anything if we asked her. And she would email the people for us, too." When Regional accepted Lydia and offered her a full tuition scholarship, Ms. Olin advised Lydia that the \$24,000 scholarship was "just too



good to pass up.” This scholarship, coupled with Dr. Taraki’s advice about the Honors Program and Mrs. Olin’s positive feedback led Lydia to accept Regional’s offer of admission. However, she still needed Mrs. Olin’s help with the new, more rigorous application to the Honors Program. Lydia said,

The Honors application was due in January or February. For that I was in Ms. Olin’s office everyday. She was probably sick of me. I was trying to get everything done. I had to send in my transcripts and my ACT scores. I needed four letters of recommendation. She wrote one for me. It was just a lot.

Thus, it seems Mrs. Olin’s played a practical role in Lydia’s college choice process by helping Lydia complete the necessary steps for her eventual college enrollment.

A final component in Lydia’s college choice process, according to Lydia’s mother, was peer influence. More specifically, Mrs. Nelson believed that Lydia chose Regional because it was also the college choice of Lydia’s boyfriend, Walt. As Mrs. Nelson puts it:

Lydia wanted to go to Flagship all of her life, but then senior year she comes home and says she picked Regional. Of course, Walt picked Regional too. I don’t have anything against Regional, because I went there, you know, but I just hate to see her settle for less.

Lydia protests, though, saying, “I really did want to go [to Regional]. They have a good program, and I liked the small school setting. Everything about it was a plus.” Dr. Taraki, who had both Lydia and Walt in class, thought that it was actually Walt who had followed Lydia to Regional, and she expressed concern that he would be “an anchor” to

Lydia. She told me, “He’s not as motivated, he’s not as focused [as Lydia]. If she has difficulty here, that will be the reason—because of him.”

*Summary.* Lydia’s enrollment in Regional, a four-year public university, was influenced by multiple factors. Specifically, Lydia spoke of her perception of the benefits of higher education, the academic programs offered at the university, and her pursuit of guaranteed scholarships. It is likely that Lydia would have ended up at Regional University without any guidance simply because it was 100 miles closer to her home than the only other institution to which she applied, as well as her mother’s alma mater. However, she would not have enrolled in the Honors Program at Regional if it were not for her English professor, Dr. Taraki, and her guidance counselor Mrs. Olin. Lydia identified her parents as influential in forming her life-long expectation to attend college, but neither she nor her parents described themselves as active in her decision of where to go to school. Despite her family’s ability to pay for college, Lydia constrained her college choice to in-state institutions that she expected to offer her a full tuition scholarship because she wanted to limit her parents’ financial burden. Additionally, she constrained her list of potential institutions to schools that she previously knew offered programs in Communication Disorders and Speech Pathology.

**Case Student 2: Katherine Isaacs.** Katherine Isaacs was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, where her family lived until Mr. Isaacs was injured at his job. After the injury, when Katherine was ten, her parents moved their family of six to Fairbanks County. Katherine is the oldest of the four Isaacs children. Her brothers are 17 and 14, and her sister is 15. On the questionnaire, Katherine classified her family as working class; she noted that she felt her family had less income than others in Fairbanks and less income

than her college-bound peers. Mrs. Olin, the school guidance counselor, and Mr. Dean, the school principal, describe the Isaacs family as extremely poor. Neither of Katherine's parents is able to work, but only her father receives disability assistance from the government. The Isaacs family lives in a small, mobile home that has visible rust on the outside and is dark and dusty on the inside. When I met Katherine and her parents, I noticed dirt and stains on Mr. and Mrs. Isaacs clothes and could tell that Katherine's clothes were from big box stores and not stores popular with girls her age. Although I only saw their living room and kitchen, my sense is that the Isaacs do not have many material possessions. Besides furniture, pictures, and a family Bible, I saw a television set and a stack of books with library labels in the living room. I saw one vehicle, a boxy minivan from the 1990s, in the driveway. Because there are no forms of public transportation in Appalachian Kentucky, almost all families have a personal vehicle.

My sense of the Isaacs' low SES was further confirmed when Mr. Dean told me about a health incident during Katherine's senior year, which for ethical reasons, I do not share in detail here. In short, Katherine had a recurring problem due to her family's inability to afford even a simple treatment that caused her to miss school. Eventually the principal himself helped the family purchase what they needed so that Katherine could return to school. Mr. Dean also tells me that a benevolent businessman in Fairbanks County learned of Katherine's family situation after watching one of her basketball games and set up a bank account for Katherine to use for any expenses during her senior year of high school. In rural, Appalachian Kentucky high school sports, especially basketball, are considered important community social events. Even people without school-aged children attend games and follow the teams. So while it was not unusual for

this businessman to attend Katherine's games and learn of her situation through conversations with other community members, perhaps even the principal himself, it was unusual for him help Katherine financially. To Mr. Dean's knowledge, the businessman had never done anything similar for another student; neither Katherine nor her family had any relationship with this man outside of the basketball games.

Katherine's athletic ability actually opened quite a few doors for her. In her junior and senior years of high school, she won recognition at the district and Regional level for both basketball and volleyball. Katherine's talents garnered recruiting attention from college coaches in Kentucky, which shaped her college search process. While Katherine was initially interested in two colleges in the Cincinnati region, her list of potential institutions grew to include the list of colleges that were recruiting her. She said:

I had a list of colleges I was looking at, but most of them looked at me first. I applied to Private, [a list of seven private colleges and universities in, or just outside of Kentucky]. [A military academy] sent me a letter for volleyball, but I couldn't do that because my ankles and knees [are too damaged for the military].

Thus, Katherine's athletic ability and desire to play sports resulted in a more extensive college search for Katherine than would be expected of a student with a low SES background.

With the intent to play one or more sports at each institution, Katherine toured and was ultimately accepted by these seven private, four-year colleges in or just outside Kentucky. As Katherine said, "I knew I was going to play college sports, I just didn't know what I was going to play and where. I had offers for all three sports [basketball, volleyball, track]." Even at Private, the eventual college in which Katherine enrolled, she

still had to decide between volleyball and basketball. Katherine's father described how she approached that decision:

She met with [the basketball coach] and [the volleyball coach]. They both wanted her to play their sport here. And she asked me what to do. I told her she had to pick one. It was a college decision, and she had to make it and I didn't want to hear, "I've made the worst decision of my life." She had to make the choice.

Katherine chose basketball; her parents supported her decision. When I asked Katherine's parents what they thought most influenced their daughter's college choice, they cited the basketball coach at Private. Katherine's father said, "I think he was pretty awesome, coming to camps and taking the time to talk to her and really telling her what he does and how it would work out [if she came here]. When we had our talk he said she could definitely, definitely be pretty good [with his coaching]."

However, playing sports at the collegiate level was not the sole motivator for Katherine's decision to seek higher education. Katherine plans to be a civil engineer. She is a professed "math geek" and decided to become an engineer in middle school after attending a GEAR UP camp that introduced students to the different careers. As her father recalls, "She came home one day and said, 'I'm going to be a civil engineer.' She's just always wanted to do to this." Katherine adds, "I knew what I wanted to do, I knew I was going to college, so it was one of those things of, 'Where do I want to go?'" The engineering mathematics major at Private University is actually a joint program between the private, four-year college and the state's Flagship research university. If Katherine completes this program, she will take courses at Private for three years and transfer to Flagship for two more years of course work. Upon graduation she will have a BA in

Mathematics from Private and a BS in Civil Engineering from Flagship. Katherine liked the idea of this program because “it offered two degrees for the price of one.”

In fact, Katherine liked a lot about Private. When asked how she made her final college choice from so many options, Katherine told me, “I chose to go to Private because I like the atmosphere of it...I mean I love it.” She continued with a laundry list of appealing institutional characteristics:

It’s not a college where you are a statistic. You are a person. You don’t go into a classroom with a hundred people and disappear. I like the small class sizes. Even today, walking back and forth, people here already know my name. It’s that student interaction. When I came, I had a basketball T-shirt on and people would say, ‘Oh you’re playing basketball, I love basketball!’ It’s so friendly.

Knowing of Katherine’s low family income and her use of an anonymous fund for expenses in her senior year of college, I was surprised to learn that she attributed her ultimate decision to the institutional characteristics she described, and what her mother called “the feel of the place,” rather than the cost.

This assertion was doubly surprising because Katherine had previously stated, “I took [cost] into consideration and how much loans I would have to take out. Here I do have to take out some, but this is probably the least amount I have to take out of all of [the colleges] I looked at.” Coupled with my knowledge of her family’s background, this comment suggested to me that Katherine’s ultimate decision hinged on the cost of attending college. Moreover, in her questionnaire, Katherine listed lack of financial aid information as a difficulty she faced in her college choice process. Mrs. Olin also told me that she had continued to look for available grants and scholarships for Katherine during

the summer because of “how needy the family really is.” The evidence indicates that cost and finding the resources to pay for college were paramount in Katherine’s choice process. However, at face value, Katherine’s words suggest that cost was only one factor in her decision-making process.

The other influences Katherine mentioned were her teachers and the school guidance counselor. She reported, “All my teachers have pushed me. That’s really it. Oh, and Mrs. Olin. She’s really good getting scholarship and grant stuff out to us.”

Katherine’s parents added the school principal, Mr. Dean to the list. They noted Mr. Dean’s interest in sports and his regular appearance at Katherine’s volleyball matches, basketball games, and track meets. Katherine’s father also described how Mr. Dean’s math background gave Katherine and Mr. Dean a unique connection:

The principal of the school was talking with her and he knew she wanted to be a civil engineer, and he wrote out a problem for her about miles of road and told her to figure it out. He thought it would take a day or two and she did it in an hour and a half. He told her if she ever needed a letter of recommendation, he would write it. He told me he was in awe. He was impressed that she was able to figure it out like that.

Mr. Dean recalled this interaction with Katherine as well. He said, “I think she’ll end up being a good civil engineer. Female engineers can pick their own job. She got a 30 on the ACT in Math, and she’s a good thinker, too.” Being unable to separate Katherine’s potential from her background, though, he also said, “She’s the poster child for rags to riches.”

**Summary.** Katherine's decision to enroll in Private was influenced by many factors, including her athletic and academic abilities, the cost of attending college and her family's ability to pay, and the academic programs and social environment at Private that allowed her to see herself as a student there. Further, the guidance counselor and principal at Fairbanks, and the women's basketball coach at Private were influential figures in Katherine's college choice process. While Katherine did not list her parents as additional influential figures, she did describe asking them for advice and visiting colleges with them her senior year. Katherine specifically mentioned cost, student loans and scholarships as factors in her decision-making process. Additionally, the unique 3-2 Engineering program offered at Private and the small, communal nature of the college helped Katherine make her eventual enrollment decision.

**Case Student 3: Kyle Vandiver.** Kyle Vandiver is an only child. His parents, both Fairbanks County natives, had him when they were still in high school. As a result, Kyle's father dropped out of school to enter the workforce. Even without a high school diploma, Mr. Vandiver earns enough money through his manufacturing job at the local Carhartt factory to, in Kyle's words, "comfortably support the family." While Kyle's mother did complete high school, she is unable to work because of epilepsy. When asked why he is going to college, Kyle says, "Well, neither of my parents went to college and I grew up with the pressure that you need to go to college and you should do something with yourself and I adopted that mindset." He continues, "I always knew I was going to college. It's always been there. My parents said, 'Hey you're smart, you're going to go to college,' and they have always guided me into more learning."



As the highest achieving student in the study sample, Kyle is indeed smart. He earned a 30 on his ACT and a near-perfect 3.97 GPA. While at FCHS, he took six dual-enrollment classes—English 101 and 102, Spanish 101, Pre-Calculus, Problem Statistics, and Health. Although the Pre-Calculus and Problem Statistics classes would be considered strictly high school classes in other communities, these dual enrollment courses are the highest level math classes offered at FCHS. Typically, rural schools struggle to provide diversified course offerings, almost always because of personnel limitations. Further while Kyle earned As in these math classes and a 31 on the Math section of the ACT, we cannot know how he would have performed in more advanced classes had he had the opportunity to take them.

Still, Kyle’s participation in the dual enrollment program shaped his college choice. After rattling off his class schedule, Kyle proclaimed, “I love learning.” In fact, he cites his general desire to learn as a key influence in his decision to pursue higher education:

My curiosity probably would have taken me [to college] anyway. I like learning things and I feel like even after I graduate I will still go back. I feel like my wanting to learn drives me there more than anything.

Moreover, Kyle views this desire to learn as a rare characteristic in his current surroundings. In describing his senior year he said, “I was ready to find more people who are like me at college...to find people like me who are [at school] because they want to be.” Kyle’s view of college as a place where he can associate with equally high-achieving students is somewhat idealized given his choice of Regional, which has an acceptance rate of 66%, a four-year graduation rate of 15%, and only 25% of students with incoming

ACT scores above 24 (NCES, 2013). Still, Kyle's perspective of college as a place where people who want to learn congregate influenced his decision to pursue higher education in the first place.

Kyle's dual enrollment math teacher, Mr. Hoover, also noted that Kyle wanted to go to college to learn. Mr. Hoover said, "Kyle got bored in high school really fast. He needs something keeping him busy thinking. I think he thinks college will be more intellectually rigorous than high school." Kyle excelled in the dual enrollment math class and described how the experience helped convince him that college was doable. Kyle said:

Once you take the class you realize that it's nothing to stress about. It's not a gazillion times harder, it's just as easy as a high school class, and it's more enjoyable atmosphere overall. You're learning with colleagues instead of classmates, which I guess is synonymous, but still.

Kyle's experience in the dual enrollment program convinced him he was capable of doing college level work. However, a pre-calculus class, even one taught by a college professor, would not be considered college level work at many institutions beyond Regional. Thus, while collegiate learning, and learning in an idealized setting of like-minded peers, was a key motivating factor for Kyle's decision to go to college, his perception of college level work was distorted by his context, in which pre-calculus is the most advanced math class available.

Even though Kyle liked the idea of learning at the collegiate level, he admits his parents ensured that he went to college immediately following high school. Kyle said, "Maybe I wouldn't have gone [to college] so soon if it wasn't for my parents. Maybe I

would have taken a year off. But I feel like I would have gone eventually no matter what.” Thus, while both Kyle and his parents wanted him to eventually earn a college degree, Kyle might have pursued a slightly different path and taken a gap year were it not for his parents’ insistence. I do not know what motivated Kyle’s desire to take a year off, but gap years are not typical for American students. Kyle’s consideration of a gap year was also surprising given his previous profession of his love to learn and belief that college would further foster this love.

In deciding where to go to college, Kyle describes being influenced by his chosen profession, his guidance counselor, and his girlfriend. In terms of his profession, Kyle wants to become a nurse anesthetist. He told me:

I’m math and science oriented. I decided I wanted to help people. From there, I decided the path I would take is through nursing, to become a nurse anesthetist.

Regional is a pretty good nursing school so I decided to go there.

Kyle learned about nurse anesthetists while researching high-paying careers at school. His knowledge of the career and the medical field in general is somewhat lacking, however. Kyle said, “After [being a nurse anesthetist], I might go on to be an anesthesiologist.” Kyle does not understand that the path to becoming a doctor does not typically begin with becoming a nurse.

Kyle’s knowledge that “Regional is a pretty good nursing school” is also suspect. When asked how he knew Regional was a good nursing school, he replied, “My guidance counselor, Mrs. Olin, said Regional had a better nursing school [than Flagship] and she showed me facts to prove it. After that, I said, ‘Yeah, you’re right’ and applied there instead.” Until his senior year, Kyle had planned to go to Flagship for nursing, but the

guidance counselor's advice changed his mind. He told me, "[Mrs. Olin] is pretty good at what she does. She made it clear to me that [Regional] was best and by the end of that week I was saying I would probably go to Regional." Neither Kyle nor Mrs. Olin could recall the exact facts that Mrs. Olin showed him; however, Regional's nursing program does have a good reputation in the area and high licensing examination pass rates (Kentucky Board of Nursing, 2013). Additionally, nursing is one of the most popular majors at Regional (NCES, 2013), while it is not a major for which Flagship is known.

When asked about this conversation with Kyle, Mrs. Olin told me she took it upon herself to talk to Kyle about college. Kyle helped out as a student aide in the guidance office his senior year, so he and Mrs. Olin interacted regularly. During his time as her aide, Kyle shared his occupational and educational aspirations with Mrs. Olin. Mrs. Olin said, "One day, kinda out of nowhere, I told him, 'I know you're adamant on Flagship, but look at other schools; I think you should go to Regional'." Mrs. Olin told me that she thought Kyle's circumstances required more of her direct guidance. "He doesn't come from the same familial background as most of our top students do. He's not had the same support system that they've had," she said. Mrs. Olin's awareness that neither of Kyle's parents had any experience with higher education influenced her interaction with Kyle during his senior year. She said, "He doesn't have someone at home that's been there, done that, so there were many things he didn't know about."

Many factors could have influenced Mrs. Olin's insistence that Kyle choose Regional. For example, it may be the case that Mrs. Olin thought Kyle incapable of succeeding at the larger and more distant Flagship University because of his family's lack of experience with higher education and his own misperceptions of college, so she

counseled him to choose Regional. Mrs. Olin also has a close working relationship with Regional University and its representatives assigned to Fairbanks County, so she may have simply been imposing her own preferences on Kyle and other students. Ultimately, Kyle applied to both Regional and Flagship, and was accepted at both schools. When asked how he made his final decision, he again cited his guidance counselor's perception of the two nursing schools, which had become his own. Kyle said, "For me, it came down to the best nursing program."

Once Kyle selected Regional, he applied to the Honors Program there. When asked why, he cited his own personal drive as well as another information source outside his family. Kyle said:

I was nudged into [the Honors Program], by a different outside source, my girlfriend. She mentioned it and I looked into it and it seemed like a good idea. Free books, and I have always taken the hardest classes I could anyway. I don't want to go to college and be bored, so, it sounded pretty good.

Kyle's girlfriend more than mentioned the Honors Program at Regional—she applied to the program herself, and encouraged Kyle to do the same. They were both accepted. Thus, Kyle might have been influenced to enroll at Regional simply because his girlfriend, whom he was still dating when they moved into the dorms, went to Regional. In fact, it is possible his girlfriend's college choice was a key influence in Kyle's decision to attend Regional over Flagship. At the very least, she was another external informant acting in the place of Kyle's parents in his college choice decision-making process.

Kyle does not mention any input from his parents on his enrollment decision, other than their general encouragement to go to college. When asked about his parents

directly, he says, “My mom is pretty happy I’m so close, and dad’s finally proud of me, after 18 years of trying. He’s proud that I’m going to do something with my life.” This statement may suggest that Kyle’s decision to go to college is in part a drive to satisfy his father, although Kyle does not directly state as much.

Finally, Kyle is unique in his assertion that cost did not influence his college choice decision. He told me, “I never thought about cost. I don’t think I ever had to.” He then added, “I didn’t [apply for] as many local scholarships as [my friends], I was just kinda hoping I could get a full scholarship at any college I went to.” Together these statements suggest Kyle’s naiveté about paying for college. Kyle seemed to assume that his ACT score of 30 and having the highest GPA in his class would earn him automatic scholarships from the two institutions to which he applied, Regional and Flagship. Kyle’s thinking was only confirmed when his initial application to Regional resulted in an acceptance letter and an offer of the Regional University Founders Scholarship of \$40,000 over four years. Not including books, one year at Regional costs roughly \$14,000. Flagship did not offer Kyle a similar scholarship when he first applied. Regional required Kyle to make an enrollment decision by February 1<sup>st</sup> to receive the scholarship. The February 1<sup>st</sup> date preceded Kyle’s reception of a full financial aid award letter from Flagship University. Although he could have applied for other aid options to cover his costs at Flagship, Kyle decided to take the Regional scholarship and enroll early.

Still, Kyle asserted, “The scholarship didn’t make my decision for me.” He explained, “I think I could have gotten the same at [Flagship] with a little bargaining.” This statement again shows Kyle’s incomplete understanding of the financial aid aspect of the college choice process in that he believed he could interact with one or more

individuals in such a way as to increase his aid award. Kyle also seemed naïve in his assertion that his parents could and would pay for his education. He said, “My parents wanted me to get every scholarship I could, but they would have paid every penny if they’d had to.” Because Kyle’s parents declined to participate in the study, I could not directly assess their ability or willingness to pay for college. Still, Kyle had no idea how much it would cost to go to college at either Regional or Flagship, and his father earns slightly more than \$40,000 a year. These facts suggest that Kyle would have needed much financial aid to attend college. He is fortunate that his combined scholarships from Regional, the Honors Program, and the state of Kentucky resulted in his ability to attend college free of charge.

Finally, while Kyle stated that cost and financial aid did not influence his college choice process, it is important to note that he did enroll at the institution that offered him the most scholarship money. It may be coincidence that Regional offered the most money after Kyle decided to attend the university based on his perception of its nursing program, or it may be that cost influenced Kyle in a way he did not recognize when asked. It is possible that the generous financial aid package offered by Regional cemented Kyle’s already tentative decision to enroll in that particular institution due to other factors.

*Summary.* Kyle’s college choice process was influenced by multiple factors, both internal and external. Internally, his academic ability, chosen profession, and what he referred to as a love of learning, influenced his college decision-making process. Externally, his girlfriend and guidance counselor each helped shape his eventual college choice. Kyle’s parents did encourage him to go to college in the first place. However, once it was clear that Kyle was college-bound, the Vandivers had little to offer in terms

of Kyle's college search and ultimate enrollment decision. His parents' lack of experience with higher education likely explains why the external college choice influences Kyle cited were his guidance counselor and his girlfriend. Together, these factors resulted in Kyle's enrollment in the Honors Program of a four-year Regional public university near his hometown.

**Case Student 4: Sara Smith.** Sara Smith lives with her younger brother and parents down a curvy road further out in Fairbanks County. Mr. and Mrs. Smith met at Regional University. However, after only one year, they left college, married, and moved to Fairbanks County to start a vehicle towing and repair business, which they continue to operate. Mr. Smith does the majority of the manual labor for the business; Mrs. Smith runs the office. The Smith's small repair shop is the only source of income for the family of four. The shop is located 23 miles away from one of Kentucky's major interstates in one direction and 28 miles away from the other major interstate in another direction. It is also 9 miles outside of the town of Juniper. I would describe its location as "out in the country." The Smiths' small brick ranch house sits on the same property as the business, so cars in various states of disrepair are strewn about the side yard.

Even though Sara classifies her family as middle class because her family has about the same level of income as others in Fairbanks and her college-bound peers, she received reduced price meals throughout school. According to the federal guidelines, families of four making less than \$41,348 but more than \$29,055 are eligible for reduced price meals (USDA, 2013). Because the Smith's entire income is based on the towing and repair business, their income varies from year to year, but it has always been between \$30,000-\$40,000. Sara works as a server at a local restaurant on the weekends to pay her



own cell phone and car insurance bills. The tipped minimum wage in Kentucky is \$2.13, but employers are supposed to ensure their employees earn \$7.25 an hour (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). While I do not know if Sara earns more than \$7.25 an hour, when describing her job, she told me, “It’s good money. I like it.” Because she needs the money to pay her bills, Sara will continue working as a server three days a week while she attends college in the next town over at Regional University.

Sara is a strong student. She graduated with a 3.66 unweighted GPA and 17 hours of college credit earned through Fairbanks County High School’s dual credit program. She also scored a 27 on the ACT. When asked how she managed such high academic achievement while holding down a job, Sara credited her parents. “Well, grades were always a big thing in my house. If I got a B, they weren’t mad, but they’d rather I had As. They offered cash incentives for As, so I went for that. I’ve never had a C before,” she said. After thinking for a minute, Sara continued,

My parents are just big on education. I guess they know what they missed out on and they want me to have that. And I understand that. They’ve always wanted me to set high goals for myself and to go to college. So I knew my entire life that college was not optional, but that I had to do it.

Mr. and Mrs. Smith agree with Sara’s interpretation. They said, “We want [Sara and her brother] to do good in school, and go as far as they can go. We’ve raised them to know that education is important for getting ahead in life.” It was not clear if the Smiths valued education for their children because of their own experience not completing college and their subsequent employment and income. However, it would not be surprising if that were the case. Moreover, her parents’ attitude toward education is not lost on Sara. In

fact, she cites parental encouragement as the main reason she decided to go to college. She said, “My parents pushing me to make good grades is a good thing. The whole world depends on an education. I don’t think I’d be going to college without my parents encouraging me all the time!” She immediately qualifies this exclamation, though. “It’s not just that I have to go to college, but I *want* to go to college.”

When asked why she wants to go to college, Sara’s reply is twofold. For one, Sara sees college as a stepping-stone to a desirable lifestyle. She said, “I had a good life and everything, but I want to make my children’s life even better than mine.” Sara expands,

My parents started to go to college but it didn’t work out. I’m not complaining about my childhood, it was perfect, but I want to be able to make things better for my kids as their life goes on. I want a good job, a good house, a good car, that kind of thing.

Sara may be referring to how she has to work to pay her bills and to buy luxuries she desires, rather than her parents paying for these things. Still, Sara drives a five-year old car that her dad bought wrecked and fixed up for her, so her parents have paid for some of her luxuries. Sara may also feel a stigma about her parents’ business, and its appearance to outsiders, which she hints at when she describes her desire to “make things better for [her] kids.”

However, Sara’s desire to pursue higher education seems to go beyond just her potential future income and lifestyle. She also told me, “I want to do something with my life that is important. I want to go to college and make something of myself.” Thus, even though Sara likes her current job of waiting tables, or at least the salary it provides, she does not seem to see waitressing as a long-term career goal. Sara is not exactly sure what

her future plans are, though. “I might be going into political science to be a lawyer, but I’m undeclared right now,” she said. Sara has a plan for choosing a major and a career, though. She laid out the steps for me:

I want to be sure before I decide what my major will be. There’s a class they offer that describes different jobs and what you can do, and I think I’m going to take that next semester since I don’t have to decide my major until 48 credits. So I still have a while, but I’m trying to decide what to major in by next semester. There are just so many things out there that I don’t know about yet, and I want to make sure I know about all those opportunities. I want to be informed before I decide.

Thus, Sara’s decision to go to college was less about pursuing a specific career, and more about her dual goals of having a career that is “important,” and that would allow for the self-described better life for her future family than she experienced growing up.

Beyond personal goals and parental encouragement, Sara describes how her teachers and an outreach program at her school also influenced her thoughts about college. She told me:

I’ve had a lot of positive influence in my life and on my schooling. My teachers influenced me a lot. And sports, too, probably. I’ve been playing basketball since 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Our coach was strict about certain things like making good grades.

Seeming to only realize the role of these influences in her educational journey as she described them to me, Sara adds, “Looking back, I’m glad that everybody pushed me so hard now. I have accomplished a lot and hope to accomplish a lot more.”

Sara described how she first learned about college through the GEAR UP program she participated in at school. GEAR UP is a federal grant program that helps

increase low-income students' access to college (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). According to the Department of Education, grants are awarded for six-years and must serve an entire cohort, or class, of students from 7<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grades. In Fairbanks County, the GEAR UP program is coordinated through Cooper College, a private, four-year institution with a mission of serving Appalachian students. The graduating class of 2012, of which Sara, Kyle, Katherine and Lydia are part, was Fairbanks County's most recent GEAR UP cohort.

Sara described the GEAR UP program in a nutshell: "They followed us from 7<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade and talked to us about college, and took us to different colleges and gave us tours." She added, "In middle school, we took interest surveys to see what careers would be a match for us. I think that is when it really sank in I was going to college." As part of GEAR UP, Sara toured seven or eight colleges, including her top two choices, Regional University and Flagship University. She told me how those tours helped shape her perception of both schools. "When we toured Flagship, it was alright, but I wanted something smaller because I was used to small town life," she said. Because of Fairbanks County's proximity to the Regional campus, the GEAR UP program visited Regional multiple times. Sara recalled:

The first time we toured Regional was probably 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade and I thought the cafeteria was awesome so that is why I wanted to go there then. Then when we toured it in sophomore year, that is when I decided it was where I wanted to get my education. It just felt right.

Thus, perhaps because of repeated exposure, Sara eventually thought of Regional University as the best institution for her.

The college outreach program was also responsible for introducing Sara, and her parents, to the ACT before high school. Sara recalled, “My parents got a letter from GEAR UP that they were offering the ACT [in a nearby town]. They carted me there and made me take it in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade.” She continued, “When I took [the ACT] again in my junior year, it really helped knowing what to expect. Some people hadn’t taken it before. I already had a 21 on it, which isn’t even that bad.” Moreover, Sara believes this chain reaction of her parents making her take the ACT in middle school after they learned about the test from GEAR UP is responsible for her high score, which, in turn, is responsible for her earning a scholarship to go to college. As Sara said,

I started taking the ACT in middle school and kept taking it and that helped me get a high enough score for the Regents Scholarship, and I might not have chosen Regional without that. So my parents encouraging me to take [the ACT] so soon and make good grades are really why I’m here.

While Sara’s comment encapsulates general college influences, it also suggests that her eventual college choice decision was influenced by financial aid. In fact, as Sara and I talked more, it became clear that cost and financial aid were key determinants in her enrollment at Regional University. As aforementioned, the Smith family income is limited, and Sara works to earn money for her own bills and purchases. Because of her family’s income, Sara knew that she needed to limit college costs however possible. One cost-saving measure she took was completing a free application for Regional University when a college representative visited the high school in October of her senior year. While Sara could also apply to Flagship for free, she completed her application for Regional first. Sara said, “The representative came to talk to us about Regional and gave us

applications and if we filled them out right then it was free. Since you didn't have to pay to send it in, I just filled it out then." Before Sara could apply to her other potential college choice, Flagship, she received an acceptance letter from Regional that included a sizable scholarship offer. She stated, "I got a letter saying I got the Regents Scholarship. Essentially, they gave me \$24,000 for school. I thought that was cool and would help out a lot." The Regents scholarship awards students \$6,000 annually over four years, and a year's tuition at Regional is roughly \$7,000.

While Sara did not know exactly how much college would cost before she applied to Regional, she did know it was generally expensive. She said,

I knew college was going to cost quite a bit of money, and I knew I didn't have it and my parents didn't have it. I also didn't want a bunch of loans, so after I got into Regional and got the scholarship it just made up my mind to go there.

Still, Sara assures me, the scholarship just cemented the college choice she had been leaning toward throughout high school anyway. "I've always thought about going to Regional," she said, before adding, "It just worked out perfectly." Sara had not known about the Regents Scholarship when she applied to Regional. She was applying to a school in which she was genuinely interested, and the financial aid worked in her favor.

In fact, more than just the Regents Scholarship went Sara's way. As Sara put it, "I've got so much financial aid and scholarships that I'll be getting money back each semester." On top of the Regents tuition money, Sara will receive nearly \$2500 in KEES money each year because of her GPA and ACT score. She also applied for and won a small local scholarship from a business in Juniper. She used that money to buy a laptop

computer and books. Beyond scholarships, Sara's financial aid package at Regional includes state and federal grants because of her family's limited income.

Sara and her parents learned about KEES money, local scholarships and the FAFSA from the senior guidance counselor at FCHS, Mrs. Olin. Sara's mother told me, "The counselor at the school always had information sessions, for [the parents] and the kids. We couldn't go to all of them because of the business, but Sara paid attention to what she said we needed to do." Sara added, "We could always go to [Mrs. Olin's] office and talk to her about stuff. She told us about all the local scholarships and how to apply. And she told us about the FAFSA." Mrs. Olin shared this information with students at FCHS by visiting all senior English classes at the beginning of each month. In these meetings, she highlighted important events and deadlines on the senior calendar that she created and handed out at the start of the school year. Mrs. Olin also emailed the calendar highlights, including application and scholarship deadlines, to all students and parents for whom she had email addresses. Mrs. Olin held two meetings at the school for senior parents, early in each semester. In the fall meeting, Mrs. Olin presented an overview of what students would need to do to get into college. In the spring meeting, Mrs. Olin had parents bring their tax information to the school computer lab where she and a financial aid representative from Regional helped them complete the FAFSA. While the Smiths did not attend that meeting, Mrs. Smith recalled, "We wouldn't have known to do our taxes early for that [FAFSA] if [Mrs. Olin] hadn't told the kids at school."

Beyond her whole class outreach, Mrs. Olin allowed students to pop into her office whenever they had a question about or needed help with their college choice process. Sara benefitted from some individual counseling with Mrs. Olin. She confided:

Mrs. Olin's the one that helped me with the Regents Scholarship. There was a paper I had to sign to accept it and send it in, so I went in and talked to her about it and she told me to send that in because it was a lot of money. And she said congratulations.

Sara turned to Mrs. Olin for advice because her parents did not offer much. While the Smiths told me they were proud of Sara's scholarships and her acceptance to Regional, they said, "the final decision was up to [Sara]." Mr. Smith explained further, "Sara's always been a good decision maker and made sound decisions. We trusted her on this." With her parents' hands-off approach, Sara sought Mrs. Olin's guidance on what to do about the admission and scholarship offer from Regional. Just as she had done with Lydia, Mrs. Olin advised Sara to accept the offer. Thus, Sara made her ultimate college choice with her guidance counselor rather than her parents.

Although it is clear that cost and financial aid played a key role in Sara's college choice, other factors influenced her decision as well. Sara sums these factors up:

Regional was perfect. It was close to home, on a beautiful campus. All the professors I've met so far are really nice, and I'm already halfway through my freshman year here because of dual credits. I've heard a lot of good things about the law program, too. It just seems to fit my needs.

It is unclear if these criteria were conscious in Sara's mind while she was engaged in the college choice process, or if these are points to rationalize the choice she made on purely financial terms. What is clear is that early in the process Sara limited her college choice to public universities near her home. She said,



It was between Regional and Flagship because those two were close. I like Fairbanks County. I don't want to live too far away from it. I want to be in reach of it and my parents and everybody there. I heard good things about Flagship, but Regional is closer to home, and it's cheaper.

Sara seems to have defined close as being less than an hour away. She also apparently disregarded private institutions in this one-hour radius, most likely due to cost.

Beyond proximity, Sara mentioned nice professors and her impressive amount of college credit as influential factors in her decision to come to Regional. These factors intertwine for Sara as she met Regional professors while taking five dual enrollment classes her junior and senior years at FCHS. Sara took English 101 and 102, Literature 210, Pre-Calculus, and Spanish dual enrollment classes. While she liked all the professors that taught these classes, she especially connected with the English and Literature professor, Dr. Taraki. Sara said, "I really like her. She is one of the reasons I really wanted to go to Regional because she is so nice and easy to get along with. She was really supportive about me getting in to Regional." Moreover, taking the dual enrollment classes in high school helped Sara feel academically prepared for college. She said,

In a way I feel like I'm already a sophomore. I've done [college-level] work. I got As and a few Bs, so I know I can do it. And I did that with high school and college classes at the same time. Now I can focus on just college and I think I'll do really good.

Dr. Taraki thinks Sara will do well at college, too, if she is able to balance her life at Regional and her life back home in Fairbanks. Dr. Taraki said:

I think she will graduate from college, but I'm not 100% absolutely sure that she will. She has the abilities and skills to do it. But she has a lot going on back home. She has a boyfriend she's been with a long time. That relationship magnet and anchor is an issue, especially with the females I see coming [to Regional]. "Still", she adds, "Sara is a mature young woman." When I agree, noting that Sara chose to live in an apartment off campus instead of the dorms, Dr. Taraki seems a bit crestfallen as she recalls, "I tried my best to talk her into living here. There is just so much of the experience our commuters miss out on. I think she'll still be successful, though. I know she can do the work."

Because neither Sara nor her parents mentioned her boyfriend, I do not know if or how he influenced her college decision. I do know that Sara is living alone in her apartment because she wants to make sure she has a quiet place to study and work. However, Dr. Taraki is correct in noting that undergraduate students living off-campus may feel less connected to their peers and the quintessential college experience, which can result in a higher rate of attrition (Jacoby, 1989).

*Summary.* Although Sara Smith's college choice process was influenced by a multitude of factors, the most influential were cost and her guidance counselor. The Smith's self-employment as mechanics and the resultant limited income constrained Sara's pool of potential colleges. Thus, Sara's college search, as well as her eventual enrollment decision, was almost entirely dependent on cost and financial aid. Interestingly, however, Sara and her parents did not consider college costs specifically by looking up tuition prices or estimating financial aid. Instead, Sara operated on her general understanding of which institutions were affordable, and applied to the cheapest of her

college choices first. When she was accepted and offered a large scholarship, her decision was essentially made for her.

However, cost was not the sole factor in either limiting Sara's college search or influencing her final college choice. While the two institutions Sara considered were based on affordability, they were also the two closest public, four-year universities to Sara's home. Further, Sara specifically cites proximity as an influence on her college choice process. Unfortunately, it is unclear which came first, for Sara—proximity or cost. Given her ties to Fairbanks County, most specifically, her waitressing job, and her main source of income, Sara may have well decided to stay close to home before realizing her goal to decrease college costs as much as possible. Sara's job provides the rent money for her off-campus apartment and all of Sara's bills. Because Mr. and Mrs. Smith cannot afford to support Sara, Sara needed to find a way to go to college and keep her job. Thus, for Sara, the need to attend college close to home is also inextricably linked to the cost of attending college.

Sara's independence from her parents did not only manifest financially. She also made her college choice decision without much, if any, help from her parents. What's more, the lack of parental guidance was not because Sara did not need help. She actually sought out a trusted adult, her guidance counselor, Mrs. Olin, for advice on accepting the first college admission and scholarship offer in the fall of her senior year. Further, while Sara did not mention it specifically, Dr. Taraki revealed that Sara consulted her about living on campus. It seems that Sara did indeed need adult guidance about her college decision-making process, but that she sought this guidance from individuals other than her parents. One reason for this reliance on other adults may be that either Sara or her

parents, or both, felt the others would be more knowledgeable sources of information. While the Smiths did go to college for a short time, they seemed to have little to offer Sara in terms of advice. Further, Sara and her parents regarded Mrs. Olin and Dr. Taraki as very trusted and reliable sources of information about college in general and Regional more specifically. Still, the Smiths' explicit instruction to Sara to make the decision for herself seems to contradict the research that treats parental encouragement and support as paramount to students' college choice process.

## Chapter 5: Cross-Case Analysis

### “Always Going to College”

For all four case students, the college choice process was more about the decision of *where* to go to college, than whether to go at all. As Katherine summarized, “I mean, I knew what I wanted to do, I knew I was going to college, so it was one of those things of, ‘Where do I want to go?’” In fact, when asked about how and when they decided to go to college, all four students responded with some variation of Kyle’s sentiment, “I always knew I was going to college.” Lydia’s version was just as strongly worded: “I’ve never thought that I was not going to go to college.” Thus, for these students, the decision to attend college was really not a decision at all, or at least not a decision any of them could remember consciously making. However, multiple factors influenced the four case students’ longstanding educational aspirations.

**Parental encouragement.** Even though they could not recall the exact origin of their desire to pursue higher education, Lydia, Kyle and Sara cited their parents’ encouragement as a likely source. Lydia said, “My parents have always pushed college. My mom says, ‘If you don’t go to college what are you going to do?’” Similarly, Sara described her parents’ outlook on college. She said, “They’ve always wanted me to set high goals for myself and to go to college. So I knew my entire life that college was not optional, but that I had to do it.” For Kyle, his parents’ recognition of his intelligence led them to encourage him to go to college. He recounted a conversation, “My parents said, ‘Hey you’re smart, you’re going to go to college,’ and they have always guided me into more learning.”

The parents I spoke with similarly described their role as educational encourager. The Smiths said, “We’ve raised [our children] to know that education is important for getting ahead in life.” Likewise, Mrs. Isaacs told me, “We did everything we could to support her getting into college.” Finally, Mrs. Nelson asserted that Lydia has been “encouraged to attend college her whole life.” Parental attitudes about the value of education are also apparent to Fairbanks County school personnel. The dual credit English teacher, Dr. Taraki, told me that Lydia “has been in an environment where education is important.” The guidance counselor, Mrs. Olin, described how most of her students’ parents “want to ensure their child gets into college” and “are willing to do what it takes to get [their children] there.” She told me she thought this attitude was true of the case students’ families.

**Aspirations for the future.** Another facet of the primary decision to attend college was the students’ perception of higher education as the means to a desirable future for themselves. For example, Lydia’s description of her two uncles’ lives and the one she would prefer indicated that she understood the benefits of attending college extended to many aspects of life. In Lydia’s eyes, her college-educated uncle who lives with his wife and children in a nearby city has the life he does because he went to college. Likewise, her other uncle lives in a trailer home in Fairbanks county without any of his four children because he did not go to college. She says, “I can just tell what I want by looking at their lives,” by which she means she wants the nuclear family and lifestyle of her college educated uncle. Thus, Lydia’s perception that the benefits of a college education extend beyond a career to one’s family life shaped her own educational aspirations.

Similarly, Sara talked about the economic and lifestyle benefits of a college degree, which she described as “a good job, a good house, a good car, that kind of thing.” Sara gives credit to the local GEAR UP outreach program for helping her understand the connection between careers and college when she was in middle school. Even Kyle’s decision to enter the medical field, and Katherine’s goal to become a civil engineer indicate these students’ understanding that college is linked to one’s future. Thus, for three of the four students, college is linked to a very specific (and already identified) career path. The case students are not just going to college to learn or to get exposure to the world as they might if they were from other communities. For these rural students from Appalachian Kentucky, college is a means to an end.

**Identity as college students.** All four case students were also able to see themselves as potential college students as well as successful adults, and this identity further propelled them to pursue higher education. Lydia’s college-going identity stemmed from her status as a “teacher’s kid,” or a student from a stable home and background who is expected to do well in school. This identity led her to the honors and dual enrollment classes where teachers and students alike presumed that all students would go to college. These classes also helped Kyle and Sara identify as college students. They both said they knew they could do college level work because they had taken the Regional dual enrollment classes at FCHS. Regardless of their contextually specific perception of collegiate work, these students’ belief in their capabilities influenced them to go to college. Kyle’s intrinsic desire to learn and his notion of college as a community of learners strengthened his identity as a college-goer. Katherine’s identification as a “math geek” contributed to her aspiration to become an engineer, which helped lead her

to college. However, her identity as a talented athlete who could play at the next level may have been more important in helping her see herself as a college student than academics or other factors.

**Role of the school.** Beyond their parents and the general perception of the benefits of an education, the students mentioned their school, guidance counselor, and teachers as influential in their thinking about college. Lydia said, “At school we are really pushed by some of our teachers...toward college. They assume that we will go to college if we are in all these honors classes, so they gear us up for college.” Katherine simply asserted, “All my teachers have pushed me.” Sara agreed, noting, “I’ve had a lot of positive influence in my life and on my schooling. My teachers influenced me a lot.”

When asked about specific teachers, the students all cited at least one dual enrollment professor, or the dual enrollment classes generally, as influential in preparing them for college. The dual enrollment program is a partnership between two local universities and neighboring school districts (including Fairbanks County) that allows students with certain GPAs and ACTS scores to take college-level courses for which they receive both high school and college credit at a reduced tuition rate. FCHS is unique because it offers dual enrollment classes, but does not offer any in-house Advanced Placement courses. The principal, Mr. Dean noted, “[Fairbanks’s] approach is no Advanced Placement in anything. Our goal is for all upper level honors classes to be dual credit.” Mr. Dean’s reservations about the AP program mainly concern the difficulty most students have earning a score that would result in college credit at multiple institutions. He characterizes the AP approach as “a serious investment with little to no return.” Given my data, I do not know if Mr. Dean’s perception was the only reason for



the lack of AP classes at the high school, or if others in the district shared his outlook and/or simply trusted his decision. For whatever reason, the only way to earn college credit at FCHS is through dual enrollment programs.

FCHS's dual enrollment program was originally only with Regional University. At that time, qualified juniors or seniors with at least a 3.0 GPA and a 21 ACT composite score commuted to Regional's campus in the evenings for class. These students did not have to pay tuition for the college courses, but they purchased their own textbooks. As the program grew in popularity, and yet remained unavailable to many students because of transportation and scheduling issues, Regional redesigned the program so the professors of dual enrollment classes could teach their courses on the high school campuses during school hours. As the guidance counselor, Mrs. Olin, recalled:

For years it was just that our students had the opportunity to drive to Regional and take something. Then, about three years ago, Regional started sending their own professors over here to teach the classes during the day, and the college tuition was still waived. That helped not just our poor kids, but also our athletes, because in the years past we had trouble with them having the ability to drive to Regional for a night class.

One of the dual enrollment professors from Regional, Dr. Taraki, added, "Not only was tuition free, but through grant monies the school had, they would buy the books for the students. So it wasn't costing [students] anything to do [the dual enrollment program]."

Around the same time that Regional redesigned its program, another nearby school, Mountain University, approached Mr. Dean, about a dual enrollment approach that would allow the teachers employed by Fairbanks County to teach Mountain's

college-level courses using Mountain professors' syllabi. This approach would save money and allow FCHS more control of these dual enrollment courses. Mr. Dean said:

Although we've always served Regional, Mountain University starting recruiting us to participate in their own dual enrollment program. We sort of started a competition, pitted [the universities] against each other, and now we have 16 sections of dual enrollment English offered on our campus. We've got three or four Regional professors who come over to teach those classes, and the Mountain system allows our own teachers to teach their classes.

While all four case students participated in the dual enrollment program at FCHS, only Kyle and Katherine took classes through both Mountain and Regional. In their senior year, Kyle and Katherine took a dual enrollment Health class through Mountain. Sara and Lydia only took Regional courses. Thus, all four case students received all or the majority of their dual enrollment college credit from Regional University.

In terms of how the dual enrollment program influenced these students' decisions to go to college, some participants suggested the program introduced students to college-level classes with little risk and great reward in terms of earned credit. For example, all four students reported feeling well prepared for college because they had taken college classes in high school. As Sara said, "In a way I feel like I'm already a sophomore. I've done [college-level] work. I got As and a few Bs, so I know I can do it." Additionally, the superintendent of Fairbanks County Schools said, "Once students get a few credits under their belts, they feel like they can do [college]." A dual enrollment professor, Dr. Taraki elaborated:

Having these college classes is an advantage our students in Fairbanks have. If they have these dual credit classes, they are already ahead of the game once they set foot on a campus, and that gives them so much confidence. They think, ‘I’ve already had that class. I already did that.’ You talk about empowering.”

Mr. Dean noted that the dual enrollment classes were part of a broader school culture about preparing students for the ACT and college. In describing the school’s efforts to help students pass the ACT, which is a component of Kentucky’s required state assessments, he said:

There was a buzz among the kids that if you weren’t doing [the dual enrollment program] you were missing out. So that meant sophomores were on alert to meet the credentials before junior year, by taking the ACT sophomore year or earlier, for some. We showed [students] and the parents as well how much money they could save by taking [dual credit] classes here. It just took off.

However, at least one person I spoke with cautioned that the dual enrollment program mostly served students who were already college-bound. Mr. Hoover, a Math professor from Regional, described his students:

They were the overachievers, the cream of the crop in Fairbanks County, these kids. These are students that were all college-bound. And my job was to make sure they were college-ready, because just because you are college-bound doesn’t mean you are college ready.

Thus, in Mr. Hoover’s view, the dual enrollment program merely reinforced students’ earlier predisposition to pursue higher education. This idea would certainly fit with the

case students' narratives about "always going to college" and their subsequent participation in the dual enrollment program.

### **Deciding Where to Enroll**

As described above, Lydia, Katherine, Kyle, and Sara's decision of whether to go to college was a non-decision in many ways. Similarly, the process by which three of the case students selected their chosen institutions was loosely defined. Only Katherine visited and applied to multiple colleges and weighed the pros and cons of attending different institutions. For the other three students, the decision of where to go to college happened upon them more than it occurred by their design. Still, all students' eventual enrollment decisions were influenced by a few distinct factors, namely their guidance counselor, offers of financial aid, and their impressions of potential institutions.

**The guidance counselor.** Mrs. Olin, the guidance counselor for seniors at FCHS, is dedicated to her work of "first helping students graduate and, then, doing whatever it is they want to do after graduation." While these post-graduation plans certainly include going to college, Mrs. Olin reminds me that many students enter the military or the workforce after high school, and that she must meet all students' needs. Because Mrs. Olin is assigned to the senior class, she works with a different group of students each year. Prior to their senior year, students work with the other guidance counselor, but they do not focus on college, except when they register for either dual enrollment or regular level classes.

Mrs. Olin visits all senior English classes, including the dual enrollment sections, at the beginning of every month of the school year. At these meetings, she goes over the

events and deadlines for the month in the senior calendar that she created and handed out at the beginning of the year. Mrs. Olin said:

Every month I tell them what is going on and what they need to do. At the very first initial meeting, I have the entire class period and I try to give them the overview of the year and tell them what to do to get prepared, getting letters of recommendation, when to apply for college and so forth.

***Working with parents.*** Mrs. Olin also holds periodic meetings with the parents of seniors, and sends regular email updates to all parents for whom she has email addresses. Just as with the students, Mrs. Olin has an introductory parents meeting early in the school year to prepare them for the year ahead. She estimates that 60-75 parents of the 165 seniors came to the meeting in the fall of 2011. Among those in attendance were Katherine's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Isaacs. At this meeting, Mrs. Olin distributed the same senior calendar that she hands out and goes through with students in her monthly visits to English classes. She also delivered a PowerPoint presentation highlighting various aspects of the college choice process. As she said, "I talk to [the parents] about choosing the college, applying for the colleges, when and how you do scholarships, when and how you do financial aid." The Isaacs told me that they found this informational session helpful. None of the other case students' parents attended this session.

Beyond this initial parents' meeting, Mrs. Olin also hosts a spring semester meeting where she focuses entirely on the FAFSA and financial aid. She plans this meeting for the second week of February, when parents will have received their tax forms, but before most Kentucky colleges' FAFSA deadlines. Mrs. Olin said, "I advise [parents] in the fall to do their taxes as soon as possible. Then I invite college

representatives to come and help the parents who brought their completed forms fill out the FAFSA while they are here.” She continued, “We host the meeting in the computer lab so they aren’t just coming in and taking notes and listening to somebody, but they actually do it here.”

The Isaacs did not attend this particular event, but they did state that Mrs. Olin was a “big help to Katherine, and all the students.” In particular, Mrs. Isaacs told me, “Mrs. Olin made sure we were in the know. She sent out emails to parents, to students. She explained the FAFSA to Katherine, so Katherine could explain it to us.” Similarly, Sara and her parents said they learned about financial aid from Mrs. Olin. Mrs. Smith told me, “The counselor at the school always had information sessions, for [the parents] and the kids. We couldn’t go to all of them because of the business, but Sara paid attention to what she said we needed to do.”

***Individual college counseling.*** Clearly, Mrs. Olin served as a key source of information about college and the college choice process for students and families at FCHS. However, the reason that all four case students cited Mrs. Olin as a key influence in their college choice also related to her commitment to “meet with students for one-on-one counseling for applications, financial aid, and other things.” Kyle, Lydia, Sarah and Katherine each described how they met with Mrs. Olin on several occasions during their college choice process. Further, they each credited her for some action or conversation, without which they would not have ended up at the college where they enrolled.

For instance, Kyle might not have even applied to Regional without Mrs. Olin’s intervention. He was determined to go to Flagship until he met with Mrs. Olin and she advised him to go to Regional for their locally reputable nursing program. Kyle told me,

“[Mrs. Olin] is pretty good at what she does. She made it clear to me that [Regional] was best and by the end of that week I was saying I would probably go to Regional.” Mrs. Olin noted that she counseled Kyle this way because she was aware that his family did not have any experience with higher education. She said, “He doesn’t have someone at home that’s been there, done that, so there were many things he didn’t know about.”

While Mrs. Olin described her approach with Kyle as more proactive than her typical interactions with students, all four case students characterized the guidance counselor’s methods as hands-on. Lydia summarized Mrs. Olin’s approach. She said,

Mrs. Olin, had applications for Regional and other colleges sitting in her office and students could do them for free. She paid the mailing costs and everything.

She would mail in anything if we asked her. And she would email the people for us, too.

Lydia, Sara, and Kyle all submitted free applications to Regional through Mrs. Olin. Kyle and Lydia also relied on Mrs. Olin’s guidance when they applied to the Honors Program at Regional. Lydia said,

The Honors application was due in January or February. For that I was in Ms. Olin’s office everyday. She was probably sick of me. I was trying to get everything done. I had to send in my transcripts and my ACT scores. I needed four letters of recommendation. She wrote one for me. It was just a lot.

Katherine echoed this sentiment. She said, “I went to Mrs. Olin’s office a lot. At some point I was probably in there every day.”

***Help with financial aid.*** Besides getting help submitting her college applications, Katherine sought Mrs. Olin’s help in finding scholarships and financial aid to pay for

college. Katherine told me, “She would find scholarships and match them to you personally.” Mr. Isaacs added, “Even yesterday, Mrs. Olin called her and had her come to the high school for another grant. [Katherine’s] been graduated and done, but still she helped her. Couldn’t ask for no better.” Mrs. Olin told me that she had continued to look for available grants and scholarships for Katherine during the summer because of “how needy the family really is.”

In fact, all four students went to Mrs. Olin for help with financial aid. Sara stated, “We could always go to [Mrs. Olin’s] office and talk to her about stuff. She told us about all the local scholarships, and how to apply.” Sara and Lydia also consulted Mrs. Olin about a sizable scholarship they were automatically offered with their initial acceptance from Regional. Lydia told me how Ms. Olin advised her that the \$24,000 scholarship was “just too good to pass up.” Sara confided:

Mrs. Olin’s the one that helped me with the Regents Scholarship. There was a paper I had to sign to accept it and send it in, so I went in and talked to her about it and she told me to send that in because it was a lot of money. And she said congratulations.

“Mrs. Olin just wanted to see us all do good,” Lydia said.

**Lack of parental involvement.** Mrs. Olin’s involvement in students’ college choice process is perhaps most notable because it seemed to occur in lieu of parental involvement. The one exception is Katherine, who visited multiple colleges with her parents and talked with them about her decision-making process. Kyle, Lydia and Sara did not describe any parental participation in their college choice process. The Nelsons



and the Smiths seemed content with Mrs. Olin's guidance, and they expressed confidence in their daughter's ability to make her own college enrollment decision.

For example, the Smiths told me, "The decision was up to [Sara]." Mr. Smith explained further, "Sara's always been a good decision maker and made sound decisions. We trusted her on this." Thus, Sara made her college choice decision of Regional without her parents' input. The Nelsons stated matter-of-factly that Lydia received application materials, scholarship information and everything else she needed for college from the school; she also submitted her college applications through Mrs. Olin. Even their description of how Lydia first considered Regional as a college choice indicates their lack of direct involvement in the process. Mrs. Nelson said,

Lydia wanted to go to Flagship all of her life, but then senior year she comes home and says she picked Regional...I don't have anything against Regional, because I went there, you know, but I just hate to see her settle for less.

This statement shows that the Nelsons were aware of Lydia's college search, but that they did not intervene when she selected an institution they considered lesser than others she was considering.

Even the Isaacs, who took Katherine to seven different colleges during her college search, told Katherine that the ultimate decision was hers to make. Mr. Isaacs said:

It was all her decision to come [to Private] by the way. No parent pushing. She asked me what to do. I told her it was a college decision, and she had to make it and I didn't want to hear 'I've made the worst decision of my life.' She had to make it.

Mrs. Isaacs, added, “Yeah, we didn’t want her to blame us for sending her to a bad college. She had to make the decision and live with it.”

The overall lack of parental involvement in these four students’ college choice process is notable in and of itself. However, it is even more notable for Lydia, who is not a first-generation college student like the other three students. In the face of limited parental involvement, the four students had to act for themselves. They developed a list of potential institutions, gathered information and applications, completed the steps to apply, and sought guidance along the way from other adults. In this way, the students were active agents in their college choice process.

**Paying for college.** One way the students’ parents may have indirectly influenced the students’ college choice process was their ability to pay for college. Sara and Katherine reported that their parents were unable to help them finance a college education. As Sara put it, “I knew college was going to cost quite a bit of money, and I knew I didn’t have it and my parents didn’t have it.” The Isaacs were also unable to help Katherine pay for school. As a result, Sara and Katherine used financial aid offers to help them determine which college to attend. Katherine said:

I took [cost] into consideration and how much in loans I would have to take out.

Here I do have to take out some, but this is probably the least amount I have to take out of all of [the colleges] I looked at.

Sara remarked, “I didn’t want a bunch of loans, so after I got into Regional and got the [Regents] scholarship it just made up my mind to go there.” Even though both these students were concerned with paying for college, they factored financial aid into their decision at different points in the process. Katherine compared financial aid packages

from the various private, four-year colleges to which she had applied in the spring. Sara accepted the first, albeit generous, financial aid offer she received in the fall before she even applied to another school. Thus, cost was important to these students, but it influenced their college decision-making process at different points in the process.

Further, even when parents could help finance their children's education, as in the case of Lydia and Kyle, cost remained a factor in the college choice process. For example, the Nelsons told me and Lydia, that they could help finance her education. Still, Lydia reported that her college search was driven in part by a desire to go to a college that would cost her parents as little as possible. She said:

I didn't want to put too much of a burden on my parents. I know my brother has to go to college too, and he's right behind me in high school. So I wanted them to have to come up with as little as possible for me.

In fact, Lydia described working throughout her senior year of high school to "get every penny [she] could" by applying for multiple scholarships, and the more competitive Honors program at Regional that offered more money for college. Thus, Lydia limited her initial college choices because of her perception of her parent's ability to pay for college.

As a result of her focus on cost and pursuit of scholarships, Lydia's parents are only paying for the meal plan that Regional requires of freshmen. The Nelsons happily characterize this financial situation as Lydia going to college, "for nothing, or next to nothing." Katherine's similar search for an affordable college education did not bring the same results, but only because she elected to enroll at a more expensive private college. In fact, all of Katherine's potential college choices were more expensive private schools

because of her desire to participate in collegiate athletics, which was only possible for her at smaller colleges. Thus, while according to Mr. Dean, she received “more scholarship money than her parents make in a year,” this scholarship money coupled with need-based aid was not enough to cover the cost of Private. Katherine is the only case student who is using student loans to pay for college.

Sara, who admitted knowing college was expensive and impossible for her parents to finance, did not pursue affordable colleges or scholarships with the same predetermination as Lydia or Katherine. Rather, she simply applied early to an institution that she had always considered attending, and found the financial dice had rolled in her favor. She said, “I got a letter saying I got the Regents Scholarship. Essentially, they gave me \$24,000 for school. I thought that was cool and would help out a lot.” Clearly, Sara was not aware that her application made her automatically available for this sizable scholarship. In the spring, Sara also received merit scholarships and need-based aid that more than paid for her college expenses. As Sara put it, “I’ve got so much financial aid and scholarships that I’ll be getting money back each semester.” In part, this windfall is due to Sara’s decision to live off campus and commute. Removing the room and board costs made an already affordable institution even more so, even if it did add additional costs such as parking and gas.

Kyle, who is also attending Regional free of charge due to merit scholarships, thought cost was not an influence on his college choice decision. He said, “I never thought about cost. I don’t think I ever had to. My parents wanted me to get every scholarship I could, but they would have paid every penny if they’d had to.” He then added, “I didn’t [apply for] as many local scholarships as [my friends]; I was just kinda

hoping I could get a full scholarship at any college I went to. I have a high ACT score.” Thus, it seems that Kyle was operating under the assumption that his academic ability would translate to a free college education. Fortunately for him, the financial aid from Regional worked to confirm his assumption. Perhaps this stroke of good fortune is what led him to deny cost as an influential factor in his college choice process.

**Institutional characteristics.** While cost may have helped the case students ultimately select their respective institutions, they also described how institutional characteristics shaped their decision-making process.

**Proximity.** One such characteristic was proximity. Lydia, Sarah and Kyle each spoke of the nearby location of their respective college as a factor in their college choice process. Further, even though Katherine did not specifically cite proximity, of the three institutions she carefully considered, she chose the closest to her home.

Both Lydia and Sara viewed the proximity of Regional as a convenience factor. Lydia said, “It was helpful that it was just 15 minutes away. I can come home and do my laundry on the weekends.” Sara expressed a similar preference for being close to home. She stated

It was between Regional and Flagship because those two were close to home. I like Fairbanks. I don’t want to live too far away from it. I want to be in reach of it and my parents and stuff and everybody there.

However, for Kyle, being close to home was a necessity, and not completely pleasant. Mrs. Vandiver has a disability that, as Kyle told me, made him feel pressure to stay close to home. Kyle also thinks choosing to attend a nearby institution comforted his mother. He said, “I have to be able to come home whenever. My mom has a medical condition,

epilepsy, where stress does her in. Me being this close makes her feel a little better about it. She knows I can come whenever.” Kyle notes there is a downside to going to college so close to home, though. “I’m pretty much at their beck and call being this close. It could be bad. It won’t bother them to interrupt me.”

Beyond the case students themselves, other participants corroborated that Regional’s proximity made it an attractive potential institution for the majority of FCHS’s college-bound graduates. The Fairbanks County Superintendent said, “Our students go to Regional because it is close and they can commute.” Dr. Taraki, the dual credit professor, agreed. She said, “Fairbanks County probably sends more of its students here than other small communities do just because we are so close to Regional.”

***Familiarity.*** In tandem with, or perhaps because of this proximity, Lydia and Sara also expressed a familiarity with Regional that influenced their college choice process. As Lydia summarized, “We’ve had a lot of fieldtrips, a lot of activities that we’ve done there.” Mrs. Nelson added, “She went to Regional lots of times with her school, and we went there for events a few times, but we didn’t visit it, like officially. Plus, I had gone there, too, so I knew how it worked.” Sara mentioned touring Regional at least twice as part of a school trip, and how her perception of the institution changed over time. She said

The first time we toured Regional was probably 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade and I thought the cafeteria was awesome so that is why I wanted to go here then. Then when we toured it in sophomore year, that is when I decided it was where I wanted to get my education.

Another aspect of familiarity that may have impacted Lydia and Kyle's eventual enrollment decision is that they had close peers who also enrolled at Regional. Kyle's girlfriend chose to enroll in the Honors program at Regional, and encouraged Kyle to do the same. He said, "I was nudged into that, by a different outside source, my girlfriend. She mentioned it and I looked into it and it seemed like a good idea." Lydia's parents specifically told me they thought Lydia's boyfriend, Walt, influenced her college decision. As Mrs. Nelson put it:

Lydia wanted to go to Flagship all of her life, but then senior year she comes home and says she picked Regional. Of course, Walt picked Regional too. I don't have anything against Regional, because I went there, you know, but I just hate to see her settle for less.

Lydia disagreed though. She said, "I really did want to go [to Regional]. They have a good program, and I liked the small school setting. Everything about it was a plus." Thus, even if Lydia did select Regional in part because of a desire to be close to the people and places she knew, she asserts that her decision was based on multiple factors.

*Institutional fit.* When choosing their respective institutions, the case students considered the "fit" between their social and academic preferences and related institutional characteristics. For example, Lydia's comment that "everything" about Regional was a plus for her indicates her assessment of good fit between Regional and her social and academic needs. Sara and Katherine also alluded to institutional fit when they described their impressions of their chosen colleges. When asked why she chose Regional, Sara said, "I heard a lot of good things about Regional." She continued:

I heard they had a good law program, and I might be going into political science to be a lawyer, and we had representatives come to high school to tell use how good Regional is and stuff. I heard good things about Flagship too, but Regional is closer to home, and it's cheaper, and it seems to fit my needs.

Sara's comment encapsulates the many ways in which Regional appealed to her as an institution.

Katherine also described how the feel of the college influenced her decision-making. She said, "I chose to go to Private because I like the atmosphere of it." Katherine characterized this atmosphere as "friendly". She elaborated

It's not a college where you are a statistic. You are a person. You don't go into a classroom with a hundred people. Small class sizes. Even today, walking back and forth, people here already know my name. It's that student interaction.

For Kyle, his impression of Regional was more about the nursing program than the institution itself. He said, "Regional is a pretty good nursing school so I decided to go there." When asked how he knew Regional was a good nursing school, he replied, "My guidance counselor, Mrs. Olin said Regional had a better nursing school [than Flagship] and she showed me facts to prove it. After that, I said, 'Yeah, you're right' and applied there instead." Although Kyle did not specify what facts he was shown, he was so impressed by them, or by his guidance counselor's opinion that he chose Regional over his long preferred college. Lydia also expressed her impression of her own chosen academic program at Regional. She said, "Regional has the best teaching programs, and I want to do [speech] with the schools, so that influenced my way of going." In some way,



then, each student held an impression of his or her chosen school that factored into his or her college-choice decision.

As described above, for Lydia, Katherine, Sara and Kyle, the college choice process was more about where to go to college than whether to go at all. Even then, the students did not engage in an extensive college search process before selecting their particular institution. Only Katherine toured multiple colleges with her parents and seriously entertained offers from more than one college before making her enrollment decision. For the three other students, it seems like momentum propelled them to the closest, most familiar institution. The factors they cite as influential were not predetermined criteria in a logical college choice process so much as they were validation for students to select the institution they were already most likely to attend.

## Chapter 6: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to begin to examine the extent to which the factors identified in the college access and choice literature applied to the understudied population of rural students. The main question guiding this study was: How does the college decision-making process of a sample of rural students from Appalachian Kentucky align with Perna's (2006; 2010) nested process model of college choice? In this section I will describe how multiple influential factors, shaped by the context of rural, Appalachian Kentucky, converged in an iterative college choice process for the four case students. While this general finding confirms the basic structure of the nested process model (Perna, 2006; 2010), I will also discuss nuances between the case students' experiences and the model. Finally, I will suggest potential refinements to the model.

Perna's (2006; 2010) nested process model identifies four main influential factors for college choice: 1) demand for higher education; 2) benefits of attending college; 3) supply of resources; and 4) the costs associated with attending college. I will discuss each of these factors in turn before returning to the role of context in shaping the case students' college choice processes. Perna's (2010) model is fairly instructive for understanding why these four rural students enrolled where they did. All four students had a high demand for higher education, and expected to accrue monetary and non-monetary benefits from attending the college of their choice. Further, they each possessed a finite supply of resources that they could bring to bear on the costs of attending their chosen institution.

## **Demand for Higher Education**

**Academic achievement.** A key determinant of a student's decision to attend college is his or her academic achievement in high school (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; McDonough, 1997). In college choice research, academic achievement has been operationalized as grades or standardized test scores, and students with higher grades and scores are more likely to aspire and apply to college (Perna, 2006). As academically able students with above-average GPAs (> 3.5) and ACT scores (> 21) nationally and within their school, Lydia, Katherine, Kyle and Sara represent the type of students whose achievement is very likely to lead to college enrollment. In other words, given their grades and test scores alone, all four case students would have probably ended up going to college so long as they did not face an insurmountable obstacle.

The four students' natural abilities to learn and test well engendered support from their parents and teachers to continue doing well in school and to go to college in a type of positive academic achievement cycle. For example, Kyle said his parents told him he should go to college because he was smart and they pushed him to earn good grades. Moreover, all four case students expressed an unwavering desire to attend college that arose in part because they had experienced sustained academic achievement throughout their lives.

Teachers and school personnel at FCHS referred to the four case students and their peers on the college preparatory track as "the cream of the crop." Although FCHS does not recognize valedictorian or salutatorian, Kyle did have the highest unweighted GPA in his graduating class with a 3.97. Lydia, Katherine, and Sara's GPAs were also

above the class average GPA and the average GPA for college bound students at Fairbanks (see Table 1 in Chapter 3).

However, earning good grades at Fairbanks is different from earning good grades at another school in the region, the state, or the nation. Recall that students do not take Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate classes at Fairbanks. The highest-level math class offered at the school is Pre-Calculus. Fairbanks holds no state or national recognition for its quality teachers, student test scores, or academic programs. In short, students' GPAs, while impressive, say as much about the school as they do the student. For this reason, it is important to look at the nationally normed ACT scores of the four case students. The four case students' scores of 26, 27, 27, and 30 puts them in the top 20% of test-takers nationally and the top 12% of test-takers in Kentucky (ACT, Inc., 2013). Clearly, they qualify as high academic achievers, but their scores are lower than those required for admission into almost all Ivy League schools. For example, Harvard's average accepted ACT composite score is 32 (Harvard University, 2013).

**Academic preparation.** Lydia, Katherine, Kyle and Sara were adequately academically prepared for college—another component of one's demand for higher education. Research in college choice has shown that taking college preparatory courses in high school is positively related to students' decisions to go to college and to enroll in particular types of institutions (i.e., four-year institutions) (Ellwood & Kane, 2000; Hossler et al., 1989; Perna 2000). While FCHS does not offer Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses, they do have a dual enrollment program with Regional University to prepare students for the rigors of college classes.

The dual enrollment program with Regional University allows qualified juniors and seniors at FCHS to simultaneously earn college and high school credit for the same class. The requirements are set by Regional University and included a 3.0 GPA and minimum ACT scores of 18 in English, 19 in Mathematics, 20 in Reading and 21 Composite. The dual enrollment courses are taught by Regional professors. Due to grant monies, they are offered at no cost to the students at Fairbanks. The courses offered at Fairbanks through this program include three English classes, Pre-Calculus, Statistics, Spanish, French, and Health. Lydia, Katherine, Kyle and Sara all took English 101 and 102, Pre-Calculus, and a foreign language class. Katherine and Kyle both took Statistics and Health. Lydia and Sara both took the additional English class. Thus, the students were not only in the top achievement quartile of their class, but they had also taken multiple college level classes with college professors.

Further, all four case students cited the Regional dual enrollment classes and/or the professors of these classes as influential in their college choice process. For one, all four case students stated that they felt taking the dual credit classes in high school prepared them for college academically. This finding aligns with the positive association between academic preparation and demand for higher education that other researchers have found (Ellwood & Kane, 2000; Hossler et al., 1989; Perna 2000). However, many of these classes, especially the math classes, would not be considered college-level work in any other context. Thus, dual enrollment may set up a false perception of college classes for students.

For Lydia, the dual enrollment program went beyond preparing her for college, and exposed her to an influential professor who would help shape Lydia's college choice

decision. In taking three dual enrollment English courses with the same professor, Dr. Taraki, Lydia developed a relationship with this teacher that evolved to include college counseling. Recall that Dr. Taraki introduced Lydia to the Honors Program at Regional University. She told Lydia, “These are your people,” and describing her own son’s experience in the program. Lydia subsequently applied to the Honors Program, and cited her professor as the reason.

In fact, Dr. Taraki talked about college generally to all students in her dual enrollment classes and allowed the guidance counselor, Mrs. Olin, to talk to students about college during class as well. Research indicates that students’ access to social and cultural capital about college, including information about college, influences their college choice process (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006, 2010). While students’ families are most often the source of this capital and information, other adults may fill that void when students’ families lack experience with or information about higher education, (McDonough, 1997; Terenzini et al., 2001).

For the four case students, their school and school personnel were certainly the source of much college information and social and cultural capital. In a way, the case students’ high demand for higher education created an equally high demand for information about college. Being unable to find this information at home, either because their parents had not gone to college or had never previously sent any children to college, the four students sought it at school. Whether in class or individually, Lydia, Katherine, Kyle and Sara depended on their teachers and guidance counselor to fill the gaps in their own and their parents’ knowledge of college.

Recognizing this gap in students' knowledge, Mrs. Olin and Dr. Taraki took it upon themselves to provide students with information about college. Moreover, Mrs. Olin did not stop at sharing information with students. She also helped students submit applications, manage financial aid forms, and weigh their admissions offers. However, the guidance counselor's time and knowledge may have limited how she was able to help students. Mrs. Olin's advice was shaped by her experience working closely with admissions representatives from Regional for a number of years. Further, when parents work through the college choice process with their children, they can ostensibly give all their attention to one child. The guidance counselor, faced with 165 students, may have adopted a sensible, one-size-fits-most approach in counseling students. Because the school was the filter for college information for these four students, as well as a hundred others, the depth and nature of the information that could be provided was different than what students from other, more advantaged schools, regions, and family backgrounds are likely to receive. In places where parents have higher levels of education, or private college counselors are available to work with families, or schools actively work to place students in competitive colleges and universities, the nature of information about college is different than it was for these four students in Fairbanks County. This possibility is further supported by the fact that 67 of the 90 college-going graduates from FCHS were planning to attend Regional at the end of their senior year of high school.

### **Benefits of College**

The case students' demand for higher education intertwined with their perceptions of the benefits of higher education. Because all four case students had decided they were definitely going to college by middle school, if not earlier, they seem to have internalized

a perception that college is beneficial, if not necessary, for one's career and lifestyle. However, Lydia, Katherine, Kyle, and Sara's perceptions of the benefits of college were sometimes based on assumptions and unfounded information.

**Monetary benefits.** The main benefits the case students described were the potential occupations and presumed higher salaries open to individuals with a college degree. Almost all research in college choice is premised on the human capital model in which individuals decide to pursue higher education as a way to increase their economic potential (Perna, 2010). Indeed, Lydia, Katherine, Kyle and Sara each expressed interest in a well-paying career requiring an advanced degree, as well as awareness that their chosen professions would require a college education. Thus, for these four students, the decision to go to college was partially a means to a desired end. However, students selected their particular future careers, and ultimately their higher education institutions, in light of their immediate context.

In her work with college-bound females in California, McDonough (1997) describes how Bourdieu's concept of habitus influences students' college choice processes. She defines habitus as "a common set of subjective perceptions held by all members of the same group or class that shapes an individual's expectations, attitudes, and aspirations" (McDonough, 1997, p. 9). McDonough's (1997) study found that students constrain or expand their college choice process given their individual habitus. More recent college choice research has confirmed the importance of habitus in college choice (Cho, Hudley, Lee, Barry & Kelly, 2008; McDonough and Calderone, 2006; Nora, 2004; Paulsen & St. John, 2002). As such, Perna (2010) includes habitus in her nested



process model in the individual and family contextual layer, but also notes that habitus may be shaped by high schools, institutions of higher education, and/or broader factors.

In terms of how Lydia, Katherine, Kyle and Sara's perceptions influenced their career aspirations, only Lydia's plan to become a speech pathologist was based on her interaction with an adult in her community. By spending time in her mother's classroom at Fairbanks Elementary, Lydia met and eventually shadowed the speech pathologist at the school. Through this experience, Lydia realized she liked working with children, and that she did not have to be a classroom teacher to do so. In this way, Lydia's unique social capital exposed her to professionals in the community beyond her parents, which in turn shaped her perception of potential careers.

On the other hand, Katherine and Sara described their chosen professions generally as engineering and law, respectively. Neither girl knew an engineer or lawyer personally, but they understood what each did and expressed a belief that their chosen profession matched their strengths well. Katherine cited her math ability and an engineering problem given to her by Mr. Dean that she solved quickly to his surprise. A Google search revealed the only engineer in the area to be a state highway-paving contractor. Neither Katherine nor her parents mentioned this individual. Katherine's perception of engineering may have also come from the recent popularity of STEM fields and attempts to engage females in these fields. She mentioned that Mr. Dean told her a female engineer was guaranteed a job. Katherine may have found the promise of certain employment appealing because of her own parents' unemployment and her family's consequent economic hardship.

As a future lawyer, Sara described her comfort in writing and arguing and an interest in political science. She did not seem to know of the generally recognized overabundance of lawyers, perhaps because downtown Juniper has only one law office. This fact is not surprising, considering that rural areas are typically underserved by lawyers and other professionals. Still, Sara's college and career plans seemed based on economic motives more so than her recognition of the lack of lawyers in her community. She openly described her desire to "make [her] children's life better than [hers]" by making sure she had "a good job, a good house, a good car, that kind of thing." Recall that Sara's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Smith, jointly run their self-owned vehicle towing and repair shop, and that Sara works as a waitress to pay for her clothes, cell phone, and car insurance. Thus, Sara's intention to become a lawyer seemed to be based on her general perception of the prestige and pay afforded lawyers.

Kyle intended to become an anesthesiologist by first becoming a nurse anesthetist, rather than by majoring in pre-med in undergrad and then going to medical school. Kyle's plan for entering his future occupation was quite out of sync with reality. Kyle's father works in a factory; his mother is unable to work because of a disability. While Juniper has a hospital, Kyle's exposure to the medical field has largely been through his mother's health care, which has not involved an anesthesiologist. Instead, Kyle's interest in the profession was more about the high salary, which he learned about at a school career fair. What is more troubling is that Kyle's ideas of how to become an anesthesiologist have gone unchallenged. It seems likely that most adults in Kyle's life would have the basic knowledge that becoming a doctor after becoming a nurse is taking the unnecessarily long way around. What is less clear is whether and why his guidance

counselor, parents, and/or teachers failed to point out this misunderstanding to Kyle. Perhaps they believed that studying nursing was more productive generally or for Kyle specifically. They may also have suspected that Kyle was more likely to complete an undergraduate nursing program than to complete a pre-med course of study and go on to medical school because of his family background. However, both the four and six year graduation rates at Regional are lower than those at Flagship, so it seems encouraging him to choose Regional was not based on any data.

**Institutional benefits.** Beyond the perceived occupational benefits of just going to college, Lydia, Katherine, Kyle and Sara's enrollment decisions were also based on their perceptions of the benefits of attending their respective institutions. Cabrera and LaNasa (2000) note that student's college search and choice decisions are shaped by their impressions of institutional factors including "the quality of the institution, campus life, and availability of majors" (p. 9). Each of the four case students expressly mentioned the academic reputation of his or her chosen institution or program, even if the source of this reputation was hearsay.

For example, Sara mentioned that an admissions representative from Regional told her that the university had a good pre-law program. She did not seem to question the motives or statements of the representative. Further, because of Regional's proximity to and long-standing relationship with Fairbanks, representatives from the university visit the high school early and often. In fact, an admissions representative visited Fairbanks in late September 2011 to speak to students and promote Regional's spotlight event that weekend, October 1<sup>st</sup>, where students could apply to Regional for free. This first college representative visit of the school year led to Sara's early application and acceptance at

Regional. After this event, Sara suspended her college search and enrolled at Regional, in part because of her unconfirmed perceptions of Regional's pre-law program.

Similarly, Kyle said that Mrs. Olin showed him facts that convinced him Regional's nursing program was better than Flagship's. Although Kyle could not recall what the facts were, they might have been the licensing examination pass rates for each nursing program in the state, which are a common measure of nursing school quality. Regional's pass rate was 96% in 2011, while Flagship's was 94% (Kentucky Board of Nursing, 2012). Additionally, Regional is locally known in Appalachian Kentucky as a popular nursing school. Kyle may very well have perceived this popularity as a marker of quality, whether or not that was actually the case.

Even Katherine's parents asserted that she had chosen the most prestigious university of her options based on their perceptions of the colleges to which she had applied. Katherine's father, Mr. Isaacs, recounted telling her "Private's ink holds the most weight over any college you are going to choose." This statement indicated that Mr. Isaacs believed a degree from Private University was worth more in terms of social and cultural capital than a degree from other institutions in the state. Further, Katherine and her parents valued the engineering program at Private because it was a combined program with Flagship University that would result in both a Bachelor's and a Master's degree over five years. The perception that Katherine was getting two degrees for the price of one was integral to her decision to enroll at Private.

**Non-monetary benefits.** Lydia held notions of other long-term benefits associated with higher education, which she saw first hand in the divergent life paths of her two uncles. Her college-educated uncle had a lifestyle she admired. He lived in a

house with his wife and children. Her other uncle lived in a trailer home by himself and, although he had children, they had different mothers and were rarely around. It is interesting that Lydia associated an intact, nuclear family with a college education because research confirms that college-educated individuals are less likely to divorce than those with a high school diploma (Fry, 2010). As a young woman in rural Appalachian Kentucky, where societal values tend to be conservative Lydia may accept the expectation to marry and have children. Her association of this desired lifestyle with a college education might be another reason she is seeking higher education.

### **Supply of Resources**

While all four case students shared a similar demand for higher education and a perception that college was beneficial, they differed in their supply of resources to finance their education. In the nested process model (Perna, 2010), a student's supply of resources includes his or her family income and the financial aid offered by higher education institutions. Because research in college access and choice has long focused on econometric models, the relationship between family income and college enrollment is well-documented. In brief, students with lower family incomes are less likely to aspire to, apply to and enroll in college than students with higher family incomes (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Perna, 2010). Recognizing this fact, higher education institutions and federal and state governments have attempted to use financial aid to offset the lack of monetary resources of low-income students. While the success of various financial aid programs is debatable, there is no doubt that financial aid offers from their chosen institutions influenced Lydia, Katherine, Kyle and Sara's college choice decision.

**Family income.** The four case students were somewhat stratified in terms of their family income. Lydia's family income was the highest of the four, at approximately \$80,000. Kyle and Sara's respective families were in the middle with nearly \$40,000. Katherine's family income was the lowest in the group, at roughly \$20,000. The students' family size varied as well. Lydia and Sara's families both had four members, but Kyle's family has only three members and Katherine's family has six members. To put these numbers in perspective, the median household income<sup>4</sup> in Fairbanks County in 2011 was \$28,148 (ARC, 2013). Thus, three of the four case students have higher than average family incomes in Fairbanks County. However, in the same year, the median household income in Kentucky was \$42,248, and the national median was \$52,762 (ARC, 2013). Thus, only Lydia's family income was higher than state and national medians. Given these numbers, it is clear that Katherine, Kyle and Sara would be considered disadvantaged in a wider population, and should be less likely to engage in the college choice process than their peers above the median.

Of the four case students, both Lydia and Kyle expressed their respective parents' willingness and ability to pay for college. Lydia's parents also emphasized their ability to pay for college, but added that they were glad she had received so many scholarships. In Kyle's case, his statement that his parents "would have paid every penny if they had to" seemed to indicate parental willingness to pay more than true ability, especially given their below median income of slightly more than \$40,000. Neither Lydia nor Kyle stated that their parents could and would pay for *any* college. Rather, for reasons I will discuss

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<sup>4</sup> The Census uses median income rather than average income to avoid outlier effects. Median household income assumes a family of four (U.S. Census, 2013).

in more detail below, it seemed clear that the Nelsons and the Vandivers were thinking about in-state institutions.

On the other hand, Katherine and Sara's families did not have any real financial means to pay for their daughters' college. Still, low family income did not seem to dampen Katherine and Sara's college aspirations or search. Instead, both girls seemed to hold to their long-held desire to attend college, and assumed that financial resources would become available somehow, even if the resources were student loans. Katherine may have had additional reason to think that the money would work itself out because of the bank account that was set up for her by a benevolent businessman in her senior year of high school, which she used for the costs of her extracurricular activities.

What was most interesting about the role of family income in the four students' college choice process was that the student with the lowest family income, Katherine, visited and applied to more colleges than the other three students. This fact is surprising given the overwhelming literature that suggests the lowest-income students do not engage in much college search behavior at all (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Terenzini et al., 2001). However, Katherine's desire to play sports at the collegiate level and her athletic ability allowed her to expand her college search. Her ability garnered attention from both volleyball and basketball coaches at multiple institutions, attention which Katherine reciprocated in the institutions. The addition of athletics to Katherine's college decision seemed to mitigate the role of family income in her college choice process.

**Financial aid.** Perhaps more than family income, all four case students' enrollment decisions were influenced by financial aid, both actual and perceived. Common sense alone indicates that students and their families think about financial aid

throughout the college choice process. Further, studies have shown that receiving a financial aid offer is a predictor of college enrollment (Linsenmeier, Rosen, & Rouse, 2006). Research has also shown that low-income students take expected financial aid into consideration more than their peers at other income levels do (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Terenzini et al., 2001). For the four case students in this study, financial aid seemed to impact all students' thinking, regardless of income level.

One aspect of financial aid that was pertinent for Lydia, Katherine, Kyle, and Sara was the Kentucky Educational Excellence Scholarship (KEES), which is an automatic scholarship offered to students attending an in-state institution of higher education. The KEES program was started in 1998 as an incentive to increase enrollment at Kentucky's colleges and universities and to decrease the "brain drain" that was happening in the 1990s (Seiler, Lander, Clinton, Alexander, Nelson, Olds, White & Young, 2011). A state legislative report found that KEES has met both these goals, with overall enrollment and degree attainment as well as enrollment in Kentucky institutions all increasing since the program's introduction (Seiler et al., 2011).

The KEES program uses GPA and ACT scores on a sliding scale to determine the amount of scholarship money that students will receive (KHEAA, 2013). Awards start at \$125 for a 2.5 GPA, and are cumulative over the four years of high school. The maximum award for GPA is \$500 for a 4.0 GPA. Thus, a student could earn an automatic \$2,000 scholarship for every year of college if he or she maintains a 4.0 GPA in high school. Additional money is offered for composite ACT scores of 15 or higher. The ACT awards start at \$36 and increase by \$35 for each additional point. ACT scores of 28 or



higher are worth \$500, which makes the maximum KEES award amount \$2,500 for each year of college.

The KEES program is widely publicized by the state and is so well known that most Kentucky students limit their college search to in state schools to ensure they will receive this scholarship. The KEES program helps explain why Lydia, Katherine, Kyle and Sara only considered in-state schools. For one, while the average KEES award is \$1200, all four case students stood to earn annual KEES money between \$2000-\$2500 per year if they stayed in state. Assuming a traditional four-year path to college, the students and their families could expect to receive \$8,000-\$10,000 in total. Further, all four students listed KEES money as one way they were financing their education. Finally, the KEES program makes already expensive out-of-state tuition seem even more costly by comparison.

The case students considered other sources of financial aid beyond the KEES program as well. For example, Lydia told me that she limited her college search to schools that would give her a good scholarship. As a result, she only applied to two four-year public institutions in Kentucky. It is not clear if Lydia's limited search was because of her flawed understanding of the available scholarships at other institutions or a misjudgment of her academic ability relative to her peers. Both of these factors have been documented in the college choice literature (Perna, 2006). What is clear is that Lydia's perception of available financial aid constrained her college choice process to two potential institutions. This fact is even more surprising given Lydia's relatively high family income and her mother's high level of educational attainment, which are positively associated with expanded college searches and number of college applications

(McDonough, 1997). It would appear that Lydia's perception of limited potential financial aid influenced her college choice process by first reducing her pool of potential institutions.

Lydia's misperceptions of available financial aid are baffling in light of Mrs. Olin's demonstrated focus on financial aid in her senior counseling programs. Many of the materials given to seniors and their parents deal with financing college, completing the FAFSA, and scholarships available for specific majors and degrees. Moreover, Lydia applied for a number of the smaller, local scholarships Mrs. Olin advertised. Somehow, though, she did not receive the message that a number of colleges offered scholarships like the ones with which she was familiar, or that applying to more colleges could increase her chances of receiving scholarships.

In terms of actual aid, all four case students admitted that financial aid offers influenced their enrollment decisions. On one end, Sara's experience was the most extreme. She stopped her college search process once Regional, the first institution she applied to, offered her a full tuition scholarship. She accepted admission, and the \$24,000 scholarship, when Mrs. Olin told her that was "just too good to pass up." Less extreme was Katherine, who noted that among other things, her enrollment decision was based on the amount of student loans required to supplement her scholarships. She wanted to limit her debt as much as possible, but she still had to like the school. On the other end, Kyle stated outright that the financial aid package he was offered was nice, but that it did not make his college choice decision for him. However, given that Kyle had only applied to one other school, which did offer him less financial aid, it seems likely that his decision was still in part about the money.

## **Cost**

Directly related to students' supply of resources is the cost of attending college. The costs associated with higher education are the real costs of tuition, room and board, fees, books, and such. Traditionally, the opportunity cost of foregone earnings is also included as a cost of higher education. For Lydia, Katherine, Kyle and Sara real costs were a primary factor in their college choice process, while a consideration of foregone earnings was not. The only other cost that seemed to influence these four students' college decision-making process was the cost of leaving home and a potential loss of "sense of place" (Howley, Harmon and Leopold, 1996).

**Actual costs of attending.** The direct costs associated with attending college have substantially increased over the last decade, both nationally and in Kentucky. In 2010, the average total cost (including tuition, fees, and room and board) for one year at in-state, four-year, public university in Kentucky was \$14,000 (Seiler et al., 2011). The annual total cost for an in-state, four-year, private university averaged \$25,500 (Seiler et al., 2011). Nationally, the average total cost for one year at a four-year, public university was \$16,000 and \$33,000 at a four-year, private university (NCES, 2013). College choice research shows a clear negative association between tuition costs and enrollment, especially for low-income students (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Terenzini et al., 2001).

While none of the four case students knew the exact cost of attending their potential institutions, which is troubling in itself, they all stated that college was expensive. Thus, they sought to limit their out-of-pocket costs for college. As previously discussed, all students limited their pool of potential colleges to in-state institutions. It was clear from my conversations with the students and their families that the financial

support for attending in-state institutions made going to a college in Kentucky a near certainty. Lydia, Sara, and Kyle further limited their college search to one or two four-year *public* universities in the state. The most expensive of these institutions was Flagship with a total annual cost of nearly \$20,000, and the least expensive was Regional with a total annual cost of \$14,500. Assuming a traditional timeline of four-years to complete a baccalaureate degree, which is feasible given the number of college credits these students possess already, a Flagship degree costs at least \$80,000 and a Regional degree casts \$58,000. That these three students chose the least expensive school indicates that cost, and reducing it as much as possible, was a factor in their ultimate college choice. Further, both Lydia and Kyle had expressed a long-seated desire to attend Flagship, but they ended up at Regional, where they are going to college almost cost free because of scholarships. It seems likely that the only factor powerful enough to change Lydia and Kyle's minds on college choice was the proverbial bottom line of the dollar amount of attending each school.

On the other hand, Katherine's list of potential institutions came down to three private colleges. Even though Katherine's family income was the most limited of the four case students, she focused on these typically more expensive schools, in part, because they offered the only opportunity for her to continue to play sports. Thus, from the beginning, Katherine's college search was not dictated solely by concerns of cost. The total annual cost at Katherine's three college choices ranged from \$20,000 to \$33,000 per year. Her eventual institution, Private University, was in the middle, with a total annual cost of \$28,000. A year of school at any one of Katherine's chosen colleges costs more than her family's annual income. Even so, she still needed work study, federal and state

grants, and federally subsidized student loans on top of her merit scholarships to pay for college. It is quite possible that Katherine and her family realized that the price of almost any college was exorbitant given their limited resources, so rather than focus mainly on cost, they considered multiple factors when choosing a college.

**Other costs.** None of the four students mentioned foregone earnings as a cost of attending college. Lydia, Katherine, Kyle and Sara may not have considered opportunity costs because of their stated long-held intention to enter college after high school.

Relatedly, by the time they began seriously making college plans all students aspired to specific careers that required advanced degrees. They did not want full time employment immediately following high school because the jobs they wanted to do required more education.

The lack of consideration of opportunity costs may also be due to the relatively high unemployment rate in rural Appalachian Kentucky. Research has shown that students are more likely to enroll in college when the unemployment rate increases (Perna, 2010). High rates of unemployment make entering the work force a less viable alternative than higher education. Unemployment is an enduring problem in rural, Appalachian Kentucky. The region's economy relies on declining and low-wage industries such as natural resource extraction, agriculture, manufacturing, and service sector opportunities (ARC, 2013). Recent estimates of unemployment in Appalachian Kentucky range from 10% to 12%, above the national average of 9% (ARC, 2013; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). In 2012 in Fairbanks County, the unemployment rate was 11% (ARC, 2013). So on top of their desire to go to school rather than work, these four students may have realized there was no work to be had if they did not go to college.

The final and most intangible cost that students seemed to consider in their college choice process was the cost of leaving their hometown. While all students naturally experience some trepidation about leaving family and friends behind as they head off to college, these four students seemed quite concerned about changing their immediate physical context. Research in college choice for Latino students has found that these students typically enroll in colleges that they consider close or easily accessible to their homes (Desmond & Lopez Turley, 2009; McDonough, 1997). McDonough (1997) also found that students defined HEIs as close or accessible depending on their SES. Lower-SES students thought in terms of ground transportation and commuting, while higher-SES students considered air or rail travel acceptable (McDonough, 1997). Further, researchers in rural education have documented a strong “sense of place” (Howley, et al., 1996, p. 2), or deep appreciation for one’s community, among rural students (Brooke, 2003; Howley et al., 1996; Sobel, 2004). In this regard, place is more than just the immediate physical or sociocultural context. For individuals from Appalachia, place, as Howley and colleagues (1996) describe it, is an ingrained part of an individual’s habitus.

For Lydia, Katherine, Kyle and Sara, the proximity of their chosen institution to their hometown was about more than easy access to laundry—it was about their sense of place. All four students enrolled in institutions within an hour’s drive from Fairbanks County. None of the students even applied to a college more than two hours away from home. Research indicates that rural students feel very connected to the communities in which they live (Beaver, 1986; Schonert-Reichl, Elliott, & Bills, 1993). Further, rural students face a tension between this connection to community and the expanded educational and employment opportunities that are almost always found outside their

communities (Howley et al., 1996). In Fairbanks County, very few students ever really go away to college. The majority of college-bound students stay in state and a large proportion of these students end up at Regional. Upon college graduation, many Fairbanks students choose to live in Seaver, the small city where Regional is located.

Choosing to attend Regional University is not necessarily a predictor of living in or near Fairbanks County for the rest of one's life. However, going to college so close to home seems to suggest a comfort that is likely to continue. For example, Sara, who specifically mentioned her desire to stay close to home, opted to rent an apartment in Seaver rather than live in the dorms, and planned to continue working her part-time waitressing job in Juniper. Sara also considers herself financially independent of her parents. In short, Sara began her adult life as soon as she graduated from high school. And, she began it 20 miles from her parents' house where she could maintain some of her sense of place while also pursuing her educational aspirations.

Lydia and Kyle seemed to operate with the expectation of staying close to home, although in a less literal sense. Both of these students have a significant other who also chose to attend Regional University. For Lydia and Kyle, dating someone from home is another way to maintain a sense of place—it is a tie to where they come from. It is also entirely possible that Lydia and Kyle believe they will marry their current significant other. Kyle's parents were high school sweethearts who married their senior year of high school when they learned they were pregnant with Kyle. Given this fact, it seems possible that part of Kyle's habitus is an understanding that it is acceptable or common to marry the first person you date. Further, the Vandivers' situation is not at all uncommon in rural

Appalachian Kentucky, which may strengthen Kyle's views and help explain why Lydia thinks she will marry Walt.

Lydia, Kyle, and Sara sought to minimize the expected cost of leaving home, and all the people tied to home, by choosing to attend an institution very close to home. They wanted to maintain their sense of place as rural Appalachians native to Fairbanks County. Katherine's experience was somewhat different. She went to an institution just over an hour away from Fairbanks without a car. She also did not express a desire to stay close to home upon college graduation. However, it is important to note that Katherine spent the first 11 years of her life in a major city north of Appalachian Kentucky. It is quite possible that she had yet to develop a sense of place tied to Fairbanks County.

### **Role of Context**

As seen above, contextual factors shaped Lydia, Katherine, Kyle and Sara's views about college generally and about specific institutions of higher education. The students' individual habitus, access to school and community resources, location relative to HEIs, and broader sociocultural environment impacted their entire college choice process, from the number and type of colleges they visited and applied to, to the way they selected one institution. If one examined the experience of these four academically gifted students devoid of their Fairbanks County milieu, one might be surprised that three of the four students chose the same nearby, four-year regional public university. However, when one considers the programs and practices of Regional University and Fairbanks High as well as the economic and cultural context of Appalachian Kentucky, this finding is less surprising. Given the particular context in which these college-bound rural students operated, it is more surprising that one of the case students, especially the lowest income



student, enrolled in a private liberal arts college that is twice as expensive as Regional University. In short, the context of Fairbanks County and the various supports and barriers therein constrained the college choice process for these four rural students.

For the most part, Lydia, Katherine, Kyle and Sara shared the three outermost contextual layers in Perna's (2010) model. They were planning for and selecting a college during a national economic downturn in a region with low levels of educational attainment and high unemployment and poverty. They lived in an area with multiple colleges and universities, both public and private, within an hour's drive. Their state offered financial incentives to attend in-state HEIs. They took college courses taught by professors from one institution while still in high school. They attended a school with a guidance counselor devoted entirely to the senior class who spent considerable time and energy sharing college information with students and parents and helping students through their college choice process. Taken together, these contextual factors encouraged the four case students to attend college, but also constrained their range of college options.

For example, all four case students cited their parents as sources of general encouragement to further their education; however, only Katherine's parents were meaningfully involved in their child's specific college choice process. The overall lack of parental experience with higher education meant that these four students were largely left to their own devices to select potential institutions, apply to schools, and make an enrollment decision. This task is monumental for even the most intelligent and conscientious of students, even with parental support and guidance, so it is not surprising that Lydia, Kyle and Sara only applied to one or two institutions. Because their parents

were unable to help them make college decisions, these three students self-constrained their range of college options to a manageable number of institutions. Katherine's range of options was expanded to seven institutions because her athletic ability garnered attention and direct contact from multiple schools. Katherine and her family also reciprocated this attention by visiting institutions and talking with coaches. Together, these factors explain why Katherine's range of options was less limited than that of her peers despite her family's low income and her parents' low level of educational attainment.

Lydia, Kyle and Sara considered only in-state institutions, and Katherine considered mostly in-state institutions, in part, because of the financial incentives offered to attend college in Kentucky. Nationally, in-state tuition is less than out-of-state tuition, which encourages many students to select local institutions. Sara reported that she only considered in-state schools because of her desire to limit college costs. Lydia reported only considering schools that she believed would offer her full tuition scholarships, and all these schools were in Kentucky. Further, these four students had automatically accrued KEES Scholarship money during high school, so choosing an institution outside of Kentucky would mean forfeiting an existing scholarship of \$2,500 per year for four years of college.

The guidance counselor focused on helping students reduce costs as well, when she explicitly advised Lydia and Sara to accept Regional's admission offer because of the scholarship it guaranteed. Taking her advice, both Lydia and Sara prematurely ended their college application process. Sara only applied to Regional University. Lydia applied to Regional and one other public university in Kentucky. Thus, even though the guidance

counselor did help these students enter college, she did so in such a way as to constrain the range of options the students considered in their college choice process.

The dual enrollment program at FCHS also served to constrain the students' college choice process by prioritizing Regional University. Because students at FCHS received college credit through Regional and not from a neutral organization like the College Board, which oversees the Advanced Placement program, they were primed to continue their college education with Regional. All four students described their comfort with Regional professors and a confidence in their academic abilities that came from their experience in dual enrollment classes. Further, because most of their senior year classes were dual enrollment classes, the students may have already thought of themselves as Regional students. Dr. Taraki described how frequently she reminded FCHS students that they were capable of college level work because their English class with her was the same as the English class she taught on campus to all students. In Lydia's case, her relationship with Dr. Taraki that developed over three dual enrollment classes strongly influenced her decision to apply to and enroll at Regional University. Thus, students at FCHS may have approached their college choice process heavily favoring Regional University because of their previous experiences in the dual enrollment classes.

Other school factors influenced Lydia, Kyle and Sara's preference for Regional as well. Regional is the first institution FCHS students visit and the institution they visit the most times. It is the institution most attended by their parents, relatives and peers, and the closest institution to their homes. Regional is also the first institution to send admissions representatives to FCHS in the fall semester. When they come to the school, they waive the application fee for any student who completes the application that day; many

students, including Lydia, Kyle and Sara, take them up on the offer. Thus, various contextual factors, many at the school level, constrain students' range of college choice options.

### **Student Agency**

Still, given their context and its constraints, students still made rational college choices, and, as such, were active agents in their college choice process. All students expressed ambitious life and career aspirations that were dependent on advanced degrees. They each viewed college as a means to an end and sought to achieve that end. Lydia, Katherine, Kyle and Sara also displayed initiative when they sought out college counseling from Mrs. Olin and other adults, especially when this counseling was in lieu of parental guidance. All four students reported visiting Mrs. Olin's office multiple times, sometimes everyday, during the college application season. Lydia and Sara also cited Dr. Taraki as a source of guidance during their college choice process. These capable students recognized when they needed help, and they knew where to find it. Finally, these students showed agency in their responsiveness to the incentive system of the KEES scholarship. Not only did they work through high school to earn as much KEES money as possible, but they also elected to attend institutions that would accept this scholarship.

### **Nuances in the Model**

While understanding the context in which Lydia, Katherine, Kyle and Sara made their college choice decisions helps explain their enrollment decisions, the model does not capture some nuances in their college choice processes. For one, the students cited some influences that were absent from the model. Further, the students were heavily

influenced by at least one central figure rather than by a number of disparate factors, as the model suggests.

One influence missing from Perna's (2006; 2010) model was the role of non-academic demands for higher education. Katherine's athletic ability seemed to complement her academic ability, which increased her demand for higher education, and allowed her to expand her list of potential institutions during her college search. She was then able to consider multiple financial aid offers and institutional factors to decide on an institution. Given Katherine's low socioeconomic status, a situation that almost guarantees limited opportunities for higher education, this expansion is noteworthy.

For Lydia, a high achieving and well-to-do student with a college-educated parent, the lack of parental involvement in her college choice process is quite unusual given the research in college access. Lydia's parents were content to trust Lydia and her guidance counselor to handle almost all of Lydia's college choice decisions. It is not unusual that Lydia's teacher and guidance counselor were sources of college information, but it is unusual that these women seemed to be her only sources. It is also unclear why these women were acting in lieu of Lydia's college-educated mother, and if Lydia sought these sources out because her mother was unable to help her or if she just took advantage of an existing structure.

What is perhaps most interesting is that the Nelsons were not surprised that Lydia was able to enroll in an Honors Program at a college nearly free of charge without their assistance. Like the Smiths and the Isaacs, they were comfortable letting their daughter and her guidance counselor make the college choice decisions. All three sets of parents stated that most aspects of the college decision-making process (applying to colleges,

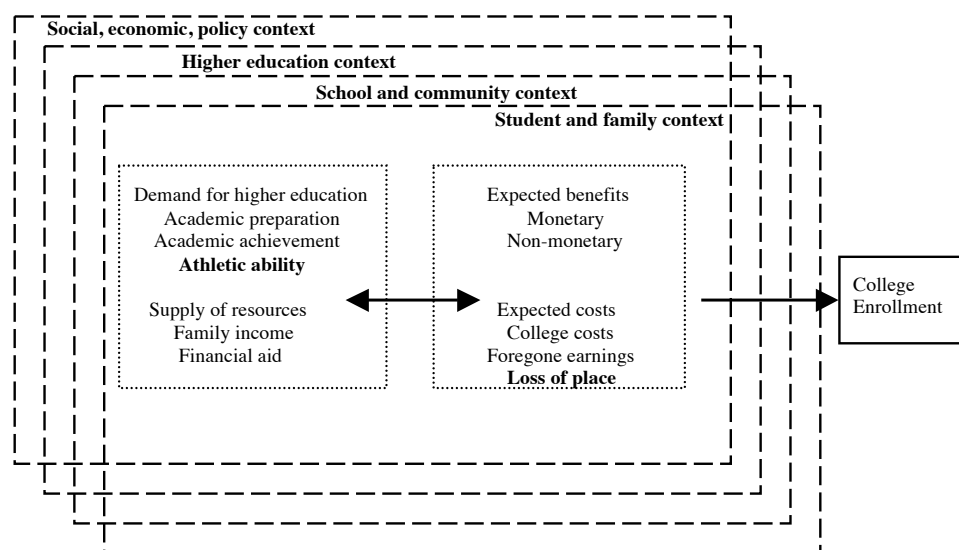
applying for scholarships, submitting admission materials) were done at school, with little to no input from themselves. According to Kyle, the Vandivers were also disengaged from his college choice process. He relied on the guidance counselor's advice about reputable nursing programs. He only applied to the Honors Program at Regional University at the insistence of his girlfriend, who also applied there. For these four students, parental engagement in the college choice process, which Perna's (2010) and other models assume, was virtually non-existent.

At least two influences were apparent for Lydia, Katherine, Kyle and Sara, but absent from the model. The first is a sense of place or connection to their home as part of a student's individual and family context, or *habitus*. As aforementioned, many rural students and individuals from Appalachia feel a deep connection to their community. This sense of place, and the potential loss of that sense, can keep rural students close to home when they think about higher education. This inclination is strengthened by policies like the KEES program that provide incentives for attending in-state institutions.

Another nuance between these students' experiences and Perna's (2010) model is the role of a strong individual figure in directing their college choice. As discussed above, Mrs. Olin was extremely involved in the students' college choice process. She told Kyle to apply to Regional and he did. She told Sara to accept early admission and the scholarship from Regional and she did. She personally mailed Lydia's Honors application and continued to search for scholarships for Katherine until the day she moved into college. Similarly, Dr. Taraki was a driving force behind Lydia's decision to apply to Regional and its Honors program. Lydia was unaware of the program until Dr. Taraki told her about it. Although teachers and guidance counselors are included in the school

context level of Perna’s (2006; 2010) model as sources of social and cultural capital, they are not characterized as primary influences in the college choice process. Yet, for these four students, these women were not simply a passing contextual influence. They played a central role in all four students’ college choice process. Mrs. Olin and Dr. Taraki either took the place of or outweighed other influential individuals and factors at some point in each student’s college choice process. Thus, it is unclear how to reconcile the four students’ experience with one overwhelmingly influential individual with Perna’s (2010) model of a college choice decision that is shaped by a number of disparate factors.

Overall, Perna’s (2010) model of college choice did prove a valuable analytic tool for understanding many of the influential factors in these four students’ college decisions. The model also accurately accounted for the role of context in students’ thinking about college. However, the model did not completely align with the experience of these rural students from Appalachian Kentucky. Below, I have revised the model (Perna, 2010) to highlight the aforementioned nuances and to indicate more fluid boundaries between the contextual layers and a more iterative decision making process.



**Figure 3: Revised nested process model of college choice**

## **Chapter 7: Implications and Conclusion**

In this study, I have tried to characterize the college choice process of four rural students from Appalachian Kentucky. I have analyzed these students' experiences through the lens of Perna's (2010) theoretical model of college choice as a nested process. My work has shown that, for these four students, the high school and school personnel were as influential as students' families and individual resources in shaping their college enrollment decisions. Thus, there are implications for theory and research in college access and choice. Because of the school's involvement in individual students' college choice, there are also some tentative implications for policy and practice at this level that future research will need to confirm.

### **Implications for Theory and Research**

In terms of theory and research, this study has shown that, for the most part, the experience of these four students aligns with Perna's (2010) model and the college choice literature. The students' college choice processes were shaped by contextual factors unique to Fairbanks County High School and rural, Appalachian Kentucky, as well as expected factors such as cost and financial aid. However, the model does not fit completely. The school's substantial role in these students' college choice process and the parents' relative comfort with this arrangement is not adequately reflected. Further, the various constraints that Lydia, Katherine, Kyle and Sara experienced as a result of their context indicate that not all college-bound students face the same range of college choice options. For students in under-resourced areas, the "choice" in college choice may mean something completely different than it does for students from more affluent areas. Thus, future college choice research should use the nested process model (Perna, 2010)



and take students' unique sociocultural contexts into account, so researchers can more fully understand the various influences on students' decision-making processes.

There is also something bittersweet about academically accomplished students defaulting their college enrollment choice to the nearby, familiar public university, even if they earn their degree without much debt. It is tempting to wonder how these students' college choice experiences would have differed had they grown up in another location. Would they have enrolled at more selective, prestigious institutions? It is impossible to say. However, research can ponder if students like Lydia, Katherine, Kyle and Sara should be encouraged to attend more selective institutions. And, if so, what conditions would encourage rural students to select more selective, prestigious institutions? What are the costs and benefits for students and institutions alike if students from under-resourced areas like rural, Appalachian Kentucky enroll in prestigious schools? Would these students be successful at selective, prestigious institutions further from their homes, or would the cultural adjustment be too much?

If sending academically able yet underserved students to prestigious, selective schools is a less pressing goal, then surely we must wonder how to broaden these students' range of college choice options. Is there an aspect of context that could be changed to help students make more informed college choices? Would changing the context in which these students, their families and their educators operated increase college access for all students, or only some students?

Perhaps these questions are unfair. Given their unique position in the world, the participants in this study seemed to be doing the best they could with what they had. In Fairbanks County and rural Appalachian Kentucky, Katherine, Lydia, Kyle, and Sara are

success stories. They are in college and facing bright futures. Their teachers and guidance counselor helped get them there when their parents could not. While there may be ways to improve the college choice process for students like these four, it is important to remember that even getting into college lies beyond the reach of many in rural Appalachian Kentucky.

As for my own future research, I would like to conduct a comparative study of college bound students from rural, urban and suburban areas, within Kentucky but also across the entire nation, to get an even better sense of the role of context in students' college choice decisions. I could also include other and more influential individuals such as peers and significant others, college representatives, and teachers in future studies. Finally, future research would need to follow students through the college choice process rather than to examine their process retrospectively. Research designed this way could more accurately describe the actual events of a college choice process, and expose how students' perceptions of events may differ from the realities of the situation.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

If the goal is to increase educational attainment levels in rural, Appalachian Kentucky, getting students into college should be celebrated as a positive first step. Thus, it is gratifying to know that the majority of students at Fairbanks County High School are going to college despite the obstacles that exist for them in Appalachian Kentucky. It is also admirable that all four case students, regardless of their family income background, are in college.

In places where a large portion of adults lack experience with higher education, parents may be unable to and/or lack the confidence to offer the necessary support in

helping their children search for and select a college. Students without a college support system at home would reasonably turn to more experienced others at their schools to fill this void. While FCHS should be commended for the work they do filling the college information gap for the families they serve, the study revealed oddities in the way the guidance counselor and teachers helped students. Rather than instruct students in how to choose a college from a pool of potential institutions, Mrs. Olin and Dr. Taraki essentially told students where to apply and what admissions and financial aid offers to accept. These women, though well intentioned, seemed to push students toward Regional, which may or may not have been the best institution for all the students. Policymakers and practitioners can respond to these circumstances in multiple ways. Because I sought only analytic generalizations, the following implications for policy and practice are tentative in nature.

First, we could better equip inexperienced parents and students to navigate the college choice process. Over the past few decades, many organizations have created public awareness campaigns and materials to help families think about higher education (*cf.* College Board, Lumina Foundation, National Association for College Admission Counseling). In Kentucky, an entire governmental agency, the Kentucky Higher Education Assistance Authority (KHEAA), is devoted to “expanding educational opportunities by providing financial and informational resources that enable Kentuckians to attain their higher education goals” (KHEAA, 2013). Increasing these campaigns through various media could help families better prepare for and operate during a college choice process. However, as the parents in this study demonstrated, the information resources are either unknown to or unused by many. It was as if they did not know how

to be involved, or believed it was not their responsibility to be involved. One reason may be that parents with low levels of educational attainment incorrectly assume they have no valuable knowledge or insight to bring to the process, so they defer to counselors or teachers, or rely on these individuals' expertise just as their children do. Parents in rural Appalachian Kentucky also hold school personnel in high regard generally, so they may believe that these individuals are the best sources of help for something as important as their child's college decision.

Thus, another approach could be to buttress the work of school personnel who help students think about higher education. The FCHS guidance counselor was able to work with so many students individually because her duties were restricted to the senior class, while her counterpart counseled the three other grades. McDonough (1997) has long suggested reducing the student to counselor ratio in public schools to increase equitable access to higher education. In rural, Appalachian Kentucky, increasing the number of public school guidance counselors is even more crucial because the area lacks private college counselors who are more prevalent in other parts of the country. However, rural districts also lack education budgets that can support hiring more personnel, so another option may be to train existing teachers or staff to work with students and families around college choice.

Another task for practitioners and policy makers may be to examine how guidance counselors are trained to advise students about college choice, and if this preparation is adequate. For example, are counselors prepared to help students research and compare institutions on key aspects such as four-year graduation rates, costs of attending over four years, and other such statistics? If counselors are left to learn how to

counsel students during the college choice process on the job, what is to stop them from steering students to certain institutions based on their own impressions or outdated information? If guidance counselor professional development is inadequate, improving this training may be a first step before hiring more counselors.

Finally, we can strengthen federal outreach programs like GEAR UP to support students and families during the college choice process. These programs could serve as a link between schools and families, and help parents to process and use the valuable information provided by counselors and other sources. While all four case students were part of the GEAR UP cohort at FCHS, only two of them mentioned it when recalling their college choice process and only one cited it as influential. Recently, however, the effectiveness of federal outreach programs like GEAR UP and TRIO in helping disadvantaged students reach college has been called into question (Haskins and Rouse, 2013), so these programs should be evaluated more fully before policymakers and practitioners rely on them to help students.

Institutions of higher education should be aware of the influence of proximity on students' college choice. By being the first and most frequently visited college of these four case students, Regional made quite an impression in their minds. Any other HEI hoping to lure these students to their door would have needed to counteract years of casual encounters as well as targeted marketing from Regional.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study revealed that these four students from rural Appalachian Kentucky faced various supports and barriers on the path to higher education. In the face of limited parental involvement, these students were able to rely on their determined

guidance counselor and teachers, as well as themselves, to complete their college choice processes. Their enrollment decisions reflect the unique context of Fairbanks County as much as they reflect the influence of well-documented college access and choice factors such as financial aid and academic ability.

After reading the experiences of Lydia, Katherine, Kyle and Sara, one could argue that a student's college choice process begins when his or her parents decide where to live. After all, this location will depend on and contribute to the family's supply of resources, and will provide access to certain schools, cultural knowledge and values, and other barriers or supports to students' educational achievement. All these things will impact students' perceptions and actions regarding college when the time finally comes to submit applications. Because context is so influential to students' educational futures, parents, educators, researchers, and policymakers should work to enhance all students' access to contexts that support higher education.

**Appendix A: Questionnaire**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone (if no email): \_\_\_\_\_

1. Are you going to college in the fall of 2012? \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

If yes, what college/university will you be attending?

\_\_\_\_\_

2. How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_ Years

3. What is your gender? \_\_\_\_\_

4. Ethnicity \_\_\_\_\_ Caucasian/White  
\_\_\_\_\_ African American/Black  
\_\_\_\_\_ Native American  
\_\_\_\_\_ Hispanic/Latino/a  
\_\_\_\_\_ Asian/Pacific Islander  
\_\_\_\_\_ Multiracial

(describe): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Other (describe): \_\_\_\_\_

5. With how many parents/guardians do you live? \_\_\_\_\_ Two (mother and father)

\_\_\_\_\_ One (either mother or father)

\_\_\_\_\_ None

6. Your parents are: \_\_\_\_\_ Married  
\_\_\_\_\_ Divorced  
\_\_\_\_\_ Separated  
\_\_\_\_\_ Never married  
\_\_\_\_\_ One or both deceased  
\_\_\_\_\_ Other (describe): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

7. How many brothers and sisters do you have? \_\_\_\_\_

What are their ages? \_\_\_\_\_

8. How long have you lived in Kentucky? \_\_\_\_\_ Years and \_\_\_\_\_ Months

9. Where did your parents grow up?

Mother

\_\_\_\_\_

—

Father

\_\_\_\_\_

—

10. Father's occupation

\_\_\_\_\_

—

11. Mother's occupation

\_\_\_\_\_

—

12. What is the highest education level achieved by each parent or legal guardian?

Mother	_____	Did not graduate high school or earn GED
(Female guardian)	_____	Obtained GED, did not graduate high school
	_____	Graduated high school
	_____	Technical/Vocational training
	_____	Some college, but did not earn a degree
	_____	Earned Associate's (2-year) degree
	_____	Earned Bachelor's degree
	_____	Earned Master's degree
	_____	Earned Doctorate degree (M.D., Ph.D., lawyer.)

Father	_____	Did not graduate high school or earn GED
(Male guardian)	_____	Obtained GED, did not graduate high school
	_____	Graduated high school
	_____	Technical/Vocational training
	_____	Some college, but did not earn a degree
	_____	Earned Associate's (2-year) degree
	_____	Earned Bachelor's degree
	_____	Earned Master's degree
	_____	Earned Doctorate degree (M.D., Ph.D., lawyer)

13. How many live in your family home? \_\_\_\_\_

14. Compared to other families in the county, do you feel your family income is less, more, or about the same? \_\_\_\_\_ Less \_\_\_\_\_ More \_\_\_\_\_ Same



15. Compared to other students in your class who are also going to college do you feel your family income is less, more, or about the same? \_\_\_\_\_ Less  
 \_\_\_\_\_ More \_\_\_\_\_ Same
16. How would you classify your family?  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Working class \_\_\_\_\_ Middle class \_\_\_\_\_ Upper Class
17. Number of brothers and sisters who are attending or have attended college:  
 \_\_\_\_\_
18. Do you have any extended family members that are attending or have attended college? (If yes, check the appropriate blanks.)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Grandparents  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Aunts  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Uncles  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Cousins  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Other (describe): \_\_\_\_\_
19. What was your grade point average when you graduated from high school?  
 \_\_\_\_\_
20. What was your score on the ACT? \_\_\_\_\_
21. Compared to most students going to college, how prepared do you feel for college academics?  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Well prepared \_\_\_\_\_ Somewhat prepared \_\_\_\_\_ Not well prepared
22. What high school curriculum did you follow? \_\_\_\_\_ College preparatory  
 \_\_\_\_\_ General  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Vocational  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_
23. How are you paying for college? (Mark all that apply.)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Scholarships  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Grants  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Student Loans  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Parent Loans  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Parents  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Military  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Work during college  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Savings from work during high school or summer  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Other (describe) \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Do not know

24. Check any problems or difficulties you have faced in deciding whether or not to go to college, or which college to attend:

lack of information regarding college and other educational programs  
 cannot afford it  
 no friends planning to go to college  
 live too far from a college  
 lack of parent encouragement  
 lack of financial aid information  
 worried about fitting in  
 not smart enough  
 do not like school  
 other (specify: \_\_\_\_\_)

25. How certain are you that you will go to college in the fall of 2012?  
 Very certain     Somewhat certain     Uncertain

26. Are there any special issues in your family that might make it difficult for you to go to college? If so, please describe those below.

\_\_\_\_\_

—

27. How strongly do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

	<b>1</b> <b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>2</b> <b>Disagree</b>	<b>3</b> <b>Neither agree or disagree</b>	<b>4</b> <b>Agree</b>	<b>5</b> <b>Strongly agree</b>
a. I always knew I would go to college.				1 2 3 4 5	
b. I considered not going to college after high school				1 2 3 4 5	
c. I feel emotionally prepared for college.				1 2 3 4 5	
d. I am scared to go to college.				1 2 3 4 5	

28. Do you have any fears about going to college? If so, please describe those below:

\_\_\_\_\_

—

29. Would you be willing to be interviewed for this study? \_\_\_\_\_ Yes

\_\_\_\_\_ No

30. Would your parent(s)/guardian(s) be willing to be interviewed for this study?

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

31. When do you leave for college? \_\_\_\_\_

32. Are there any dates in July and August that you and your family will **NOT** be available for an interview? If so, please list all of those dates below.

---

---

## Appendix B: Questionnaire Email

Dear Student,

Congratulations on your recent high school graduation and your decision to go to college! Those are some important accomplishments. I grew up in Kentucky and was the first member of my family to go to college. Because of this, I am extremely interested in learning how students from Kentucky decide to go to college. I have created a questionnaire to help me understand how students think about going to college. The questionnaire can be found by clicking on this link:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/viewform?formkey=dEgyZTF5UGtPRUdDc3pSbzVmNnNoSGc6MQ>

You have been asked to fill out this questionnaire because I want to know about the decisions you have made about college. This questionnaire asks about your decision to go to college and your background. Please be as honest as possible when filling out the survey. Your responses will be confidential. No one other than myself will be able to link your name with your questionnaire. It should take about 30 minutes to fill it out. Filling out the questionnaire will not hurt you in any way. Some students may feel uneasy letting a researcher know about their personal life, thoughts, and attitudes. You are not required to complete the questionnaire, and you may stop filling it out at any time without consequence. If you do complete the survey, you will be entered into a drawing for a \$100 Walmart gift card. The first item on the questionnaire asks you to give your consent to participate, or, if you are under 18 years of age, your parents must give their consent for you to participate.

If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at [krislharris@gmail.com](mailto:krislharris@gmail.com) or 606-682-4819.

Thank you,  
Kristen Harris

**Appendix C: Data Spreadsheet Template**

<b>ID Number</b>	<b>College Plans</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Free and Reduced Meals</b>	<b>GPA</b>	<b>ACT</b>

For College Plans:  
1=4 Year Institution, 2=2 Year Institution, 3=Work, 4=Military, 5=Trade School,  
6=None

For Gender:  
1=Female, 2=Male

For Ethnicity  
1=White, Non-Hispanic, 2=African American, 3=Hispanic, 4=Asian, 5=Other

For Free and Reduced Meals  
1=Yes, 2=No

For GPA, record 2 decimal points.

For ACT, record composite score.

## Appendix D: Case Student Interview Protocol

1. Introductions
2. Review of Consent/Permission to audio record
3. Ice breaker
4. So you've decided to go to Name of College. Tell me how that came about.
  - a. Probes for this section:
    - i. Help me understand the order of events you're talking about.
    - ii. Can you give me an example of that?
    - iii. How did that come about?
    - iv. What was significant about that for you?
5. Why did you want to go to college?
6. When did you decide to go to college?
7. Who influenced your decision to go to college?
8. When did you decide to go to Name of College?
9. Where do you want to be in four or five years?
10. Probing questions for specific influences:
  - i. Probing questions for individual influences:
    1. Do you know what you will major in at college?
    2. What do you want to do for a living?
    3. Where do you want to live as an adult?
  - ii. Probing questions for parental influences:
    1. Did your parents encourage or discourage you from going to college? From going to a certain college?
    2. Why did your parents want/not want you to go to college?
    3. Did your parents go to college?
  - iii. Probing questions for school and peer influences:
    1. Tell me about your high school.
    2. Do you feel academically prepared to go to college?
    3. How do your friends feel about college?
    4. Are any of your friends going to college?
    5. What do your friends think about the fact that you are going to college?
    6. Did anyone at school tell you about college or things related to college (i.e., applying, financial aid, etc.)?
    7. Did your guidance counselor work with you to help you think about college? If so, how?
  - iv. Probing questions for college influences:
    1. How did you learn about specific colleges?
    2. Have you been on any college tours?
    3. Did colleges send you information through the mail?
    4. Talk to me about applying to college. Were the applications difficult?
    5. What made you choose those colleges? What were you looking for in a college?

6. How did financial aid offers impact your decision to go to college or to go to a particular college?
  - a. Had you thought about the cost of college before you applied to colleges?
  - b. If not, were you surprised by the cost of the colleges you applied to?
  - c. Did you and your parents talk about the cost of college before your applied? After you applied?
7. Why did you choose Name of College?
8. What aspects of college are you looking forward to? What are you nervous about?
11. Are there any factors that were essential for you in making this choice, that without it you wouldn't have decided to go?
12. Is there anything else that was important to you in making your college decision that I haven't asked about?
13. If I realized I missed something, can I call you to talk about that?

## Appendix E: Parent Interview Protocol

1. Introductions
2. Review of Consent/Permission to audio record
3. Congratulate parents on child acceptance into college
4. So Student's Name has decided to go to college at Name of College. Tell me how that all happened, from your point of view.
5. How do you feel about that decision?
6. What was your role in your child's decision to attend Name of College?
7. Who do you think most influenced your child's decision to go college?
8. What, if anything, made it difficult to help your child make the decision?
9. Probing questions for specific influences:
  - i. Probing questions for parental influences:
    1. Did you encourage or discourage your child from going to college? From going to a certain college?
  - ii. Probing questions for school and peer influences:
    1. Do you feel your child is academically prepared to go to college?
    2. Are any of your child's friends going to college?
    3. Did anyone at school tell you or your child about college or things related to college (i.e., applying, financial aid, etc.)?
    4. Did you ever interact with a guidance counselor?
  - iii. Probing questions for college influences:
    1. How did your child learn about specific colleges?
    2. Have you been on any college tours?
    3. Did colleges send your child information through the mail?
    4. Did your child talk to you about their applications for college?
10. How are you and your child financing his/her college education?
11. How did you learn about financial aid for college?
12. Probing questions for financial aids:
  - a. Did you complete a FAFSA? What was that experience like for you and/or your child?
  - b. How did financial aid offers impact your child's decision to go to college or to go to a particular college?
  - c. Had your family thought about the cost of college before your child applied to colleges?
  - d. If not, were you surprised by the cost of the college?
13. Is there anything else that was important to you in your child's college decision that I haven't asked about?
14. If I realized I missed something, can I call you to talk about that?



## Appendix F: Guidance Counselor Interview Protocol

### Initial Contact:

1. Introduction and overview of study.
2. Ask for guidance counselor's help in sending questionnaire to recent graduates who have decided to go to college in the fall.
3. Ask about using the school as the meeting location for college-going recent graduates.

### Guidance Counselor Interview:


1. Greeting
2. Review of Consent/Permission to Audio Record
3. What do students from this school do after graduating? Do most go to college? Enter the workforce?
4. What are the biggest obstacles these students face in getting to college?
5. In your opinion, what is the school's attitude toward sending students to college? The district's?
6. Is part of your role to help students go to college? If so, what do you do that helps students go to college?
7. At what point in high school do most students express to you an interest in going to college?
8. Do you have a timeline of activities or meetings that you offer as support? Individual or group?
9. Do you think it's important for someone to earn a college degree? Why or why not?
10. Typically, how does a student in this district decide whether to go to college?
  - a. How old are students when they first begin thinking about college?
  - b. How old are students when the schools or counselors begin to share information about college?
  - c. Does the district have a grade-level plan for discussing college with students?
  - d. Does the school?
  - e. What is your role in helping students decide whether or not to go to college?
  - f. What is your role in helping students prepare for college?
  - g. What is your role in helping students apply to college?
  - h. What is your role in helping students decide which college to attend?
  - i. How do you interact with parents regarding college information and decisions?
  - j. How much of your role is determined by the district, the school, yourself?
11. Questions about sharing information with students and parents
  - a. Do you give presentations or hold any events through the year related to college?
  - b. Who is the audience for these presentations?
  - c. Are they open to all? To certain grades?

- d. How do students find out about these events?
  - e. Can you walk me through those presentations?
  - f. Are there other ways you share information with students and parents about college? What are those ways? Can you show me?
  - g. How do you counsel freshmen with college aspirations? What about sophomores? Juniors? Seniors?
  - h. Are there outside organizations that help you counsel students about college? If so, can you list those for me?
  - i. When is your next college counseling session, either individual or group? May I come observe that session?
12. What other offices, departments, or individuals in the school help you counsel students about college?
13. Can I get your background information?
- a. What are your qualifications and degrees?
  - b. How many years have you been counseling?
  - c. How many years have you been counseling at this school?
  - d. Where are you originally from? If not from Kentucky, how long have you lived here?
14. Questions about individual students' college choice process (if confidentiality allows).
- a. I'm not sure if you are able to share some of the following information with me, so if any questions violate student-counselor confidentiality, please let me know and we'll talk about something else.
    - i. Did you counsel Name of Student about college?
    - ii. Was your counseling session(s) typical of what you described earlier?
    - iii. Did you interact with students' parents?
    - iv. What do you think influenced this student's decision to go to college? To the particular college he/she selected?
  - b. If counselor cannot share specific details, I will ask the topics in a general way.
    - i. How often do you interact with parents about college counseling?
    - ii. What influences most students' decisions to go to college?
15. Is there anything else that is important about college counseling at this school that I haven't asked you about?

## **Appendix G: Influential Individual Interview Protocol**

1. Introductions
2. Review of Consent/Permission to audio record
3. So Student's Name has decided to go to college at Name of College. Tell me how that all happened, from your point of view.
4. What do you think your role is in helping a student (or friend, or employee, etc.) get to college? Were you able to do these any of these things?
5. Did you have conversations with Name of Student about college? If so, what did you talk about?
6. Was your interaction with Name of Student typical of your interaction with other students/friends/employees? If yes, how so?
7. Do you agree with Name of Student's decision to go to college? Why or why not?
8. Do you think it is important for someone to earn a college degree? Why or why not?
9. Did you ever have the experience of making the decision to go to college? What influenced your own decision to go or not to go to college?
10. Is there anything else that is important about this student going to college that I haven't asked about?
11. If I realized I missed something, can I call you to talk about that?

## Appendix H: Counseling Materials




If you previously used GoHigherKY.org, you may use your account user name and password to access your information via the federal MyFSA website at [https://studentaid2.ed.gov/xap\\_pack/Default.aspx](https://studentaid2.ed.gov/xap_pack/Default.aspx). With MyFSA, you can create a personal portfolio to store and retrieve your financial aid information, add colleges you are interested in attending, explore careers and much more.

With implementation of new features at [kheaa.com](http://kheaa.com), we hope to provide even better services to Kentuckians. If you have any questions or comments regarding the website, please call our Customer Care staff at 1-800-928-8926 by choosing "0" at the options menu.



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 The contents of this brochure were developed under a grant from the Department of Education. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

THE ENHANCED  
**KHEAA.COM**

## Plan, Prepare, Pay


The enhanced kheaa.com combines the popular functionality of the former GoHigherKY.org with the trusted resources of kheaa.com. The enhanced site provides students, parents and others with the information they need to successfully navigate the career exploration, college preparation and financial aid processes.

### Students and Parents

#### Planning for College

Grade-specific planner timelines in this section help you get ready for college or technical school. You'll find:

- Tools to help you identify and prepare for a career.
- Helpful study tips.
- Information about standardized tests.
- Details on college admissions.



**Selecting a School**  
Kentucky has a full range of options: public universities, private schools, community colleges and trade schools. This section will help you find a school that best suits you. Consider campus life as well as academics in making your decision.

#### Paying for College

Financial aid is the money you receive to cover the cost of your education. Most people are eligible for some form of financial aid. Search for scholarships, learn the real cost of college and get detailed information on financial aid in this section.

### Money Management

Knowing how to manage your finances lets you concentrate on learning and having fun, not being sidetracked by money troubles. Tips in this section will help you become financially literate.

### College Publications and Newsletters

KHEAA publications such as *Getting In* and *Affording Higher Education* have been sources of information for counselors, students and parents for decades. If you want to be in the know all the time, sign up for our online newsletters here.

### Adult Learners

If you're an adult returning to school, find out what you need to know about admissions, financial aid, transfer planning, distance learning and careers in this section.

### Military and Veterans

This section provides information and links to federal and state programs that help our men and women in uniform gain access to higher education during and after their time of service.

### Borrowers

Many people have to take out student loans to help pay for college. This section provides information about what you can do if you're having difficulty repaying your student loans. Use information found here to help educate yourself on how to manage your repayment and maintain a clean financial record.

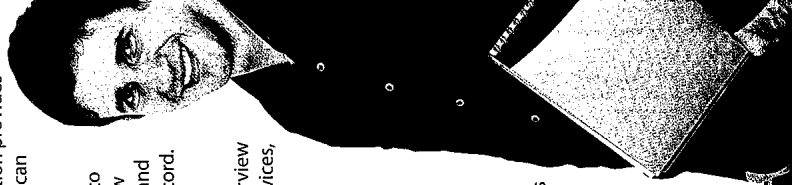
### Financial Aid Providers

This section provides an overview of KHEAA's products and services, training opportunities and materials, newsletters and more for school financial aid personnel.

### Counselors, Community Partners and College Access Providers

Anyone who helps students and parents with college access can use this section as a resource. You'll find:

- An overview of our outreach services.
- Contact information for outreach staff.
- Lesson plans.
- Newsletters and more.



## College planning calendar for seniors

### September

- Narrow your list of colleges to 5 to 10. Meet with a counselor about them and, if you've not yet done so, download college applications and financial aid forms. Plan to visit as many of these colleges as possible.
- Create a master list or calendar that includes:
  - tests you'll take and their fees, dates, and registration deadlines.
  - college application due dates.
  - financial aid application forms required and their deadlines. (Note: Aid applications may be due before college applications.)
  - other materials you'll need (recommendations, transcripts, etc.).
  - your high school's own application processing deadlines.
- If you can't afford application or test fees, a counselor can help you request a fee waiver.
- If you have not had your test scores sent to the college to which you are applying, be sure to contact the College Board or ACT to have your scores sent.

### October

- Try to finalize your college choices.
- Prepare Early Decision, Early Action, or rolling admissions applications as soon as possible.
- Ask for counselor or teacher recommendations if you need them. Give each teacher or counselor an outline of your academic record and your extracurricular activities. For each recommendation, provide a stamped, addressed envelope, and any college forms required.
- If you're submitting essays, write first drafts and ask teachers and others to read them. If you're applying for Early Decision, finish the essays for that application now.
- If you have not had your test scores sent to the college to which you are applying, be sure to contact the College Board or ACT to have them sent.

### November

- November 1–15: For Early Decision admissions, colleges may require test scores and applications between these dates.
- Complete at least one college application by Thanksgiving.
- Counselors send transcripts to colleges. Give counselors the proper forms at least two weeks before colleges require them.

Handout 3D page 1 of 2

College Counseling Sourcebook, 4th Edition. © The College Board. All rights reserved.

## College planning calendar for seniors (page 2)

### December

- As you finish and send your applications and essays, be sure to keep copies.
- If your college wants to see seventh-semester grades, be sure you give the form to your counselor.

### January

- If you apply to colleges online, be sure to have your high school send a transcript—it goes to colleges separately, and by mail.

### February

- No senioritis, please! Accepting colleges do look at second-semester senior grades.

### March

- Keep active in school. If you are wait-listed, the college will want to know what you have accomplished between the time you applied and learned of its decision.

### April

- You should receive acceptance letters and financial aid offers by mid-April. If you've not done so yet, visit your final college before accepting. As soon as you decide, notify your counselor of your choice.
- If you have questions about housing offers, talk to your counselor or call the college.

### May

- May 1: Colleges cannot require a deposit or commitment to attend before May 1. By that postmarked date, you must inform every college of your acceptance or rejection of the offer of admission and/or financial aid. (Questions? Talk to your counselor.)
- Send your deposit to one college only.
- Wait-listed by a college? If you will enroll if accepted, tell the admissions director your intent and ask how to strengthen your application. Need financial aid? Ask whether funds will be available if you're accepted.
- Work with a counselor to resolve any admissions or financial aid problems.

### June

- Ask your high school to send a final transcript to your college.

Source: *The College Board*

Handout 3D page 2 of 2

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# Tough Questions to Ask on Your College Visit

By Making It Count and FastWeb

## About Academics

1. What academic elements are considered in the admissions process, for example: courses, grades, test scores, rank, interests, institutional needs, essays, recommendations, and interviews? How important are each of these factors?
2. Is the college/university accredited?
3. How many students return after their freshman year?
4. What percentage of students graduate in four years or less?
5. Which academic programs on campus are the most popular?
6. Does this college offer the major that interests you?
7. How easy is it to change majors?
8. Will your AP/previous college credits transfer?
9. What are the largest classes you could have as a freshman or sophomore? How many large classes can you expect?
10. Who teaches the freshman classes? Teaching Assistants? Graduate Assistants? Will you get enough contact with and/or attention from them?
11. How easy is it to get the courses you want at the times that are convenient for you?
12. (If this applies to you) Are there any special support services if you are a special needs student (ADD, ADHD, LD, etc.)? How do these support services function and is there any additional cost charged for these services?
13. Is there an Honor Code? How does it operate?
14. Is there an Honors Program for talented students? How do you qualify?
15. What percentage of students successfully apply to graduate school?
16. What kind of career planning services are available?
17. What does the school do to help graduates find jobs?
18. Does the school provide free job placement services?
19. What percentage of graduates find jobs within a few months after graduating?
20. What percentage of graduates find jobs in the field they studied for?



## **About Student Life and Social/Recreational Opportunities**

1. What percentage of the students are male/female
2. How diverse is the campus?
3. What percentage of students are commuters?
4. What portion of the student body lives on campus? What portion of the student body remains on campus for the weekends?
5. What activities do students participate in during their free time both on campus (school sponsored) and in the community?
6. Does the campus have a Greek system of fraternities and sororities? If so, what percent of the student body participates in Greek life? Are parties open? How do students who elect not to participate in the Greek system fit in?
7. What are the most popular extracurricular activities?
8. What student organizations are active on campus?
9. What intramural sports are on campus?
10. Where is the central gathering place for students?
11. What transportation options are available to and from campus, both for trips just outside campus and for treks to transportation centers for trips home?
12. Can freshmen have cars on campus? What is the fee for having a car on campus?
13. Is it easy to get around campus? Can you walk to and from classes?
14. Are there parent or sibling events so your family can be a part of your college experience?

## **About Auxiliary Services**

1. Where do students go if they have a medical emergency?
2. What tutoring, counseling, and support services are available on campus and how are they accessed?
3. What computer access will you have? Do you need to bring your own computer? Are the dorms wired for Internet/e-mail services?
4. What is the quality of the library and research facilities?
5. What laundry facilities are available and how accessible are they?
6. What recreational facilities does the campus offer?

7. What are the safety issues on campus? How are they addressed? Ask for a crime report. Federal law requires schools to provide safety information to students.
8. Are there on-going construction projects around campus? (This is a good thing as it signals good facilities.)

### **About Housing/Food Services**

1. Is campus housing guaranteed for all four years? What percent of students live on campus all four years?
2. How much does housing cost? Is it easy to get on-campus housing?
3. What housing options exist? (Honors? Themed? Single sex? Co-ed? Greek?)
4. How hard is it to find off-campus housing?
5. What meal plans are available? Are freshmen required to purchase a specific type of meal plan?
6. Do the meal plans provide menus for special diets (vegetarian, kosher, ethnic, etc.)?
7. What hours may students access food services?

### **About Paying For It**

1. What is the yearly cost of attendance, including books, tuition, fees, housing and meal plans? In other words, what is the all-inclusive cost?
2. Does your ability to pay the full cost of attendance have any impact on the college's decision to admit you?
3. Which financial aid forms are required? (The most common two are the FAFSA and the CSS PROFILE, but some schools have institutional or school-specific forms and some states have special forms.)
4. What percent of entering freshmen receive aid? What was the average freshman aid package? Is there a way aid is packaged, loans first for example? If you are unhappy with your aid package, is it negotiable?
5. If you demonstrate need, will the school be able to prepare a financial aid package that will meet 100% of your demonstrated need?
6. Will outside scholarships affect the amount of aid the school will offer you?
7. What types of payment plans exist for paying the Estimated Family Contribution?
8. How easy is it to find a job on campus? Are there work-study programs available?
9. What kind of refund can you get if you have to suddenly drop out or cancel some of your courses?


benefits offered by Kentucky lenders, visit [www.kheaa.com](http://www.kheaa.com). KHEAA administers the Federal Family Education Loan Program (FFELP), the largest student loan program in the state. Some schools may participate in the Federal Direct Student Loan Program, which has the same eligibility and award criteria as FFELP.

**4 Apply, apply, apply.** By applying for several types of aid, you increase your chances of receiving enough to pay your school costs.

**3 Read and follow directions.** Filling out an application properly and neatly is important. You may be disqualified for failing to complete all questions, answering them incorrectly, or missing the deadlines.

**2 Consult your guidance counselor.** This person is an excellent resource and can tell you about financial aid in general and where to look for help.

**1 Beware of scams.** Before paying a fee for financial aid information, talk with your high school counselor, a financial aid officer at the school you plan to attend, the Better Business Bureau in your area and the area where the firm is located, and the Kentucky Attorney General's Office, Consumer Protection Division, 1024 Capital Center Drive, Frankfort, KY 40601. You may also call toll free (888) 432-9257 or visit [www.law.state.ky.us/cfp/Default.htm](http://www.law.state.ky.us/cfp/Default.htm). Some companies may offer money-back guarantees to students who don't receive any scholarship sources or funds, but students who are unsuccessful or not satisfied may find that refunds are difficult, if not impossible, to obtain.



**KHEAA**  
Kentucky Higher Education Assistance Authority

P.O. Box 798  
Frankfort, KY 40602-0798  
Phone: (502) 696-7377  
Toll-free: (800) 928-8926,  
extension 7377  
Fax: (502) 696-7373  
[www.kheaa.com](http://www.kheaa.com)

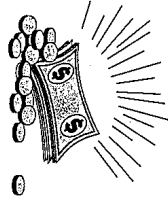
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# Top 10 Student Financial Aid Tip\$

from KHEAA



What can you do to increase your chances of receiving student aid to help pay higher education expenses? Here are some tips from the Kentucky Higher Education Assistance Authority (KHEEA).



**10 Complete tax forms early.** You must use information from the federal income tax form to file the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Make sure to keep a copy of your parents' completed form and yours, too, if you file the form.

**9 Submit the FAFSA as soon as possible after January 1 to obtain aid for the fall semester.** The FAFSA is used to apply for financial aid from several major state and institutional programs as well as federal programs. For the quickest results, you should file online at [www.fafsa.ed.gov](http://www.fafsa.ed.gov). A paper version is available from high school counselors, financial aid officers of higher education institutions, and KHEEA. If you complete and return the FAFSA early, you'll have the best chance of receiving aid for which you may qualify. You should also contact the school's financial aid office to determine if you need to complete additional application forms.

**8 Make good grades in high school.** By making a 2.5 or higher grade point average, you can earn money for college or technical training through the Kentucky Educational Excellence Scholarship (KEES), administered by KHEEA. The better you do in high school, the more you will earn to help pay your higher education expenses.

**7 Talk with the college financial aid administrator.** Ask about aid programs that are available through the school—institutional aid.

**6 Search for free information about student financial aid.**

- Go to your high school or public library and look for books with sources of student aid.
- Consult *Affording Higher Education*, a KHEEA reference book containing more than 3,100 sources of student financial aid administered by Kentucky colleges and trade schools, state and federal governments, companies, and organizations. Copies are available at public libraries, counselor offices, and KHEEA's Web site [www.kheea.com](http://www.kheea.com).

• Visit KHEEA's Web site [www.kheea.com](http://www.kheea.com). The site has information about KHEEA financial aid programs and services, KHEEA publications, the interactive College Aid Calculator (developed for KHEEA by Think Ahead, Inc.), and links to other financial aid sites. You may also access the most current information about your KHEEA grant, loan, and KEES award.

• Use the free services of KHEEA's Higher Education Learning and Planning (HELP) Center. This mobile unit visits Kentucky schools and provides KHEEA materials, publications, school videos, financial aid applications, career choice and scholarship search guidance, and financial aid experts.

• Read *Funding Your Education*, a U.S. Department of Education (USDE) handbook containing valuable information about student financial assistance. Copies should be available at public libraries, counselor offices, and online at [www.ed.gov/prog\\_info/SFA/FYE](http://www.ed.gov/prog_info/SFA/FYE). Additional details may be obtained by calling USDE's Federal Student Aid Information Center at (800) 4FED-AID (800) 433-3243) or visiting [www.ed.gov](http://www.ed.gov).

• Watch newspapers for scholarships offered through local community service organizations, businesses, clubs, unions, churches, fraternal groups, etc., and contact them for more information.

• Write to organizations connected with your field of interest (such as the American Medical Association or American Bar Association) which may have financial aid available. These organizations are listed in directories of associations available in public libraries.

• Check with community organizations and civic groups such as the American Legion, YMCA, 4-H Club, Kiwanis, Jaycees, Chamber of Commerce, and Girl or Boy Scouts. Foundations, religious organizations, fraternities or sororities, and town or city clubs are some other possible sources of aid.

**5 Learn about low-interest loans.** You should first seek aid that does not have to be repaid. However, most financial aid packages prepared by schools contain student loans. That means you need to learn as much as you can about the benefits offered by lenders. Different lenders offer different benefits. Some of those benefits come when you take out the loan, such as lower origination and guarantee fees, which means more money for you to pay for educational expenses. Others come when you're paying back the loan, such as lower interest rates and loan forgiveness if you provide a service, such as teaching or nursing. You need to find the lender whose program best suits your situation. For more information about some of the

Pre-College Curriculum for Fall 2002+	
English/Language Arts – 4 credits required	English I English II English III English IV (or AP English)
Mathematics – 3 credits required	Algebra I Algebra II Geometry  (see note below)
Science – 3 credits required	Credits to include life science, physical science, and earth/space science (at least one lab course)
Social Studies – 3 credits required	From U.S. History, Economics, Government, World Geography and World Civilization
Health – ½ credit required	
Physical Education – ½ credit required	
History and Appreciation of Visual, Performing Arts 1 credit required	History and appreciation of visual and performing arts or another arts course that incorporates such content
Nonnative (Foreign) Language – 2 credits required or demonstrated competency [effective date: fall 2004 semester]	
Electives – 7 credits required (5 rigorous)	Recommended strongly: 1 or more courses that develop computer literacy [In 2004, requirement is 5 credits (3 rigorous)]
Total Credits: 22	15 required credits; 7 elective credits (2002) [17 required credits; 5 elective credits (2004)]

In 2002, a student may substitute an integrated, applied, interdisciplinary, or higher level course within a program of study if the substituted course offers the same or greater academic rigor and the course covers or exceeds the minimum required content.

*Rigorous* electives should have academic content at least as challenging as that in courses required in the minimum high school graduation requirements. These electives also should be in social studies, science, math, English and language arts, arts and humanities, nonnative (foreign) language, and, above the introductory level, in agriculture, industrial technology, business, marketing, family and consumer sciences, health sciences, and technology education and career pathways. Electives in physical education and health are limited to one-half unit each.

# Other Frequently

## Questions

Do I have a specified time to use my KEEES award?

Yes, you can generally receive the scholarship for up to eight academic terms in an undergraduate degree program. For most degree programs, the scholarship must be used within the years of high school graduation.

Do I have to apply for the scholarship?

No, there is no application to fill out. All you have to do is study hard and make good grades! Your high school will send your yearly GPA to KHEAA at the end of the school year. KHEAA will notify you each year about your KEEES award. You can also check your KEEES account online at [www.kheaa.com](http://www.kheaa.com).

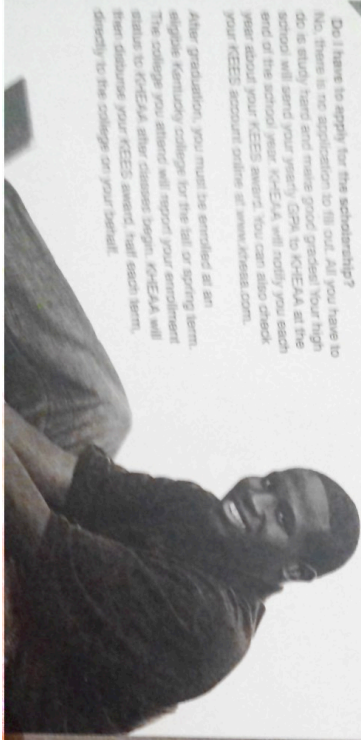
After graduation, you must be enrolled at an eligible Kentucky college for the fall or spring term. The college you attend will report your enrollment status to KHEAA after classes begin. KHEAA will then disburse your KEEES award, but each term, directly to the college on your behalf.

What should I do if my award information is incorrect?

If you find incorrect data while checking your KEEES account at [www.kheaa.com](http://www.kheaa.com), see your high school counselor. The counselor will submit the corrected information to the KEEES coordinator in your school district, who will make the necessary changes.

What if my major isn't offered at a college or university in Kentucky?

If a major isn't offered in Kentucky, you may be able to use your KEEES awards at an out-of-state school if that state participates in the Academic Common Market (ACM). For more information about the ACM, visit the Council on Postsecondary Education's website at [www.cpe.ky.gov](http://www.cpe.ky.gov). Illinois, Indiana and Ohio schools are not eligible because those states do not participate in the ACM.

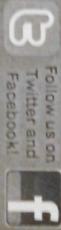


## How to Learn More

If you have more questions about KEEES, visit [www.kheaa.com](http://www.kheaa.com) website [www.kheaa.com/keees/faq](http://www.kheaa.com/keees/faq) or answers to Frequently Asked Questions.

Besides KEEES, KHEAA also administers need-based grant, work-study, scholarship, and savings programs. To find out more about these programs, contact KHEAA at [www.kheaa.com](http://www.kheaa.com) or

P.O. Box 798  
Frankfort, KY 40602-0798  
Toll free: 800.929.8926  
Fax: 502.696.7373



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KHEAA is an EEOC Employer  
12/12/12

# KEEES

KENTUCKY EDUCATIONAL  
EXCELLENCE SCHOLARSHIP

We pay for  
good grade



Kentucky

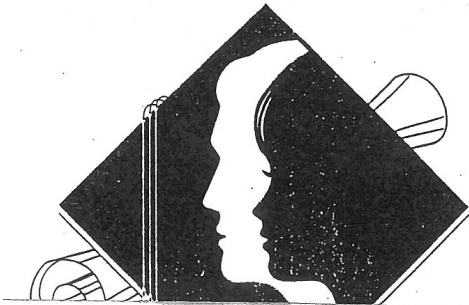
# Sr. Parent Information Night

## Tip Sheet



1. The dates given are following the pattern set by the colleges; updates will be given monthly. Read each month's new calendar!! Monthly Sr. Calendars will be on my website at: [www.yourclasspage.com](http://www.yourclasspage.com) Then click on my name. And / or go to our school webpage at [www.kyschools.us](http://www.kyschools.us) and click on my name. There is a way that you can sign up that it will notify you every time that I add something – you may want to check that out.
2. If playing sports in college at NCAA division I or II school, register with clearinghouse at: [www.eligibilitycenter.org](http://www.eligibilitycenter.org) When registering to take the ACT, list 9999 as one of your codes. Cost: \$65. If playing sports in college at an NAIA school, register with their clearing house at: [www.PlayNAIA.org](http://www.PlayNAIA.org), and when registering to take the ACT, list 9876 as one of your codes to get your test results sent to the clearinghouse. Cost: \$60.
3. If applying for BETA Club scholarship, list 9867 as one of your codes when registering for the ACT.
4. Fee waivers are available for ACT, SAT, applications for admission to colleges, and for required orientation sessions. U of L is also waiving or adjusting their housing deposit.
5. When you get your letters of recommendation, bring me a copy to keep for you.
6. Local scholarship applications will be available in March.
7. Student Resume due to me by Friday, Oct. 28.
8. If interested in Georgetown College, visit by Dec. 1 and apply by Jan. 17 to receive an additional \$2000 while attending there.
9. Academic Common Market --- good if interested in attending an out-of-state college for a major not offered in KY. Can use KEES money and get in-state tuition rates.
10. Financial Aid --- there will be a workshop on February 12 at 3 p.m.. Before then, get taxes done and get 2 pin numbers: one for one of the parents AND one for the student at: [www.pin.ed.gov](http://www.pin.ed.gov)
11. College Goal Sunday – last Sunday in January: Jan. 31 this year. Will help with financial aid application; sessions will be held at various locations around the state.
12. Apply for college admission in October. Must be accepted BEFORE you can apply for scholarships! Some programs at certain colleges have waiting lists --- so apply early. Apply for state colleges online at [www.KHEAA.com](http://www.KHEAA.com)
13. UK has some departmental scholarships; search them out on UK's website.
14. FREE college classes at: ECU, MSU, Sullivan, Spencerian, & Bluegrass Community & Technical College system. ECU's application deadline is Nov. 1. Some are free, ECU's range from free - \$90/class, BC&TC's cost \$202.50.

15. College Days – one / year. Take advantage of Open Houses.
16. Getting In Book --- received last spring!! Extremely valuable!!
17. KEES money won't be there at the beginning of the semester; expect delays.  
Check for accuracy at: [www.kheaa.com](http://www.kheaa.com)
18. Vocational Rehabilitation – could pay some college tuition if you qualify AND give a book allowance. Medical, psychological, and drug / alcohol: any one is a criterion to qualify.
19. [REDACTED] CEEB code (to have scores sent back to us): [REDACTED] [REDACTED] is now an ACT testing site; for this, please enter: [REDACTED]
20. Jan. 13 is UK's scholarship application deadline.
21. Feb. 1 is ECU's scholarship application deadline. They are re-doing their scholarship program and guidelines at this time; I will update you as more information becomes available.
22. PEPP --- summer program for future dentists &/or doctors. Application Deadlines: March 1 for UK; March 31 for U of L. GREAT program – strongly recommended!
23. KY Dept. of Transportation's Civil Engineering Scholarship application deadline is March 1. Go to: [www.transportation.ky.gov/highways/scholarship.asp](http://www.transportation.ky.gov/highways/scholarship.asp)
24. Commit to college of choice by May 1.
25. Residual ACT is offered at ECU. You can go online to reserve a spot for your teen at [www.testing.ecu.edu](http://www.testing.ecu.edu) Cost is \$50.
26. University of the Cumberland offers the Bert T. Combs Grant that bridges the gap from other types of aid.
27. A great opportunity for you: our parent portal is getting great reviews from parents. Go to: [https://infinitecampus.kyschools.us/campus/portal/\[REDACTED\].jsp](https://infinitecampus.kyschools.us/campus/portal/[REDACTED].jsp) You will need to contact [REDACTED] to get a user name and password: [REDACTED]@[REDACTED].kyschools.us or call [REDACTED] and ask for her.



*Working together, this can AND will be a "great" year! Thank-you for coming.*

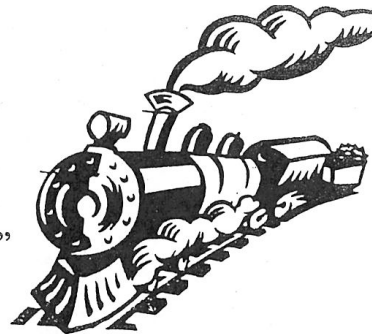
*Mrs. [REDACTED]*



## CLASS OF 2012

### SR. CALENDAR

“A YEAR AT A GLANCE”



#### GENERAL:

\*\*These Sr. Calendars will be printed and distributed monthly. Mrs. [redacted] will give every senior a copy. The calendar will also be posted on our district website: [www.\[redacted\]kyschools.us](http://www.[redacted]kyschools.us) and our school website: [www.\[redacted\]kyschools.us](http://www.[redacted]kyschools.us)

\*\*Reminder for the students interested in scholarships: Scholarship applications hit heavy starting in January. (Be sure to have your paperwork ready...we never know when we will get snow and be out several days. Most of the time, the colleges and universities will NOT change the deadline -- regardless of the circumstances!!! So be prepared and get organized now!! Don't wait until the last minute!!

\*\*Each senior gets one excused College Visitation Day. Schedule visits at least one week in advance! Students are encouraged to go to the Open Houses sponsored by colleges and universities on Saturdays.

\*\*Cost of the ACT is \$34 this year. (Late fee is: \$21) [redacted] code is: [redacted] All students should have tested in their junior year. It is imperative that every senior in the Class of 2012 test in October!! **If the student may be interested in applying for the Beta Club Scholarship (the deadline is usually in November), be sure to send ACT scores to the Beta Club Scholarship Foundation by putting their code number, 9867, on your ACT registration sheet as one of the places to send your scores. If the student is registering with the NCAA clearinghouse, put code 9999 on the ACT registration so they will receive the scores also. And, if the student is registering with the NAIA, put code 9876 on the ACT registration in order for the scores to go there as well.**

\*\*Cost of the SAT is \$49 this year (late fee is an additional \$26). It may be beneficial for seniors to try this test if they aren't quite scoring what they had hoped to on the ACT. Some students do better on one test vs. the other.

\*\*All males must register with the "Selective Service" within 30 days of their 18th birthday!! If they don't register, they are breaking the law and could be sent to prison for up to 5 years and fined up to \$250,000. In addition, they cannot qualify for federal financial aid for college, job training benefits, or many state and federal jobs.

\*\*Military Recruiters are allowed in our building to do lunchroom visits on the third Thursday of each month.

\*\*students.gov is a government-wide web portal that makes it easy for college students to find any kind of federal service or information they need

|

\*\*Web sites that may be of interest to you:

→ fastweb.com  
petersons.com  
collegeboard.com  
nasfaa.org  
ed.gov

→ www.kheaa.com — Apply for KY colleges here!  
You can get lots of good information on scholarships, scams, etc...

\*\*Here is another web site you may want to check out:

<http://www.kentuckymentor.org>

It is an Internet-based student information management system for college-bound high school students. It gives information about admissions, financial aid, college preparation, and is said to be invaluable in finding the college that best suits your needs.

\*\*www.kheaa.com is an excellent web site:

- apply for admissions to KY colleges here! (& send transcripts)
- check your KEES money account
- get an estimate of how much financial aid you can receive and what you'll be expected to pay toward college costs by using the interactive College Aid Calculator on this site.
- links to FREE scholarship search sites

\*\*A concerned parent contacted my office and asked me to pass some information on to you. Please be aware that you do not have to give out your Social Security Number to colleges. You will have to give it when you apply for financial aid. When (it is given for one purpose (i.e. financial aid),"colleges cannot use it for other reasons!! For more information, go to: [www.usdoj.gov/04foia/1974ssnu.htm](http://www.usdoj.gov/04foia/1974ssnu.htm)

\*\*EKU is sponsoring the EKU Now! Program -- a student can take up to two 3 hour college class for almost free in each semester of his or her jr. & sr. years. Tuition rates depend upon the location of the course. For the 2011-12 year, Gear Up is also purchasing your textbooks for you. If interested, the student can get an application and more info from me. Seniors with a 24 ACT (or higher) can take 2 free classes -- regardless of location! All students are responsible for textbooks, parking permits, associated course fees, and late registration fees -- if applicable.

\*\*If you are planning on attending Sullivan University, you need to open a savings account at the Engineer Guaranty Bank. They will match your funds up to a maximum of \$500. GREAT DEAL!!

\*\*Bluegrass Community & Technical College is offering "Opportunity College" (their version of EKU Now!) to high school juniors & seniors where they can take one class / semester for \$202.50. (1/2 price of what a college student would pay for a 3 hour class) plus a security fee of \$25 and the cost of the book.

\*\*Sullivan University and Spencerian College are offering a Jump Start Program. A student can take a free course in the January term and another free course in the March term. The student needs to make contact with the college by the end of December. Also, if you apply now, you can lock in to this year's tuition rates.

\*\*Sullivan University, Spencerian College, ECU, Morehead State University and Bluegrass Community & Technical College all have articulation agreements with us -- meaning that if a student has taken certain courses here and has earned at

least a "B" in them, then he or she can receive college credit for the class without retaking it at the college level. Tell your son or daughter to check this out with the colleges.

\*\*Bluegrass Community & Technical College has a great deal! If your child will attend there for their 1<sup>st</sup> two years, going full time each semester, he/she can then transfer to EKU for the next three years --- BUT BE LOCKED INTO BCTC's tuition price!!! That's getting a college degree from EKU at ½ price!!!!!!!!!!!!!! This is called the BCTC Colonel Scholarship. Go to: [www.bluegrass.kctcs.edu](http://www.bluegrass.kctcs.edu) for more information.

\*\*Students interested in U of L and wanting to be added to their mailing list can go online to: [www.admissions.louisville.edu](http://www.admissions.louisville.edu) and click on "Future Students," choose a quick link: "Freshmen" and then fill out the "Information Request" form.

\*\*Northern KY Univ. is considering offering a new bachelor's degree in aviation; therefore, they are asking high school students to go online and complete a short survey designed to collect students' opinions about the options the program has to offer. Go to: <http://access.nku.edu/oca/aviation/student.asp>



\*\*SunTrust "Off to College" Sweepstakes, \$1000 scholarships available. Winners not determined by GPA or financial need. One winner chosen every 2 weeks from Oct. – May. Apply online at: [www.offtocollege.info](http://www.offtocollege.info) Begin applying on Sept. 15, first drawing on Oct. 31. Only one entry / drawing; however, students can re-register for each drawing.

\*\*The University of Tennessee is offering Nuclear & Radiological Engineering Scholarships. Go to: [www.engr.utk.edu/nuclear](http://www.engr.utk.edu/nuclear)

\*\*Morehead State University is now offering a degree in Space Science. For students interested in careers in: astrophysics, satellite telecommunications, space physics, or cosmology. Call (606)783-2381.

\*\*The University of KY's Dept. of Mining Engineering has scholarships available. See Mrs. Neal for more information.



\*\*WYMT-TV and Coca-Cola are sponsoring the Outstanding Mountain Student Achiever of the Week. Winners will be chosen based on GPA, extracurricular activities, and community service. Segments will be aired on the TV station. Get applications from Mrs. Neal & turn in ASAP.

\*\*Interested in Dental Assisting, check out: Fifield School of Dental Assisting – 10 week course. Contact info: (606)287-8989, e-mail: [fsda@prtcfnet.org](mailto:fsda@prtcfnet.org), website: [fifieldschoolofdentalassisting.com](http://fifieldschoolofdentalassisting.com)

\*\*Culinary Scholarships can be found at: [www.nraef.org](http://www.nraef.org), [www.acfchefs.org](http://www.acfchefs.org), [www.chef2chef.net](http://www.chef2chef.net), [www.starschef.com](http://www.starschef.com), [www.cookingschools.com](http://www.cookingschools.com), [www.allfoodbusiness.com](http://www.allfoodbusiness.com), [www.sms.scholarshipamerica.org/jamesbeard](http://www.sms.scholarshipamerica.org/jamesbeard), [www.hsmai.org](http://www.hsmai.org), [www.kyra.org](http://www.kyra.org), [www.iacp.com](http://www.iacp.com), [www.womenchefs.org](http://www.womenchefs.org), [www.fastweb.com](http://www.fastweb.com), [www.scholarships.com](http://www.scholarships.com)

AUGUST:

Aug. 16 EKU Now required registration

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- Aug. 17 School Picture Day
- Aug. 22 EKV classes begin
- Aug. 26 Sullivan University's Culinary Open House
- Aug. 27 Sullivan University "Discovery Day"
- Aug. 27-28 Sullivan University's ACT Review (must pre-register)
- Aug. 28 Last day to register for or add / drop a full semester EKV class without "W" being on transcript; last day for a full tuition refund
- Aug. 29 Sullivan University's Paralegal Open House

SEPTEMBER:

Sr. Orientations:

- give every student a copy of his/her transcript
- review graduation requirements
- review pre-college curriculum requirements
- check credits
- go over college info., scholarships, financial aid, ACT, etc...
- discuss the "Getting In" Book. It is "EXTREMELY" VALUABLE AND BENEFICIAL!!
- NCAA & NAIA registration for freshman year eligibility in college
- survey of plans - as of now
- Vocational Rehabilitation Sign-Up
- KEES Scholarship
- ACT is most important factor in scholarship competition. Also - volunteer and community service activities are extremely important!
- ETC...

\*\*\*\*\*Get letters of recommendation. Keep a copy & give me a copy.

- Sept. 1 Sullivan University's IT Open house
- Sept. 5 No School - Holiday
- Sept. 5 No EKV classes
- Sept. 5 No MSU classes
- Sept. 6 ACT Science Preparation Workshop, 3:15 - 5:15 p.m.
- Sept. 7 EKV Admissions Rep here to visit with interested seniors - cancelled!
- Sept. 7 ACT Math Preparation Workshop, 3:15 - 5:15 p.m.
- Sept. 8 EKV Tuition bills e-mailed to students
- Sept. 8 ETS rep here to visit with seniors, 8:15 - 9:10 a.m.
- Sept. 8 ACT English Preparation Workshop, 3:15 - 5:15 p.m.
- Sept. 9 Sr. magazine money due & Sr. Trip permission slips due!

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Sept. 9 Upward Bound Meeting at 1:00 p.m.

Sept.9 SAT Registration Deadline for the Oct.1 Test Date

Sept. 10 ACT Test Day

\* Sept. 10 EKV's SpotLight Day; \$30 application fee waived at this event,  
8:30 a.m.– 2 p.m. You can register online at:  
<http://admisssions.eku.edu/spotlight>

Sept.11 PADD's Drug March at 2 p.m

Sept. 11 "Exploring College Options" (private / elite college open house / info session)  
in Lexington at Hilton Lexington Downtown, 7:30 p.m.

→ Sept. 12 UK's "See Blue Preview Night" in Lexington at 7 – 9 p.m. at the  
Lexington Center & Rupp Arena (430 W. Vine Street) in the Bluegrass  
Ballroom

Sept. 15 Picture Make-Up Day

Sept. 15 Military recruiters allowed in the building

\*\* Sept. 16 ACT Postmark Registration Deadline for the Oct. 22 ACT Test

Sept. 16 End of 1<sup>st</sup> Six Weeks: Mid-Term for 1<sup>st</sup> Trimester at ECHS

Sept. 16 Georgetown College's VIP Day

\* Sept. 16 1<sup>st</sup> Sr. Trip Payment due: \$100

Sept. 17 Transylvania University's Open House

Sept. 17 Thomas Moore College Fall Preview Day

\* \* Sept. 19 ECHS Test Day – seniors take the practice ACT

Sept. 21 SAT Late Registration Deadline for the Oct. 1 Test Date

Sept. 24 Academy Day – for info on service academies- 8:30 a.m. (West Point, etc...)  
Applications due Oct. 15

Sept. 26 Parent / Teacher Conference 4:30 – 7:30 p.m.

\* \* } **Sept. 26 Senior Parent Informational Night at 6 P.M.** } \* \*  
in the library

Sept. 26 Sullivan University's Fall Quarter JumpStart Classes begin

Sept. 27 EKV's Tuition Due (balances paid for by GearUp)

Sept. 29 ETS Individual Meetings as needed

\* \* Sept. 30 Late Registration Postmark Deadline for Oct. 22 ACT Test Date

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- Jan. 13 UK's Honors Program Application Deadline
- Jan. 13 U of L's Application Deadline for Scholarships. Apply on-line at <http://admissions.louisville.edu/aid/>
- Jan. 13 Early Admission Application Deadline to U of L's Dental School. Must apply for regular admission to U of L, have a GPA of 3.75 and a 30 ACT score.
- Jan. 13 Murray State Univ.'s Scholarship Application Deadline
- Jan. 13 Northern KY University Scholarship Application Deadline
- Jan. 13 Western KY Univ.'s Academic Scholarship Application Deadline
- Jan. 13 UK's College of Engineering Scholarship Application Deadline
- Jan. 16 No School – Holiday (DL)
- Jan. 16 No EKU classes; last day to drop/add classes
- Jan. 17 Admissions Application Deadline to receive the "Travel Grant at Georgetown College (if you visited campus by Dec. 2 and apply by today, you'll get \$500 / year for the 4 years you attend there! Total= \$2000).
- Jan. 19 Military Recruiters in the building
- Jan. 20 Late Registration Postmark Deadline for the Feb. 11 ACT Test Date
- Jan. 21 EKU's SpotLight Day; \$30 application fee waived at this event, 8:30 a.m.– 2 p.m. You can register online at: <http://admissions.eku.edu/spotlight>
- Jan. 26 ETS Individual Meetings
- Jan. 26 & 27 Asbury College's Open House
- Jan. 28 SAT Test Date
- Jan. 29 College Goal Sunday at 2 p.m. – KHEAA will help parents with FAFSA at locations across the state: Check: [www.kasfaa.com](http://www.kasfaa.com)

**FEBRUARY:**

\*\*\* { \*\*On Feb. 12, I will host a Financial Aid Workshop in the [redacted] Computer Lab to assist parents in filling out the forms. A financial aid representative will conduct the parent workshop and will answer questions. PARENTS REALLY NEED TO HAVE THEIR INCOME TAX FORMS FILLED OUT BEFORE COMING TO THIS WORKSHOP -- AND BRING THESE FORMS TO THE MEETING! } \*\*\*

\*\*Spencerian College will host an Overnight in Housing Event this month

\*\* Feb. 1 EKU's Academic Scholarship Application Deadline \*\*

||

April 20 Late Registration Deadline for the May 5 SAT Test

April 23-27 Sr. Trip (U)

\* \* April 30 - May 4 EKU's Final Exams

MAY:

\*\*Sullivan University's Scholarship Days: Ambassador / Mock Trial / Recipe Contest. Exact deadlines to be announced closer to this time.

\*\*Spencerian College will host a Scholarship Day Event this month

\* May 1 Students attending private colleges need to "commit" by today.

May 1 Alice Lloyd Deadlines for admission and housing

May 1 U of L's Orientation Confirmation Deadline

→ May 1 UK's Housing Application Deadline

\* \* April 30 - May 4 EKU Final Exam Week

May 4 ACT Test Registration Postmark Deadline for the June 9 Test Date

May 5 SAT Test Date

May 7 EKU Final Grades due to EKU registrar's by 1 p.m.

May 7-11 AP Exam Week 1 (\$87/exam)

May 8 SAT Registration Deadline for the June 2 SAT

\* \* May 9 College Dual Credit Students' grades due to me

May 11 Last day of school on original calendar (before snow days)

May 14-18 AP Exam Week (\$87/exam)

May 17 Military Recruiters in the building

May 18 Late Registration Postmark Deadline for the June 9 ACT Test Date

May 19 PROM (U)

May 22 SAT Late Registration Deadline for the June 2 SAT

May 28 No School - Memorial Day

JUNE:

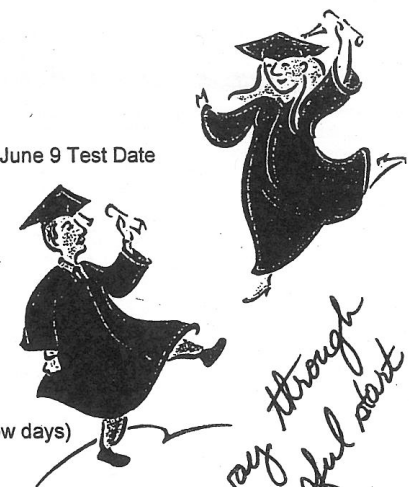
\*\*Spencerian College will host a Scholarship Day Event this month

June 2 SAT Test Date

June 9 ACT Test Date

\*\*\*\*\*Prepared by: [Redacted] Counselor

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*Let's dance our way through the year to a successful start on life!  
Remember, I'm here to serve you; I'll help you any way that I can. (U)*

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