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**ASPIRATIONS, EXPECTATIONS, AND INFLUENCES ON THE POST-
SECONDARY PLANS OF RURAL YOUTH**

A Dissertation in

Rural Sociology

by

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Abstract

This study examines the influences that high school seniors considered when making their plans for after graduation. Bourdieu's theory of habitus and Coleman's social capital theory inform the conceptual framework. Qualitative interviews were conducted with students and school counselors from four rural Kentucky school districts. Family, peers and social networks, schools, school personnel, and communities shaped respondents' preferences and the options they considered for their futures. Respondents reported aspirations that reflected an internalization of the expectations they heard from conversations they had with those around them, and they chose colleges and careers that were already familiar to them through their networks. Rural communities were influential in that respondents chose careers or colleges geographically close to home or recreated the small town feel they liked, or they picked majors that would give them the flexibility to stay or move later. Maximizing their future job opportunities was a primary consideration, while paying for college closely followed. The fear of what comes after high school and how their lives will change also was a concern among respondents. Within these considerations, respondents discussed college and career aspirations, though they did not necessarily act on plans to pursue them.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

A college education is increasingly becoming the minimum qualification and expected level of achievement in American culture. More individuals pursue higher education, and bachelor's degrees are becoming a standard as the high school diploma once was (Draut, 2005). This can be seen as the rise of credentialism in America, which has created a new stratification system. Brooks (2008) sees this shift in the New York Times wedding section, where descriptions of family background have been replaced by lists of the newlywed's alma maters and academic achievements.

This also is reflected in surveys of adolescent educational aspirations. More and more students from across the United States report that they wish to pursue a four year degree (Reynolds, Stewart, MacDonald, & Sischo, 2006). Despite stating these ambitions, many do not attain these degrees. Rural students in particular are less likely than students from suburban and urban areas to attend college (Smith, Beaulieu, & Seraphine, 1995; Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012), though studies show that rural students similarly aspire to four year degrees (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004).

Research is needed to better understand how rural students are deciding what to do after high school graduation. What are the opportunities rural youth consider viable options for them to pursue for college or career choices? What are the considerations that influence these youth to prefer one option over another? How do they form their preferences, and what actions do they take to pursue these goals? The present study focuses on addressing these questions by understanding the process from the perspective of these rural youth.

The Dissertation Project

As a graduate assistant on the Rural Youth Education (RYE) project, I frequently discussed the educational, occupational, and residential aspirations of rural youth from ten rural school districts in Pennsylvania in that study. The data showed variation across those aspirations, some respondents reported their desires to go to college and enter managerial or professional careers. Despite seeing rural students profess these aspirations, other research finds that rural students were going on to college at lower rates than their non-rural peers. Previous research has studied factors that affect college attainment and influence educational and occupational aspirational choice. Research has produced statistics on why students want to go to college or not and what factors make it easier or hold them back from doing so (Arnett, 2004; Draut, 2005). Working on the RYE project got me wondering what happens in between the aspiration and the attainment, what creates the gap for students who state one aspiration and go on to achieve another.

Understanding that gap was the motivation for this dissertation project. The current study was designed to talk to high school students to find out in their own views on what they considered as they enacted their plans for post-secondary pursuits. The qualitative method was chosen particularly to address the lack of explanation for what seem to be conflicting statistics. Students report certain aspirations but do not go on to achieve them. I wanted to ask them why this was the case and examine their responses using their own words. Returning to previous literature, I thought about the factors that affect these decisions. Looking at only “gap” students (those whose aspirations and achievements do not concur) in isolation could have missed influences that other students who go on to attain their stated aspirations may have included, or vice versa. This

dissertation project grew beyond examining a rural attainment gap to looking at how rural students arrive at their post-secondary plans, and whether this process is related to the communities in which they grew up.

Previous literature includes the school, family, and peer factors already found to influence aspirations at the time in young adults' when they transition to adulthood. Community literature looks broadly at how place matters, including specific focus on rurality. Bourdieu's theory of habitus and additional social network theory provide the framework for how individuals' cultures and preferences are shaped, while attainment models and bounded rationality consider how students identify their options. The questions this dissertation addresses exist at the intersection of these two frameworks, and focus on what factors shape students' preferences and how their preferences inform their plans for the future.

Research Questions

The main research question this study seeks to address is:

1. What is the decision making process of rural youth as they choose to act on educational or career aspirations?

To better understand this process, this study will examine three aspects of how youth make these decisions:

1. Does the rurality of the community in which one grows up affect the educational attainment decision making process? If so, how?
2. What are the individual, peer, family, school and community influences that shape this process for these youth?
3. In what actions do rural youth engage as they plan and pursue their post high school aspirations?

Overview

The purpose of this research is to better understand the influences on rural students' plans for after high school graduation, with a focus on how rural students consider these influences. Qualitative research methods, particularly in-depth interviews, are the best approach for answering questions that depend on better understanding an individual's personal experiences (Weiss, 1994). To address these research questions, qualitative interviews provide the most thorough information available from the students' perspectives to examine what and how factors shaped their views.

Interviews were conducted with senior high school students and school personnel at four rural school districts in Kentucky. All four school districts were chosen for their rural characteristics, including Census codes and commuting distances to urbanized areas. One school counselor at each school was interviewed to provide background on the schools and their communities. The counselors also discussed their experiences working broadly with students on their post-secondary plans. The counselors' interviews provide context for the student interviews that followed.

High school seniors who have varied post-secondary plans were sampled and interviewed in the weeks following their graduations. At that time, students' plans were mostly already decided and acted or about to be acted upon. I first asked what their plans were and from there moved into discussing what influenced them in deciding on those plans over alternatives. The interviews were semi-structured, following an interview guide, but probing questions were added as participants introduced themes into their responses. The interview instrument was informed by the factors that previous literature

found to be relevant to post-secondary transitions; participants were asked for information about their family, school, peers, and communities.

The overarching questions about the factors of family, peers, school and community provided the “what” – the influences themselves, while the probing, less structured questions tried to dig deeper into the “how” – the different and individualized ways these influences impacted respondents’ decisions. Student and counselor interviews were transcribed and then coded according to the themes that emerged across responses. Within the areas of family, peers, school, and community, respondents reported varying ways they felt these influences, and their responses were coded according to these themes. The detailed accounts of how the study was informed, methods and findings are presented in the chapters that follow.

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized to walk readers through the project in a way that presents the necessary information to provide background and context while allowing the reader to bracket the background so as to focus on the results from the respondents’ perspectives. It consists of six chapters, and each chapter includes an introduction to that chapter, individual sections with subheadings, and a summary. The overview, literature review and conceptual framework, and study methodology that comprise the first three chapters, respectively, present the background on why and how this study was done. The results presented in chapters 4 and 5 focus on the what and why of rural students’ post-secondary plans in their own words. The results are organized thematically to be consistent with the influences the respondents focused on most, with individual sections

that discuss where the themes emerged from the responses. The discussion across themes is then connected in the final chapter, which includes concluding discussion, implications of this research, the study's limitations, and direction for future research.

This first chapter provides the introduction to the study. After this overview of the dissertation project and how it is organized, Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework and Review of Factors Associated with Aspirations will present the conceptual framework that shaped this study and a review of the literature. The conceptual framework provides theoretical background on Bourdieu's habitus and Granovetter's social networks. These theories provide understanding for how individuals' views and preferences are shaped by the culture of their environments and the network of relationships from which they receive information. Self-efficacy, status attainment, and bounded rationality theory also provide understanding for how individuals think about themselves and their choices. This provides the framework in which to consider previous literature on aspirations, expectations, and plans for the future. Aspirations are examined first by looking at what they are and the most commonly found aspirations. Factors that affect aspirations are discussed next. Family and peer influences will be examined before considering the school and community factors that influence aspirations. This framework and literature provides the foundation for the study methodology that follow.

Chapter 3: Study and Research Methods describes the methodology this dissertation utilized to answer the research questions. Chapter three presents an overview of the research design, including a timeline of the steps taken in this process. Site selection and participant selection will also discuss the criteria used for selecting each. How many sites and potential participants were available and how each was contacted

will be addressed before presenting information on the sites and participants in this study. Discussion of the site visits and interviews that were used for data collection will also be included.

Chapter 4: Respondents and their Plans begins the presentation of the results and focuses on the “what:” a descriptive look at the respondents, their college and career plans, their communities, and their residential plans. The respondents and their plans are introduced. First, their post-secondary plans are described according to their chosen paths into the military, four-year colleges, two-year colleges, the workforce and undecided. Descriptions of their communities are then presented, followed by their residential plans. The youths’ responses are grouped by those who plan to stay in the same place or move to communities similar to their home areas, those who have not decided on their residential plans but are maintaining some flexibility to stay in or leave their communities, and those who are moving to new communities. Information from the school counselors and site visits is used to provide context for the discussion of the respondents’ views, and so it has been incorporated throughout the results as it fit the themes.

Chapter 5: Influences on Youth Plans explores the influences that shaped the plans described in chapter four. The chapter is organized into sections based on family, peers, high school, school personnel, community and concerns influence on youth plans. These reflect the factors identified in previous literature that were used to build the interview guide. Regarding these areas of influence, respondents individually expressed views that mirrored experiences and perspectives shared by other respondents, and these

provided the basis for the thematic subsections. Within the thematic subsections, points of overlap and departure among respondents are further explored.

The thematic subsections and individual sections include discussion on how these themes and influences impacted respondents. In the final chapter, Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusion, the themes will be connected and the findings summarized with implications for scholarship and policy. This is followed by conclusions that present the limits of this dissertation and identify areas of future research.

Chapter 2

Conceptual Framework and Review of Factors Associated with Aspirations

The conceptual framework of theories informs the research design and the interpretation and analysis of results, while previous research provides background for developing appropriate interview questions. This study is not intended to test the theories, but rather the theories were used as the basis for the research questions and to provide understanding for how to address the research questions addressed in this study.

This study focuses on what and how high school students plan for their lives after high school. Plans are the concrete pursuit of aspirations, which reflect an individual's expectations and hopes for his or her future. To develop the foundation for the current study, this chapter first will describe aspirations and trends in youth post-secondary aspirations. The conceptual framework is then presented. The theories of habitus and social capital contribute to understanding how aspirations and plans are formed and provide the basis for the conceptual framework. The literature review then examines factors that have been found to impact future plans in previous research on status attainment and aspirations.

The current study situates influences on post-secondary aspirations at the intersection of habitus, social capital and how these can influence decision-making. Habitus and social capital work through culture and social networks to shape ones' preferences. Individuals apply their preferences to evaluate the options they see as available to them and how realistic they perceive their chances of attaining their goals. Previous research on status attainment and college and career choice identifies some of what youth consider to be influences on their options. This study examines rural youths'

preferences, influences, and options to better understand how these elements combine to form their plans for the future.

Aspirations and Plans

Aspirations are an individual's desires about the future, while expectations are what one intends to pursue. Though separate, expectations and aspirations are closely connected and can affect each other (Deil-Amen & Turley, 2007). Aspirations are the ideal, while expectations are a more realistic assessment of what might actually occur (Morgan, 1998). MacLeod (1987) defines aspirations as the reflection of "...an individual's view of his or her own chances for getting ahead and are an internalization of objective probabilities" (p.15). The assessment of how realistic one's chances are to accomplish a plan incorporates one's perception of his or her capabilities and what one knows about the situation. These assessments and the expectations, intentions, or aspirations that one forms are shaped by many factors, including internal preferences and external influences. Aspirations exist along any dimension that requires an individual to make choices: marriage aspirations, residential aspirations, educational aspirations, occupational aspirations, etc. Here the focus is on educational, occupational and residential aspirations.

The source of aspirations is an intersection of an individual's desires for the future with one's perception of his or her ability to achieve them. Self-efficacy is one's perception of that ability, whether or not individuals think themselves capable to succeed in the actions necessary to achieve their desired outcomes (Bandura, 1977). One's perception of efficacy changes depending on the context – the goals in question, previous

success or failure, and the actions required to achieve them. Previous success or failure creates a feedback loop called reciprocal determinism, which is the idea that one engages in activities that confirm existing self-perceptions (Bandura, 1986). Someone with lower self-efficacy may not be confident to attempt the actions necessary to goal attainment.

Struggling students may perceive a lack of support from teachers and may subsequently be reluctant to seek help (Berg, 2010), creating a reciprocal determinism of lower self-efficacy without the support to overcome it, thus lowering their own expectations for themselves. Spohn, Crowther, and Lykins (1992) found a conditioning effect of teachers' and school personnel's' perceptions of student ability and lower self-perceptions of academic ability among Appalachian students. Thus, an individual who has a high perception of self-efficacy is more likely to undertake the behaviors necessary to achieve his or her goals, thus continuing his or her perception of high self-efficacy. Someone with high or low self-efficacy may or may not then engage in actions related to goal attainment based on feedback from others' reactions. Trusty (2001) confirms the link between student educational aspirations and self-efficacy, with family and socioeconomic factors also predicting expectations. Students rely on their expectations of their abilities to determine college or career options that seem realistically attainable.

Youth educational aspirations have been steadily increasing over the last twenty years, though many students do not continue on to attain the degrees to which they aspire (Reynolds et al., 2006). Kirkpatrick, Johnson and Reynolds (2013) looked at the stability of high educational aspirations and found that stability of high expectations was associated with achieving them. Individuals from families with high socioeconomic status held more stable and higher aspirations.

College aspirations reflect the education needed for the types of jobs the current economy offers that are considered more stable and well-paying. Despite the growing number of Millennials who get college degrees and the return on investment that comes with the degree, Pew Research (2014) found that the median earnings of Millennials barely increased compared to Boomers, Gen Xers, and the Silent Generation at similar ages. This is partly explained by what Pew terms “the declining value of a high school diploma” (p. 8). Previous generations could earn living wages and support families in jobs that required no more education than a high school diploma; now, individuals with just a high school diploma often live below the poverty line due to the low wages offered in the jobs available to them.

Changes in the U.S. economy over the decades of the 1980s and 1990s resulted in shifts toward fewer unions, individuals holding more temporary and contingent jobs and changing jobs more often, and a labor market characterized by instability (Draut, 2005). The widening gap between the jobs (and corresponding pay) available to those with four-year degrees or more and those with less than a four-year degree has normalized educational aspirations to the four-year degree, though the reality of attaining one has not kept pace with the desire for that degree.

Habitus

The internalization of feedback from one's surroundings is the foundation for Bourdieu's (1984) concept of habitus, where an individual's practices are systematically distinguishable by group. One's world view is directly linked to the schemes created by his or her structuring environments. Conceived to explain the reproduction of class,

habitus involves both "structuring structures" and "structured structures" (Bourdieu, 1984, p.170). This means that habitus both explains different practices among groups and also reflects the tastes or preferences of the group. Habitus has a conditioning effect; it allows for "strategic calculation" of "the past effect into an expected objective" (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 278). Bourdieu emphasizes the socializing effects of habitus, further stating that it allows shared meaning to develop based on the objective reinforcement of reactions to experience (Bourdieu, 1972). Previous experience informs one's opinions of desirable outcomes in addition to one's perception of his or her likelihood of success, also informing self-efficacy.

Glaesser and Cooper (2014) use habitus to examine education choice among German and English teens. They position habitus next to Rational Action Theory; they note these two theories are sometimes considered conflicting explanations. They consider habitus useful for explaining "'subjective' rationality," or that habitus "shapes desired goals and preferred means for achieving them." (p. 467). They found that youth aligned their aspirations with their familial expectations, which they considered evidence of the manifestation of habitus.

Habitus provides the framework of common preferences and perceptions for members of a group while shaping the expectation for appropriate action (Deil-amen & Turley, 2007). It also informs cultural capital, which is one means by which parents transmit values to children. Not only a parent's stated views of education but the culture which they construct within the family will influence a child's expectations for education. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) extend the framework of influence to the theory of cultural capital, which they apply to schools to explain the reproduction of social stratification.

Schools reproduce the dominant culture, and so students must perform according to the expectations that align with the culture of the elite to succeed. Students who do not do so are “eliminated” from advancing, whether through failure to pass or score high enough on college or career readiness assessments or entry examinations or self-selecting themselves out of the potential to move on to higher education because they calculate their probability to succeed as lower than those who were better aligned with the system. Individuals may have multiple habitus shaped by family or school, what Glaeser and Cooper (2014) call familial habitus and institutional habitus.

Social Capital

In considering explanations for social action, Coleman (1988) introduces the concept of social capital, which draws on two primary areas of thought: sociological contexts of norms and culture, reflective of habitus, and the rational choice framework of economists. He defines social capital “by its function:”

It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors-whether persons or corporate actors-within the structure. Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible. Like physical capital and human capital, social capital is not completely fungible but may be specific to certain activities. A given form of social capital that is valuable in facilitating certain actions may be useless or even harmful for others. Unlike other forms of capital, social capital inheres in the structure of relations between actors and among actors. (p. 598)

Social capital is the relationships among individuals that enable action. Levitte (2004) incorporates additional elements into the definition of social capital: “networks and relationships, which are imbued with values, norms, and attitudes and that facilitate trust, reciprocity, and the collaborative production of tangible resources like services and

money” (p. 45). Social capital is one’s ability to leverage his or her actions within networks and relationships to access tangible resources.

Relationships among individuals constitute social networks, which can take the form of strong ties among family and close friends or weak ties among acquaintances (Granovetter, 1973). Weak ties are acquaintances that one does not interact with frequently, but they are crucial for individuals in the job market. For individuals considering career options, weak ties are a source of information about job opportunities; acquaintances constitute networks big enough to provide information that the individual may not have known otherwise, but not so extensive as to circulate the information widely enough to negate the benefits of the connections (Granovetter, 1973). Rural communities are small enough that most people know each other in some capacity, thus creating extensive networks of ties, both strong and weak. Youth in these communities get information about opportunities through these networks.

These connections can facilitate one in achieving goals, thus it is the structure of relationships that enable action. Networks of acquaintances can support entrepreneurship and provide more opportunities for individual job seekers (Levitte, 2004) and expose individuals to different options for education and careers. The norms and networks in which social capital exist can also provide support for education as adult members of a community support youth (Smith et al., 1995). The flow of information is as relevant as the information that is passed among members of the network, but it is this information that is passed that helps inform what youth perceive as their options and the expectations others have for them. In their study of immigrants and their labor markets, Pfeffer and Parra (2009) found that weak ties provided information on opportunities outside of ethnic

enclaves, while strong ties benefitted from the information brought in from weak ties in addition to the benefits strong ties share.

Social networks further provide visibility to options that students may consider for college and career plans. Seeing others in their network attend college or perform careers can inspire youth to consider those aspirations for themselves. Students' aspirations depend on the information they have available about what their choices may be. After options are identified, one faces making the actual choice. However, choices are sometimes constrained by limited information available at the time of the choice, which is considered "bounded rationality, or the inability to consider every potential option or compare incentives when making a choice.

Within the framework of bounded rationality, individuals make decisions about their choices according to the limited information available to them. Morgan (2008) proposes a stochastic decision tree model of education choice, in which "commitment and preparation can be shown to be functions of the accuracy and precision of beliefs about future courses of behavior" (p. 549). This means that students who do not have much information about their options for pursuing a four-year degree or who have not witnessed the benefits of a four-year degree in the lives of anyone they know will be less likely to consider a four-year degree as an option for themselves; these youth will be less likely to commit to such an aspiration or take the steps necessary to pursue it. This is seen further in conflict some students perceive regarding the cost of higher education compared to immediate income and the impact of lack of information about financial aid on college choice decisions (Spohn et al., 1992)

This lack of information is a foundational concept employed by McDonough (1997) in her study of class and school structures. McDonough found people decide according to the influences of their social and physical environments: "...students cannot possibly find out information on every single choice they have available to them and instead rely on 'satisfactory alternatives' that are constrained by physical location, social networks, environmental stimuli, and their anticipated goals and consequences of college" (McDonough, 1997, p. 10). McDonough found that students' choices were limited by the information available in their environments, such as information related to understanding of curriculum requirements or application processes. Similarly, Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) found that Appalachian students cited lack of information about college as one of their biggest difficulties in making post-secondary decisions.

Social networks broaden one's ability to access others' resources through those with whom they have ties. Social networks expand one's social capital across family, peer, and community relationships. Lin (2001) conveys the usefulness of networks as one works towards realizing occupational plans as others in one's network can promote individuals through relaying recommendations of skills and reinforcing one's feelings of worthiness. Ultimately, social capital constitutes networks of individuals who provide support and opportunities for each other, which extends to college and career options. Students learn of opportunities from those around them, and they can leverage social network connections for help in making their decisions or navigating their means to attainment.

There can be negative effects of social capital as well. Networks can create homogeneity by discouraging members from pursuing pathways outside the network or

norms of the network, encouraging “conformity” (Portes & Landolt, 1996, p. 2). This may restrict the options youth consider as potential college and career choices. Woolcock and Narayan (2000) caution that social capital theory implies a heterogeneous community in which one policy benefits all individuals and the community at large, which may unintentionally deny access to programs or policies to those outside the norm who need them. Further, networks may create environments of exclusion when strong ties among members are used to deny access to newcomers or individuals who are different than the group (Portes & Landolt, 1996).

Factors that Influence Aspirations

Previous research has identified factors that influence future plans. Families are influential on youth aspirations. Relatives and family structure provide examples and shape expectations for what an individual thinks she or he can achieve. Peers and others in one’s social networks extend those influences. These relationships occur within the schools and communities in which these students grow up, and the cultures and norms of the area further reflect the opportunities and expectations individuals consider as they make their plans for after graduation. Networks and neighborhoods or communities create intertwining influences that impact youth post-secondary decisions.

Status attainment models seek to explain adult education and occupational outcomes by considering various influences. The 'Wisconsin Model' developed by Sewell, Haller, and Portes (1969) includes the influence of significant others and respondents' self-perceptions along with background characteristics of father's education and occupation. Though this model considers an individual's education as a factor for

their later status attainment, it can help conceptualize the influences that lead to educational aspirations and attainment. Both status attainment models and habitus suggest that individuals who are doing well may receive more encouragement to pursue higher goals. The highest achieving students receive encouragement from parents and teachers to continue on to college (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Corbett, 2007), while parents and teachers may lower their expectations of students who do not do as well as expected or who experience failure (Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999).

Many youth from low income families lower their expectations; according to Draught (2005), many college-qualified students from families that earn less than \$50,000 (in 2005 dollars) enroll in community college rather than attend 4-year schools because of the cost of tuition. Snyder, McLaughlin, and Coleman-Jensen (2009) found that even when youth held aspirations to attend college or work as of 2000, their levels of idleness, or lack of participation in post-secondary education or the workforce, were higher than expected by 2005. This was particularly true for young adults in rural areas and center cities more than their suburban counterparts (Snyder et al., 2009).

Youth from rural areas may also lower their aspirations to a high school diploma or two year degree (Howley, 2006). Two-year degrees serve two different functions. While they can be ends unto themselves that provide job training and certification, many students see two-year degrees as stepping stones on the path to a four-year degree. This is not often realized as many students do not complete the two-year program or face difficulty transferring their credits to a four-year college when they do complete the two-year program.

The entire model of the two-year college as a funnel to four-year colleges was questioned by Clark over 50 years ago (1960) as he examined the logistical impossibility of supporting the number of students enrolled in community college if they were to advance into the state college system. Research in the years since then has found mixed outcomes for students who attend community college; some two-year matriculants do “cool out,” as Clark labeled it, without finishing their two-year degrees nor going on to four-year degrees, but others do go on to four-year college or maintain plans to do so if they have not done so yet (Alexander, Bozick & Entwisle, 2008).

Lower percentages of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds go on to college across achievement levels than students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (McDonough, 1997). Some of these students have lower aspirations (Hanson, 1994), but even those with aspirations of a four year degree go on to enroll in college less often (MacLeod, 1987; Crockett & Crouter, 1995). Albrecht and Albrecht (2010) also found that students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds had higher educational attainment compared to students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Students from rural areas are also less likely to go to college than urban students (Furstenburg et al., 1999; Snyder et al., 2009; Byun, Meece & Irvin, 2012), while students from Appalachia had lower college enrollments than the national average despite stating aspirations to go to college (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004).

Students from families with low socioeconomic status are disadvantaged in a system where institutions favor the attributes of the middle class (Geiger, 2004). Participation in extracurricular or college preparatory activities gives middle and upper class students a competitive advantage in college admissions (Berg, 2010). Parents’

perceptions of college also shape the preparatory activities in which students participate (Hearn, 1984). First-generation college students tend to have more difficulty in college because they began to think about college later, may not have had information on what classes would have been useful to take in high school to prepare for college, and they can experience culture shock between their college and their home communities (McDonough, 1997). Students from across socioeconomic backgrounds whose parents held college degrees, regardless of the school the student attended, recalled that the question was always where to go to college rather than whether or not to attend (McDonough, 1997). This expectation reflects a college-going culture, the habitus of families for whom college attendance is a given.

The funneling of students into educational trajectories already has been noted in comparisons of socioeconomic status (Lareau, 2003). Expectations and interactions differ for students from high and low socioeconomic backgrounds. Sanchez-Jankowski (2008) found that youth in areas where a college going culture is not pervasive may be shunned or stigmatized for choosing to pursue a degree. The attitude towards education for some in rural areas is one of ambivalence (Sherman & Sage, 2011) because those who go to college often leave the areas in pursuit of careers. Socioeconomic status affects the likelihood of rural youth to attend college, with lower socioeconomic status also constraining actual attainment of educational goals (Byun et al, 2012).

Families who are able to provide economic support may delay the student's entry to the workforce (Carr & Kefalas, 2009) or provide the opportunity for the student to engage in college preparation or SAT exam preparation classes (McDonough, 1997). Participating in the kinds of activities that will benefit them in a higher education setting

may help students envision themselves in college contexts. Students attending private high school in a more affluent neighborhood were more likely to have parents who held advanced degrees. These parents also helped them to navigate the process by narrowing down prospective schools and preparing for their college applications, including providing SAT preparation courses (McDonough, 1997). Getting in to college represents only one difficulty students face.

Paying for college as tuition increases faster than earnings is a concern for students from all backgrounds. Previous generations were able to go to college with lower tuition relative to wages, and many had benefits such as the GI bill available to help pay for other costs (Draut, 2005). College was more accessible to anyone and the income gap between high school diploma and college educated adults was smaller (Draut, 2005).

Lack of information about financial aid opportunities is one of the biggest challenges faced by more recent prospective students, especially those in rural communities (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004). Some youth may “drift” or “flounder” through jobs just to pay the bills without being able to focus on an educational or occupational pathway of their choosing (Arnett, 2004). Students at the public school in a working class community did not know many people who had attended college. One student described applying to a school on a whim, filling out a financial aid form, and assuming that it would just work out without any planning of how she would pay for school (McDonough, 1997).

Students who are unfamiliar with the process of applying to college need help. Belasco (2013) finds that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds benefit from

interacting with school counselors, which increases their likelihood to attend college. Though they may benefit the most, McDonough (1997) found that many low-income students felt ignored by school personnel, while others were emotionally supported in their decisions to seek out colleges despite having no one to help provide information on how best to proceed. These students were unsure of how to choose schools and apply, and had little guidance and few resources to help inform these decisions.

These experiences are contrary to the phenomenon of what Carr and Kefalas (2009), and many before them, call "brain drain," the push for high-achieving rural youth to leave their communities for other opportunities. While some rural students will leave for education and then return to work in rural communities, leaving for education often begins a permanent departure and migration out of rural areas for many of these youth. Interaction with school counselors and academic advisors can help guide students in their decision making processes, whether they end up going to college or not (Draut, 2005).

Choosing to stay in rural home communities leads some youth to forgo the advanced educations that would be irrelevant for those who live in an area where many job opportunities do not require a college education (Corbett, 2007). School culture and teachers can essentially train students to leave communities that are deemed deficient in educational and job opportunities (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Howley & Howley, 2010; Theobald & Wood, 2010), especially for youth considered the best and brightest. Contact with school personnel fosters a sense of closeness to community among high-achieving students, which makes some of these high achieving students more likely to want to stay in their hometowns (Petrin, Schafft, & Meece, 2014). Social support can be an important

influence on aspirations. A sense of school belonging contributes to academic motivation (Goodenow & Grady, 1993).

For some individuals, staying in home communities and adapting to local economic structures demonstrates an identity of resilience and ability, even a source of pride for one's endurance (Corbett, 2007; Howley & Howley, 2010). In struggling economies, students who wish to stay in their communities may focus on the nonmonetary benefits of their rural communities, giving occupational or educational aspirations less consideration. Sherman (2009) found this to be the case in the rural community she studied. After industry moved out and left many in the area unemployed, residents still gave glowing reports of the community, focusing on the joys of things like having venison to eat. In a community where many are unemployed, status was categorized along moral fault lines. Doing any type of honest work was valued in an area where many people rely on government assistance. In a community like this, there is little reward for going on to higher education. Students from communities like these may prioritize their connections to home and choose post-secondary aspirations based on what is available in the community. Other students are unaware of the options available beyond the local communities and so make post-secondary education and career choices based on what they see available around them.

This study seeks to gain insight into what living in a rural area means to the respondents and whether or not the opportunities or constraints these locales may present were a consideration when identifying educational aspirations and plans for the future. The structuring environments of living in a rural community may be salient for education, particularly concerning the trajectories of rural youth into higher education.

These competing identity frameworks reflect broader issues within rural communities, which McDonough, Gildersleeve, and Jarsky (2010) dub the "golden cage." This represents the lack of a "college going culture" (p. 204) in rural areas, or the idea that college attendance is inconsistent with the desire of these students to stay in rural areas. This makes sense in the context of place literature. Interactions within communities reinforce a sense of community which can provide a feeling of purpose and power to individuals (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Bess, Fisher, Sonn, and Bishop (2002) base community in shared emotional connections and the fulfillment of needs. There may be conflict between the needs for community and staying close to family and/or pursuing local careers with the desire for education and careers more likely to be available outside the area.

Despite this incongruity, rurality may also have positive effects on educational attainment. Byun, Meece, and Irvin (2012) found a rural advantage for students in communities with active social engagement, such as involved parents and participation in church activities. In their analysis, rural students whose parents were more involved and more likely to attend church had increased likelihoods of completing a bachelor's degree. Despite these potential contradictions and, ultimately, differences in attainment, both rural and urban youth have similarly high aspirations (Snyder et al., 2009). This may reflect a struggle rural youth may have resolving their desires for education with their connection to rural places that do not offer such opportunities close to home (Hektner, 1995).

Seeking further information on how rural students make these decisions, Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) examined students in Appalachia and found that having

family members who went to college made some students more likely to want to attend college. They deemed this effect "familism" and considered it, along with "localism" and "historicism," to make up a defining character of rurality in Appalachia. They also found support for a dismissive view of higher education and attachment to staying local as reasons students cited for not wanting to go to college.

There is conflicting evidence of social support in rural areas. Structural constraints in rural areas may negatively affect the likelihood that students receive social support or encouragement towards higher education goals (Smith et al., 1995), though more recent research suggests that rural areas may have more social support for students who wish to pursue higher education than their non-rural counterparts (Byun et al., 2012b).

Rural youth who discussed their aspirations with their parents were more likely to aspire to college degrees (Byun et al., 2012b). However, sense of belonging may also contribute to lowered aspirations when students are strongly attached to their communities and would prefer not to leave for education or employment (Howley, 2006).

Chapter 2: Summary

This study examines how rural high school students make decisions about their futures, so it is important to understand their aspirations and their plans. Aspirations are an almost idealized hope for the future, what youth think they would like to achieve. Expectations are a more realistic assessment of what they think they will achieve, while their future plans are the actions they pursue. The constructs of habitus and self-efficacy inform individuals' preferences and perceptions of ability. Habitus serves as a regulating

function in that it shapes one's preferences in accordance with the environment in which he or she is immersed, and though it originated to explain social class, it can be extended to other social delineations as well (e.g., locations such as rural or urban areas). This shaping of one's preferences directly aligns with defining aspirations as it provides the context for an individual to evaluate the perceived appropriateness and likelihood of attaining such goals. The convergence of one's preferences and one's perception of his or her ability to succeed in attaining those preferences form one's aspirations. To better understand how both plans and aspirations are formed, it is necessary to understand what influences individuals' preferences that lead to choices about the future.

The theory of habitus presents the idea that individuals' preferences are shaped by their surroundings, as the dominant culture positively reinforces particular behaviors and choices. Habitus explains choices through external validation, which may not account for an individual's opinions of which of his or her preferences is the best choice. Glaesser and Cooper (2014) discuss multiple types of habitus, familial and institutional. The interactions among influences presented in the framework can be interpreted as one habitus with multiple influences. If an individual's habitus represents his or her worldview, it can be interpreted that an individual would have one view that has been informed by multiple influences. These influences create layers that can explain differing habitus among individuals in the same family or same school or community. No two people have identically overlapping influences, and so habitus can emerge differently across individuals, even in the same family.

Social capital extends the idea that individual actions are situated within a network of relationships. This network is normative, like habitus, but also provides

opportunities for individuals to make choices by providing more information about options available from the extended network and by taking beneficial actions within the network.

College and career choices happen for rural youth within these frameworks. These influences blend together into an individual's preferences and perception of his or her self-efficacy, which can then inform aspirations.

Previous research provides a foundation for understanding the influences that build the frameworks for these choices. Families, peers, and communities serve as enculturating networks in which rural youth form their preferences and then make their decisions. Family and school members develop one's habitus as rural youth learn the norms and dominant preferences of their groups. Social capital reaffirms or discourages youth action based on their close and extended peer networks. Communities provide many of the options which youth will consider as their choices. All of these influences – family, peers, schools and communities – shape the preferences that lead to aspirations and also provide inputs that youth weigh as they make their decisions regarding which future plans to enact. The results chapters that follow will explore if and how these influences are considered by respondents as they made their post-secondary plans.

Chapter 3

Study and Research Methods

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the influences that affect the post-secondary decisions of youth from rural communities. As discussed below, a qualitative design is the best approach for understanding experiences from the respondents' perspectives, and so this study uses in-depth interviews to learn how respondents made these decisions as described in their own words. This chapter will outline the research design and steps in the study, ethical considerations and data management, researcher positionality and establishing credibility, how sites and participants were selected, and finally how data was collected.

Qualitative Methods

A qualitative approach best addresses the research questions in this study. Specific methodology will be addressed in more detail in the next chapter, but this section briefly outlines the methodological foundation on which the research design is built.

Habitus and social capital represent uniquely individual frameworks, and a "person centered approach" (Kloep, Hendry, Gardner, & Seage, 2010) is useful for addressing questions intrinsically defined by each respondent. What are rural youths' plans for after high school? What influences their decisions? What shapes their habitus, and how do they make their decisions? There is no one process to impose on participants because each student has a unique background, resources, constraints and aspirations which will shape the decision making process. This decision making process is what this study seeks to identify and explain. To understand multiple perspectives on such a process, this study is grounded in phenomenology. Creswell (2007) notes that

phenomenology is best employed for studying problems "in which it is important to understand several individuals' common or shared experiences" (p. 60). Though there is no one pathway through high school, all students face the uncertainty of what comes next. Youth all undergo the experience of planning their futures, and while their perspectives and the influences on the decisions they make will differ, many of the same factors affect decisions they make as their aspirations transition to concrete plans.

Qualitative research is concerned with representing the most accurate portrayal of the truth as perceived by respondents, which means staying true to the local meanings and expressions used by respondents (Emerson, Kretz, & Shaw, 1995). Qualitative interviews allow the researcher to explore participants' aspirations and what shaped them. An in-depth interview "enables the participants to speak their mind and explore their experiences in their own way.... to tell their own story, free from the constraints of a restrictive and inhibitive set of interview questions" (Cope, 2005, p. 179). The benefit of in-depth interviews is that it gives participants the power to develop and explain their stories.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format informed by the literature reviewed in this chapter, featuring questions designed to guide the respondent through recalling the choices made and actions taken leading up to the decisions regarding their post-graduation plans. Questions regarding influences were added to more deeply understand how the decision making process unfolded and what led to each step on the way. After identifying what aspirations the youth decided to work towards, questions were further designed to elicit information about the influences the respondents considered when making those plans. The semi-structured questions focused broadly on

the areas of family, peer networks, school and school personnel, and their communities, which have been discussed in this chapter as influential on college and career choice. Despite this guiding framework, it was important to allow participants to direct their responses according to their own experiences. Open-ended questions allow respondents to interpret and supply their own meaning to what is being asked.

Varied meanings are likely given the varied aspirations and plans discussed in previous literature. Since aspirations are not evenly distributed across the population, a random sample in this study could have potentially resulted in having participants with similar post-secondary plans. Students with different plans may have been missed. To best capture the diversity of influences and experiences students have in making these plans, a purposive sample will be used to "show different perspectives on the problem, process, or event" (Creswell, 2007, p. 75). Students' plans and perspectives differ, and this study can aid in understanding the points of similarity and divergence among students' plans and their influences.

Qualitative methods should enable this study to identify students' varied perspectives and the plans that developed from those views. The framework of habitus, rational choice, and social capital provides understanding on reinforcing students' beliefs and cultural perspectives regarding their own efficacy and considerations of what are reasonable options for their futures. Previous literature has shown the expectations and examples of family and those in one's social network to be influential sources of information students turn to for identifying their options; schools, school personnel, and communities further provide models to which students aspire, persuade students to pursue goals, or discourage plans that do not align with the resources or norms of the local

community. I expect the findings of this study to provide a deeper understanding of the factors that influence students' aspirations, how they decide what expectations are realistic within those aspirations, and then the actions they take to pursue concrete plans.

Research Design

The research design uses a qualitative approach to better understand the meaning rural youth give to their decisions about what to do after high school. Before moving forward with any research, I obtained approval for Human Subjects from the Office of Research Protections. The study was designed around conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with respondents. In order to facilitate this method, I considered the phases of qualitative interview studies described by Weiss (1994): “sampling, preparing for interviewing, conducting the interviews, analyzing the data,” before ultimately “writing the report” (p. 14).

Though Weiss lists it second, I started with “preparing for interviewing.” He describes this as figuring out what to ask. Reviewing existing literature provided the inspiration for this study and from there I developed the conceptual framework as discussed in Chapter Two. This was really the first step in embarking on this research. From there, influences found in previous research to impact college and career choice were used as a foundation for designing interviews that would best encourage respondents to reflect on and expand discussion around their own influences.

Given the aim of the research questions and in-depth interview approach, the next step was to choose the sample to interview. I started by identifying the schools from which to sample rural youth. I chose to focus on my state of residence, Kentucky, for two

reasons. First, Kentucky has a lot of rural places. Only three of its 120 counties are urban per the 2010 U.S. Census definition of “a densely settled core of census tracts and/or census blocks that meet minimum population density requirements,” which is a population of 50,000 for an urbanized area. Second, it was reasonable for me to travel within the state with the limited, self-funded budget this study on which this project operated. I chose four school districts to serve as the sites for this study, and I first recruited the school counselor from each school to participate in an interview. This process is detailed in the section on Site Selection.

After selecting the sites for the study, I began data collection by visiting the schools. Site visits occurred in May 2014, at the end of the respondents’ senior year of high school and in the two weeks leading up to graduating. The timing was important because the focus of these interviews was on their post-secondary plans, not just their aspirations for the future. I wanted to know what they were about to undertake, and so I wanted to ask them at the time they would be acting on these plans.

While there, I toured the schools and conducted the interviews with the school counselors, which are both described in detail in the section on Data Collection. This provided rich background on the schools and communities by enabling me to see these places firsthand. The interviews with school counselors also provided additional context for the schools and the environments in which the participants were making their post-secondary decisions. This also enabled triangulating the data for reliability, which is discussed in the section on Establishing Credibility.

During the site visits, I was able to meet students who would be in the sample pool to introduce myself and the research. I also used the visit to administer a screening

questionnaire. Since this study seeks to examine influences on how youth made their decisions, it is important to talk to respondents who have made different decisions to see if and how influences on their decisions differed. Drawing on previous research, I identified five categories of post-secondary plans that I wanted to have represented in the sample: attending a two-year college or technical school, attending a four-year college, joining the military, entering the workforce, or not yet decided. As discussed in the conceptual framework, I chose to construct a purposive sample to ensure that respondents included in the study varied in their plans for after high school. To construct the purposive sample, I needed to find out the post-secondary plans of the students in the sample pool, for which I used the screening questionnaire as described thoroughly in the section on Participant Selection.

Using the information from the screening questionnaire, I then chose and contacted students from the sample pool to recruit participants, which is also discussed in the section on Participant Selection. I conducted the interviews beginning the second week of June 2014. Again, the timing of the interviews was chosen to closely follow respondents' high school graduations. Interviews were conducted by phone with one exception – an email interview, which will be described in the section on Data Collection. The timeline of these steps can be seen in Table 3.1, and each phase will be discussed in more detail in the sections that follow.

Table 3.1. Timeline of Steps in the Research Process	
<u>Steps</u>	<u>Timeline</u>
Research design and review of literature	Fall 2013 – Spring 2014
Site selection and school contacts	April – May 2014
Site visits	May 19 – 30, 2014
Contact participants and conduct interviews	June 9 – July 25, 2014

Ethics and Data Management

This study completed all research protection reviews necessary by Penn State and the Graduate School. The Office of Research Protections deemed this study exempt from Internal Review Board initial and ongoing review according to federal regulations:

45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: (i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

Great care was taken to ensure the integrity of this study. Informed consent was required of all participants. The school counselors received paper copies of the consent form at the time of the in-person interview, and they verbally confirmed their consent in their recordings. The students interviewed by phone were read the informed consent and asked to state their consent verbally before the interview began. A paper copy of the consent form was then mailed or emailed, depending on their preferences, to the students after the interview to keep for their records.

Though IRB approved the use of telephone interviews in this study, one respondent no longer had phone service and preferred to be interviewed by email. I contacted the Office of Research Protection to get permission to change this interview format from telephone to email. Since the study was exempt and the ORP contact assigned to my review concluded that switching the format from a telephone interview to an email interview would pose no additional risk to the participant, it was deemed acceptable to proceed without further review. The student who responded via email was emailed the consent form at the beginning of the process, and due to the less secure

nature of electronic communication, her emails were immediately deleted after copying her replies into a document.

Data were stored in a password protected folder on a locked computer. The document compiling the email interview replies, the files of the saved interview recordings and the interview transcripts are stored in a password protected folder on a locked computer. Backup copies of these files are kept on a separate password protected hard-drive. The files were assigned numeric identifiers and these IDs are matched with the names only in a separate document.

Personally identifying information was removed from responses and kept in separate documents. First, data from paper forms were entered into spreadsheets, and the paper copies are stored in a locked fire-proof safe. I shuffled the paper screening questionnaires and entered the responses into a spreadsheet, which I then sorted by the students' plans. This grouped students with like plans but kept the students ordered randomly otherwise. I then assigned each student a numeric ID, a three digit number where the first digit indicates school 1-4 and then the second and third digit counted the students from that school. For example, student 216 was the sixteenth student on the spreadsheet from the second school district I visited. I then split the spreadsheet into two separate Excel files, one that maintained the students' real names, contact information, and numeric ID to use as a key, and another file that linked their numeric IDs to pseudonyms and to their screening questionnaire responses for gender and post-graduation plans.

Protecting the confidentiality of participants is important for this study. Though the risk of discussing their plans for after high school is minimal for participants, it was

necessary to establish a secure context in which the students felt they could be open about the concerns that influenced those decisions. Pseudonyms are used for the locations and participants. The school counselors are referred to by pronouns only to intentionally make it difficult to connect any one counselor's replies across topics and increase the confidentiality of their replies.

The school districts are referred to as Derby, Bluegrass, Cardinal, and Wildcat. I chose the four pseudonyms for the school districts because, as a recent Kentucky transplant, to me these names represent Kentucky as a whole and are not specific to one county. "Bluegrass" is the official state music, and the grass itself abounds in Kentucky fields. Though the horse race is run in Louisville, KY, people are familiar with the Kentucky "Derby." With no national league sports teams in any sport anywhere in the state, college athletics are a major fan institution in Kentucky, with loyalties split between the "Cardinals" and the "Wildcats." Even those who may not consider themselves fans can still identify the Cards and Cats as emblematic of Kentucky in a broad view. This is my way of keeping the pseudonyms in the spirit of Kentucky, while ensuring that no one name can be linked to any one county or school. The pseudonyms have been assigned to their school districts at random.

The students' pseudonyms were chosen based on the Social Security Administration's list of the top baby names in Kentucky in 1996, the year that a participant who was 18 years old at the time of the study in 2014 would have been born. The participants were listed in the screening questionnaire spreadsheet in random order after shuffling the paper responses and sorting only by post-secondary plan. I went down the spreadsheet and assigned each respondent a name from the top 10 births. Assigning

the pseudonyms this way was both systematic and random so that no connections exist between the respondents and their pseudonyms.

Researcher Positionality and Establishing Credibility

The focus of the study is to understand the subjective views of its participants about the influences students considered while deciding what to do after high school as told from their own perspectives. To keep the interpretation of this process in terms of the respondents' own understandings, it is necessary for me as the researcher to set aside my own understanding of how the process unfolded for me. As someone who has graduated from high school and experienced the process of choosing a trajectory, it is important for me to stay aware of my own perspective to avoid biasing the research. The philosophical assumptions of phenomenology call for a bracketing of presupposition, which requires thoroughly examining the words one uses to discuss phenomena and being aware of one's perspectives. Bracketing requires a transparency of self-perceptions, being aware of one's preconceived ideas and then setting them aside to see what is present in the data as it is (Moustakas, 1994). By using bracketing, the researcher is able to inform the qualitative study through previous literature as a foundation for the direction of inquiry, while also avoiding potential sources of bias based in personal experience.

Bracketing was implemented in two ways to help avoid bias. First, as the researcher, I took time apart from the research to reflect on my own experiences in making post-secondary college and career decisions. Even as a graduate student working on this dissertation, I still am only slightly sure that I have figured out what I want to be “when I grow up.” In some ways, I did not have a post-secondary “plan” of my own, at

least not in high school, which partly fueled my interest in finding out how others went about it. This made me aware that respondents may not have conscientiously thought about their plans in the context of a decision making process, which was helpful as I constructed the interview guide. The interviews were semi-structured to ensure that specific areas of interest were covered, and so questions were drafted, but it also enabled me to be more responsive with my prompts and allow the respondents to drive the interviews by sharing their own perspectives. My own lack of plan also made it easier to approach the analysis because it was not something I had thought much about prior to this research. While analyzing interview data, things respondents said would spark memories of my own experiences in high school. These memories had not shaped my own decision making, which made it easier to step away from my own nostalgia.

The second way bracketing is employed to reduce the risk of bias is through systematic analysis of these data. Moustakas (1994) offers guidelines for the analysis of phenomenological interview data: looking for significant phrases and clustering themes. Identifying these themes provides issues on which to focus the analysis. An issue-focused analysis is ideal for this research question because it moves "from discussion of issues within one area to discussion of issues within another, with each area logically connected to the others" (Weiss, 1994, p.154). In this way, analysis of the data stays focused on what the participants have said, while the researcher's own perspective is minimized. Having concretely identified my own near lack of perspective on the process, which is itself a perspective, also allowed me to check the themes that emerged in the data against my own views. Identifying points of divergence between my experiences and respondents ensured that I was not imposing my own perspective on respondents' stories.

Additionally, the interview guide was carefully constructed to ensure reliability. Wording was specifically chosen to increase validity, and some of the questions used in this study were previously established through use in prior research and now are accepted as appropriate interview questions. This will be discussed further in the section on Data Collection.

Another way this study was designed to ensure the most accurate representation of the respondents' perspectives was to triangulate the data. Triangulation helps confirm the credibility of the data by providing additional sources of information to align with the statements from respondents (Cho & Trent, 2006). This is a way for qualitative researchers to contextualize the statements of experience expressed by respondents. The philosophical perspective of phenomenology is grounded in the ontology that there is no single objective reality; rather, the study is concerned with representing to the best of its ability an accurate portrayal of the reality constructed by participants. Therefore, these interview data represent perceived realities of respondents, which can be subjectively interpreted. Site visits, interviews with school counselors, background information on the schools and communities of respondents provide objective points of comparison. Supporting materials from the site visits and school background information will provide multiple sources of data for triangulation that, when integrated with the varied experiences, or multiple realities experienced by the students, will provide credible insights into establishing the phenomenon of the processes undergone by rural students as they emerge from high school and enact their post-secondary aspirations.

Site Selection

In 2014, when this study was conducted, the state of Kentucky had 120 regular public school districts in 120 counties, where each county shares the same boundaries as its school district. There were an additional 54 independent public school districts at the time of this study. Independent school districts operate separately from the county school districts in the areas in which they overlap, but they are regular public schools. The county school district represents the entire county, while independent school districts serve individual communities within counties (KSBA, 2011). School board members in county school districts are elected per divisions, and board members in independent districts are elected at large (KSBA, 2011).

This study focuses on rural communities. The research questions specifically seek to examine the post-secondary plans of graduating high school seniors from rural communities, and so the sites for this study necessarily had to be rural. The school districts included in this study, therefore, were selected based on criteria defining their rurality. I categorized the counties and school districts then selected those for consideration for study based upon certain designations within the following parameters: the four definitions of rural and urban used by the Economic Research Service (ERS) at the United States Department of Agriculture, their Rural-Urban Commuting Area codes, the National Center for Education Statistics Urban Centric codes, if the school district contains a high school with grades level 9 through 12, and whether or not the counties are Appalachian.

The ERS uses Census data to split rural areas along three definitions using Census places as the basic geography. Census places can be incorporated places (e.g.,

municipalities) or Census-designated places (CDPs). The ERS assigns three definitions of rural according to population size for any area outside either incorporated places or CDPs, as defined in Table 3.2. The ERS also uses the Census definition of urbanized area, which is also defined in Table 3.2.

Incorporated Place	An incorporated place is an area within a single state or equivalent entity that has been established to provide governmental functions for a concentration of people. It may be a city, town, village, borough, or have another place name designation or legal description.*
Census Designated Places (CDPs)	Areas of settled concentrations of any size population that are not legally incorporated under the laws of the state in which they are located. Boundaries often coincide with visible geography and have no legal status but must be contained within a single state and may not extend into an incorporated place.*
Rural Definition #1	All areas outside Census places with 2,500 or more people. These areas have populations of 2,499 or less. As of the year 2000, these areas included 87.7 million people, 31% of U.S. population, and 97% of U.S. land area. †
Rural Definition #2	All areas outside Census places with 10,000 or more people. Rural Definition #2 includes those in Rural Definition #1. The areas that fit Rural Definition #2 have populations less than or equal to 9,999. As of the year 2000, these areas constitute 115.8 million people 41% of U.S. population, and 98% of U.S. land area. †
Rural Definition #3	All areas outside Census places with 50,000 or more people, which includes places that fall under Rural Definitions #1 and #2. These areas have populations less than or equal to 49,999. As of the year 2000, these areas constitute 177 million people, 63% of U.S. population, and 99% of U.S. land area. †
Urbanized Area	All Census places with populations greater than or equal to 50,000 people. †
* U.S. Census Bureau, 2012, Geographic Terms and Concepts – Place. † ERS Rural Definitions, 2007, Kentucky.	

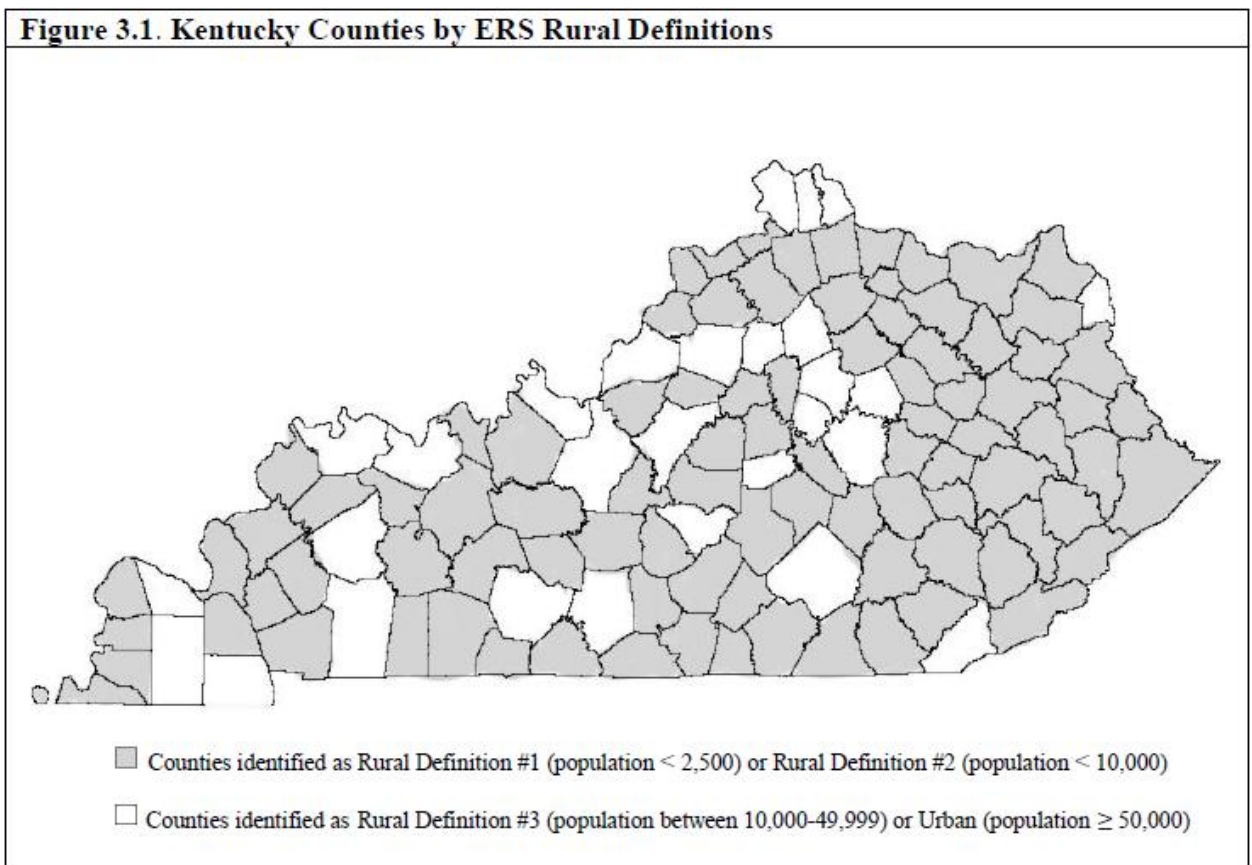
A single county can contain areas with different ERS definitions of rural or urban, though this study looked only at rural areas. I classified each county based on the Census place with the largest population contained within the county. Therefore, even if the largest

geographical area of the county fit any of the rural definitions, I categorized the county as urban if it contained any Census place with a population greater than or equal to 50,000. Since the boundaries of the school district are shared with the boundaries of the entire county, the students from the rural areas in those counties often attend schools located in the urbanized areas of the county.

Only three of the 120 counties in Kentucky contain any urban census places with populations greater than or equal to 50,000, and I categorized these counties as urban for this study. The other 117 counties fall into one of the three ERS definitions of rural. I identified 25 counties that fell within Rural Definition #3, which contain some Census places with populations up to 49,999. Forty-four counties in Kentucky are defined under Rural Definition #1, containing no Census places with populations greater than 2,499 anywhere in the county, and 48 counties qualify as rural under Rural Definition #2, containing no Census places with populations greater than 9,999 anywhere in the county. The sites chosen for this study were selected from among these 92 counties, which are shaded in the map of Kentucky in Figure 3.1.

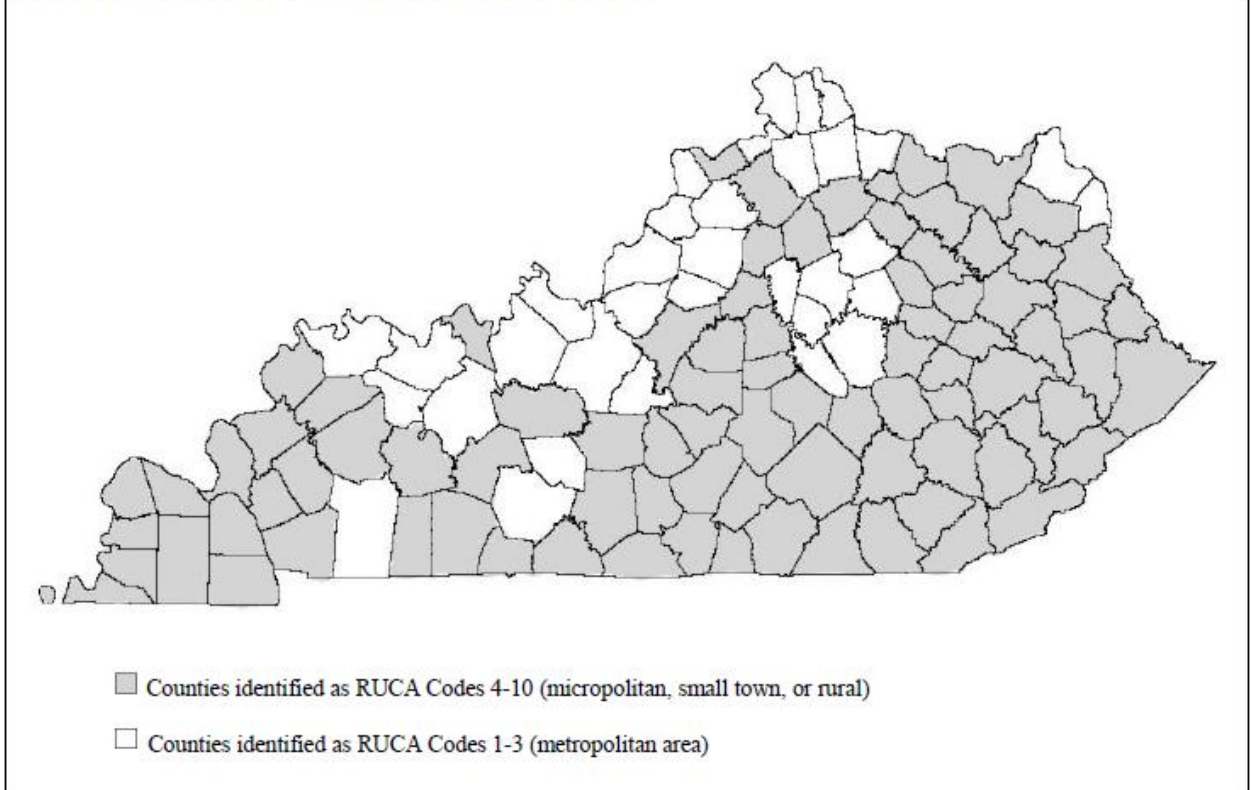
Counties can be understood in more detail by looking at census tracts, which are the smallest units of area available for coding. The second criterion I used to select counties for this study was their Rural-Urban Commuting Area, or RUCA, codes. The United States Department of Agriculture classifies census tracts based on these RUCA codes to further assess interactions and influence between neighboring areas. These codes are created using “measures of population density, urbanization, and daily commuting to identify urban cores and adjacent territory that is economically integrated with those cores” (USDA ERS, 2015). Primary RUCA codes span 1 through 10, where codes 1-3

represent areas that have commuting into or out of metropolitan areas, and codes 4-10 are non-metropolitan areas that commute among other non-metro areas. Secondary codes within these 10 primary codes further refine these areas according to high or low rates of commuting and by the kinds of areas to which they commute: small urban clusters (populations less than 10,000), large urban clusters (populations less than 50,000), or rural areas. These “urban cluster” designations still refer to non-metropolitan areas and overlap with the three definitions of rural used by the ERS.



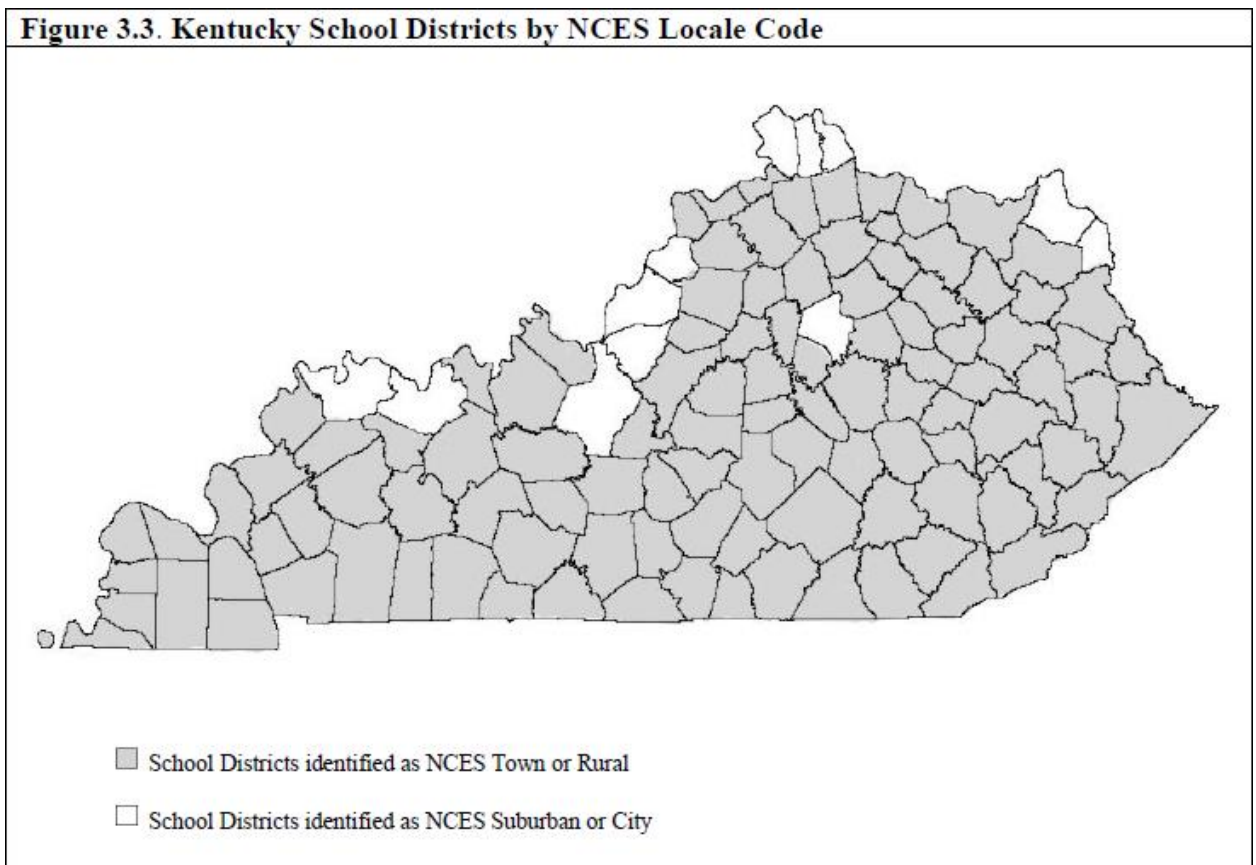
Since RUCA codes occur at the census tract level, a single county can contain various RUCA codes. Eighty-six counties in Kentucky contain the rural RUCA codes 4-10 and no urban RUCA codes 1-3 (Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2. Kentucky Counties by RUCA Codes



All counties selected for this study contain primary RUCA codes 4-10. Any county that had at least one census tract with a RUCA code of 1-3 was not chosen, even if the majority of the county was coded 4-10. This means that some of the counties in the study are near counties that contain urban clusters, while some of the counties in this study are near only rural counties. Students in the counties near only rural areas who may be considering employment and educational options in and around their communities do not have easy access to more geographically distant urban options that would require relocation or lengthy commutes to pursue. The proximity to small urban areas in neighboring counties for students in rural counties may provide different employment and educational opportunities for students considering post-secondary plans in relation to what is available in or near their home communities.

The next criterion I looked at when choosing my study sites was their National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) classifications. NCES uses urban centric codes to classify school districts according to their locations as city, suburb, town, or rural. These categories are refined by size or proximity to urban areas. The city and suburb categories are defined according to their own sizes: large, midsize, or small. The town and rural categories are subdivided according to their distance from urbanized areas: distant, remote, or fringe. The school districts in this study are all coded as town or rural, including any combination of distant, remote, or fringe (Figure 3.3).



To classify the school district overall, NCES states:

A school district's locale code is not assigned on the basis of the central office address. It is derived from the locale codes of the schools in the district. If 50 percent or more of the public school students attend schools with the same locale

code, that locale code is assigned to the district. If no single locale code accounts for 50 percent of the students, then the major category (city, suburb, town, or rural) with the greatest percent of students determines the locale; the locale code assigned is the smallest or most remote subcategory for that category. (CCD, Identification of Rural Locales)

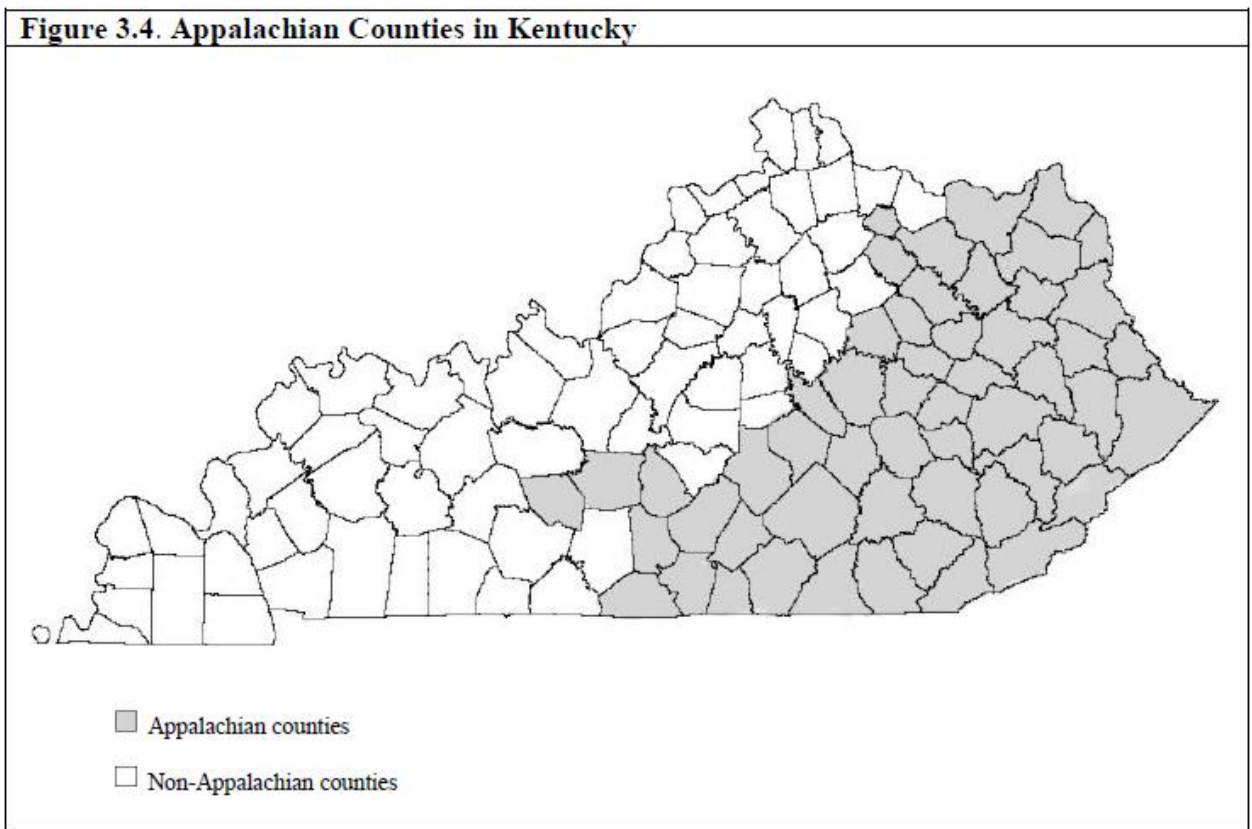
Much like the census tracts used for RUCA coding, school districts can contain multiple urban centric codes depending on where each school in the district is located, but the district overall is coded according to the code that represents the majority of students in the district.

After narrowing down the list of potential school districts according to their definitions of rural and RUCA codes, I looked up the remaining school districts' NCES codes to ensure that their schools were within town or rural codes. This did not eliminate any additional counties.

This process of elimination occurred as I layered the ERS rural definitions, RUCA codes, and NCES urban centric codes. Among the counties that remained, I needed to locate the high schools since this study focuses on graduating seniors. Searching the Common Core of Data, I was able to find each school within the remaining school districts. These data provided the types of schools and the ranges of grades within the high schools. Some school districts have multiple regular high schools, and so in my categorization, I listed each high school separately. I also listed independent high schools as potential high school choices within the county school districts that their independent school district overlaps. First, I listed only high schools that contain 9th through 12th grades, or traditional senior high schools. Some school districts in Kentucky do not have a high school that teaches grades 9 through 12 and so their high schools are combined with middle schools and sometimes elementary schools, where one school serves the entire pre-kindergarten through 12th grade population. I also did not list charter schools or

alternative schools and treatment programs, which are specifically aimed at working with unique populations. After eliminating school districts without eligible high schools, this left 69 school districts containing 80 possible high schools for possible inclusion in this study.

One final characteristic was noted in choosing sites for this study, whether or not a county was considered Appalachian. Nearly half of Kentucky is part of Appalachia. According to the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), there are 54 counties in Kentucky considered part of the Appalachian region, shown shaded in the map in Figure 3.4.



ARC also monitors economic conditions in these areas and has created a composite variable that "compares each county's averages for three economic indicators—three-year average unemployment rate, per capita market income, and

poverty rate—with national averages. The resulting values are summed and averaged to create a composite index value for each county." (ARC, County Economic Status).

Nearly all of the Appalachian counties in Kentucky are considered in economic distress or at-risk, and most of the counties deemed to be transitioning out of distress still contain areas within them that are considered distressed. Of the 69 counties still eligible to be chosen as sites for this study, 45 counties were Appalachian. Given the nearly equal divide between Appalachian and non-Appalachian counties in Kentucky overall, I made sure to include at least one school district in an Appalachian county and one school district that is not in an Appalachian county.

After narrowing down the school districts from which to choose my sites, I chose which school districts to contact. This was done randomly to not favor one category of schools or another. The categories were used to eliminate school districts that I did not want to include, not to choose school districts to specifically contact, other than to be sure that at least one Appalachian and one non-Appalachian school district were included among the four school districts in this study.

I chose four high schools as sites for this study because that provided variation among the various codes included in the school district elimination process. There is no one type of rural, and so I chose to interview a few students across a few schools rather than many students at one rural school.

To contact the schools, I reached out to the principals via contact information available online. I telephoned eight high schools in total before getting the four I needed to participate. Since entering schools requires differing permissions from one school district to another, I opted to contact the principals directly to ensure that I would have

permission to come to the school. The principal could also act as a liaison if necessary in case school districts required that I request permission from the school board to conduct my research. The principals who agreed to participate did not request that I seek permission from the school boards. The principals of the school districts who declined to participate cited poor timing as the reason. My preference to visit the schools and talk to students and the counselor during the very busy time before graduation when school trips and testing were planned made scheduling difficult. The principals in those schools expressed interest in my research despite the inability to accommodate the time I would have needed to spend at their schools.

When I reached out to the principals, I identified myself as a graduate student at Penn State and explained the nature of my study, that I wanted to visit their schools for a time to be agreed upon at their convenience so that I could meet with and interview a school counselor and then meet with members of the senior class to screen them for participation at a future time. This reassured the principals that I would not be taking up too much time from school personnel or students during a very busy time of the year. Once the principals approved, they put me in contact with the school counselors. When I called the school counselors, I explained the study and asked if they would be willing to participate. If any counselor had said no despite the principal's approval, I was prepared to eliminate that school and try another one, but that did not happen and all four school counselors I contacted agreed to participate. I arranged times to meet at their convenience, and from there, I visited the sites to meet the counselors and students in person.

Participant Selection

To select student participants from among the four school district sites, the intent of the research design was to use a purposive sample by categorizing students according to their post-secondary plans. For this purpose, I used a screening questionnaire (Appendix A) to get information on students' plans and personal information. I administered the questionnaire while visiting the schools and meeting with the students in person. The screening questionnaire included open ended fields for students to supply their name, age, gender, and preferred contact methods. A multiple choice question that included a place to fill in an "other" response asked students to identify their plans for after graduation, and yes/no options were given for students to indicate their English proficiency and if they participate in an IEP. I classified students according to their responses in these areas. Age, IEP, and English proficiency were used to narrow down the sample pool, and gender and plans for after graduation were used to construct the purposive sample. Using the contact information they provided, I then contacted students by telephone and email to invite them to participate in the study, which will be further discussed in the section on Data Collection.

Two-hundred and fifty-eight students took the screening questionnaire. I divided students into the first category based on their ages. Of these 258 students, 45 students indicated that they were 18 years old. Only those students aged 18 or older were considered eligible to participate so that they would be able to provide their own informed consent. Students younger than 18 years old would have needed to get their parents' permission to participate in the study. Since this study focuses on students' decisions about transitioning to adulthood with graduating from high school serving as a

marker of that transition, I wanted to treat the students as autonomous adults who have made these decisions and were about to enact them. The interview questions focused on the influences respondents felt impacted their decisions, whether these were positive or negative, and specifically about their families. Having respondents get permission from their parents could have biased their responses if their families were particularly influential in their decisions. For this reason, students aged 17 were removed from the sample pool.

Students were also screened for participation in exceptional student programs, or “special education,” and students with exceptional needs were removed from the sample pool. The questionnaire asked students whether they have individualized education plans, called IEP’s. Students in special education programs have IEP’s, which outline what information students need to learn and what resources, outside the regular curriculum and resources, they will have to help them meet those learning objectives (The Individual Education Program: A Student’s Guide, 2004). Special Education in Kentucky identifies categories for Mild Mental Disability, Functional Mental Disability, Hearing Impaired, Speech Language, Visually Impaired, Emotional Behavior Disability, Orthopedically Impaired, Other Health Impaired, Specific Learning Disability, Deaf Blind, Autism, Traumatic Brain Injury, and a separate category for students who have Multiple Disabilities (KDE Kentucky School Report Card). Since special education may be a sensitive topic, I asked if students participate in an IEP to avoid potentially making students uncomfortable or revealing “special ed” students who may not openly acknowledge that status among their peers. Exceptional students represent a unique

population, and future research should address the questions examined here for these students.

One final criterion for eligibility included in the screening questionnaire was English language proficiency. English Language Learners and Migrant students combined represented less than 4% of all students across all grade levels in the state for the 2013-2014 school year, during which this study took place (KDE Kentucky School Report Card). All students replied on the screening questionnaire that they were proficient in English, and so this did not limit the sample pool.

The first three categories – age, participation in an IEP, and English proficiency – were used to narrow the sample pool, and the next two areas of interest on the screening questionnaire, gender and plans for after graduation, were used in the second step of selecting participants. The next category I used to classify the students who took the screening questionnaire was gender. According to Census data, 50.7% of individuals in Kentucky identify as female persons (Quick Facts). Of the 258 students who completed the questionnaire, 120 identified as male, and 132 identified as female. This question was left open ended for students to choose how to express their gender identities. Six students left this field blank; however, these students left significant portions of their questionnaires blank, including their names and contact information, and so I do not believe that this was to avoid identifying their genders. I wanted to ensure that the purposive sample was roughly split between males and females.

Constructing the purposive sample was the next thing I focused on, and so I categorized the students according to what they stated their plans were for after graduation. The screening questionnaire asked students to select their post-secondary

plans and provided multiple choice options based on youth aspirations identified in previous research. Students could select all that applied, and a space was provided where they could fill in their own reply to “other.” The categories of plans are: (a) to attend a four year college, (b) to attend a two year school or vocational or technical training, (c) to enter the workforce, (d) to enlist in the military, or (e) to take time off after high school before deciding on further pursuits, which includes those who “don’t know” what they wanted to do immediately after high school. Students filled in “other” in conjunction with another selection, listing the specific college or career choice that they were planning to pursue. Of the 258 students who completed the screening questionnaire, 139 students (53.9%) stated plans to attend a four-year college, while 63 students (24.4%) planned to attend a two-year college or technical school. Twenty-one students (8.1%) planned to enter the workforce directly, and 14 students (5.4%) were unsure of what they planned to do after graduation. Only 13 students (5.0%) planned to enter the military, and 8 students (3.1%) did not respond to this question (Table 3.3).

	<u>Bluegrass</u>	<u>Cardinal</u>	<u>Derby</u>	<u>Wildcat</u>	<u>Total</u>
2 yr college or tech school	10 (33.3)	20 (26.0)	21 (21.9)	12 (21.8)	63 (24.4)
4 yr college	16 (53.3)	38 (49.4)	54 (56.2)	31 (56.4)	139 (53.9)
Job	2 (6.6)	2 (2.6)	10 (10.4)	7 (12.7)	21 (8.1)
Military	1 (3.4)	4 (5.2)	4 (4.2)	4 (7.3)	13 (5.0)
Not sure	1 (3.4)	5 (6.5)	7 (7.3)	1 (1.8)	14 (5.4)
Missing	0 (0.0)	8 (10.3)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	8 (3.1)
Totals	30 (100.0)	77 (100.0)	96 (100.0)	55 (100.0)	258 (100.0)
Percentages in parentheses.					

The purposive sample was designed to include respondents from all five categories of post graduations plans. Initially, the research design included students from all five categories in all four school districts, but not every school had students in all five categories. Given the percentages of each category in the sample pool, it made sense to adjust the sample to include more students from the larger categories – four-year and two-year college plans – and fewer students from the smaller categories – entering the workforce and military. The categories were used as quotas to be sure that students with each of the plans were represented. This also allowed me to specifically contact students with certain plans when more respondents were needed in a category.

I initially tried to contact the entire sample pool by phone to recruit as many students as possible. As students completed the interviews, I stopped contacting students in the categories of the purposive sample that had been met. Students were contacted in June and July following graduation using the contact information they provided in the screening questionnaire. Some students agreed to participate and were able to be interviewed during the initial phone call, and some students declined immediately. Some students asked if I could call them back at specific times, which I did, though only one student who requested this answered the scheduled phone call. I left messages when someone other than the student answered the phone or when voicemail was available.

For the second round of contact, I used email to try to capture the students who were unreachable by phone. This yielded the email interview from one student who no longer had telephone access. The student who was interviewed over email was treated as similarly as possible to the students who were interviewed over the phone. To mirror the conversational tone of the interview, the interview guide was used as a guideline but not

emailed to her directly so that it would not be overwhelming to fill out a lengthy document of questions. Instead, a few questions at a time were sent, which also allowed follow up questions to emerge from her responses just as they would in a verbal interview. Research has found that email interviews are comparable to face-to-face or telephone interviews in the richness yielded from their data (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006).

I then did a third round of contact for those who had not yet responded, this time again by phone. A fourth, final round of phone calls yielded additional interviews. One difficulty encountered while contacting students for interviews was that many of the students who planned to enter the workforce after graduation had already done so, and though phone calls were made at varied times and messages offered to set up return calls at their convenience, it was very difficult to contact some of these students.

The total number of 12th grade students in the four participating school districts combined is just under 500 youth. Of them, 258 students completed the screening questionnaire. Students who participated in programs for exceptional students or who were under age 18 were ineligible to participate and removed from the sample pool, leaving 198 students to contact for interviews. Of these, 123 students could not be reached. Some of these students did not reply to emails or return phone calls. In some cases, the telephone numbers the students provided in their screening questionnaires had been disconnected, or their voicemails were not set up or were full and unable to take new messages. Fifty-eight students explicitly declined to participate. Some of these students wrote on their screening questionnaires that they did not wish to be contacted for an interview at all and they were not contacted, while some declined to be interviewed once they were contacted for the interview. Students who took screening questionnaires

but who erased their responses or who returned their screening questionnaires with inappropriate doodles are included in this category. This left 17 students who completed interviews (Table 3.4).

	<u>Bluegrass</u>	<u>Cardinal</u>	<u>Derby</u>	<u>Wildcat</u>	<u>Total</u>
Total	30	77	96	55	258
Ineligible by Age or IEP	9	18	23	10	60
Unable to Contact	9	28	58	28	123
Declined to Participate	9	26	11	12	58
Completed Interviews	3	5	4	5	17

The categories in which the seventeen respondents who participated in the study fit will be discussed in the results of this study, chapters 4 and 5. Little variation is seen across school districts in respondent aspirations or influences, and so they are discussed holistically in the results. Also, there are few students in each category, and so the totals are reported to obscure identifying individual respondents with their school districts. In summary, the participants' categories from the screening questionnaire are presented in Table 3.5.

The sample was purposively selected to capture the variety of plans reported by students on their screening questionnaires. According to their screening questionnaires, 7 of the participants interviewed (41.2%) planned to attend four-year colleges, and 4 participants (23.5%) were planning to attend two-year or technical schools. Three participants (17.6%) were entering the military, and 2 participants (11.8%) were undecided on their post-secondary plans. One participant (5.9%) planned to enter the workforce at the time of the interview. As will be analyzed further in the results, the plans stated in the screening questionnaire did not always match the plans respondents' discussed in their interviews.

	<u>Total</u>
2 year college or tech school	4 (23.5)
4 year college	7 (41.2)
Job	1 (5.9)
Military	3 (17.6)
Not sure	2 (11.8)
Total	17 (100.0)
Percentages in parentheses.	

Data Collection

There were three components of data collection used in this study: site visits, interviews with school counselors, and then student interviews. I arranged to visit the schools during the final two weeks of the school year leading up to graduation. While there, I met with the school counselor. The site visits and school counselor interviews occurred simultaneously. I conducted interviews with the counselors in person while I was there, and they gave me tours of the school. Student interviews took place beginning three weeks after the site visits.

Site visits. To observe the potential supports or barriers that respondents may encounter in their schools, I visited each high school for a site visit to learn more about the school environment that would provide context for the respondents' experiences. This provided an opportunity to triangulate the data.

Site visits provided rich data on the contexts in which the students' experiences occurred. I was able to observe the communities in which these schools were located, which informed my descriptions of these areas. The school counselors also provided brochures and information packets with information they shared with students, such as information on extracurricular activities, scholarships and parent information nights. While school websites may list some of this information, seeing these materials in person gave me a better understanding of how the school counselors prioritize and disseminate this information directly to the students and their families. I was also able to witness the counselors interacting with students.

The site visits also served as the first contact for me with the students in three schools. The school counselors participating in the study introduced me and shared with the students their understanding of my background, why I was at the school, and what I wanted to talk to them about. I was then able to address the students. In one school this occurred in small classes, but I talked to assemblies of the entire senior class at two other schools. When I met with the students, I explained to the students what my research is about and how they could help before distributing the screening questionnaire. In addition to getting the students' contact information and responses regarding their plans, the questionnaire included my contact information, which I verbally encouraged the students to copy for their records. The information on the questionnaire also stated that completing the questionnaire indicated that they were interested in potentially participating in the study and they may be contacted if chosen for an interview.

In the fourth school, an unavoidable conflict came up on the day when I was scheduled to visit, and the only day the school counselor was able to reschedule was on a

day when the senior class was attending on off-campus event. I was unable to meet those students in person; however, the counselor administered the screening questionnaire on my behalf. She distributed it during a senior assembly, and I directed her to explain the study, my contact information, and how completing the questionnaires indicated that they were interested in participating in the study. She promised to administer the questionnaire following my directions so that it would be similar to the experiences in the other schools. She then mailed the completed screening questionnaires back to me.

Counselor interviews. During my visit to the schools, I met with a school counselor who had agreed in advance to participate in the study. In addition to showing my around during the site visits and enabling me to administer the screening questionnaire, I sat down with each counselor for an interview in his or her private office. Each counselor was given a copy of the informed consent, and the interviews were recorded with their permission.

The interview was semi-structured using an interview guide, which was drafted in advance (Appendix B). I also added prompts to engage the counselors for more details as they disclosed their views. The interviews focused on two areas: the school counselors' jobs and background on the school. The first area was directed at how the counselors focused their time, what kinds of administrative and counseling tasks they were responsible for, and how they interact with students. The second area of the interview supplemented the site visit by focusing on the school itself. The school counselors were asked to describe the school and community from their perspectives.

Student interviews. The primary focus of this study is to learn more about how students from rural communities plan for their lives after high school. To find this out, in-depth interviews were conducted with the sampled rural youth. Since these school districts are spread out around the state, after the initial site visit, the individual student interviews were conducted by telephone with one exception, who was interviewed by email. Participants who agreed to be interviewed were read the informed consent at the beginning of the phone call, and they provided verbal consent to participate. I got their mailing addresses or confirmed the email address to which they prefer I send them a copy of the informed consent, which I then provided. I then asked students if I could record the call for accuracy, and with their permission, I set up a recorder to capture the conversation on speakerphone.

The student who was interviewed via email was sent the informed consent after she replied to the initial email contact volunteering to participate. After she agreed, we exchanged email replies with a few questions at a time. I followed the main areas of the interview guide and asked additional questions for more information about what she had replied to keep the flow as natural as it could be in that format, which mirrored the semi-structured format of pre-written questions and natural prompts that I employed in the interviews.

The interviews with student respondents were in-depth and semi-structured, featuring questions designed to guide the respondent through recalling the choices and actions taken leading up to the decisions regarding post high school graduation plans (Appendix C). After identifying what plans the youth have decided to work towards, questions were asked to elicit information about the influences the respondents

considered when making these plans, whether that be in the form of support or barriers, expectations or school. Also of interest is if and how the respondents' communities were relevant to their plans. The interview questions focused on gaining insight into what living in a rural area means to the respondents and whether or not the opportunities or constraints these locales may present was a consideration when they were making plans for the future.

Analysis

The interviews were transcribed into Microsoft Word documents, and identifying information was removed. The documents were labeled with the students' pseudonyms. I created high level categories based on the responses and interview questions; these are reflected in the subsections in the results: family, peers, high school, school personnel, and community. Post-secondary concerns also emerged as an overarching concept within interview responses. As described previously in this chapter in the section on bracketing, I then used an issue focused approach to analyze responses for significant themes. I grouped phrases and segments of interviews with reoccurring ideas to identify the themes that will be discussed in chapters 4, 5, and 6.

Description of the Study Sites

The school backgrounds presented here are intended to give a general impression of the areas in which the study was conducted. Descriptions come from my visits to the communities, their local county websites, national and state data on the regions, and information from the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) and the schools.

Background characteristics of the counties and school districts are presented as rounded, approximate values to obscure the ability to directly identify the counties while still presenting a holistic picture of the attributes of each place

The Kentucky Department of Education compiles data on every county and school which is published on in “School Report Cards.” They provide details on the state overall, each school district, and individual schools, “including test performance, teacher qualifications, student safety, awards, parent involvement and much more” (KDE Kentucky School Report Card). Some of the data come from test scores and administrative reports, while some of it is reported by the schools. The KDE requires high schools to follow up with their graduating students to report what they call “transitions,” or the activities alumni are engaged in after graduation. These include categories for attending college, working while attending college part-time, attending vocational or technical school, military service, working full time, and a catch-all category they name “unsuccessful,” which encompasses students doing none of the other things or who could not be reached. The data on these “transitions” for the schools in this study are presented here, with “college” and “part time college” combined and “unsuccessful” renamed as “other” to more directly capture the nature of this category.

The values presented in these descriptions are approximate values to give an overall view of what these students are doing while maintaining confidentiality by avoiding exact reports. Similarly, descriptions of the counties and communities are reported using approximate values when it is particular to a county. This is to ensure that the counties included in this study are not readily identifiable. None of the values reported here at the county level are exact and were intentionally obscured so that they

could not be linked to the specific counties. The values reported here are relative values, some higher and some lower, so that the impression created to describe the county remains true without putting confidentiality at risk.

The national averages are reported directly based on Census and national statistics. County level information comes from Select Kentucky online, which presents data from the state's Cabinet for Economic Development. Some data come from 2013 and some data come from 2014, but this time frame spans the 2013-2014 school year for the students in this study.

Bluegrass County. The first school in this study falls into the Rural Remote Census category, though it is in a rural county that borders counties that have urban RUCA codes. This means that the school itself is located in a rural community in a rural county, though it is within commuting distance of counties that contain less rural areas. The school is located at least one hour from a Census defined urbanized area (populations of 50,000 or greater), though the county tourism efforts advertise rural attractiveness that is close to everywhere. There are sparse buildings dotting the main route into town, with housing in small clusters. The noticeably newer construction belongs to institutional buildings such as the school, library, and large local government center.

The county itself had just over 10,000 residents according to 2013 Census estimates. Youth under age 16 make up about 21 percent of the population, while people over age 65 comprise about 16.6 percent. This differs from the percent of the population statewide according to 2012 Census data for Kentucky, with 23.2% of the population aged 18 or younger, and 14% of the population aged 65 or older. Overall, Kentucky's

population is similar to the US overall for the same data, with 23.5% aged 18 or younger, and 13.7% aged 65 or older. Ninety-seven and a half percent of residents of the county identify as white.

Like other counties in less densely populated areas of Kentucky, the county has a county-wide chamber of commerce designed, according to their mission statement, to enable collective action across businesses for the greater good of the community. The local Chamber designed a long term strategic plan in an effort to make the community members feel that their needs were being addressed and not ignored. Their development plans sought the voices of community members of all ages, including school aged youth. In surveying the community about what residents would like to preserve or improve, they found that overwhelmingly residents of this community wished to keep a small town feel while increasing economic opportunities. The unemployment rate here hovered around 5%, lower than the U.S rate of 6.2. However, wages in the area were lower; Bluegrass County's weekly average income in 2013 was around \$650, while the national weekly average was \$957. The median household income was around \$40,000. This is almost 25% less than the national median household income recorded by the US Census Bureau of \$53,046 for the same time frame (QuickFacts). The majority of residents commute out of the county for work. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the majority of employment in the county, just under thirty percent, falls within the service sector, while trade and utilities followed by public administration comprise the largest other employment categories in the area.

Bluegrass High School enrolls just over 500 students in 9th through 12th grades with between fifty and fifty-five percent of students receiving free or reduced price

lunches. The school is about 95 percent white. Students graduating in 2012 transitioned to college at a rate of about 40 percent, while nearly 30 percent went straight into the workforce. The military, vocational schools, and part time college while working represented about 12 percent of the graduates' pursuits. The remaining 18 percent of graduating seniors were not pursuing education or work after graduation.

Cardinal County. Cardinal High School is in the second county that is a rural county with an urban county bordering in the commuting area. The “small town feel” was evident during my visit, as parents and students buzzed about the main office where I waited to meet with the school counselor. Staff and parents who clearly knew each other on a personal basis chatted about their summer plans, while students switching classes clustered in the halls to point at me, an outsider, and whisper “It’s a girl” in the less-than-hushed voices of excited underclassman.

Of the nearly 11,000 people in the county, about 95 percent identify as white. Youth under age 16 make up 23 percent of the population, and those over age 64 make up about 14 percent of the population. The median household income is nearly \$40,500. About 55 percent of residents commute out of the county for work, while 70 percent of employees in the county commute in from neighboring areas. The largest employment sector in the county is manufacturing, employing around 35 percent of the local workforce. Services employ an additional 25 percent of the workforce, with the next largest sector being Trade, Transportation, and Utilities. The unemployment rate in the county in this time frame was over 7 percent, at least one full percentage higher than the national rate of 6.2, but the weekly average wages here were very close to the national

average of \$957. According to the school counselor who has been familiar with the community her entire life, agriculture used to dominate but declined over the years, and the area struggles to establish a meaningful economy.

With buildings situated in fields towards the outer edges of the town center, Cardinal High School matriculates just over 500 students, about 25 percent of them in the graduating class. Almost 54 percent of students receive free or reduced lunch. Nearly 90 percent of students are white. Just over 50 percent of students transition to college upon graduation, while almost 30 percent enter the workforce. Eight percent attend school part time while working, and about 7 percent do not transition to either education or work. Less than 2 percent of students enter the military, while about 2.5 percent attend vocational schools.

Derby County. Derby High School is both a rural school in a rural county and also borders rural counties, so there are no urban commuting areas nearby. It is located in an Appalachian county over an hour and a half from the nearest urbanized area. The school counselor here described the community as not having a lot available to do, only having gotten the modern amenity of a local movie theatre in the last few years. A local park where youth play pick up sports is a popular hang-out, and shopping is limited.

Of a population around 16,000, youth under 16 make up 20 percent while those aged 65 or older represent just over 18 percent. Almost 98 percent of residents identify as white. In this economically distressed region of Appalachia where households average more than two people, the median household income is just under \$29,000.

The largest employment sector in this county is manufacturing, employing nearly 30 percent of the workforce. The Trade, Transportation and Utilities sector and the Services sector are the next two largest employers with around 18 percent of the workforce each. Local economic development efforts emphasize its central United States location in Kentucky and its easy interstate highway access. Though nearly 60 percent of residents commute to work outside the county, almost 65 percent of employees in the county also reside in the county. The unemployment rate in 2014 was almost one percent higher than the national average. The average weekly wages in Derby County were significantly lower than the national average of \$957. The wages here at the time were just over \$550, only slightly better than half of the national average.

This county also has its region's local vocational center in addition to the high school. Of the nearly 700 students who attend Derby High School, around 70 percent receive free or reduced lunches. Like the county as a whole, nearly 98 percent of students identify themselves as white. Of the previous graduating class, about 55 percent of students went on to college, while another 30 percent entered the workforce directly. An additional 6 percent work and attend college part-time. Two and a half percent joined the military, and another one percent went on to a vocational school. Just over five percent were not pursuing any transitions to adulthood upon graduation.

Wildcat County. Also located in what is considered part of Appalachia, Wildcat High School is in a county that is both rural and bordered by rural commuting areas. Ninety-seven percent of the fewer than 10,000 residents in this county identify as white. Twenty-one percent of the population is younger than 16, while 17 percent of the

population is over age 65. The median household income here is around \$29,500. Employment in the county falls predominantly within the Manufacturing and Trade, Transportation, and Utilities sectors, as these two categories account for almost 50 percent of the county's employment. Nearly 75 percent of residents commute out of the county for work, while only around 45 percent of employees in the county both live and work there.

The unemployment rate here is almost the same as the national rate in 2014, 6.2 percent, but weekly wages here fall between \$550-600 compared to the national average of \$957. Local leadership in the area is interested in planning for change and encouraging a diverse industry base, citing the addition of local Mexican and Chinese food restaurants and expanding Dollar General stores as expansion over the last 20 years. The school counselor here told me that “if you need clothes, you go to Family Dollar” because even Wal-Mart is at least a 30 minute drive away. Some students here have never been shopping in a mall because the nearest one is almost an hour away, but this is not a top concern in a school where some students do not regularly have electricity at home.

Wildcat High School is the smallest of those in the study, enrolling just over 400 students across 9th through 12th grades, and of them 97 percent identify themselves as white. Between 65-67 percent of students receive free or reduced price lunches. Around 33 percent of graduating seniors attend college, while around 25 percent enter the workforce. Less than 3 percent of graduating students from each of the other three high schools attend vocational schools, but over 10 percent of seniors from School 4 will go on to a vocational school. This school also has the largest share of students who work and attend school part-time, nearly 12 percent of graduating students. An additional 3 percent

join the military, while about 16 percent do not pursue education or work after graduation.

Chapter 3: Summary

This study uses a qualitative approach to collect data on rural youth plans and the factors that influence them. School sites from around Kentucky were chosen according to their rural characteristics, and a screening questionnaire was used to construct a purposive sample of rural youth according to their post-secondary plans. In-depth interviews used open-ended questions grounded in previous literature, while also probing with follow up questions adapted to each respondent. Data were carefully stored and managed to protect confidentiality, and analyses are presented in the results that follow.

Chapter 4

Respondents and their Plans

The results of this study are organized thematically. Chapter 4 introduces the ‘who,’ ‘what’ and ‘where’ of this study: the respondents and their plans. Chapter 5 then will present analyses of the specific influences the respondents considered in making these plans. Information from the counselors’ interviews is incorporated throughout for context and as triangulating support when the counselors observed or spoke of things that align with the respondents’ views. Respondents are discussed as a whole or as their responses relate to the themes that emerged across the group; they are not discussed by school districts because doing so was not supported in analysis. Similarities and differences occurred within and across school districts without definitive geographic boundaries emerging as responses were coded.

This chapter begins with some context on the respondents’ plans, followed by a brief introduction to the respondents. Their plans will be discussed in more detail in the following sections in this chapter. College and Career Plans will look at what the respondents were doing at the time of their interviews. For some respondents, these are the enactment of the aspirations they had worked towards. For others, their current activities reflect where they ended up upon graduation as they continue to look towards the aspirations that they had not yet attained. Background on Kentucky and the sites in this study is then provided as context before discussing the respondents’ residency plans. The section on Residency Plans examines where respondents want to live. This includes their immediate housing upon high school graduation for some, but for others it reflects

the plans they have for where they would like to live as adults and how it fits into their college and career plans.

Background on Student Plans

Chapter 3 introduced how the state of Kentucky strongly emphasizes college and career readiness. Schools have ‘Report Cards’ posted online by the state that share information on testing, faculty and staff ratios, student backgrounds, academics, and test scores, including whether high schools meet state-level college and career readiness criteria. This is measured through the percentage of students who pass standardized tests. Regardless of their plans, students are tested to qualify as college and career ready, a designation that captures most aspirations. The state of Kentucky pushes students towards the college and career readiness to encourage productive youth outcomes.

As one counselor notes, “I think we do a pretty good job of K-12, they start tracking. They have a lot of college and career type things going on starting out early on in our district. Sometimes I think it has a negative effect. There’s like ‘college and career ready’ – they hear that 48,000 times now, so it gets kinda old.” Though students may tire of hearing about careers and career planning, the students sampled here were college or career ready and their plans reflected this.

Overwhelmingly, school counselors cited medical professions as the top aspirations they hear among students. Whether through two-year vocational programs or via a four-year degree, students are interested in various health professions: “Lot of kids going into the health fields, whether it be a nurse or occupational therapy/physical therapy, you know, we have a lot that are looking to that.” According to one counselor,

the girls go into the health fields more often, and another notes that through the programs enacted as part of college and career readiness, students are being exposed to more options, “kids are finding out they don't just have to be nurses. They can be radiologists. They can be doctors. They can be surgical technicians. They can be a physician. They can be a physician's assistant. And they're finding out all kinds of opportunities that they have available to them.”

Other popular options are directly related to fields available in the vocational schools, from welding, “electricity,” and engineering to agriculture related pursuits, “especially for the kids not going to college.” The choice between going to a four-year college and pursuing a career or two-year degree out of a vocational class track can be difficult. One counselor, who encourages many of her students to take classes in the “votech center” noted:

They'll make more money than the senior class will because the senior class will all go to college -- the majority, we have like 75% will go to college -- but it will take them a few years to get to the money they need to be making. Whereas these kids, they'll have those money already in the pocket. So! And that kind of money, hard for them to go back to college when they are making that kind of money. So it's another avenue for them, so we have a high number of students that... and if the economy is really good, you would think that the students would go to college. Nuh uh, they go to the workforce because the workforce needs them.

Despite the financial lure of the workforce and tech schools, counselors acknowledge a “wide variety of interests” among students. One counselor estimated the trends he sees in student plans over the years as breaking down to 40% four-year colleges, 20% two-year colleges, and 40% entering the workforce directly, with a handful of students entering the military from among them. There is discrepancy between the plans counselors hear throughout the school year and the actions students undertake following graduation. This is captured in the differences between the plans students reported on their screening

questionnaires and the plans students actually pursue following graduation. The screening questionnaire was administered between 2 and 6 weeks before the interviews were completed, a short time frame for plans to have shifted.

Meet the Sample

The seventeen respondents in this study are described and their views discussed collectively. In each section and chapter, they are rearranged and grouped thematically, as the overlap and divergence in their plans and views spans school districts. Discussing the respondents holistically also makes it harder to identify who is from which of the school districts in this study. Here is a brief introduction to the respondents.

Ashley joined the Air Force after graduation. She plans to study in her spare time in a program through the military so that she can also earn a degree in criminal justice. She would like to work in law enforcement someday because she feels strongly about helping families who have been victims of crimes find justice.

Austin will be living at home with his parents while he attends a four-year college to study biology. He grew up hunting and fishing with his dad, and he would like to pursue a career with the Kentucky Fish and Wildlife department.

Billy wants to be a writer. He will be going to the local community college to study writing. He would like to transfer to a four-year college for journalism, but he doesn't think he needs a degree to start trying to get his stories published.

Brittany grew up volunteering for a nonprofit, a hobby she shared with her father. She will attend a four-year college to study administration so that she can work full-time in that field.

Chris always thought he would be an accountant until spending time with his girlfriend's special needs brother in high school gave him a different perspective on interacting with people. He will attend a four-year college to study special education.

Emily loves animals, and internship opportunities and a summer program introduced her to the field of veterinary technology. She will attend a four year college to study to be a "vet tech" so that she can work in an animal clinic in the future.

Hannah grew up in an unstable home life, moving among guardians. She would do anything for her sisters, and she just wants to get a job to help them. Her dream is to be a courtroom sketch artist, but she was looking for a cleaning job to pay the bills in the meantime.

Jacob loves music and says that he would like to go to a four-year college to pursue a career in the music industry. However, he is not acting on this goal. He is considering starting at a two- year college, but ultimately confessed that he is unsure if he even wants to go to college. He is working in a local industry while he makes up his mind.

James wants to study criminology at his four-year college. He will be working part-time during school to earn some money, and he joined the National Guard to help pay for school and get out and see some of the world at the same time.

Josh was quiet in his interview. He plans to look for a job in his town, preferably in a sporting goods store. He had not yet applied and was open to going wherever was needed for him to find work.

Kayla grew up working in her father's plumbing shop, where she realized she was good at paperwork. She will be going to a four-year college to study business.

Matt wants to be an astrophysicist. He will be taking his general education classes at the local community college before transferring to a four-year college where he plans to double major in chemistry and physics.

Mike is in the process of joining in the Marines. He already took his required tests, participates in physical training with recruits, and is talking to a recruiter, but he still has to finish his enlistment processing. He would like to work in law enforcement in the future.

Sarah is enrolled at the local community college in the nursing program. She would like to transfer to a four-year college for her BA in Nursing when she finishes the program.

Taylor is also interested in nursing. She took Certified Nursing Assistant classes in her high school's vocational center, but she did not qualify to take the certification exam at the end because she had missed too many classes. She is unsure of what to do next.

Tyler grew up volunteering in local politics with his family. He will be starting at a four-year college in the fall with a dual major in History and Business. His long term goal is to go on to law school after completing his four-year degree.

Zach was the only male in the health sciences classes at his high school's votech center, but he didn't care. He was fascinated to learn more about his own diabetes, and he wants to attend the local community college to study hematology.

These plans will be discussed in more detail in the following sections.

College and Career Plans

The study used a purposive sample to ensure that there were respondents representing each of the five education or occupation aspiration categories students stated in their screening questionnaires. The categories were: enlisting in the military, attending four-year colleges, attending two-year colleges, entering the workforce directly or still undecided after graduation. The respondents' college and career plans are presented here.

College and career plans: Military. James, Mike and Ashley joined the military. These three came from different school districts but had in common the belief that joining the Armed Forces would enable them to go farther in life than they would otherwise be able to achieve. For James and Ashley, this meant using the programs available through the military to pay for post-secondary education, while Mike saw the military as providing better job prospects. All three planned to ultimately pursue careers in law enforcement and saw the military as a first step towards that goal.

Ashley enlisted in the Air Force and planned to study Criminology through a program that allows members to attend college at the same time: "you can actually study when you have your spare time online or on a campus nearby." Her ultimate goal is to enter law enforcement. The Air Force is a way for her to help finance her education while experiencing the travel her grandfather spoke of so highly.

James similarly wanted to study Criminal Justice and enrolled in a four-year college, planning to begin attending in the fall after returning from training for the Air National Guard. He wanted to levy the "good benefits" that the Guard provides. James enlisted with the intention of using the National Guard to pay for college. Like Ashley, he

has known others who went into the military, and he sees this experience as complementary to his interest in public safety.

Mike also wants to pursue law enforcement, and he sees the Marines as a good stepping stone to do so. He had been working at a local factory through high school but quit to enlist in the Marines, though he had not done so yet. His response to the screening questionnaire was to select entering the military, and though he speaks of his plans to do so, at the present time he has not made these arrangements. He has taken his Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery test and talked to a recruiter, but he has not been through Military Entrance Processing. He wants to be a police officer eventually, and figured that enlisting in the Marines would help him “get a job faster” and that he would “have more opportunities” when he gets done than if he’d stayed. For him, the Marines outweighed the factory job he saw as his alternative: “I mean I figured I’d git paid pretty good if I did the Marines. I wanna get paid decent, so I figured I’d—it’d help me save up my money then when I got out I could just do whatever. You know, I could just, ‘cause if I did that I could do anything in law enforcement that I wanted to.”

College and career plans: Four-year college. Chris, Emily, Austin, Tyler and Brittany enrolled in four-year colleges and were ready to begin their post-secondary educations in the fall following their graduations.

Chris is enrolled at a four-year college and will begin studying special education. Growing up, he planned to go into accounting. His girlfriend’s younger brother has epilepsy, and Chris was inspired to consider a career working with special-needs individuals as the two became closer. Changing his plans late in high school meant

double checking that his classes would count and that the college of his choice offers the appropriate programs. Though his career plans changed, going to college was never in question for Chris. As a high school athlete, it was important for him to be able to continue playing, and this factored heavily into his college choice. Assured that he could play sports and study special education at his preferred college, the choice became easy for him, since “you can always transfer out and do other things if it doesn’t work out.” He saw this step as a chance to “go with what makes [him] happy.”

Emily also made her college plans based on the college’s “good” veterinary technology program and a campus she “loved.” She will be attending a four-year college a few hours from home. Her love of animals led her to participate in co-ops at local veterinarians’ offices while in school. One co-op experience was set up through the high school, but she arranged the other one independently to confirm her feelings about pursuing a career as a vet tech. This experience was influential, as Emily emphasized how much she enjoyed the animal clinic internship she had because everyone was so nice: “Working at the animal clinic [for the co-op] made me really want to work there. They were nice and taught me a lot of things.” While exploring her high school’s offerings in this vocational field, she was able to participate in a three week summer program for college credit that allowed her to live on campus in “such a nice little town.” This experience confirmed her desire to go to this four-year college despite the few hours travel away from home to get there.

Distance was also a factor in Brittany’s college choice. She plans to attend a four-year college to pursue a specialized administrative degree directly related to volunteer work that she greatly enjoys doing. She followed her father into nonprofit work in this

field, and she would like to get a degree to pursue a career focusing on administration in this field.

Austin will be attending a four-year college to study biology while living at his parents' house and commuting. Always a nature lover, Austin would like to work as a wildlife biologist for the Fish and Wildlife Department in Kentucky after he graduates, a choice he's "had [his] mind set on, pretty much."

Tyler's mind was also firmly decided, and he has his future carefully planned out: "Well, I'm working over the summer part time at a pharmacy and also for a political campaign for state representative. Then in the fall, I'm going to attend the College and pursue a degree in History and a second major in Marketing or Accounting. Following that I will be attending law school." He describes himself as having a "passion for history" and being "very into, like, current events and things of that nature." His descriptions of how he chose the college at which to pursue these interests was as concise and direct as his post-secondary plans, "Well, I like the atmosphere of the college when I went to visit, and I, uh, was really fond of the small student-teacher ratio. And I was very impressed with faculty, with how personable the faculty was and approachable they were. And then I received a full scholarship to there. So I was really glad of that."

College and career plans: Two-year college. The students going on to two-year schools are split between those who see it as a terminal degree and those who wish to leverage their credits on to a four-year degree. Kayla planned to attend two-year college to earn a degree that she could then use to enter the workforce, while Zach, Sarah and

Matt saw community college as a way to complete general requirements and save money before transferring to a four-year college later.

Kayla enrolled in a two-year, public community college to earn her degree in Business. Her father owns his own plumbing business, and she helped out in the office with him, which gave her an understanding of what a business career would be like. Though she always wanted to be a veterinarian, she changed her mind when she realized that “it's up to 10 years or more for college, and with business management I don't have to pay as much money.” Her reason for switching to business after leaving her veterinary ambitions gave the impression of reluctance: “Um... I was... I dunno. I just think I would be... better at, I guess paperwork, than other things. I'm not really sure.” Choosing this school and degree was not without conflict for Kayla, who feels friction between her family's expectations compared to her resources.

Sarah also chose community college for financial reasons. She was enrolled for the fall to begin a program in nursing and plans to eventually pursue her Bachelor's degree, noting that “nursing has always been what I said I wanted to do; the only thing that was holding me back was deciding where I wanted to do it.” She was born premature and had to spend time in the hospital, and she reflects that “there was always someone there for me” during that time. She wants to be able to provide that care to others.

Zach was also inspired to pursue a career in the medical field because of his own health issues. He has diabetes, and “was always interested in why do I have to take shots, why do I gotta poke my finger, why do I have to go to the doctor every few months, why do I gotta do this or do that.” He began taking classes in health sciences so that he could answer those questions: “Well, I just learned it all.” He is enrolled to begin a full time

surgical technician program in the fall but has decided that he would prefer to find out if he can change the track to hematology. Zach would like to transfer to a four-year school after completing this program. Despite these plans, he had not registered for classes as of mid-summer before the fall semester would start and still needed to confirm that his financial aid would come through.

Matt will also start at a two-year community college and transfer to a four-year college. His selection of a four-year college on the screening questionnaire reflects his ultimate goal, though it is not what he is currently planning to do. He would like to double major in chemistry and physics and recognizes the need to move to where the appropriate programs are offered to ultimately pursue a career in astrophysics. After his mom gave him a book on astronomy and his brother gave him books by Einstein and Stephen Hawking, Matt became interested in astrophysics, “I dunno, something sort of calling my name about it” and cites the atom as particularly influential in his decision. In the meantime, he is taking general education classes online in the summer to get started and to save money because of the cheaper tuition.

College and career plans: Workforce. Billy, Josh, and Hannah entered the workforce directly after high school. Billy hopes to save money to go to college. Josh decided that he is not interested in college and this will be his career in so far as he has no other plans. Hannah’s goal was always to enter the workforce directly, though the job she has is not what she planned.

After high school, Billy got a job. He selected a four-year college as his plan on the screening questionnaire, and he speaks of going to community college then

transferring to a four-year college to study journalism. Billy has always loved writing and continues to write fiction, though he sometimes struggled in school due to what he described in his interview as severe ADHD. He had not participated in any type of program for exceptional students. Despite some difficulties surrounding his learning style, he felt that reading influenced him: “books, magazines, stuff like that, reading,” and so he always knew that he wanted to be a writer. But his reality in the meantime is that he is taking time off to work at a factory so that he can save up some money to help pay for school. Despite having to delay his plans, Billy “always wanted to go to [this particular four-year college], not even really sure why... there aren’t many schools that would be a bad choice for journalism, but this is closer to home.”

Josh also selected college in his screening questionnaire but will instead enter the workforce directly. Instead of pursuing a two-year degree, Josh’s immediate plans following graduation are to “I guess get a job, really.” He would like to work at a sporting goods store in the community, though he had not applied yet for a job. Josh said that he wants to work at the sporting goods store, “I guess because I like playin’ sports and that’s what I figured I’d best get a job at.” If he does not get hired there, he plans to just “go somewhere else.” Not particularly talkative, he said there was no reason he could think of that he changed his mind about going to college and he had not considered any alternatives to just getting a job at that point.

Hannah also made her decision about what to pursue after high school based on what she is good at. She wants to find a job as a courtroom sketch artist, though the labor market is small and specialized. After doing a google search for the college she would need to attend to become a courtroom artist, she found that the job is based more on skill

than a degree. In high school, she “started [her] own business” selling sketches at school, despite the fear of getting in trouble for selling things at school. After graduation, she moved to North Carolina with her best friend, and due to circumstances, she is currently seeking a job cleaning because she “enjoys” that work and needs to find a job fast. Due to her volatile home life, Hannah had to get out on her own immediately after graduation. Her interview was conducted over email as it was the only stable means of communication she had available. She still plans to pursue a courtroom sketch artist job in the future, and though she did not have a specific plan for how to do so at the time of her interview, she wrote, “Of course ill be a courtroom artist.but we all must start off somewhere so I'll find a job cleaning couse for some odd reason I enjoy it! I'll get there soon.”

College and career plans: Undecided. Taylor responded to the screening questionnaire that she was not sure what her plans for the future are, and at the time of her interview, she was still undecided. She took Certified Nursing Assistant classes in high school and had planned to take the exam, get certified as a CNA, and enter the workforce directly after high school. After missing too much school, she was disqualified from taking the certification exam. At first she did not know that missing school would affect being able to take the test, but when she found out, she still had doctors’ appointments to go to and there was nothing she could do. She thinks she will have to do summer school to make up the class she missed before taking the test, but she had not pursued signing up for the class or the test again.

Jacob is truly undecided. He selected four-year college on his screening questionnaire and began the interview talking about going to a four-year college to study music: “unless I change my mind once I get [to college] but not considering any other options right now. Music’s the big thing for me.” He then mentioned that he was “kinda behind” on registering for orientation, but that “it’s not an issue, just somethin’ I need to get done.” When probed, he admitted that he had not finished registering yet because “it’s more of a personal thing, but um, yeah. I’m just gonna take off... or deciding whether I do or I don’t. I’m still debatin’. That’s why I haven’t, why I haven’t even signed up for orientation or anything because I’m still debatin’. I’ve been accepted into [college], but I haven’t, you know... done anything yet.” Jacob mentioned planning to start off at community college and transfer to this four-year college later, but he decided to go straight to the four-year school because a lot of people were telling him about the campus and, even though he has never been there, it seems like a fun college. He also emphasized that it is close to home. His debate over whether or not to attend reflects a “personal” question that he is struggling with because he really does not want to be too much “out in the world.” Jacob seemed conflicted between wanting to pursue music, which he loves, and not wanting to go to college, which he is scared of but feels pressured to do by others. In the meantime, he got a manufacturing job, which he treats like a footnote. Whether or not he goes to college, he wants to be a musician, and he seemed very unsure of how to proceed.

College and career plans: Discussion. The purposive sample design was chosen to include participants across specific post-secondary plans, and a screening

questionnaire was used to identify respondents who fit the aspiration categories of enlisting in the military, pursuing a four-year degree, attending a two-year college, entering the workforce directly, and those who had not yet decided, or unsure.

The responses here reflect these categories with some variation within them. Of the three students joining the military, only Mike is pursuing it as his sole career. The other two military-bound respondents were also looking at post-secondary educational opportunities with their military service as a means to finance that goal.

Among those going on to four-year colleges, plans for where to go and what to study varied widely, and the respondents going on to two-year colleges mostly hoped to go on to four-year colleges later. One student, Sarah, saw a two-year degree as its own end with the desire to enter the workforce thereafter.

Of the respondents who were entering the workforce directly, John seemed not to have a specific goal other than to get any job at all, while Hannah took a job to pay the bills while holding on to the hope that she would eventually find her way into her dream job as a courtroom sketch artist. Billy was working to save money so that he could then pay for college in the future.

The two respondents who were uncertain of their plans were so for different reasons. Taylor had a plan for after high school graduation and was surprised when she found herself unable to pursue her CNA certification. Jacob did not identify as unsure in his questionnaire or initially in his interview. He planned to go to a four-year college, then he said he planned to maybe start at a two-year college, then he mentioned his ability to pursue his dream career, making music, without a degree at all, before sharing

that he already had a job in a local factory and was undecided as to whether or not to pursue college at all. The reasons for all their plans are discussed further in chapter five.

Despite administering the survey questionnaire in the two weeks before graduation, nearly one-third of respondents reported different plans in the eight weeks following graduation during which the interviews were conducted. This time frame was chosen to maximize the certainty with which students could reply that they had finalized their plans, except for those who remained uncertain, but the changes documented here were students who had stated their plans to pursue one aspiration but who then took different actions in the weeks immediately following graduation. When those who reported different plans were asked, their reasons for the switches varied, with none specifically reporting changing their minds but rather speaking of the influences that persuaded them to the newly selected path. These influences will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Residency Plans

Respondents discussed their plans for where to live both in the context of their immediate post-graduation activities and also where they see themselves long term. This factored into their college and career plans for some respondents. Their feelings on the communities in which they grew up also reflect their plans for where to live after high school. Communities and their influences are discussed in more detail in chapter five.

Residency plans: Same community. Some respondents wanted to stay in the communities in which they grew up. These respondents more often liked their

communities than the respondents who wished to move away. College options may conflict with their desire to live close by, and so some respondents described their new communities as similar to their home communities.

Staying close to home was important for Zach, which is why he chose community college. Financial aid is also a concern for Zach, since his mother does not make much money and his other income, a SSI check he gets for his diabetes, will run out when he enters school. He also wants to get a job over the summer, and again, location is critical since being able to walk to work in town would be ideal to help save on gas money. Zach had considered going to a two-year college farther away but decided to go to community college in his town because “it is close to home and my family.” Staying close to home was important to Billy, and he chose to attend his local community college for the same reason as Zach.

Austin also wanted to stay close to home, which influenced his college choice. He will be moving to live on campus, but the new community will feel similar to his home community: “The city I live in has about.... 3,000 people, maybe. And the community in which the college is in probably has about 10,000 or so. Maybe. Maybe 7,000. It's a very rural area.” Location was an important factor in his decision: “I really wanted to stay - where I've grown up all my life. And I plan on staying here as long as I can get a job.”

Jacob and Josh are staying in their home communities because of the employment options they have there. Jacob described his community as “good,” noting, “If I wanna go out and get a job, I can. I have. I have a job right now actually with [local manufacturer].” His long term career goals are to perform music, and he feels that he could accomplish that while staying in the area since he already has an opportunity to record some songs.

He plans to “take my CD and go to the radio station in town and ask for permission first of all to play the song you know for live ... and ask to leave a CD there and if anybody comes by that likes it, tell ‘em to get it. And help me spread the word, you know. I went to Indiana recently and recorded songs and got CD’s... You know I started from nothin’ and now I have CD’s and I have people buyin’ ‘em.”

Josh did not factor where he wanted to live into his plans for what to do after graduation. His only decision was to “get a job” and he plans to do so in his hometown. He thinks he “prob’bly” wants to stay there but would move for a job if he had to, “I guess.”

Counselors observed these residency plans in their discussions with students. One counselor said, “Most of them are gonna stay close to home, very few that will move far away. And, um, it’s a fear – you know? [University] is a big deal, going to [a larger town] and that’s not that far away. So a majority are going to stay close to home.” Another counselor noted that it is a “dynamic community as far as people talk about leaving and they don’t leave. Or they’ll go away but they’re home every weekend.”

Residency plans: Future flexibility. The struggle between staying and leaving was evident for some respondents. Though some respondents would have preferred to stay near home, career training options prevent them from staying. Colleges will take Brittany, Chris, and Emily away from where they grew up, and Mike must leave for his four years in the Marines. However, these respondents spoke of their career choices as providing residential flexibility. Though they will move away initially, they plan to return

to their communities with jobs in which they think they will be able to find employment anywhere.

Chris was impressed with the smaller campus and small town community in which the college he chose is located. Though it is not close, it reminds him of home. He would like to return after college but has accepted that he may need to move for a job and chose to pursue a career in education, which can be done anywhere. He said, "...coming back here is a good thing, but it wouldn't bother me not to come back. You can get a degree and you could always go anywhere's what I always thought."

For Brittany, options for colleges that offer her desired program are very limited. Though it is still a few hours from home for her, the college she chose had a smaller campus that feels similar to her community, and she still speaks of this school as being "close to home." She wants to return home after college. She acknowledges she would move to get a job if she must, but she is "hopin'" that she can move home and settle down in the same community with her career. Though she would like to return to work in her home community, Brittany knows that she can do administrative work in her field almost anywhere. She is open to living "just wherever I could get a good job at after I graduate college."

Emily did not consider where she wants to live when thinking about her career choice, but it did affect her college choice. She figures that she can work in a veterinary office anywhere as a vet tech, and she is open to moving for a job: "there's animal clinics everywhere so I can do vet tech anywhere." She is interested in finding out more about living in Washington State someday because she enjoyed a recent visit. But she picked

her college for its similar feel to her home community, noting that “it’s really far away but I like it down there, so I’ll feel at home and I’m pretty sure I’ll do good.”

Mike considered where he wants to live when thinking about his career options. He knows that he would like to stay in the area, “maybe not in the same town, but close.” He joined the military knowing that it would take him away but only for a specific four year time frame and then provide him the flexibility to live wherever he wants: “Well I figured that if I went to the Marines when I came out I could just become a Kentucky state trooper, an’ then I could be wherever I wanted to be because if I’m Kentucky state police I figure I could move anywhere.” Mike plans to come back when he gets out expecting that his service will help him get a job in law enforcement at that time.

Residency plans: New community. Some respondents are leaving their home communities immediately after high school, and this reflects a specific choice to live somewhere new. One counselor observed that most kids who want to do anything – bowling, skating – have to leave. She said, “I think that makes it hard on our kids and I think that’s what attracts a lot of ‘em to get outta here once they’re out.”

James is one such student. He wants to move to a larger town as an adult because “there’s more opportunity in larger places.” His desire to get out of his hometown was one reason he joined the National Guard: “I wanted to get out and do, get out and kind of explore the world.”

The desire to get out and explore was also true for Tyler, who is moving away to his four-year college and hopes to attend law school in a city after he graduates from college. His long term residential plans are: “a large city, maybe Los Angeles or New

York City, somewhere like that? I did kind of partly want to keep my options open, because while I am willing to move elsewhere, it kind of lets me have a broader vision of what I want to do in my future.”

Matt similarly plans to get away. He strongly dislikes his hometown, and though he is starting community college there, he looks forward to transferring to a larger university in a city after two years. He knows that he will have to move to pursue a career in astrophysics, and he plans to move accordingly. He said, “Most of the places for the application of astrophysics come from California, Hawaii, or [Washington] D.C.”

Hannah and Billy also know that they will have to move for work. She wants to be a courtroom artist, which is more specialized than the needs of her home community. She said in her email, “I want to live near a city known for court cases that wont let the media in . I'm not sure exactly where.” Billy wants to live in a larger city as an adult because “it’s much easier to find a career in journalism in a larger area.”

Residency plans: Discussion. Consistent with previous research on transitions to adulthood, these rural youth were split between wanting to stay in their home communities after high school and wanting to leave. Some respondents wanted to stay in their home communities entirely, while others moved away for post-secondary education while expressing their desire to return later. Other respondents sought larger, more diverse settings reflecting the college and career opportunities they were seeking. Some respondents made college and career choices that expanded their residential options by choosing careers that could exist across locales, thus giving them the flexibility to delay their residential choices until later.

Chapter 4: Summary

This chapter introduced the respondents and their plans. These seventeen young adults had just graduated from high school at the time of their interviews, and they reported the plans they were in the process of carrying out for what to do next with their lives. Fifteen respondents were pursuing college and career options in the military, four-year colleges, two-year colleges, or industry, while two were unsure of their next steps.

Respondents also discussed their residential plans in conjunction with their college and career plans. Some respondents were staying close to home, while others were in the process of or planning to move away to new communities. A few respondents discussed their residential uncertainty and had chosen college and career options that provided them with the flexibility to explore more residential options before making their final decisions about where they would like to live as adults. The next chapter will examine the influences respondents considered in making these plans.

Chapter 5

Influences on Youth Plans

The main focus of this study is to examine in detail the factors that students considered when making the plans discussed in Chapter 4. This chapter explores what the respondents had to say about the things that mattered to them when they were making their decisions. Respondents' families, peers, home communities, and high schools' setting and personnel influenced respondents in varying ways. Respondents also identified concerns about transitioning out of high school. Each of these is discussed more thoroughly in the following sections.

Family

The first individual section looks at family, with subsections addressing influence, motivation, expectations, and support. Respondents identified the ways in which their families were influential, sometimes exerting direct influence and sometimes being influential as respondents observed things they wished to emulate or avoid. The overarching themes that emerged within the concept of family influences are listed in Table 5.1.

The respondents repeatedly referenced the influences, both positive and negative, that their families had on their choices. Family members were described as sources of inspiration, and some respondents viewed their families as motivation, pushing them to achieve goals. Most respondents felt supported, encouraged, or inspired by their parents and relatives through discussions or by example. Family members often had expectations for respondents, but families differed in the help and support they provided. While almost

all respondents felt that there was some level of expectations placed on them, most felt that their families also helped them achieve those steps. Some respondents felt pressured by these expectations when the help they needed to achieve the expectations was not available from the people they needed to please. For some respondents, family tried to motivate them by providing examples they did not wish to follow. Though not all respondents talked to their families about their aspirations for the future while they were growing up, those who did remembered conversations split between practical concerns such as what the options were and general encouragement. Most respondents cited their families as a support that helped them pursue their plans, though some had difficulty reconciling parents' views (or lack thereof) with their own goals.

Inspiration	Viewed family members positively and wanted to follow in their footsteps or be like those whom they admired
Motivation	Pushed respondents to work harder or set higher goals
	Some parents who want to see their kids achieve higher schooling than they did, their own regrets
Expectations	Respondents who had conversations with family members tended to align their goals with the expectations others had for them
	Respondents who did not talk to their families about the future were unsure of their plans
Support	Respondents who felt supported also reported having taken action towards achieving their plans
	First view of support: sometimes just feeling encouraged, like people believe in the respondents' abilities
	Second view of support: as tangible help such as researching schools/careers or filling out forms
	Respondents struggled when parents have expectations but don't provide tangible support to help respondent achieve them

Family: Source of inspiration. Respondents look to their families as their first sources of inspiration, whether that is to follow in their footsteps or simply be inspired by their relatives. For Sarah, family inspiration means taking her mother's can-do attitude

and applying it to her own goals. “She’s a single mother and she raised four kids. Um, I played a lot of sports as a child and so did my other siblings, and she never once told us we couldn’t do it. She always found a way to do it, so she always put that on that you can do it, just put your mind to it, you can do whatever you want to do.”

Family was also very influential for Ashley. After losing a relative in a DUI crash, Ashley felt that her family never got closure: “my family never got, um, justice for losing her to the man who did it. And I've always wanted to be able to give other families the satisfaction of - when they lose a family member due to that fact... I wanted to help others because I don't see why some people can get away with it and others don't. And I don't want anybody else's family to be affected like mine has.” This sad situation inspired her conviction to pursue a career in law enforcement, and, influenced by her grandfather who was a “top maintenance man” and officer in the Air Force, she decided that enlisting would provide her the best opportunity to do so. She spoke of him: “he was an officer in the Air Force. And he told me how many great things about the official training you get, and all the, the special techniques you learn within the Air Force. And you just learn a different, an entirely different thing than you would actually learn just in college. It's not just giving you school... it's also giving you the real world as well as learning.” Ashley decided to follow that path: “he'd always say good things about the Air Force, about traveling and everything, so I thought it would be a good opportunity to visit the world and to further my education upon what I want to be when I grow up.”

James was inspired by his father’s resilience in the face of illness and wants to adopt that resolve as he progresses through the military and into his criminal justice

studies. Tyler and Ashley, who joined the Air Force like her grandfather, both reported wanting to emulate others in their family and modeled their aspirations to follow.

Brittany was influenced by her father, with whom she shares the hobby that she plans to pursue as a career. With her mother not involved with the family, she remembers talking to her father and grandmother about the future, saying that “they were a big part of everything. They encouraged us to do whatever we wanted.”

Austin’s initial spark of interest in the field he plans to pursue was also generated by spending time in hobbies with his father: “We always hunted together and that made me grow my love for wildlife and trees and stuff and that’s the reason I want to be a biologist.” With the foundation in biology, he was able to narrow his plans further through experiences at his high school: “Well, we had a, uh, a forester from the state department come in and talk to us about the fish and wildlife department, about the job opportunities and everything. And that’s when I decided I wanted to do that.” His family provided the initial influence that helped Austin decide the direction he wanted to take in his future, and the broader school community influenced his specific choice of how to apply the preferences his family shaped. This example reflects the intersection within the conceptual framework discussed in Chapter 2. Future plans emerge from one’s preferences interacting with one’s networks of influence.

Tyler was also inspired by his family to pursue a similar path: “Yeah, my family has always been really involved in politics. My parents, my grandparents especially, have always been devoted to different political causes. And my uncle serves as [a public official] of our county. And just over the years there have been several people in my family to serve different roles in the community.” His family’s activity in the community

inspired in Tyler a passion for history and politics that he found influential in deciding on his future career path. Following his family's political activity, Tyler is very active in local politics and volunteering because he finds it very interesting.

Talking about her plans with her parents also helped inspire Emily. As the first person in her immediate family to go to college, she senses excitement from her family. She discusses these feelings, her plans, and "everything under the sun" with her older brother, with whom she is very close. He works in a factory now, and she feels supported by the advice they share with each other in these conversations. For these respondents, openly talking about their plans for the future with their families helped them develop those plans and provided a source of motivation to draw on as they went on to pursue them.

Taylor thinks she may follow a similar career path as other family members. A lot of her family is in nursing, and she "started out when I was a little kid wanting to be a pediatrician but then as I got older I decided I'd rather just take the nursing classes because I won't have to go to college as long... I found out you have to go to college like 11 years for a pediatrician and I don't wanna go that long." Her brother also took the CNA test, and one of her friends took the CNA classes with her. Though she did not talk about her plans with her family, they provided an example of a path she could follow.

Family: Relatives as motivators. For some respondents, family members motivated them to set goals, which pushed these respondents to set higher goals or work harder to achieve their goals. Matt credits family with motivating him, stating that he

feels that his brother “has been pushing me towards going into greatness.” He considered different colleges to attend but decided against the one that was “far away from family.”

Zach’s father was also motivating to him. Zach was close to his father until his death in December of Zach’s senior year of high school. Since then, he took on the responsibility of helping his family in this “critical time,” which shaped how Zach is pursuing his plans. Though he wants to go to a four-year college, he is starting at the community college in town so that he can stay close to his mom and relatives. This will allow him to save money but also to be available to her as needed, which aligned with the motivation he got from his father.

Ashley, who is entering the Air Force and going to college to study Criminology, struggled with her self-esteem at times and recognized that was holding her back. She credits her mother with helping her overcome those feelings and helping her believe that she is capable of succeeding in the Air Force and college.

Tyler was similarly motivated by his family. Talking about plans for the future with his family was also integral to Tyler’s decision to pursue college and eventually law school, “they’ve always, um, anything I have ever decided on, they’ve always been willing to talk over with me, kind of discuss what they think. They’ll always be there to kind of give me that push if I need a little extra motivation.”

Chris also recalled hearing from an early age how important school was. Starting in around seventh grade he remembers, “It was, ‘what are you thinking, what do you want to do, has something sparked your interest, would you want to play sports in college, what are your goals?’ And we laid it all out and went from there.” School came before extracurricular activities for Chris, whose parents were “extremely strict, very

very strict.” If he didn’t get good grades, he wasn’t allowed to do things, “so that was a huge motivating factor for me.” They instilled in him expectations for college to match the work ethic so that he could accomplish his goals.

College as a means to achieving goals was also the perspective that James’ family took. His parents, “they wanted me to go to a place where I would have so many opportunities.” Even Jacob’s father’s pressure on him to go to college, though ultimately putting a strain on Jacob, was rooted in his experiences working in a factory and wanting more opportunities for Jacob. Austin’s family also saw college as a way to open up more opportunities. His mother graduated from high school, but his father dropped out as a sophomore. Though his father went onto be successful in his own business, Austin says, “he still tells me that I have to get it; you know, it's essential for me to, to get a degree.” His mother regrets not going to college and tells Austin that she wishes she would have gotten a degree.

Family: Expectations. Respondents frequently cited expectations from parents in discussing how they decided what to pursue. Respondents who did not have those conversations with their parents seemed to be less sure of their plans. For Hannah and Taylor, there were no discussions with family or expectations to live up to, and they both now are still figuring out what to do. The only expectation that Mike’s mother had for him was to graduate high school – the first in his family to do so. He did, and now his plans are to enlist in the Marines, but he has not taken the action to do so.

Jacob is still unsure of his plans, but the uncertainty comes from his discomfort with doing what his father expects of him. Jacob is struggling to reconcile his feelings

with his options as he sees them based on the pressure he is getting from his father, who expected “for me to go to college and get a good career, period. He’s always telling me to go to college, you know, not to have to work in... a factory or... something like that. He’s always telling me to go to college, you got the chance.” Having this expectation ingrained in him may explain why Jacob chose a four-year college as his plan in the screening questionnaire. In his interview, Jacob started out speaking firmly of his four-year college choice and only as we spoke more did he explain that he was not enrolled and eventually that he was still unsure. At one point, he slipped, “I’m just gonna take off,” referring to not immediately starting college after high school, but he immediately caught himself and stammered “or deciding whether I do or I don’t.” Jacob’s true passion lies in playing music, and he spoke of how he is able to begin working in that business right away by making CD’s to distribute at local radio stations. A college degree may not be necessary to do that, and he voiced strong personal opposition to the “worldly” aspect of college.

Billy also dealt with conflict between his own views and his parents. Though he spoke glowingly of the help he got from his father and stepmother, he also spoke of the issues he had with his mother and stepfather. His mother and stepfather did not understand or try to help him when he struggled, and it made the problem worse: “It was all about the grades, not actually what I learned... When I would get bad grades, they would just get mad at me. Yell at me for not wanting to do anything with my future. [My stepdad] wanted me to end up being just like him... I resented it. ‘Cause he tried to mold me into a little him despite the fact that I’m my own person.”

Having people doubt your goals proved detrimental for Taylor. Growing up, her family did not talk about the future, and when she decided to take CNA classes in high school, her brother openly said that he doubted she would make it. She completed the CNA coursework but was unable to take the certification test due to missing too much school. It is possible to make this up in summer classes and still take the test, but she has not pursued this and claims to be “undecided” on her plans. Other respondents felt inspired and motivated by the support of their family, while Taylor feels unsure. She said that she had not put much thought into why she chose this career path and had no reasons not to go to college or choose another career. Even as I asked probing questions in all these areas, she often replied, “I don’t know.” Taylor also noted that her brother became certified as a CNA after being unable to get other jobs, and she said that he didn’t believe she would “make it” to become a CNA. No one had expectations of her, and her mother was going back to college to become a teacher “if she doesn’t change her mind.”

In some ways, this reflects the influence of habitus in a way similar to respondents whose families’ shaped their career choices, except instead of inspiring one path or another, Taylor’s family cultivated an attitude of indifference. Both situations reflect the strong influence family surroundings and expectations have on respondents. Positive interactions are helpful as respondents navigate how to align their desires for the future, their plans, and their self-efficacy.

Hannah was also frustrated by her family’s views of what she should do with herself. She had a bad experiences with authority, describing her first guardian as a “control freak.” Hannah lived with her sisters, and when their guardian tried to take stuffed animals away from her sisters, Hannah tried to get them back in a violent way.

She and her sisters moved to live with someone else, where she stayed until graduating high school and moving out on her own, “lucky” to have been moved only once. Her loyalty to her sisters is as strong as her independence and desire not to be controlled. She calls her younger sisters her kids, and they call her mom. Her plans reflect her desire to take care of her family, her rebellious nature, and the lack of information on pathways to attainment that she missed in her tumultuous situation. She originally started drawing to copy the anime cartoons that she loves, and while her guardians acknowledged her artistic talent, they complained about the subject matter. She was determined to prove her talent despite the subject matter, which she described in her email: “I decided to show them up cause you cant tell me I cant do something. So I asked for a picture of the dog a sabiran husky. I drew her my mom was amazed!!I kept wanting to amaze people.” Encouraged by teachers, she spent hours in the art room at school focusing on her style. After a stint as the courtroom artist for her school’s mock trial, she decided to pursue that career, using google to find out that it does not require a college degree. Kicked out when she turned 18, the biggest expectation placed on Hannah was that she move out on her own after graduation, and so she did, moving in with a friend. Much like Arnett’s “drifters” she is taking a cleaning job to pay the bills with the hope of seeing her sisters soon.

Family: Support. Support from their families helped respondents confirm the decisions they were making. Chris happily recalled how “extremely” supportive his family and friends have been, even attending his signing day when he committed to his college’s athletic program.

Respondents defined support in different ways that encompassed elements of encouragement, motivation, and letting them follow their own pathways without pushing a plan or aspiration on them. Some of the variation in their definitions of support included “giving inspiration, telling me to keep pursuing what I want to do” to feeling like family “encouraged my talents, supported my choices, haven’t tried to sway my decisions,” which was Jacob’s view of “support.” His desire to pursue music was strengthened by the encouragement of those around him: “I just, I picked up playin’ guitar in middle school and I liked it... and in high school I got to sing in front of my school, and just, I had a lot of friends and teachers tellin’ me, you know, keep goin’ keep going, you’re good. Do somethin’ with yourself. And so I got a lotta inspiration, and I just, you know, that’s what I wanna do.”

Similarly it was important for Sarah to know that she had people who believed in her: “Oh it means a lot because there’s a lot of people who wouldn’t have the support, people bringing them down or tellin’ them they can’t do it, but knowing that I have, uh proud of – people behind me, just supporting me encouraged me to go ahead and do it and do what I want.” This emotional support was bolstered by help preparing for her future. Sarah recalled how her mom helped her research different types of jobs and what would be best for her.

Most respondents spoke warmly of the conversations they had with their families surrounding their parents’ expectations. Ashley’s nightly dinner table conversation with her family focused on what was done in school, what her plans for the future were, and what she could have done to further improve. Echoing the previous sentiment about support, Ashley recalls her parents making them do their homework even in pre-

kindergarten, they'd say, "you know, do this and you can have a great education and future or you can't do what you want to do when you grow up.' They've always been straightforward with us, no matter what it means. But they've always helped us; they've always supported us in all that we've done." Ashley's parents backed up their expectations with the support she needed to succeed.

Beyond expectations, encouragement, and conversations with respondents, families also provide more tangible forms of support. Emily also had help from her mom, "Mom helped me apply for scholarships and is helping me get ready for college and is making sure I have everything to feel comfortable. Zach got help from his family because his cousin is going through the same community college, and they've agreed to share resources for common gen ed classes and transportation if necessary. Billy moved to live with his father and stepmother because of the support he got from them, noting that they provided their kids with "everything they need to pursue their wants and their goals."

Besides discussing options, respondents relied on their parents for help with financial aid for colleges. This is a challenge for many respondents' families, and it is a concern that the school counselors hear from students repeatedly. Despite hosting "parent night" at the school where parents can come in to learn more about the FAFSA, and financial aid seminars during the day for students, one counselor often sees students in his office because "they're constantly bringing papers in because they don't understand the process." All four high school counselors spoke of offering information sessions for parents. Counselors also spoke of accommodating varying work schedules and understanding the difficulty of transportation in their rural areas.

Given the strong emphasis the state places on college readiness, school personnel make every effort to enable their students to go on to college, and they recognize that cost is an obstacle for many of their students: “They don’t realize the expense. And, um, but I think that’s probably the biggest fear is just the money, the money part of it.” All of the school counselors spoke of offering assistance in some way to help students and parents navigate the financial aid process, and all schools invited parents to come in and actually have help filling the form out.

Two counselors spoke of similar experiences working with parents. One counselor described, “A parent and student will both come in and they’ll bring in their W2s and we’ll fill out their FAFSA together. Sometimes that doesn’t happen and I’m on the phone, ‘I’ve got your child here and they don’t know what your social security number is.’ I’ll have parents to come in, sit down and talk with me and say, ‘This is all new; we’ve never done this before. What should we be doing and when?’” And we give at the beginning of every year, a guideline, a calendar of what a student and parent should be doing.” Another counselor had similar experience with parent interactions: “A lot of times their parents don’t know what to do, and so, they’re like looking for help elsewhere. The kids are pretty good about asking for help and trying to relay it to them. I’ll do a lot of parent phone calls, though I’ll get that but not much person to person. Usually, at our gatherings, 15% usually come. Fifteen percent per grade level, no matter what the session is for – parent night, financial aid night, etc – pretty consistent.”

I asked what happens to the other 85% of students whose parents do not attend the information sessions, and he said that “it’s not all bad.” Some of them have families who already know the process, whose parents are educated. But of the rest, he couldn’t say.

One such student spoke of this kind of difficulty in her interview. The lack of understanding how the admissions and financial aid process works was a challenge for Kayla. Her voice wavered as she described how her family would tell her to do what makes her happy but denounce her choices: “they were all supposed to help me. They haven't helped me with, you know, finding what I want to do, or what college I went to, and then I picked a college and they're not happy with it. So it's one of those things. And they're... you know, they want me to go to a really good college and all, but they're not going to pay for it. And I can't pay for it. So, that's why I picked [this school], it's something I can afford.” For Kayla, the expectations her parents had do not match the reality she is facing, and she feels pressure and guilt for not going to a school that is “good enough” in their eyes. Kayla navigated her family’s expectations by going on to a four-year college but staying within what she felt were her means. She was frustrated by their lack of effort to help her find information while assuming that anyone with good enough grades should be able to go to any college of their choosing, an American ideological dream that Kayla found untrue given the reality of her inability to pay for it.

Family: Discussion. Respondents were influenced by their families. Some respondents saw family members as inspiration that they hoped to emulate by going into similar career fields. Some respondents felt that their families motivated them by pushing them to work harder or dream bigger. This was often linked to expectations that family members had that respondents should achieve certain things such as graduate from high school or attend certain colleges. Expectations were also a source of conflict for some respondents whose own aspirations may not have matched what families expected and

who then struggled to reconcile the two in their plans. Expectations were easier met for respondents who felt that their families also supported them in their efforts, whether through encouragement or tangible assistance doing research and visiting colleges.

Peers and Networks

The next area of influence discussed is respondents’ peer groups, some of whom were described as sharing similar paths as the respondents. Respondents were split between having similar college and career plans as their friends and going their own ways. The students whose own plans and those of their peers were similar varied across all post-secondary plans in this study: attending four-year colleges, attending two-year colleges, joining the military, entering the workforce, and being slightly unsure. For some of these students, peer groups were specifically influential, while others maintained their independent planning even as they followed the same pursuits. The main themes discussed in this section are presented in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2. Themes within peer influences	
Same Path	Friends with similar paths were particularly important for students moving away from home
	Opportunity to share resources – live together, share textbooks or carpool
	Respondents saw themselves as independent decision makers, even those doing the same things or excited to share the same experiences
Different Path	Disagreements when respondent had different plans than what peers wanted them to follow, but respondents went their own way
	Conflict when peer group chooses to pursue deviant behavior

Other respondents discussed the paths their friends were taking that were different than their own, and for some respondents this was a source of conflict. Billy, Jacob and Hannah had their own plans without peers doing the same thing, but they still mirrored

the preferences of their friend groups. Only Ashley was adamantly opposed to her friends' "plans" because she cut contact with them as they began using drugs. These thematic subsections are grouped by friends on the same path, friends who went their own ways and conflicts between friends.

Peers and networks: Similar paths. Brittany, Chris, Emily, and Tyler are going on to four-year colleges, as are their friends. Some are going to the same schools. When he signed on to play collegiate athletics, Chris' friends came to support him on his signing day, and some are also attending the same four-year college. Though the college Emily picked is a few hours away from home, she will already know a few people who attend school there. They will be studying different majors, but she plans to spend time with these friends around campus. Emily stated that no one influenced her and it was "my decision" but she also expressed multiple times how important the feel was to her. Emily was looking for a small town feel similar to her home community, and knowing friends there will make the transition easier.

Sarah and Zach, who will both be pursuing two-year degrees in health sciences with the hope of going on to four-year colleges afterwards, also have friends going on to community college with them. Sarah, who wants to be an RN, has friends who will study radiology. She says she did not consider her friends' influence when making her plans because she considers her peer group to be "more all equal." Rather than any one friend leading her group in a particular direction, her friend group self-directed in the same way.

Zach's pursuit of the health sciences is a departure from his friends. As the only male in some of his health classes, he was teased by friends who said he was going to be

a nurse, which they considered an inferior, gendered occupation. Zach didn't care because he enjoyed what he was doing, and, as he put it, "They didn't realize I can be so much more." He plans to study hematology, not nursing. Though their fields are different, most of Zach's friends are also pursuing two-year degrees in auto mechanics, carpentry or welding. One friend who wants to go to a four-year college is seen as different, as Zach describes, "My one friend took welding but he wants to be a history teacher. I don't know why picked that – he's really smart but he's lazy." Even this friend joined Zach and the others at the vo-tech center taking vocational classes in welding, which is considered a strong choice among Zach's friends.

Zach's peer group includes his cousin, who is a student at the same community college Zach will be attending. This has helped Zach, who is conscientious of the cost of attending college, decide how he will navigate this pursuit. Zach's cousin had to take the GED before he could begin attending community college, and this made an impression on Zach as he was sure to take the classes he needed to avoid the costs his cousin accrued in some of the general education classes that were needed to catch up to the college/career ready standards: "I'm already college and career ready so I'm able to go straight into like the college/career classes and everything that's needed, the basics. And I've already taken Anatomy and [a medical terminology class] through [the] vocational [center] whereas [my cousin] took them at the community college. So he's a sophomore and I'm gonna be a freshman and but we're gonna be on the same page in classes-wise, so we're gonna try to share costs and everything."

Hannah is also sharing resources with her friend by moving in together. Moving out on her own immediately after graduating, she joined her friend in moving out of state where they both are getting jobs directly and saving on costs by living together.

Josh and his friends are all entering the workforce directly after graduation as well. Josh's attitude towards getting a job was very laid-back; he had not yet applied and he expected to just get the job at a sporting goods store immediately upon applying. If he is not hired, he expects that he will just apply to different stores. When asked what his friends are doing, he described a similar path: "Nothin' really, just get a job I guess." Josh had tentative plans to which he was not fully committed and he did not seem to care strongly whether he carried them out or not. As a respondent who often replied "I don't know," Josh was planning to get a job at a sporting goods store in town though he seemed to almost fall into it. With no plans to pursue college or a specific occupation, Josh's view seemed to be that any job would be fine. He was interested in the sporting goods store because he enjoyed playing sports, but if he was unable to get hired there, he planned to just go somewhere else. Even as Josh said his only plan was to get a job, he had not applied for any yet. Not unlike the "drifters" that Arnett (2004, p. 150) found, Josh's main concern was just getting a job and paying the bills. He described similar points of view among friends with similar plans.

In addition to sharing the same paths, some respondents directly made their choices because of influences from friends. Chris decided to change his major through the influence of his peer network. He described the strong impact his girlfriend's younger brother, who has special needs, had on him as the reason he changed his plans from

majoring in accounting to pursuing special education. The girlfriend's brother changed how Chris sees the world and wants to interact with people.

Mike's girlfriend's family also influenced Mike to change his plans. He had been working in a factory but knew he wanted to pursue law enforcement. When his girlfriend's cousin enlisted and starting attending physical training with the Marines, he talked Mike into going, and he "just figured why not." He sees the Marines as a stepping stone to becoming a cop when he finishes a four year enlistment, and he talked to his girlfriend and her cousin about his options to decide if it would be best to go or stay. He began going to physical training and working out with his friends and girlfriend's cousin to prepare for the Marines, and two of his friends enlisted in the Marines as well.

Peers and networks: Divergent paths. Some respondents are setting out on their own from among their peers. For some respondents, this reflects a lack of close relationships among the peer groups, as they did not continue to stay in touch. For one respondent, this represents a deep conflict as her peers stay down the path of illegal drugs. Other respondents diverged from the same paths their friends were on in less dramatic ways, having differing views of what they want in life, even when their peers try to sway them to pursue similar paths.

Matt was unsure of his friends' plans for after graduation since he had not talked to them in a while. Kayla, who will be going to a four-year college, has one friend heading out to the Coast Guard and one friend pursuing a career in welding. Billy would like to eventually go to a four-year college, but as his friends head there directly, he is starting in community college instead. He does not see anyone or anything as particularly

influential, just that it was not a difficult decision. He wants to be a writer and talked about the four-year journalism degree as more of a formality as he plans to write fiction on his own while he is in school since, as he sees it, you don't need a degree to write stories.

Ashley represented more than just a departure from her friends' paths. Her voice fluctuated between sadness and anger, trailing off multiple times, as she collected her thoughts to describe where they are now:

My friends? I've honestly lost contact throughout the past three or four months. Everybody's going their separate ways. But I know some of them, they're not going to make the best decisions. And others I know they're going to go to college and do well. But... I don't really...understand some of them right now because they'll... they feel like they've graduated and can do whatever they want, and they're just going to mess up their lives. So um... And I know a lot of my friends have gone the wrong way. And that's why we've lost contact. But I feel like if they really wanted to change, they could change it.

Drugs are a problem in the area, to which Ashley, and will be discussed more in the section on Community. Ashley is joining the military and plans to pursue law enforcement. Her relative was killed in a car accident caused by a driver under the influence, and it is clear in her career pursuit and active volunteering in anti-drug initiatives in her community that this influenced her plans. She cites the lack of justice for her family as the reason behind her choices, and seeing the mistakes she considers her peers to be making strengthens that resolve.

Jacob and Hannah were somewhere in between following their own paths and joining their peers. They both spoke of their own plans mirroring those around them, though their actual pursuits are different. They are inclined towards similar paths and seem to be influenced by their friends but ultimately pulled in their own directions.

Jacob's college choice, if he goes to a four-year college, will be the same as the one his friends will already be attending. He has never been to visit the campus but is impressed by the descriptions others have given him that it is a nice, fun place. One friend is going to be an astronomer, while another is going "on to be a score record keeper for sports, I don't know." Though Jacob is interested in going to the same college, he is not directly interested in his friends' plans. When asked why he wants to go to that four-year college, he speaks deterministically, saying it's just the one that he always knew he would go to. Jacob's father set stern expectations that he would go to a four-year college, and Jacob is enthusiastic when talking about his music and what he hopes to pursue. His knowledge of the college itself does not go beyond what he heard "from people" around the area. When asked more specifically about going to college, Jacob admits to being uncertain if it is for him. Though he talks about his plans in the same way as what his friends are doing, he is delaying enrollment at this college while he decides if he even wants to go and has a job in a local industry, work which he fell into. Jacob admitted that he was unsure if he wanted to go to college and at all and that he felt he could pursue music without a degree. He would work and save money in the meantime.

Hannah similarly is talk about what she wants to pursue someday, though her actual plans differ greatly. Hannah wants to be a courtroom sketch artist and knows this will mean living in a city where she can find a job. This is a problem since her fiancé does not want to leave the place where he grew up. Hannah explains his plans in her email, "To be honest I dont know.hes changed his mind so many times. He does odd jobs lately he working on cars takeing them apart and putting them together. he cant go to college due to poor grades.but he'll find something he always does. He know what I want

to be im trying to talk him into city life but hes never lived out of the country. He repairing the house he was born in. It means alot to him but its not a wise choice there's missing instalation and missing parts of the floor.but his hearts dead set on it so there is no stopping him.” At the time of the interview exchange over email, Hannah had moved out of state with a friend because she needed to get out on her own immediately after graduation. She planned ultimately to return to her fiancé in Kentucky: “I'm not sure exactly where im getting married and we still ne to talk about where to live. We haven't decided. he want a church wedding and I want a cheap picnic wedding. We've been together for about a year and a half. Will [We'll] talk it out we talk everthing out. Will probably end up agreeing to live out side a city.” I asked how this fits in with her plans to be a courtroom artist, and she said that she believed she would become one eventually, but that everyone has to start out working at something. Returning to Kentucky was also a good choice to her because she desperately missed her sisters. Hannah worries about providing for them and wants to get a job so that she can take care of them because they're like her “kids.”

Peers and networks: Discussion. The respondents in this study varied with respect to whether their plans matched those of their friends or not. For some respondents, their own plans matched what their friends will be doing, whether they were directly influenced or not. Chris and Mike both cite their girlfriends' family members as directly impacting their choices, Chris through their interactions and Mike through direct persuasion. The other respondents whose paths were similar to their friends' choices said that they had not considered what their friends would be doing in making their own plans

and asserted their independent thinking even when their plans matched. Those whose plans differed from their friends were fewer and their reasons for pursuing different pathways were more specific. Ashley denounced her friends' spirals into drug use, but this was still influential on her as she saw its negative effects. Jacob doubts that college is for him even as he is pressured towards it. Hannah just wants to get a job to support herself, and her long-term career plans are a secondary concern.

High School

The broader high school setting is the next area of influence addressed, and the primary themes that emerged within the sphere of high school are listed in Table 5.3. Subsections here first look at how respondents described their high school experiences overall and how they felt about their time in high school and the schools themselves. The respondents across these four school districts mostly liked their high schools and spoke of positive experiences. The things they disliked were issues specific to classes or incidents. Positive feelings stemmed from good experiences in certain classes, high opinions of helpful teachers, and enjoyable times in a pleasant environment. All respondents considered themselves good students in one way or another. The descriptions respondents gave of their high schools mirrored considerations respondents expressed in their planning.

Extracurricular activities and school programs are discussed in the next two subsections. Respondents varied in their participation in extracurricular activities within the school and community. Schools offered a variety of activities as part of formal extracurricular activities or organized through summer camps, after school programs, and

visits to the high school by community members for college, career, or military opportunities.

Table 5.3. Themes within high school influences	
Experiences	Considered most teachers and school personnel helpful and saw their schools as close-knit, which many respondents expressed as something they looked for in the college choices
	All considered themselves good students, though differed as to how. Respondents who said they got good grades had college plans, and respondents who said they did not get into disciplinary trouble had workforce plans
	Respondents who disliked their high schools because there were not enough opportunities or diversity also planned to pursue four-year colleges and careers in other communities
Extracurricular Activities	Respondents who were very highly involved in activities in their schools and communities were all planning to attend four-year college and chose activities that complemented their college/career choices
ILPs	Individualized Learning Plans were poorly administered.
	Unrealistic, unhelpful, or forgotten, even though they are specifically designed to address college/career choice for students

The final subsection in this area looks at a program utilized in Kentucky, called the Individualized Learning Plan (or ILP) that is directly intended to influence college and career choice. Respondents and school counselors expressed mixed opinions on its usefulness.

High school: Overall experiences. When asked to talk about high school, respondents mostly spoke generally of the things they liked about this time and more specifically about things they disliked about high school. Specifically, students disliked chemistry and math classes in particular, though art got a mention as well. Beyond the individual classes, students complained most about having to get up early and cafeteria food!

More seriously, the things respondents disliked most about their schools were either a clash with the overall teaching styles and expectations or unsupportive teachers. Only one student felt that the school environment itself was stifling. Tyler, who plans to pursue law school at a university in a city after he gets his bachelor's degree, said, "Um, yeah, I feel like being in a small school kind of um dampered my opportunities as far as... getting to go places and... seeing things and that type of thing. Would have liked to have gone to maybe a little bit of a bigger school. I'm really, um, I'm fond of diversity and encountering different people and cultures. And that's something I kind of missed out on in my school. We, I guess our student population is probably 98% Caucasian and so... there's no-, too much, essentially no diversity." Other respondents also noted the small school feeling but considered it a good thing.

One issue students had was not feeling like they were learning. Matt, who read Stephen Hawking on his own, found high school "boring" and "didn't learn anything." Though not boring, others echoed that they felt that school was not geared towards learning content. Ashley felt that "as for schooling, the school system... I feel that there's better ways to achieve than what we do. I feel, uh, it's more textbook than more hands on. If our teachers didn't just throw a textbook at us, I feel like our scores overall would be higher than they are." Billy also struggled with feeling like tests favored other learning styles. Though he did participate in an individualized education plan for exceptional students, Billy said he has "severe ADHD" and so he did not like high school because "it was more focused on catering to people who learn different than I do." He felt that the grading system rewarded obedience over intelligence.

Respondents referred to specific instances in cases when they disliked their teachers. Matt noted that the only classes he disliked “had to involve the teacher” because otherwise he liked school. Taylor thought that “some of the teachers weren’t very nice at times.” Zach had a problem when his teacher experienced technology issues that erased grades and pulled his GPA down, taking multiple semesters to sort out.

Other than specific incidents, respondents’ views of their teachers generated favorable impressions that contributed to their liking school overall. Though Tyler wished his school had more diversity, he also appreciated the benefits that came with its smaller size: “I like that it was, um, we had a few enough people that I was able to kind of have a personal sense of belonging with each person, so I kind of know everyone. Um, and all of my teachers were really willing to give personal attention and help to each specific need I had.” Other respondents echoed this closeness. Ashley said, “I love my high school. I felt like everybody was a big team. No matter what, you could go talk to anybody. And no matter what was wrong, you always had someone to talk to.” This is very similar to Austin’s view: “I liked high school. It was- we were like a big family. I knew everybody there. You know, we got to voice our opinions on things, and I really enjoyed high school.” Sarah described a similar feeling, noting that “you were always safe there,” everyone was friendly, and teachers were there to help. This is another instance where respondents’ echoed each other, as Mike also said, “The teachers were nice and everybody got along and had fun and made everything fun.” This view embodies the school culture in these areas, as one counselor also noted, “We have the – quote unquote – the “Family Feel” here; we have ‘family’ meetings on Monday so I really do think the kids feel like it’s a family. So they can go to anybody they feel

comfortable with; it doesn't have to be us. We really do just saturate them with the availability.”

Again and again, respondents cited their teachers as creating positive experiences for them in school. Ashley especially loved her English classes because of the teachers: “I loved reading, and I loved writing. Writing, all of my teachers, I poured my heart onto the page and everything was OK.” Chris did not pick his favorites based on content or subject matter, either; rather, his favorite classes were those in which the teachers were “energetic” and he liked their teaching style.

While the things students disliked about school varied more and were more specific, respondents mostly spoke well of their schools because of this close-knit environment. Zach described liking high school as a place where you could make memories. Two respondents were less enthusiastic, noting that they liked school but not pinning down particular reasons. Kayla said, “I don't really have any complaints. I mean, no, I didn't have any favorites or anything like that. They were all just classes to me.” While Josh said that he liked school, he couldn't say why, “I don't really know honestly, I guess just playin' ball I guess.” The other specific thing considered a favorite part of high school by numerous respondents was spending time with friends.

With the sentiment towards school tending to be more positive than negative, it is not surprising that most respondents considered themselves “good students.” This meant different things to different respondents, though. Brittany and Sarah both considered themselves to have been good students and reported getting mostly A and B grades. Austin cited his 3.6 GPA to show he was a good student. Ashley acknowledged that she did not put forth much effort in her early high school career, but by her senior year, she

had pulled her grades up to earn A's in all her classes except Chemistry: "I feel like I did a great job!" Grades came easier for Emily, who said, "I was a smart kid so I didn't have much trouble."

Not getting into trouble was the marker of a "good student" for kids whose grades were not as high. Taylor said she was "kinda" a good student because "I haven't really gotten in trouble at school for a while." Matt got A's and B's at first but over the course of his four years in high school they declined to mostly C's and "maybe" a D, but he said he was a good student because he listened in school. Jacob, who initially stated the he was going to college and eventually admitted that he had not registered for classes because he was unsure if he wants to go at all, stated first that he averaged A's and B's. As the conversation progressed, he said that he got mostly C's and a few D's, and he considered himself a good student because he never disrupted class. Regardless of grades, respondents felt they were good students if they avoided disciplinary problems in school.

High school: Extracurricular activities. The respondents fell into three different participation profiles when it came to extra-curricular activities. Two students were not involved in school other than attending class. Most students participated in a few things, some related to their aspirations, while others were just for something to do. The third group of students was heavily involved in as many activities as they could fit in. Students in each group spanned college and career plans.

Billy, who will start community college to study writing and aspires to a four-year college degree, did not participate in any community or school programs. He disliked school overall, so he "was too focused on graduating, getting out of there" to stay for

additional activities in school. Jacob also did not participate in any programs at school other than staying for necessary tutoring as needed. He did participate in church activities, though he refused to talk about it more. Jacob viewed college as getting out into the world, and he felt conflicted about going to college, describing it both as seeming fun and as representing a slide into the worldly places where people do not understand how poor a position society is in as a whole. His strong views and allusions to his church suggest that he was heavily involved in church sponsored activities, though he would not specify any more.

The next group dabbled in extracurricular activities. Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA) and Future Farmers of America (FFA) were popular among students with no intentions of going into business or farming. Some students also worked part time, like Kayla in her dad's plumbing business. Students volunteered in community emergency response services and raised money for shelter animals. Matt was in band, and James was in forensic club. Josh played football and baseball, his love of which was the deciding factor in choosing to pursue a career at the sporting goods store in town. Hannah's school activities also influenced her plans. She aspires to be a courtroom artist, which she was exposed to during her high school's mock trial. Her history teacher was influential in getting her to participate, as she explained in her email: "Actually as soon as I took him the sophomore history class started their mock trial. And they needed me to play the artist. I had so much fun its a real challenge!" This extracurricular activity provided inspiration for Hannah as she considered career options.

The remaining respondents were also likely to focus their activities outside the classroom towards their future pursuits and overall were a very busy group of students.

Emily participated in a summer camp focused on animal care to explore the veterinary technician career in addition to running track and tutoring other students in her school, noting that “I was pretty involved; I had a lot of stuff to keep me busy.” Ashley also stayed busy and was involved in as many activities as her mom would allow before worrying she was overcommitted. This Air Force enlistee who will study criminal justice was involved in community programs volunteering with youth court and anti-drug campaigns and was an officer in FBLA. Her dad would drive her to events, and her mom decided that was enough. Sarah, who plans to pursue nursing, also engaged in activities related to her career plans through the school’s health occupation club. She also played sports, was in two additional school clubs, and took leadership roles on her school council. Tyler was also involved in student government, which fits his enthusiasm for politics and law school aspirations. He did FFA and FBLA, technology club, and National Honor Society, too. Austin and Chris were both involved in school clubs and sports, too. Emily, Ashley, Sarah, Tyler, Austin and Chris all aspire to four-year college degrees, and their heavy involvement in community and extracurricular activities will help prepare them for college schedules.

In addition to extracurricular activities, respondents engaged in specific activities related to preparing for their future plans. The schools offered a variety of programs to prepare students to be “college/career ready” to meet Kentucky education standards. Grant funded programs, local business and college events, and high school focused activities give students access to information and experiences designed to help them figure out what they would like to do after graduation and help them achieve it. Respondents who were interested in college were able to take advanced placement and

dual college credit classes when they were available. Respondents interested in entering the workforce had co-operative learning, or co-op, opportunities to get out into local businesses.

High school: Informational offerings and programs. School counselors explained the College and Career Fairs they currently offer, when colleges and employers come in and talk to students about what their occupations entail: “We may not have as many colleges, but we have technical schools and we have local employers that come in, and they, they're talking to the kids about you know job opportunities or internships or co-ops. And the kids are you know getting excited because we have major industries [...] So they want to hire local people, but if you're not taking the right courses, not getting the right degrees, then they're not going to be able to hire you.” Most school visitors set up tables in the lunchroom so that kids can approach them for information on their own time. Military recruiters get the most attention when they bring a pull up bar for the students to attempt.

In addition to organizing general college and career visits to the high school, the schools offer more individualized programs to students as well: “Every sophomore meets with a mentor outside of our school system. So if I want to be a firefighter, if I wanted to be a musician: I find a musician, I find a firefighter, I find a, uh, a nurse, a doctor, a lawyer. And they come in and they sit down and they have one on one meetings with our sophomores, and they tell them what they need to be doing, what classes they need to be taking. They're not hearing it from me; they're hearing it from somebody else.” Counselors worried that students might tune out if they were inundated with information

by school administration. Another school counselor noted a similar concern, “We – I don’t want to say ‘bombard’ them because that sort of sounds like a negative word – but we are always talking about their future, post-secondary, whether it’s work, career, military, college. We’re constantly saying ‘What are we gonna do? What are we gonna do? Have you got this done?’” Inviting members of the community to discuss these options engaged students while giving employers the chance to meet potential future workers.

Given the small size of the communities in which these high schools are located, this has varying outcomes. On one hand, there are not many businesses and employers available to come in and meet with students, so schools are careful not to overburden the same community resources repeatedly. This can mean that students in the sophomore mentoring program do not have any follow up as these same mentors focus on the next class of sophomores and they move onto other programs as juniors and beyond. But the small size of these communities also means that more people know each other, and so volunteers in the community will tell the school counselors, “listen, anything that they need, let me know.” School counselors also described how the community volunteers enjoy the experience: “Careers love it. We bring in careers from here and [neighboring communities] and they love the interaction with the kids. That’s a big deal.... It’s more they just wanna come in and see the kids, you know, see their neighbors and their grandkids.” These visits are as much recruiting opportunities and friendly visits. Respondents spoke of their high schools in terms of a big family or big team, and this welcoming environment extends to interactions with the broader community.

In addition to college and career events, the high schools offered additional activities for students. Summer camps covered academic and general hobby interests. Some camps and after school activities required additional fees, but grants provided reductions for students with free and reduced lunches, dropping the cost along a sliding scale of half price fees for students receiving reduced price lunches and free to students who also get free lunch. Programs covered ranges of activities from robotics to help with the general transition between middle and high school for incoming freshman. There were offerings for students to recover credit towards classes they did not pass. High schools organized field trips to college campuses, nearby education centers, and local businesses always with the focus on ultimately ensuring their students passed college and career readiness standards for the state. Even with these diverse offerings, one school counselor expressed how she wished they could do more: “I would like to offer more after school activities to give kids something to do besides going home and sitting on the computer or whatever it is they do.” She continued that if she had the resources, “I would do a lot more field trips so the kids could actually go. We do some visiting industries, but it’s a select group of kids. If we could do a lot more of allowing the kids to do field trips within their fields, I think that would be helpful, too.” Some of the classes through the vocational school arrange to visit specific businesses in the area so that the students can see those skills in the field, but she felt that all students would benefit from seeing what is available outside the school’s immediate community.

High school: Individualized Learning Plans. Part of the preparation for meeting college and career readiness in Kentucky is the Individualized Learning Plan, or ILP.

The state contracts with a company called Career Cruising that, according to their website, operates in 50 states and 10 Canadian provinces serving over 5 million users. The program starts in 6th grade with a career matchmaker test that asks questions about the students' preferences and personality. The program then suggests career matches to the student's results. Students can explore the careers they match with and select one to track their classes towards so that they can prepare to meet the requirements for that field. One counselor observed that the students pick their career in 6th grade and may pick something unrealistic like professional athlete but as they get older they just choose the same thing that they'd already chosen: "they do these ILPs starting their 6th grade year and everybody in their 6th grade wants to be a professional athlete. But by the time that their, you know, 8th grade year rolls around, they seem to want to just click on the same thing, which by the time they get here, it's like, I'm not going to allow you to be that, let's be a little more realistic, especially if you're not playing a sport!"

This presents a difficulty with fully utilizing the ILP. Students may not take it seriously in 6th grade and subsequently have little incentive to change that. Some respondents already knew what they wanted to be and so the ILP reinforced that. Austin found it useful because it matched the career he was already interested in with his results, so he felt reassured that he was making a good choice. Billy always knew he wanted to be a writer and so would choose that as his career choice on the ILP. They were the minority as the other respondents could not remember much about the ILP despite filling it out once a year for six years. Chris laughed at the premise of deciding what he wanted to be in elementary school and could not remember what he had put. Josh and Matt did not remember what they filled out, either. Mike, who wants to join the Marines, remembered

“like answerin’ questions and stuff and figurin’ out what job would be best for you. But I had mechanic stuff like diesel mechanic and stuff like that.” His responses were not related to what he wants to do after high school.

The school counselors noticed the students’ lack of engagement with the ILP. The only positive aspect of the program any counselor described is that it introduces students to thinking about their futures early. One counselor noted that their middle school has the students make posters with info like “If I want to major in X, where can I go to school?” so that kids are required to start seeking that information early. The counselor from Bluegrass summed it up: “Unfortunately, the ILP is a very good instrument in Kentucky, but it’s – and I’ve been at 3 different schools in KY and it’s kinda the same in all – it’s more, it’s uh – it’s got a good foundation, got a good background, but you really, it’s something you have to work on over time and by the time it— every time, you’re pulling kids out of class all the time, and it’s just not utilized the way it should be probably. And so it’s more ‘let’s get it done’ because you have to do it in KY to graduate, everybody does. [...] We’re pulling kids all the time for everything. I mean, to meet their benchmarks, we pull kids for that. For testing. I mean we’re constantly pulling kids from class for everything. And it’s just like, that would be something else, so it kinda gets to the back burner, so I think everybody ends up just ‘let’s get it done.’ And I would say less than 5% really utilize the ILP to be honest. And I would think that would be everywhere, not just here.” Another counselor explained that a media teacher is responsible for having the students complete it every year, and so the ILP becomes just a form to fill out.

High school: Discussion. Though its main purpose is to connect students with options for their futures, the ILP was discussed as the least useful activity the students engaged in during high school to prepare for after graduation. Students were more involved in the classes, activities, and programs that allowed them more direct access to college and career options that they could see in their everyday lives. Respondents took advantage of camps, college credit, AP classes, co-op internships, and extracurricular activities as they decided what to do after high school.

School Personnel

Though school personnel are a part of the high school area of influence, school counselors and teachers are discussed in a separate individual section because of the extent of the themes that emerged around respondents’ discussions of their interactions with school personnel. The main idea of the themes of this section are listed in Table 5.4. Further, information from the school counselors’ interviews is incorporated throughout the individual sections and thematic subsections as appropriate and fitting, but this individual section provides a logical place to discuss information from the counselors’ interviews that provide rich and useful context that may not have fit in the other areas.

Table 5.4. Themes within school personnel influences	
Advisors	Students saw teachers as help with both school work and turned to teachers and counselors for general life advice.
	Counselors saw themselves as parent figures to help students.

In each of the four school districts in the sample, there was one dedicated school counselor. They referred to themselves as guidance counselors, and they are responsible for helping freshmen through seniors. They described their primary duties as split among testing, scheduling, and organizing information for students and parents – financial aid

nights, college and career visits, college admissions information, scholarships, etc.

Though the counselors were the students' primary points of contact for these things, teachers and other school personnel were also available to provide this type of guidance to students as necessary. These schools were recipients of grants aimed at increasing their college and career readiness, and "college and career coaches" were recently brought into these schools to work with the school counselors, effectively doing similar things and taking some of the workload off the designated school counselors. Respondents noted the support and help they receive from teachers and counselors. This section looks at who works with students and what they do, how the students see the personnel, and how the counselors see the students and themselves. This individual section is divided into thematic subsections that look at who in the schools works with students on their post-secondary plans, what they do, the nature of student and personnel interaction, and some of the counselors' individual perspectives on their students, schools and communities.

School personnel: Who works with students. Respondents commented on the supportiveness of their close-knit school communities. While some respondents specifically appreciated the help they got from their school counselors, these students also recalled the guidance regarding post-secondary options that they got from teachers along the way. Discussing who provides which services in her high school, one counselor phrased it like this: We all do. We really do. That's one of the things that, we have tried to work with our teachers with being more comfortable talking to our students about transitioning. And their transcripts, you know, are they on the right track? Are they taking the right classes for that career? And since we're a small staff it's easier, you know, like,

if the biology teacher calls me and ‘hey I’ve got such and such, don’t they need to take [this]?’ ‘Yes.’ And then, they’ll- they’ll work with the kid.” The schools in this study tried to promote that students have someone around they can talk to, whether that is the school counselor or a teacher or staff member, just that students know they can take concerns to someone who will try to help or direct or guide them.

School personnel: What they do. One counselor neatly summed up one of the struggles of working with high school seniors and how it changed her approach:

“Well, when the *Harry Potter* series came out, I got this grandiose idea from them. Harry Potter has his little slip of paper and he was going to go meet with his advisor about what he wanted to do when he grew up. And I thought ‘oh that’s a wonderful idea!’ Because for the-, for my first few years I did senior seminars on a monthly basis, met with all the seniors, told them ‘alright, this is the ACT deadlines, this is the deadline for this, and this is the deadline for scholarships.’ And [then], a top student came to me. It was one day before the honors program expired at [the university he was planning to attend], and he said, ‘I need a letter of recommendation, I’m doing this scholarship.’ And I said, ‘What? I’ve been telling you this for all, for four or five months!’ And I said, ‘Why didn’t you do this?’ And he said, ‘Were you talking to me?’ No, I wasn’t.”

For all the programs and all the activities and classes and help that these schools make available to their students, the school counselors were aware that they and the teachers needed to help the students make the right connections and take the actions needed to be successful in their plans. This counselor started having one-on-one meetings with every senior in the fall in addition to the monthly “senior seminar” she had been doing prior to her *Harry Potter* revelation. Other counselors described similar meetings, either individual meetings with students, or group meetings with seniors and the counselors or teachers. Within academic programs, the teachers also get together into learning

communities to help promote their programs and ensure that students are getting the information they need and planning activities.

Some students already know what they want to do after high school, and they make use of the information nights and programs that the schools offer, which were discussed in the previous section on High School. For these students, the school counselors work to make sure the students are doing what is needed to get accepted, process financial aid, and be prepared to enter the college or workforce. One counselor noted, “We’ll get asked – if they are in a particular program – that they come and go through the different schools to find out which has the best program, but otherwise, they’ve already made up their mind.” This was true for Chris, who had already chosen what college he wanted to attend before changing his mind about his career path and the major he wanted to pursue. He talked to his school counselor about what classes he would need to take and to be sure this college had what he needed available for him to pursue the new major. Emily also already knew where she wanted to go to college because of its campus and community feel, but she needed help after that decision. She talked to her school counselor for help with the application process and choosing classes.

In addition to providing information about the pathways students ask about, the counselors spoke of the frequent questions they hear about how to pick a path. Students will ask the counselors for advice on what kind of post-secondary plans the counselor thinks they should do, but the counselors were careful to let the students figure it out for themselves with responses like, “I’m here for whatever decision you make.” The approach is not entirely hands-off as much as it tries to let students make up their own minds rather than be told what to do. Counselors will talk to students who ask these kinds

of questions to help the student arrive at a decision of his or her own. When a student asks one counselor to tell them what to do, the counselor replies, “I’m like ‘noooo, don’t do that!’ You know, and I just say ‘Well, what do you like? What do you hate?’ And they’ll say, ‘I hate little kids’ and then I know that you don’t want to be a teacher, you know? ‘Well I like being outside.’ So then I’ll give them ideas of careers that could be outside. But no, they’ll always say ‘Should I go to here or should I go to there?’ and I’ll make them do the pros and cons. I won’t make their decision.”

Sometimes counselors struggle with encouraging the students to pursue their own choices when the reality of what a student picks may not be attainable in the context of the students’ GPA and test scores. This was not something I asked the counselors, but they independently brought it up on their own. As discussed in the section on High School, some students may claim to want to be professional athletes after high school, and if they are not even playing a sport in high school, the counselors recognize that this is unrealistic and will steer the students towards other options. It can be more difficult when the stated aspiration is generally more attainable than professional athlete. One counselor struggled with wanting to tell students when their decisions are not “good.” She doesn’t want to “burst their bubble,” but “if it’s not real truly realistic, then we start thinking, ‘Let’s look at other avenues.’”

It was important to the counselors to stay encouraging, even in this situation. Another counselor put it this way: “I’m usually pretty positive for the most part. I hate saying ‘no, you can’t get in there,’ things like that, but we’ll look at alternatives, too, if their aspirations are a little bit more than what the reality of the matter is.” Other than firmly steering students away from the unrealistic dreams of professional athlete or

entertainer, the school counselors all described supportive approaches that shift a student's focus to what he or she could excel at rather than negatively highlighting the areas in which the student is not very strong.

School personnel: Personnel and student interactions. Students noticed the positive attitudes of teachers and counselors. When the respondents were asked about aspects of high school they liked, many spoke of good experiences with teachers and school personnel. More directly, respondents spoke of an atmosphere of support in their high schools.

Respondents discussed how they felt this support. Emily said of the teachers and administrators at her school, "They want everyone to succeed and do the best they can." Austin said something similar of "the principal and all the supervisors and everything," not just school counselors. He thought that "they were real involved in the student's family." Chris felt the same way about some of the teachers at his school, "Some teachers were extremely caring and you could go to them with any personal matter or anything and knew that they would keep it private and try to help you."

This involvement was also something Billy appreciated. Some teaching styles or expectations for content memorization conflicted with how Billy felt he learned best, and he struggled in some classes because of his severe ADHD. The best teachers Billy had "helped teach me in a way that I could learn, to be honest." Dealing with his learning needs as he tried to plan for his future could be discouraging, and Billy was genuinely moved by the teachers and school counselors who helped him because "they listened to my opinions."

Being open to what students' think was something Tyler liked about his teachers and school counselor, too. He described his school personnel as "really focused on helping us to be college and career ready and putting us all on some path. We all at some point had individual talks with our college and career readiness coach to kind of discuss what we were going to do after high school so that nobody would just be doing nothin'." Though Tyler plans to pursue a four-year degree and then law school, he noted the equal attention teachers and counselors gave to students across post-secondary aspirations: "They were really crucial in the process of just kind of knowing my options. They were always very supportive in, um, everyone we know."

Support for everyone was also important to Zach, who complained that some teachers and administrators in his high school "play favoritism." He contrasted that to teachers who would go out of their way to help as best they can and to whom he felt he could take any type of question at all. He specifically appreciated one of his science teachers whom he talked to frequently. He described how she went above and beyond the teaching of health material. Zach grew up getting support because of his diabetes, and his mother also received social security income. With that jeopardized at graduation, Zach was concerned about his long term finances. He was comfortable talking to this teacher about it, and she helped teach him basic personal finance. Zach marveled at her recommendation to "pay yourself first" by opening savings accounts so that interest could compound.

Ashley also observed teachers and administrators who were open to helping students with more than learning class content. Similar to Zach, she specifically noted teachers who would help "as best they can" and to whom she felt she could go to ask

anything at all: “Um, there are certain teachers that you know that no matter what's going on in your life, no matter what, if you needed, you could always go to them. They can help you as best as they could. They would try to give the best advice they could with being aged – not saying old or anything but having their life experience.”

The counselors described themselves as being available and proactive to help students, and Emily, Austin, Billy, Tyler, Zach and Ashley noticed and made use of the help the counselors offered. Other respondents had little interaction with teachers and school personnel beyond teaching and classroom interactions. Though the four school counselors all had seminars, meetings, or one-on-one sessions with students to be sure that every student was helped in some way, the counselors also noticed and discussed some differences among the students who seek them out for more help or whom they rarely see again after those initial meetings.

The students whom the counselors report seeing the most often vary in their aspirations and needs. Some are upper level students who are considering multiple colleges and need more help with organizing multiple campus visits or completing multiple application processes. Sometimes these are “the kids whose parents are saying ‘go see the counselor, go see the counselor, you know get all the scholarship opportunities,’ we have that. Parents are pushing them to get in here and get all the information they can.” But “on the flip side” some of these students also need the help from school counselors because they do not have a lot of support at home or their parents don’t understand the process. There are also “needy kids who I see probably two or three times a week, that just got things going on and just need somebody to talk to,” which fits

with the respondents who described being able to talk to their teachers and counselors about anything.

Between the students who talk to the counselors often and those who rarely talk to the counselors, there are “the middle of the ground students who aren’t sure if they want to go to college.” The counselors said they see those kinds of students less frequently than those who need a lot of help; however, these students still meet with the counselors to discuss their options.

There are some students the counselors have little interaction with outside required seminars and meetings. Some of the students who do not go to talk to the counselors often are “just more reserved. They don’t share everything that’s going on in their lives. Maybe they have more family support, more friend support.” This described Matt, who wants to be an astrophysicist. His parents and brother got him books on the subject and helped him look at colleges, and he said he did not talk to the school counselors about his plans.

Another counselor described the students that she sees the least. There are students she may see only one time, and “the problem is they have a hard time communicating what they want to do. They don’t really know what they want to do.” This was seen in Taylor’s response. She was unable to get certified as a Nursing Assistant through her CNA class at the high school because of missing too much time from school, and she is now unsure of her plans. When I asked if she had talked to teachers or the school counselor about her options, she said no, “I don’t really know, I didn’t talk to the counselors much.”

Within these categories of students, there are two types overall: those who need help and those who do not. Those needing help tend to be those students who do not have any at home or they are applying to so many colleges it is difficult to manage. Those who do not need help are those students who have guidance at home or are not pursuing plans that need assistance from the school. Some of those the students who do not seek help may not be college and career ready, meaning that they have not passed the tests that the state deems demonstrate their ability to enter the workforce or college successfully. One counselor said that at any informational event, whether financial aid or parent-teacher nights or other informational events, sponsored by any of the schools he has worked at over the years, he expects to see about 15% of parents. Always, he estimates 15%. Of the other 85%, he said that some students will fall into the categories of those whose parents do not need the help because they already know this kind of information. I asked what happens to the others: “I don’t know. I really don’t know,” he replied.

School personnel: Counselor perspectives. In addition to talking about the work they do and their students, the four school counselors also brought up in their interviews how they see themselves in their roles. This was not a specific question I asked, but the theme emerged as they spoke about the way they interact with students. The counselors’ views of themselves in the school counselor role influenced their approaches to working with students. Echoing the sentiment of the small, close communities that the respondents held about their high schools, as discussed in the section on High School, the school counselors saw themselves as helping to foster that nurturing school environment. One counselor described how often students come back to the high school to ask her questions

even after they've graduated because they felt comfortable there and needed more help navigating their post-secondary paths.

The counselors are happy to help. One saw that as the reason he chose his own career: "I'm really interested in helping students get to where they need to be." Even though the counselors described testing and administrative duties as making up a large portion of their jobs, they spoke animatedly of their interactions with students. One counselor, who has worked in multiple high schools across "different administrations, different types of kids," maintained that focus on his students: "I'm very kid-oriented, moreso than trying to please adults. I have a pretty big kid following. They tend to meditate to my office a lot of times. I like that. They just talk... about life, whatever, everything. Sports. I'll work while they're talking."

All four school counselors I spoke to left the impression of being very invested in their students. One counselor said, "As a teacher or a counselor, I think that rapport is the #1 factor, relating to kids. Being in education just takes a positive attitude. It's about kids." During my site visit, I observed students just popping by just to say hello between classes. The counselors all had backgrounds in other teaching, and they all stayed very focused on, as one counselor called them, the "kiddos."

This focus presented itself in a parental way. Discussing the students they see often, two counselors noted how some students may not have a mom and dad at home, they may not have that support, and so those students turn to the counselors. One counselor specifically embraced this interpretation of her role: "What I have found is the role of a guidance counselor now becomes more the role of a mother or a father. That their parents may not have ever gone to college and because of that they utilize me [and

another staff member] for that guidance because they don't-, they don't know. Their parents don't know.” Walking through the halls with her, it was easy to see her perspective manifested in such things as the hallway bulletin board decorated with an elaborate display headlined, “We Got In!” Here, senior photos paired with college acceptance letters and notes of scholarship awards were posted, just as a proud parent might do.

School personnel: Discussion. The four schools in this study are small, and this fosters closeness within the school community. It also means that school counselors have a lot of responsibility across their guidance, testing, and administrative duties. Teachers and administrators share these tasks, and respondents noted being able to get help from many personnel in their schools. Counselors take an almost parental view of helping their students, and they are heavily invested in their students’ successes. Respondents spoke of the specific help the teachers and counselors provided that went above and beyond classroom material to better prepare them for many aspects of adult life. These are one type of students counselors recall working with most frequently. Counselors also discussed the students that they rarely interact with, either those students who needed less help because they were getting the kind of information about transitions to life after high school from other sources like their parents, or the students who were most lost and may not have even known what questions to ask because they did not know what they want to do. Respondents fit those categories as well. Overall, the counselors saw themselves as student focused and approached their work with students from a nurturing point of view.

Community

The respondents' descriptions of their communities make of the first thematic subsection, and the next subsection looks more closely at the pros and cons of these communities according to respondents. One "con" that got specific attention from respondents' and counselors is drug use in these areas, and so it is treated in its own subsection before the theme of rurality is examined. Table 5.5 lists the primary themes that emerged within the category of community influence.

Views	Respondents liked their small, quiet, nice towns close to nature, where everyone knows everyone
	Felt a sense of belonging
	Sometimes could be too small, lack of privacy, lack of diversity
Rurality	Hard for Respondents to define but associated with positive sentiments
	"I'm just a country girl."
	Sense of limited experiences, not just social but no part time jobs, counselors discuss it from the perspective of very small world views and lack of experiences, no exposure, insular

The prevailing characteristic that respondents used to describe their communities was "small," which makes sense in areas that were chosen for rural characteristics which naturally limits population density. Almost all respondents described their communities as small. The other common description was "rural." Smallness was something some respondents liked but contributed to things that other respondents disliked. This section will look at these communities, along with the pros and cons of living there, and then a more detailed examination of what "rural" means to respondents before considering the influence of community on their choices.

Community: Descriptions. Driving out to the schools for the site visits, I passed through open fields of farmland and small towns with buildings in varying states of

repair. Gas stations dotted the landscape, along with the occasional fast food restaurant. Signs that could be described as “classic” or “retro” still hung outside tiny shops advertising products whose brand name logos had long since been redesigned. A quote often misattributed to Mark Twain (Courier Journal) claims that the writer said, “When the end of the world comes, I want to be in Kentucky because it’s always 20 years behind the times,” and driving through these communities, I could understand why locals repeated it. The newest buildings were large government centers, including one labeled Youth Services. The buildings that were maintained the nicest were churches, sometimes sprawling with attached community centers and Sunday schools beckoning varying Christian denominations. Just as quickly as they appeared, these tiny towns disappeared in my review mirror as expanses of fields continued on.

Besides “small,” the most common descriptor respondents used for their communities was “rural.” Some respondents considered “small town” and “rural” almost interchangeable. Ashley described, “Where I live... My county is actually wh- the town where my school is, but I live a little further out. Um, it's a small town, rural community I guess you could say.” Emily had a similar view but added nature to her definition of rural, “It’s a small town, and it’s very rural. There’s a lot of trees and stuff.” Billy described his community as rural, adding that it is “out in the middle of nowhere.” Rurality will be looked at more closely in a separate subsection.

The sparseness of rurality reflects the small nature of these communities. There are few people and correspondingly few businesses. Multiple respondents called their towns “small,” but Matt summarized his community clearly: “Small, of course. It’s really small, and there isn’t very much goin’ on in my community. Farming’s just about it.”

Chris shared a similar description, “It’s a smaller area. I mean, it’s not a big city or anything, just a small little town. Everybody knows everybody.”

The low population density inherent to rural communities meant that things can be spaced out. Though scenic, this can be a problem for residents with limited means of transportation. One counselor explained that the school busses in the area have routes with designated stops, and if a student lives along the route, they can be picked up near home. Others may still have to drive or be driven to the designated bus stops, which may be somewhere like a grocery store. There is not enough money to support bus transportation to every part of the county without students having to be on the bus for hours due to the nature of the routes.

Getting around the area can be a challenge, but there are only so many places in these communities that the students want to go anyway. When I asked one counselor what kind of things there are to do in the area, she replied, “In our town? Not much!” She explained that people from the area who are looking for more to do or more opportunities often end up leaving for cities like Louisville. One community in the study only got its first local movie theatre in the last decade. For students in these communities, shopping is very limited. Most people buy clothes at the Family Dollar store or make the over 30 minute drive to Walmart. As one counselor said, “Some of these kids have never been to a mall.”

Besides providing little in the way of entertainment, the lack of businesses in these areas meant limited opportunities for work. One counselor explained: “Job opportunities are very limited for them. I hear a lot of kids complaining, you know, we have McDonald’s, and so, the opportunities for them to work while they go to school is

very limited because they are here. And then I think that, you know, I have a lot of kids who say ‘I could go to work in [a larger town 30 minutes away] or I could go to work here,’ but then they’re going to spend their paycheck driving to get to work. So I think our kids are limited in their work experience prior to graduation, which I think hurts them.” Students in these communities see how few jobs there are as they start to consider what to do with their futures.

To sum it up, one counselor stated, “It’s not a big industry based community,” citing one industry nearby. One silver lining to small communities with fewer industries is that when these companies hire, they turn first to local talent. One counselor commented, “Our industries, not all of them, but probably [most of them], will take a student on that’s just got a high school diploma. They may be hired on a temporary basis, maybe through a temporary agency. But they can get \$15-20 per hour. So a lot of our industries hire our local students, especially if they’ve been over the tech center in welding or automotive or carpentry or industrial maintenance.” Because of this, the counselor also said she strongly encourages as many students as possible to take classes in the vocational center.

Community: Pros and cons. Respondents included things they both liked and disliked about their communities in their descriptions of where they live. As Zach stated about his community, “Yeah it’s a nice community. It has its problems every now and then but those are problems that are easily solved.” Broadly, the things respondents liked about their communities were that it is small, it is nice, nature, or people know each other.

In addition to Chris and Matt as noted in the previous subsection, Jacob, Emily, Sarah, and Kayla specified the “small” size of their communities as attractive to them. Jacob described his community as “a nice, little, small, little place.” Emily said that she likes living there because “it’s small and not very hectic or crazy most of the time.” Like Emily, who appreciated that her small community is not “crazy” or “hectic,” the thing that Mike liked the most was that his community is “quiet.” Kayla had the same sentiment when she called her community quiet. Billy expressed a similar like for the calmness of the area he lives in because he “loves nature.” This was also what Taylor liked most about her community. She lives near a creek and likes being outdoors sometimes.

Brittany also considered her community nice but this was more because of the people. She said, “It’s a safe place. The people are really nice.” Sarah also observed the niceness of her neighbors: “I love it. I love that it’s a small town and everybody knows everybody, and when something happens everyone is willing to help.” Kayla has an almost identical view about her community: “Um, it’s nice. I mean it’s a little town, so usually everybody knows everybody.” Again and again, respondents had the same observation. Brittany phrased it as liking her community because “just that I know just about everybody where I live and everything.” The close social networks respondents have access to are directly related to their small communities.

Tyler identified the connection he shared with previous respondents regarding the small towns and their friendly residents: “I like the sense of community, belonging.” The small size of these communities fosters closeness among their residents. Ashley saw this in how her town works to encourage these networks by bringing people together. The

main thing she loves about her community is the way people get together: “Um, I love the fact that everyone tries to... bring everyone together to have a good time. Um, we usually do all kinds of different events. We have all kinds of different things that go on, like [a local festival] that is coming up, and there's gonna be all kinds of different people coming down from all over. There's all kinds of things this town does to help and bring people in.”

Chris also observed the helping spirit of people in his community: “Uh, everybody like in a small town, everybody knows everybody which can be a good thing... because since you know everybody, growing up with everybody, and it's not like, you can always go to anybody to talk to which is always a plus. Everyone is *extremely* – everybody is extremely supportive of everyone. So you can participate in different things like voluntary work and you know everybody so it's always like a close relationship.” This had an impact on him personally, and he added that “it taught me to become a better person in many ways, like being able to uh, let's see.... Being able to go out to the community and help, that's like— different stuff like that. And being able to do that a lot with different stuff and so being able to do that's helped me become a better person and care about more people.”

Despite his personal growth and stating the closeness in his community as “always a plus,” Chris did also consider its negative impacts as something he dislikes about living there. Respondents who expressed their dislike either hated where they live overall or had three main considerations: too much small town closeness, the lack of things to do, and drugs.

Though Brittany, Mike, and Sarah had nothing about their communities they disliked, Mike had nothing about his community that he liked. He had nothing to say specifically other than that he does not like it there at all. Taylor liked the nature around her, but she overall strongly disliked her community. She could not explain why at first, but then cited the lack of good telephone service that causes her to miss calls. Matt also disliked his community overall, calling it “Horrible. Very low end town and... pretty much, if you’re not a certain way then you’re downgraded. Everybody that is different gets downgraded.”

This reflects the negative impact of closeness in a town where “everybody knows everybody.” Though it fosters a sense of community, those who do not fit in may be excluded. Billy saw it as “a lot of people, they’re very closed minded.” In an area where everyone knows each other and most people have similar backgrounds, things or people that differ from the norm may not be well received. Tyler also disliked this about his community because “it kind of puts a damper on innovation, creativity, diversity and that kind of thing.”

The other aspect of the small town closeness that respondents disliked was that they would prefer to not always have everyone knowing everything. Chris complained, “It can also be a bad thing. People are like really nosy and people will always know your other business. Like you can’t – It’s harder to get privacy.” Nosiness was also something Emily disliked in her community, “I don’t really like the people in it because they’re nosy, and yeah, that’s one of the bad things about living in a small town.”

The other negative thing about living in a small town that some respondents expressed was lack of things to do. As discussed in the community descriptions, these

areas do not have many amenities. Kayla specifically disliked that there is “not a lot to do.” James let his voice trail off as he described it: “Hm, well there’s nothing to do around here, so....” To him, the lack of things to do speaks enough for his dislike.

Community: Drugs. Lack of recreational opportunities makes room for residents to find alternative things to do, which is drugs for some members of these communities. News outlets around the Kentuckiana area (Southern Indiana/Kentucky border) report the rise of meth, cocaine, and heroin drug use, and the city of Louisville has implemented clean needle programs (LouisvilleKY.gov). The New York Times also ran a feature documenting the H.I.V. and hepatitis C outbreaks in Indiana attributed to shared needles (New York Times, 2015). I see public health campaigns and anti-drug ads everyday on the bus in Louisville, and some respondents reported unease at the drug use they watched growing in their communities.

This was the biggest issue Ashley had with where she lives, and it also negatively affected her friendships. She explained, “Um... My county has a way of affecting people. And... if somebody gets affected the wrong way... it can lead their life to a dark, lonely path. Um, I love my county and all, but right now, drugs is a very big problem in this town.” As discussed in the section on Peers, Ashley broke contact with friends who went down this path.

Though he called it a problem, Zach did not consider drugs as seriously as Ashley. He initially commented that his community had good things and “problems” that could be “easily solved.” When asked what kind of problems, he elaborated, “I think the main issue would be like probably drugs. Not every --, very now and then you’d hear

something that'd be drug related. You'd hear a drug bust or somethin' happenin'. Like just the other-, just a couple days ago, a bank was robbed and the person didn't really rob anything. And a couple weeks ago a house exploded because of a gas leak but everyone thought it was like, uh, it was a, uh, meth explosion but it wasn't." Zach sees the drug use in his area as undesirable, but he does not think it is a pervasive problem.

One counselor shared that view with Zach. Having lived in the area on and off for her entire life, she watched the agriculture base of the economy erode with little to replace it:

"I guess I have a vested interest [in the community]. Because I know what our community has been, I know where it's going down, and I say there is a part that's going, it's a going down part because our community was all agriculture based. We were [a large agricultural area], and no agriculture is here now. And when the ag and... the agriculture started going downhill, the farmers lost their money, they lost their farms. The kids lost their summer jobs. I will attribute a lot of that lack of farming to them doing drugs now. You know, it's illegal opportunities of marijuana. I mean, it's easily grown here. I'm hoping that we can grow marijuana legally someday. I hate to say that I'm in favor of that, but for the farmers, I want them to have a crop that is a cash crop that they can go back and be legal and be taxed, which is right now is not the case. But I'm going to be an advocate for, you know, especially medical marijuana, because our state needs something. When industry left, you know, you have the drug problem that comes in. You have the low income situations. And then what do you do? ... It can go to almost any community, but you have to find something else. And you have to find something that is legal. And we're working on that."

Though she is embarrassed to admit it, she sees legalizing marijuana as a possible solution for the community's economic hardship.

Community: Rurality. The former agricultural base of these communities reflects their rurality, which is also a central consideration of this study. Even before I asked about it, respondents adopted "rural" to describe where they live. I then asked

respondents to define “rural” in their own words. Some respondents verbally shrugged, with stretches of silence and “I don’t know.” Though she described her community as rural, Brittany said that it doesn’t mean anything.

The definition of rural was difficult to capture for respondents. Tyler evoked pastoral scenery when he defined rural as “unpopulated, near the lake.” Fitting with respondents’ overall descriptions of their communities, Jacob specifically defined rural as “small.” He extended his definition to include “secure I guess” before retracting it because “aint’ no place in the world’s secure.”

Instead of offering her own definition of rural, Ashley tried to explain why she couldn’t define it: “It’s just something I feel. It’s like... if you ever go into somewhere, you’re like, well, ‘it’s rural.’ You don’t really know how to say it or express it, but you know it. It’s just a word that pops into your head.” While Jacob may not have committed to the idea, he initially shared with Ashley the sense that rurality was about the feeling and impression your community creates as much as the physical surroundings of the place. Sarah was also unsure about how to explain what “rural” means: “I dunno, isn’t that like in the country? I have no idea.”

Equating “rural” with “country” fit the descriptions of their communities according to other respondents as well. Chris described the area as “A lot of farms, I mean we have a smaller like town, it’s not all farmland. It’s a tiny bit organized, but it’s like a lot of farmland and open areas and pastures and stuff like that.” Austin had the same idea: “Uh, you know, not door to door houses. I mean there’s some neighborhoods that, you know, are close together, but there’s a lot of farmland. Houses are spaced out. Stuff like that. It’s very... it’s country.”

“Country” was also a way respondents contrasted their communities from what they are not. Emily said her community is “like country, it’s not a city. It’s a country town.” Respondents see their rural communities as separate and distinct from cities. Austin said of his community, “I mean, it’s very rural -- it’s not a big city.” Hannah, who moved among guardians growing up, described where she lived in high school: “the second home was nicer it was in the country a little bit of a shock to us city kids.” Zach also contrasted his community to the city, though in a very specific way: “I just don’t really like big cities... ‘cause I think ever since they took like drivers’ ed away from a lot of schools, I feel like that parents don’t have enough time gettin’ ‘round to teachin’ their children how to properly drive. Or let alone how to drive good themselves. ... I feel confident in my driving skills, it’s just other people I’m scared of.” Dislike of cities was also part of how Kayla views rurality: “I don’t like cities. It’s... I just... I don’t like all the noise or... yeah, I’m just a country girl.”

One counselor described this as his own experience and part of how he ended up working in this school. He’d grown up in a rural community until “something snapped and I moved away.” After living in various places, he settled on working in a rural community, but he commutes a lengthy drive: “the kids are fine, probably my favorite job, but it’s a rural community and there’s not a lot to do here, and it’s just – I try to urge the kids, you know, ‘go elsewhere, see what’s out there, if you don’t like it then come back’ but just give everything else a second chance, and I think that’s very important for all kids no matter where you live. But I see in every community I’ve been in with the kids, though I see that though a lot; they don’t experience things.” His initial view was similar to those of respondents’ regarding his rural community, but over time he came to

appreciate the perspectives he gained through new experiences in more diverse communities.

Community: Discussion. The communities in this study were chosen for their rural characteristics, and these were displayed during my site visits. Sparse communities set among fields were the backdrop for the towns where these high schools were located. Respondents described their communities as small and rural, though rurality was difficult for them to define.

For some respondents, this was integral to what they love about living in these communities. Their small towns are quiet and close to nature, countryside apart from the noise and perceived faults of the city. Everyone knows everyone there, and this generates positive feelings of caring and helpfulness. For other respondents, this was the source of what they most disliked about their communities. Close neighbors could be nosy or closed-minded, and the small towns lacked diversity. Some members of the community turn to drugs, which is a problem of varying seriousness to respondents who noted it.

Post-Secondary Concerns

The final area of influence explored in chapter five is concerns about the changes respondents would encounter in life after high school that the respondents and counselors identified as influencing decisions. The main themes that emerged here are described in Table 5.6.

The concerns that the students expressed in their interviews were very similar to the concerns that the school counselors recall hearing the most often, and these concerns

can be classified in two themes: money and way of life. When thinking about their futures, the two issues respondents stated struggling with were figuring out where the money would come from, whether that was getting a job that paid well enough or paying college costs, and facing the unknown of what life after high school would be like.

Finances	Paying for college as primary concern
	Choosing colleges and careers to maximize job opportunities
Ways of Life	Wanting to stay near home or somewhere similar
	Fear of the unknown

Conversation grew around how respondents considered money in their plans, whether that meant paying for further education or maximizing their earning potential in the workforce. The other theme respondents raised was general discussion about the ways in which their lives would change after high school. Though it is a fact for all the respondents, some expressed specific considerations as to how this impacted their plans for the transition beyond high school.

Post-secondary concerns: Finances. For some respondents, money presented opportunities. Tyler, Emily, and Austin got scholarships that made their choices easier. Tyler’s tuition will be paid in full at the four-year college he planned to attend. Emily considered how much scholarship money she was getting from her college of choice. Cost was an important factor for her, so she considered “scholarships, like how much I got from X State. And I considered the cost.” Similarly, a \$15,000 academic scholarship reduced the worry Austin had about deciding to go to a more expensive four-year college.

James and Ashley both joined the military to help pay for their degrees. Ashley will study through a program while being enlisted in the Air Force full time, and James is

using National Guard tuition benefits to help cover the cost of his four-year college. Mike also joined the military for financial reasons, but instead of using it for post-secondary schooling, he sees the pay and benefits in the Marines as stronger than what he could find in the area to start. He also thinks it will open up better paying jobs for him when he gets out.

Finding a job that pays well was also a primary motivator in Zach's peer group. He talked about one friend taking a job in Texas for underwater welding: "you make a LOT of money within like just one hour, but it's very, very dangerous." Finding a job to pay the bills was also Hannah's and Josh's primary motivation, and they both entered the workforce directly after high school.

Paying for college in addition to bill was more of a concern for other respondents. Kayla restricted her college search because she worried about paying for college. Despite pressure from her family to go to a "good" college, she chose a less selective four-year institution with cheaper tuition that she felt she could manage to pay for on her own. Paying for school is a big concern for Kayla, but she had yet to finish completing her FAFSA and applying for financial aid at the time of the interview, the summer after high school graduation.

Similarly, Sarah narrowed her college search down based on cost: "I guess financially I did not want to take out any student loans. I didn't want that stress on me, so figuring out where I could go with my financial aid what was going to cover was a big part of my decision on where I was going to go." She is opting to go to a two-year college that will allow her to "save up money" because of its cheaper tuition.

Billy did not want to take out loans either, and so at the time of his interview, he was not yet acting on his aspiration to attend a four-year college. He entered the workforce directly out of high school to save money to pay for college, and even then he plans to start at a community college to leverage his money farther on cheaper tuition. He wants to be able to pay for as much as he can out of pocket, relying in order on “grants and scholarships first, then money, then loans.” His long term plan is to then transfer to a four-year college to complete his degree in journalism, but financial constraints have made this the third step on his path after high school graduation.

One counselor explained that she encourages every student to take classes in the tech center and estimated that at least 70% of her students take at least some classes there. The draw of the tech center is the allure of training for jobs that might pay \$15 or more per hour, good wages in these communities. And yet, even among students who had taken classes there and were pursuing local jobs, respondents spoke of choosing these areas of study for other reasons – Emily studied veterinary technology because she loved animals; Sarah studied nursing because she loves people. Only Zach spoke of the financial incentives of pursuing careers from the tech center, and that was what he saw his friends doing, not for himself. He spoke of the money his friend who had studied welding would be making in a job that would pay on a project basis with no guarantee of long term employment, but that single \$3000 pay out was an impressive sum of money to them.

As he heard the stories of the money his friends would make, paying for college was a big concern for Zach. He watched his friend’s sister go to a different college than he picked and now her mom is taking a second job to help pay their \$16,000 school debt.

He considered this when making his choice: “community college [doesn’t] cost that much and FAFSA would be good enough, when I send it out I was able to get granted like a full grant plus with my KEES money through high school and the scholarship that I got, it can help pay off through the years. I’m pretty sure I can still fill out scholarships through the summer and try to get more.” He referred to KEES money, the Kentucky Educational Excellence Scholarship, and it is available to any student who attends a certified Kentucky high school and earns at least a 2.5 GPA (KHEAA-Administered Programs, 2014). Essentially, it is an incentive to keep kids from dropping out of high school. There is a base amount available that goes up as one’s GPA increases, and it increases for each year the student stays in high school.

Counselors leverage the KEES money in their conversations with students. One counselor noted, “Money. They get real—don’t know how they’re gonna pay for their education, even the best students. That’s why I really try to tell them the importance of the ACT and their GPA is getting money because Kentucky has the KEES money of course. That, there’s \$2500 you can get right there. So um that’s the big thing that they become concerned with when they see the cost.”

All four school counselors stated that they commonly hear financial aid concerns from students. In addition to the first counselor discussing KEES money, another brought up the overall concern about paying for school that she often hears. She stated, “Financial aid is probably the biggie. But I think, you know, even though we have the information nights, they don’t get their FAFSA filled out in time and then the money’s gone.”

All four high schools offer financial aid nights available to parents and students to get help filling out the FAFSA, and all four counselors talk to students and parents

directly when they can to help them navigate the process. The third counselor said the most common questions she gets from students are, “Money – where is it going to come from? How to fill out the FAFSA?” She spends significant time negotiating scholarship terms, discussing with students how to leverage different scholarships and combine them with aid to get the most benefit.

Scholarships often cover tuition, but students still need to figure out how to pay for everything else that goes with college – residence, books, fees and everything else. The fourth counselor brought up the conflict this problem creates for some of her students: “The most common reason kids are torn about staying in the community or leaving [for college] is money related. They say they want to get away but they often cannot afford tuition and room and board somewhere.” Respondents in this study mirrored the concerns discussed by counselors and how money affected their decisions.

Post-secondary concerns: Changing ways of life. The second most common concern raised by respondents and school counselors is how the students’ lives will change after graduation. Regardless of the college, career, military or workforce pathway they are choosing, respondents worried about how things would be different.

Jacob’s concern differs slightly from the fears about life transitions expressed by other respondents and counselors in that he does not want to adapt to his next environment. Jacob wants to pursue a music career and states that he plans to study music at a four-year college. But he has not registered and is still debating if college is right for him, and he is working in industry in the meantime. His indecision stems from his concerns about getting out into the world beyond his community. When I asked what

makes him unsure, he struggled to explain his fear: “It’s more of a personal thing, but uh, I just don’t really wanna go on to college... maybe... just because I don’t wanna get... like I said it’s my own personal thing, I don’t wanna get too caught up in uh... I don’t know how I could say it that’s really crazy, uh... um...um... I’ll just say I don’t want to get too caught up in society.” Jacob really resisted here, definitely starting to say without condition that he doesn’t want to go to college, and his voice wavered as he added the “maybe.” His dad “always talked TO me,” telling him to go to college as he was growing up, and his doubts came later. Jacob said that he always wanted to go to college, “just until I started seein’ this world and how it really is. It’s one big lie. You can’t believe nothin’.” This strong view of life outside of high school and his home community is bigger than the fear other respondents expressed about fitting into their new pursuits.

Jacob said that he goes to a fundamentalist Christian church, and he has come to see the world this way by “goin’ to church and seein’ it for myself.” When I asked if his church influenced his views or contributed to his indecision about college, Jacob got upset. His voice rose as he ranted, “No! No, no, no – my own eyes, my own seein’, my own perspective is what did it... like I said, this world is one messed up place and nobody knows it. Well, a lot of people do but no one is paying attention to it. And I’m one of the people that do... Pretty bad shape right now we’re in. We’re in 2014 for cryin’ out loud. And we got President Obama. And that... anyways...” Going to college in the context of how he sees the reality of the society and what the world represents for Jacob is not just a change in his way of life but a deep moral dilemma.

Jacob was genuinely torn as he discussed his reasons for wanting to go or not go to college. His father expected him to go and his friends are going to what they describe

will be a fun campus, but his experiences getting out into communities beyond his school and church left him recoiling at the "big lie" he perceived out in the world. While other respondents discussed attending college as necessary to pursue their overall career goals, Jacob spoke of college as a thing to do in and of itself and felt he could find a career without it. The view that college was not necessary to his pursuits deepened his ambivalence about attending. Combined with his overall angst about the world, Jacob struggled to convince himself to go to college when his only motivation seemed to be that it was expected of him. The path he seems to most want to take diverges both from that of his peers and the expectations of his family, and at the time of the interview he remained stuck between what he thinks he wants to pursue and what he is actually doing.

Jacob's views are a more extreme version of the fear expressed by many respondents worried about what their new communities will be like as they get out into the world beyond high school. Some respondents felt that their home communities are too small, and those respondents made post-secondary choices that addressed the aspects of their communities that they disliked. This is discussed in the section on Community.

Multiple respondents' spoke fondly of their home communities, and they picked their four-year and community colleges for proximity to home, whether in distance or in feel. Emily wanted her college to have a similar feel as her home community. She expressed wanting to stay near home, but she ended up choosing a school that is hours from home. Despite the distance, she said she felt at home there because of its small town feel. Billy, Zach, Chris, and Sarah all said similar things about staying close to home after high school.

Austin chose his school for similar reasons: “Just the change from high school to college is just a concern, you know, all in general. And, uh, that's pretty much all; I mean I'm still concerned about it right now, how I'm going to adapt to it, how much different it's going to be. But with the school I chose, the average class size is like 20-some students. It's a private school, so I think I can adjust to it pretty well. You know, I'm not going to be like a number to a university, I'm gonna be like, they're gonna know me by my name because it's a small school.” Going to a school with an environment similar to what he is familiar with makes Austin more confident that he will be able to adapt well.

This concern is something the school counselors expressed seeing and hearing about when they talk to students. One counselor noted, “I think some students are very scared to graduate. Um, I think they fear the change and they don't want to leave the confines of a small rural community or their own home situation, so those kiddos will go to [a community college] most of the time.”

Counselors also discussed this apprehension as something students are scared, “the fear factor of it.” She hears this as “like do I have my paperwork in, how when I go – how will they – how do they know to give them my money and pay for my bill, where do I get my books? [The students are] so used to us bottle feeding them all of the information. And no offense to universities, then, but they don't bottle feed you anymore. You know, if I tell you you need to bring a piece of paper and you don't bring a piece of paper, you're out of luck.” These new expectations and broadening responsibilities are a departure for students in small communities where they describe their high schools like family. Another counselor similarly observed a lack of exposure to the world beyond their small communities for some students in the high school: “I'm not sure that... I

think, a large percentage of our kids have very little cultural experiences. I think they, um, they have no idea what's out there, and – and I think some of them go to big colleges and they fail because they've not had that exposure.”

This can be difficult to overcome for some students. Another counselor described how some students struggle to transition: “We see when they move away to school that they're more likely to come back home. They don't survive, you know, away from mom and dad. And, um, some of our students are participating in a program where they go and stay on campus in the summer. Those students I think are gonna transition fine, you know. They've stayed six weeks away from mom and dad. But some of our students that this might be the first time not with mom and dad – it will be home pretty soon.”

The concern about changes extends beyond students missing the comfort of their family homes. Counselors also described local parents who were reluctant for their students to leave the nest: “But you're gonna see the parents, some of the parents don't want them to move. The parents are not – it's not that they're not supportive – they're just not eager to make sure they're completing the process. It's— it's odd. I see that a lot here. You know, I have kids that want to go to, you know, Alabama, but their parents don't want 'em to go to Alabama.” Beyond sometimes struggling to understand and complete complicated admissions and financial aid processes, some parents also need to come to terms with their own feelings on this transition. This is not true in all cases, and counselors and respondents also talked about the help they received from some parents, which is discussed more in the section on Family.

The effect of changing ways of life is larger than some students expect, and one counselor noted that some graduates will go away to a four-year college and have

difficulty adjusting. She explained, “We’ll have some. But I have seen in my years in this community that if that does happen that they’ll end up going back. They’ll come home, they’ll get a job, and they’ll see that ok, you know. They may not, they may start out at Community College or they may start out at tech school, but yeah, I do think we have some of that. Not a whole lot, but some.”

Post-secondary concerns: Discussion. The cost of going to college is high, and respondents worried about how to pay for it. Some watched others around them struggle to pay, taking on debt and loans, and they did not want that for themselves. The military and scholarships were the resources cited most by respondents as ways to pay for college, though school counselors emphasized the financial aid nights and FAFSA assistance offered through the high school. Other respondents were more concerned about maximizing their earning immediately after high school. In one way or another, money was at the front of respondents’ considerations as they made their post-secondary plans.

The other main concern respondents discussed and school counselors hear is how students will adapt to their new endeavors after they graduate. Students are concerned about fitting in. Some students want to leave because they crave more diversity and will fit in better somewhere else, but others want to stay or find similar communities to keep what they love now. The concern over how their lives will change as they pursue plans after high school graduation was expressed by respondents and something that school counselors noted as a common reason students come to talk to them.

One counselor summed up both problems in observing that there are some students who graduate without addressing either the financial or transitioning concerns:

“The kids that 'oh I can't wait to get away from home' and they're not thinking financial right now. All they're thinking is 'I got full tuition scholarship, I can borrow \$5,000 dollars' and then they realize after a year and maybe, uh, they didn't go to class as much as they should have, come back to our community college to finish up or to grow up a little bit.”

Chapter 5: Summary

Respondents discussed many things that directly and indirectly impacted their decisions regarding what plans to pursue after they graduated from high school. Though the effects were felt in different ways, respondents most commonly reported the influence of family, peers, high school settings and personnel, and their communities. These were the areas pursued thematically in the interview, but these were also things that the respondents brought up on their own and wove throughout their stories.

Some respondents directly recognized the people or events that impacted them, such as Ashley’s desire to follow her grandfather into the Air Force and study criminal justice so that she can work to prevent other families from the enduring the victimization and sense of loss that an unclosed criminal case brought to hers. For other respondents, these influences emerged throughout the discussion. I am still not sure if Jacob fully realized the depth of his resistance to college, as it seems to still be the default he assumes he will do. He may end up going, but when he talked about his music goals and his views about how to achieve them in his own community, it was clear that this was what he wanted to be doing.

Besides demonstrating the factors that respondents consciously considered compared to the more subtle influences they may not have recognized as quickly, Ashley and Jacob also highlight the positive and negative ways these influences were seen. The language of “positive” and “negative” is used here not as a value judgment but in relation to the way respondents reacted to these influences.

For Ashley, the factors that she considered directed her more positively towards her goals. Ashley was happy to follow her grandfather, or another example is how Matt enjoyed the science books his family gave him, and Emily loved her time interning at the animal clinics. These are “positive” influences because the respondents felt positively about them.

Conversely, Jacob’s influences stressed him out, which was evident from the form of almost anxious ranting that some of his interview replies took. He became agitated when talking about college and getting out into the world, his voice rising and his speech quickening as his train of thought went from going to college to the way society works to the Obama administration, “for cryin’ out loud.” Kayla also sounded near tears when speaking about her family’s disappointment in her college choice. These respondents had negative reactions to talking about their influences, and so I call these influences “negative” because of the way they were interpreted by respondents.

Not all factors that influenced respondents were openly welcomed, and some influences were sources of friction for respondents. Some influences were neutral, simply connections respondents made. Mike likes his community, so he’d like to live there in the future but it wasn’t a deciding factor. Zach is pursuing a health sciences career because learning about his diabetes got him interested in the medical field.

The themes in these influences will be examined more closely in the next chapter.

Chapter 6

Discussion and Conclusions

The specific areas of influence – family, peers, school, and community—asked about in these interviews were carefully chosen based on previous study in the fields of emerging adulthood, higher education, and college and career choice. Quantitative studies presented in Chapter 2 established correlations among these areas and youth outcomes, and the responses of participants in this study were consistent with previous research. This study sought to go beyond what respondents’ plans and influences were to examine how they came to be. Qualitative interviews were used to find out from respondents’ own perspectives both what influenced their decisions and how they felt those influences.

The areas of influence discussed in this study could broadly be grouped as people and places. Family members, peers, and school personnel were people who influenced respondents’ plans, while they created their plans within the environmental contexts of school and community. Some of these influences were explicit, but some of these influences can be seen in how respondents’ choices reflect the things they valued. The focus here is to examine how respondents made their choices as much as the choices themselves. This section brings together the discussion from the previous chapters to connect themes across plans and influences.

The areas of influence identified in previous literature include family, peers, schools and their personnel, and communities. Additional areas of influence emerged in the interviews, as respondents identified specific considerations they had within and in addition to those areas. Of particular concern to respondents were finances and changing ways of life after high school. The previous chapters were arranged according to these

influences, with the themes that emerged based upon how the respondents viewed the influences arranged as sections of chapters. Each section also includes a discussion that highlighted the themes and most important aspects of the influences that respondents identified. The findings in the previous chapters focused on the individual themes within each area of influence; for example, within “family” as an area of influence, respondents considered the impact of family members who inspired them or expectations that their families had for them.

This concluding chapter will connect the themes in the findings from across those earlier chapters and look at the broader ways these influences can be seen within the respondents’ plans in relation to the theories presented in the conceptual framework. The main college and career influences cited by respondents will be discussed before considering the ways the themes reflect the theories of habitus and social capital and networks. Following the discussion of themes, this chapter addresses the limitations of this study, its implications for policy and scholarship, and directions for future research.

Connecting Themes across Plans and Influences

Within respondents’ college and career plans, connections emerged across thematic subsections. Though each area of influence can be seen across respondents’ choices, some influences were more often observed than others, and they are the focus here.

Social networks and cultural factors are the influences respondents discussed most often as important for shaping their college and career plans. As discussed in the conceptual framework, personal preferences are shaped by habitus. Habitus is the means by which individuals internalize preferences based on the culture around them, while

social networks extend the framework of influence. Family, peer groups, schools and local communities provide these cultures and social networks.

Respondents entering the workforce or military directly and their college-bound peers shared similar influences, citing social networks and cultural factors as most influential on their career choices. Also spanning college and career plans, respondents reported similar influences on their decisions whether to attend a two-year or four-year college or moving directly into the workforce or military. Respondents who were unsure of their plans had stories similar to those of their undecided peers.

Once career goals were identified, respondents considered their pathways to achieve them. Though family and social network influences were important to respondents as they decided to pursue college or enter a career directly, respondents heavily framed their choices on where to go after high-school within their community preferences. Respondents focused on finding communities that reminded them of home as they ventured away to colleges that were not geographically close. In that way, communities were relevant for post-secondary choices insofar as respondents wanted to stay in their communities or attended colleges that reminded them of home. Some respondents who had to leave home for college chose majors that would enable them to return to their home communities later if they wished. No respondents expressed a desire to forgo education or other aspirations to remain in their communities, even when the desire to stay near home was strong. Rather, they set up pathways for themselves that would allow them to return after leaving to pursue other aspirations.

As students, respondents approached their post-secondary education plans by considering what to study and where to go. The college majors and areas of study

respondents chose reflect their ultimate career plans and were influenced by the people around them, their general preferences, and their perceived abilities to get jobs.

Respondents' feelings about their communities were reflected in their choices of college campus and location. Deciding whether to go to a two-year or four-year college was heavily influenced by financial concerns.

Connecting Themes across the Conceptual Framework

In addition to the themes identified in the individual discussion sections and in this chapter, these analyses generated broader impressions of how these rural youth navigated their post-secondary decisions. The themes seen in these interview responses align with the theories presented in the conceptual framework, and this section more closely examines how the theoretical framework can help understand the influences and actions respondents described.

The themes discussed here can be interpreted across the theories presented in the conceptual framework, though some themes seem to more closely align with either habitus or social capital. Other themes reflect respondents drawing on both habitus and social capital at once in different ways. The ability to see aspects of both habitus and social capital across the influences and choices respondents discussed represents the intersection of these theories. Respondents' individual preferences towards post-secondary education or the workforce were informed by their habitus, as seen in the influences of family and their school experiences. Expectations and feedback from family, peers, and school personnel also shaped respondents' self-efficacy and their perceptions of their ability to achieve their aspirations. Respondents considered the

information available to them through their social networks in deciding their college or career aspirations and in forming their concrete plans to pursue those aspirations. The themes that emerged in the areas of influence discussed in Chapter 5 and here draw on both habitus and social capital, and no one sufficiently explains the decision making process these rural youth employed. These themes, influences, or theories must be examined together to best understand how rural youth decide on their post-secondary plans.

Connecting themes and habitus. As discussed in the conceptual framework, the theory of habitus provides an understanding for how individual preferences are shaped, as the dominant culture and the beliefs of those around one reaffirm the internalization of norms. This can be seen in some of the themes that emerged in responses. The themes presented in Table 6.1 are most closely aligned with habitus.

Table 6.1. Connecting themes and habitus	
Family	Respondents were inspired to emulate relatives.
	Family expectations were internalized as individual aspirations.
Community	“I’m just a country girl.”

Respondents overwhelmingly referred to their families as being their biggest influences. Whether that was as inspiration to emulate or motivators who pushed them to pursue their goals, respondents reflected the culturing habitus of their families. Some respondents felt this when their parents spoke of their own regrets of not pursuing higher education or furthering their careers. For other respondents, this was captured in direct expectations from parents and loved ones.

Respondents differed as to whether or not anyone had explicit expectations for them. Most expectations were from family members, particularly parents who stated what

they wanted the respondents to achieve. Respondents spoke of the family conversations in which they discussed their plans for the future and specific encouragement they received towards improving themselves or their plans. Though the plans were different, these respondents have in common that they planned according to what was expected (or not) of them. Respondents who had no encouragement or expectations placed on them continued through the path to high school graduation but were the respondents who were most unsure of their next steps. Respondents who were expected to graduate high school did so and then moved into jobs. Respondents who were expected to go to college, whether two- or four-year, were planning to do so. None of the respondents who were expected to graduate high school without other expectations for additional education planned to go to college. Other than those who were entirely unsure, these respondents had reasons for choosing their career paths, but they had not considered alternatives.

Even respondents who were unsure had witnessed this uncertainty among family members, which influences their own perception of uncertainty as a normal state for how to approach decisions about the future. Respondents were strongly influenced by the decisiveness of those around them, whether that was family or community expectations set for them. Whether that was to graduate from college or to pursue a certain career or degree, respondents adopted others' preferences for their futures as their own, even as they stated they were independent decision makers. Respondents had internalized these expectations for themselves.

The other way respondents expressed their identities in relation to their goals was through their feelings on community. So many respondents said that "rural" did not mean anything in particular or that they did not identify with it when asked specifically, but

they went on to discuss the ways their communities mattered to them and how their communities influenced their decisions. The question may not have resonated with respondents, so I probed with follow up questions asking specific aspects of their communities. The conversation blossomed when respondents talked about their views on their communities. Multiple female respondents referred to themselves as just “country girls” even when they did not have a concrete definition of rurality. Respondents liked their small, quiet, nice towns close to nature, where everyone knows everyone. They then made career choices that would enable them to stay near home or chose colleges that had a similar feel to their home communities. Respondents did not want to leave behind their home environments after high school.

Connecting themes and social capital. In discussing their careers or choices of field of study, respondents cited social network influences and their own preferences more than school or community influences. The themes that are best understood in the framework of social capital are presented in Table 6.2.

Respondents spoke of the family members they wanted to follow, whether in a similar career or in spirit. This spanned career plans, from those entering the military, to choosing majors in college to support their eventual occupational plans, to those entering the workforce directly. Some respondents identified teachers who pushed them towards goals. Respondents initially identified their college or career interests, but teachers and school personnel then expected these students to actively pursue those goals. Respondents’ views of the helpfulness of school personnel reflect the views school counselors held of themselves as parent figures, extending help beyond coursework to general life advice.

Through these school social networks, respondents found resources for working towards their post-secondary choices.

Table 6.2. Connecting themes and social capital	
Peers	Respondents chose career options they had seen other members of their families or communities pursue.
	Respondents plan to attend colleges or go into the same job fields as their friends.
	Respondents share resources such as costs of books, housing or transportation with peers pursuing the same colleges.
Community	Respondents seek to mirror the feel of their home communities if they are moving away for college.
	College options were weighted according to distance from home, campus feel.

Social network influence was also seen in respondents' college choices.

Respondents spoke of going to the same colleges that their brother or cousin before them had attended. A college far from home was appealing to respondents who had friends that would be there, too. For respondents who were wary of the unknown in new communities, having social connections going to the same place increased their ease and expectations of smooth transitions. They will have someone they know nearby to share experiences; they will already have relationships in place despite entering a new, broader social network.

Besides providing examples which the respondents aspired to emulate or similar paths to share, family members and peers shaped respondents' preferences. This could be seen in the career influences respondents discussed. Respondents chose careers in fields they had either been encouraged to pursue by those around them or had seen in their communities. Only two respondents wanted to pursue careers in fields that they had not already seen someone they know do or that exist in their hometowns. Even with Individualized Learning Plans (ILPs) designed to match students with a variety of career

choices they may not have considered on their own, students still gravitated to options they witnessed within their communities or had heard about through their social networks. This fits the bounded rationality framework of this study that these students picked careers based on the limited range of options with which they were already familiar. The two respondents who picked careers that could not be found in their communities both were encouraged in these career options by family or teachers.

Community influence could also be seen in the colleges respondents chose. Some respondents specifically wanted to stay close to home and chose local branches of community colleges or four-year colleges as close to home as possible. These respondents also had positive things to say about their communities and liked where they live. Consistent with literature on the potentially negative aspects of social capital, some respondents felt their communities were too small, their neighbors too nosy, and their surroundings not diverse enough. These respondents chose colleges that were farther away or planned to go on to higher education in cities at a later time. Consistent with previous research, respondents' positive or negative feelings about their home communities were reflected in their plans to stay, return, or leave their communities.

Some respondents said that they chose careers that would allow them residential flexibility in the future, and community was relevant to respondents specifically in choosing where to live after high school, whether that was for a job or selecting campuses similar to (or different than) their home communities. The more subtle way that community influences respondents' career choices is in those respondents seeking careers based upon what is available in their home community. Even when respondents were unsure if they planned to stay in their home communities, those who chose careers that

would give them flexibility to decide where to live still picked careers that they had seen at home. This allowed them to keep their options open and make that decision later. This approach reflects aspects of all the theories that have been discussed. The options they see in their community are also driven by their local social networks. Respondents' preferences for their careers and fondness for their home communities reflects their prioritization of cultural influences.

Connecting themes across habitus and social capital. Though the themes above are categorized according to the theory they reflect the most, aspects of multiple theories can be seen across themes, which are presented in Table 6.3.

Uncertainty	Respondents kept their career options open to delay deciding their residential plans. Their preferences were varied and sometimes at odds with the choices seen among peers in their social networks.
	Respondents were anxious about the overall changes in their ways of life as they transitioned past high school. Moving onto new communities, careers, or educational institutions is different and creates anxiety, so respondents made decisions based on maintaining the habitus or social networks with which they are already comfortable.
Finances	Respondents considered military, colleges and careers to maximize future employment opportunities.
	College options were restricted based on cost to attend and financial aid available.

As discussed in the section on respondents' concerns, finances were influential in driving respondents towards their post-secondary choices. The interviews ask if respondents felt that their families could afford the same things as others in their communities, and responses varied. Some respondents agreed that their families could afford the same things that other families could afford, while some respondents hesitated but indicated that their families could mostly afford the same things as others. Some respondents stated

that their families could not afford the same things as others but managed to meet financial necessities, and some respondents just said no their families could not afford things that others could. Along that continuum, the impacts on respondents varied. Of the eleven respondents who said yes their families could afford the same things, either firmly or with hesitation, respondents were split among all the post-secondary plans in this study – military, four-year college, two-year college, workforce, or unsure. The respondents who said that their families could not afford the same things as other families in their communities were also split among plans to enter four-year colleges, two-year colleges and the workforce. Across all responses to their ability to afford things, respondents discussed the ways in which they considered the financial impacts of their post-secondary plans.

Though not delineating respondents along certain paths, the influence of finances could be seen in how respondents approached their college and career choices. As discussed in the section on concerns, financial aid or how to pay for school was very important to respondents. Among those respondents going to four-year colleges, grants and scholarships were necessities. Respondents going to two-year colleges were all doing so to save money before transferring to a four-year college later, they hoped.

Respondents limited their college choices based on affordability. One counselor said she tries to recommend Berea, a four-year college in Kentucky that offers free tuition for in-state students who qualify based on financial need and acceptable grades. None of these respondents were going there or had considered it. Few respondents considered out of state schools and no one was attending one. This is consistent with student outcomes published by the state of Kentucky. According to data on the 2011-2012 graduating class

of high school seniors, of the graduating seniors who went to college, only 9 percent enrolled at schools out-of-state (Education and Workforce Development Cabinet, 2013), and the majority of those students attended Indiana University, which has a branch campus directly across the river from Louisville and operates a reciprocal in-state program for students from border-counties. The aversion to out-of-state colleges may reflect the preference most respondents expressed for staying close to home in geography or campus feel or concern about tuition and additional expenses associated with attending an out-of-state school.

Though finances represented a primary concern for students, few specifically spoke of financial incentives for their career choices. Respondents spoke of maximizing their job opportunities so that they could get jobs, and in some cases, better paying jobs. Most respondents spoke of opportunities in terms of simply being able to get a job, not necessarily a job with specific earning potential.

Financial considerations were also the most cited driver for respondents entering the military. All three new members of the Armed Forces wanted to eventually work some branch of law enforcement or the justice system in some way and saw the military as opening better opportunities for them. Most respondents, not just those entering the military, spoke of their future plans in terms of their opportunities for careers. Whether they chose two-year or four-year colleges, respondents were weighing the options they considered available to maximize their benefits. This was also noticeable in the trends of respondents who participated in extracurricular activities. While some respondents were not engaged or participated in a few activities, there were some respondents who were

very highly involved in community and school activities that specifically reflected their career interests.

Further, all the respondents considered themselves to be good students, but their rationale differed according to their strengths. Respondents who said they got good grades had college plans, which is consistent with previous research, while respondents who had workforce plans said they were good students because they did not get into disciplinary trouble. These youth seem to be making choices that reflect some analysis about what they are good at, and their reasonable expectations about succeeding in these plans. Viewing themselves as good students, whether for high grades or positive behavior, increases their self-efficacy when they consider college or career options that align with their strengths.

When I asked respondents about their plans for after high school graduation, the respondents going to college, whether two-year or four-year schools, gave a two part answer that included where they were going and what they planned to study. When prompted for more detail, few respondents asked if I wanted to know more about one or the other of those two aspects, and most respondents discussed them together. What to study influenced where to go in so far as respondents made rational choices about the colleges they preferred to be sure that these schools also offered the majors in which they were interested. Most respondents spoke of college as a means to an end, getting them the credentials they need for their ultimate career choices, and not as a destination itself. Jacob was the only respondent who spoke of going to college in a way that was disconnected from his career goals, and he was also the most unsure of what he wanted to do with his future.

Respondents who were going to college chose their majors in conjunction with their career plans. School counselors spoke of projects starting in middle school that required students to research colleges based on majors and career choices that were influenced by their individualized learning plans (ILP). Most respondents did not remember what careers they selected in their ILPs, but respondents did speak of doing research on college majors related to their career plans. Even if the ILP career options were not used by respondents, the projects associated with the ILP did provide a model for how to find out more information and the consideration of choosing a major (or college) based on career choice. For many respondents, Individualized Learning Plans were unrealistic, unhelpful, or forgotten even though they are specifically designed to address college and career choice for students. This program creates a scheme in which students make decisions about their plans for the future, as something to be checked off.

Respondents expressed overall concern surrounding one of the biggest life changes these recent graduates were undergoing in their young adult lives--the transition from high school to their next pursuits. This overall uncertainty was acknowledged, and some respondents actively planned for how to address it, such as ensuring that they chose colleges with campuses that felt like home. However, these concerns may have overwhelmed some respondents who expressed uncertainty that in some ways had the effect of avoiding transition, allowing these respondents to stay home and continue doing some of what they had already been doing, just without high school. As expressed by respondents and counselors, the life changes that occur after high school can be overwhelming. These unengaged respondents are not wholly embracing change, possibly even avoiding it by not actively making plans for their futures or following through on

the plans that they seemed to fall into. These respondents seemed to struggle in ways that no single theory could address. They lacked guidance or expectations to shape their own preferences, they avoided social networks or resources that could have helped them in this process, and they drifted into jobs to avoid making more active decisions.

In discussing the students they talk to, the counselors described what could be considered two types of students those who need help and those who do not. Those needing help tend to be those students who do not have any at home or they are applying to so many colleges it is difficult to manage. Those who do not need help are those students who have guidance at home or are not pursuing plans that need assistance from the school. Some of the students who do not seek help may not be college and career ready, meaning that they have not passed the tests that the state deems demonstrate their ability to enter the workforce or college successfully. One counselor said that at any informational event, whether financial aid or parent-teacher nights or other informational events, sponsored by any of the schools he has worked at over the years, he expects to see about 15% of parents. Always, he estimates 15%. Of the other 85%, he said that some students will fall into the categories of those whose parents do not need the help because they already know this kind of information. I asked what happens to the others: “I don’t know. I really don’t know,” he replied.

Some respondents’ aspirations were disconnected from the plans they were actually pursuing. As defined in the literature review, aspirations are one’s vision for his or her future and include some consideration of the reality of obtaining them. Morgan (1998) suggests that a mismatch between intention and attainment may reflect considerations that the individual may not have been aware of at the time the aspiration

was formed. Though this is consistent with a bounded rationality framework, it does not entirely explain why respondents would still speak of future aspirations without present actions to work towards achieving them at the times of their interviews.

This study was specifically interested in looking at respondents' post-secondary plans, not necessarily future aspirations. The research design and interview timeline immediately following high school graduation was intended to capture what students were specifically doing after high school, rather than what they were hoping to do. The screening questionnaires occurred two weeks before the end of school and asked what they would be doing after graduation. The interviews happened right after graduation and asked students what they were doing. When responses differed between the two, it was not the case that someone who had been planning to do something as of the screening questionnaire changed their plans by the time of the interview. These respondents still spoke during their interviews of the aspirations that they had answered on the screening questionnaire rather than what they were actually doing, representing a clear disconnect between expectations and aspirations.

Though both their immediate actions and future plans are relevant for understanding how respondents were making decisions about their futures, the fact that respondents replied to questions about their immediate plans with information about their future aspirations suggests some confusion or disconnect respondents had around separating these. One of the inspirations for this study was comparing data in which rural youth state aspiring to four-year college degrees to the rates at which rural youth attend four-year colleges. This finding suggests that the aspirations youth are stating may reflect an idealized hopefulness or what they think they are "supposed" to do, a manifestation of

college-going culture or habitus, rather than a reasonable assessment of what they are actually planning to pursue.

Connecting themes: Discussion. Respondents reported influences that could be categorized neatly according to family, peer, school, and community factors. The themes that emerged in how the respondents thought about these influences also fit into theoretical groupings. But respondents spoke of the process across all these influences and theoretical concepts. No one respondent identified their college and career choices within any single thematic category or theoretical framework. These rural youth made their post-secondary aspirations and future plans at the intersection of their habitus and their social capital using their sometimes bounded information to make decisions.

While these theories have provided a means for more fully understanding how students make post-secondary plans, additional theories would provide more robust explanation. Economic decision-making models and Rational Action Theory, such as that used by Glaesser and Cooper (2014), would provide another layer in which to conceptualize the factors and choices these youth consider. The theories used here provided a useful framework for understanding the influences that shaped these respondents' preferences and the information they had about their options, but decision-making models would help better understand how respondents used these influences and this information to think about their futures.

Further, the conceptual framework for this study evolved to consider both habitus and social network and the ways they interact to shape individual preferences and how individuals find information about the options they have available to them. These

represent individual and community level factors, and the nesting diagram developed to present the ways in which they can be seen interacting in this study brings to mind the nested factors seen in socio-ecological models (SEM). Used predominantly within the health sciences, SEM examines individual, relationship, community, and structural factors of behavior and the interdependencies among them (Stokols, 1996). Future research may find it useful to more thoroughly explore how this approach can illuminate the behaviors surrounding post-secondary choices and education.

No one theory can completely explain any respondents' process of forming and pursuing their post-secondary plans. This research examined how these theories overlap and intersect in the realities of respondents, and found that they make meaning of the varied family, peer, school and community influences they engage through habitus and social networks.

Future Research

The findings from this study suggest implications that deserve more consideration. Students may not be considering aspirations from the perspective of realistic future plans, and Individualized Learning Plans are not being fully utilized to help students prepare for realistic futures. Some students may be disengaged from the process, and counselors would like to provide more opportunities for students to visit other communities, colleges, and work places so that they can be better informed for their college and career decisions. These implications should be further researched and are explained in more detail here.

Future research can also address some of the limitations of this study. Though the sample size was chosen specifically based on a purposive sample, participants were difficult to contact and recruit. The sample intentionally excluded exceptional students and those who dropped out of high school. Finally, pilot tests with the interview instrument may have helped by identifying that the question on rurality did not resonate with respondents so that it could have been reworded more directly.

Policy and Research Implications

The results of this study have implications for policy and other research. This research found disconnect between respondents aspirations and their real plans for the future that should be examined more carefully. These analyses also identified the need for more consideration of how Individualized Learning Plans are implemented and utilized in Kentucky schools. How to more fully engage students in their own decision making processes also emerged as a consideration, and one potential response from counselors to diversify student experiences merits further consideration. Appendix D provides a summary of findings with recommendations that school counselors may find useful.

Jacob's story is an extreme example of the disconnect between aspirations and plans. He stated adamantly that he planned to go to college but was not taking any action to enroll. He got a job instead and eventually expressed disgust and fear at the thought of going to college, admitting that he was unsure of his plans. Other respondents' aspirations were similarly disconnected from the plans they were actually pursuing. Despite screening students based on what they said were their plans after graduation, respondents' interviews uncovered that some had replied with aspirations instead of

plans. Research already acknowledges that these are not exactly the same thing, but aspirations have been used as an indicator of what students plan to do. Literature reviewed for this study focused on gaps and differences in aspirations among groups from different demographic groups, but this research suggests that a gap in aspirations may exist between groups while another gap in actual future plans may also exist between groups. Previous literature finds fewer students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds report aspiring to four-year degrees, but this research raises the question that of those who report aspiring to a four-year degree, a large share may have little intention of actually pursuing those aspirations as realistic future plans. Respondents in this study did not seem to distinguish between aspirations and plans, though there were clear patterns of active pursuit of alternative plans even as they spoke of aspirations. More research is needed to understand how students assess the reality of their aspirations.

The schools in this study and in the state of Kentucky focus very strongly and very early on preparing college and career ready high school graduates, and these analyses found considerations that may improve that process. Within the Individualized Learning Plans used in Kentucky schools, students are introduced to career options in sixth grade. Counselors described middle school projects in which students researched the colleges and majors necessary to pursue those careers. And yet respondents had little meaningful connection to their ILP responses. Few respondents remembered what they chose as career options in their ILPs, and counselors described a rote process of checking off boxes to get the program completed and out of the way. Though this research is not intended to assess the ILP program itself, it has exposed the need for more thoughtful consideration of how ILPs are implemented in these schools. Kentucky schools may

benefit from more research into how the ILPs are enacted across grade levels and how these programs are administered and students engaged in other states.

Another issue with preparing college and career ready students that emerged in this study was how to address students who are unengaged. These school counselors reported seeing students who were disgusted or did not care, and some respondents were not invested in succeeding with their own plans. Counselors had lengthy lists of duties to fulfill at their schools but still made it a point to meet with all seniors at least once. Beyond that, the students who may have needed the most help – the ones who were unsure – were the ones the counselors described interacting with the least. The analyses demonstrated the impact of expectations on respondents, and more interaction between school personnel and students could benefit these respondents both as they decide what to pursue and take the actions necessary to pursue it. Given the demand on these school counselors, help may be needed to implement more intensive counseling. These schools were in the early phases of grant funded programs to add more personnel specifically focused on working with students on college and career readiness, and follow up research may identify changes that are already occurring or the potential for future changes in this area.

One change counselors would like to see would be to create more diverse experiences for their students. All four counselors expressed the narrow ranges of experiences available to students in their small communities and emphasized the need for high school students to see more of the world. They mentioned some students who get out into college or the workforce and fail due to the lack of exposure to the world outside these small, nurturing communities. One counselor specified that if she could change

anything, she would arrange field trips so that the kids could go more places and just see what's out there. Other counselors echoed similar ideas. Respondents complained of the lack of things to do in the area, and analyses found that in this sample, respondents chose careers in fields that they had been exposed to already in some way.

Finally, future study should consider developing theory in the intersection of habitus and social capital. These findings suggest that social networks may act as an extension of habitus, where familial and institutional habitus are not necessarily separate but rather multiple facets of one individual's points of view. Habitus relies on feedback from previous experiences and an individual's culture. Family is the primary means of cultural socialization in which habitus is developed, and family members represent strong ties based on frequent contact. Others in school and the community expand one's social network relationships, but these weak ties still provide information, experiences, feedback and socialization that inform preferences, goals, and expectations, just like habitus. Layering these theories creates a more robust means with which to examine how individual preferences are shaped. As discussed in the conceptual framework, others consider separate types of habitus such as familial and institutional, but the findings of this study suggest that the sphere of habitus centers on the individual and incorporates aspects of all areas of one's life into one habitus. Future study should consider developing and testing expanding theories of the potential nuances of habitus.

Limitations of the Present Study

This study was limited in a few ways. Though it was designed intentionally to employ a small, purposive sample, the sample size was smaller than anticipated due to difficulties

contacting participants. The sample was also screened to remove exceptional students, and it did not capture the plans of youth who had dropped out of high school. The interview guide and screening questionnaire should have been pre-tested. Only one school counselor was interviewed at each school, though these schools were in the process of adding additional college and career “coaches” who may have more insight into this process from their work with students specifically in this area. Finally, this research was limited to rural Kentucky.

A purposive sample was used to capture students with ranges of post-secondary plans to include those entering the military, four-year colleges, two-year colleges, the workforce and who were undecided. With four schools chosen for their rural characteristics, the planned research design called for one student in each category at each school, for a total of twenty students. Despite contacting all students who indicated they agreed to participate in the study in the screening questionnaire distributed in each school shortly after my meeting with them in person, the response rate was low. Students did not answer their phones, and many did not have voicemail set up. Despite making calls at varied times of weekdays and weekends, many students were unreachable, and some declined because they answered the call while at work and were unable to talk. Even some students who agreed to a time when I could call them back often did not answer. There were 17 respondents. Though respondents were interested in talking about their plans, there was no incentive for them to participate in the research. An incentive may have helped increase participation, but lack of funding was a limitation to providing incentives.

As a qualitative study, the results presented here are not intended to be generalized to other populations, so the small sample size does not weaken these analyses. However, having more participants would have enabled my data to more closely approach saturation, the point when no new information is gained from additional interviews (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research aimed at developing theories benefits from saturation, and so this was not a primary aim in this study given the phenomenological approach. However, given the emergence of the interactions among themes that was seen through multiple theories in this study, future research in the nature of grounded theory should consider how habitus can be extended through social networks.

The study also limited participants to not include exceptional students with individualized education plans, or “special ed,” in the sample. These students have varying, specialized needs and sometimes specific classes and programs designed to guide them through the transition beyond high school. This was beyond the scope of this research and bears consideration for future study.

Another specialized population is youth who have dropped out of high school. This study recruited participants who had been high school seniors and graduated, not including students who were no longer enrolled, and so, this research was limited by not addressing this segment of rural youth. The graduation rate in Kentucky for the 2013-2014 school year was 87.5 (KDE Kentucky School Report Card). Dropping out of high school is itself a complex factor and its impact on youth plans for the future deserves more specialized study.

One area where this study could have been improved was the screening questionnaire and interview guide. Though both were drafted and reviewed multiple times and based on questions used in previous research, students and participants stumbled in two areas. First, some students answered the screening questionnaires about what their plans were with reports of their aspirations, as has been discussed extensively. The difference between replies on the screening questionnaire and the plans respondents gave in the interview ended up spurring more conversation in the interviews and led to the analyses discussed here, but testing for understanding of the original question on the screening questionnaire may have revealed this difference sooner and allowed for questions that could have captured both aspects of factors influencing students' responses. The other question that gave respondents pause was asking students how they identify themselves. I encouraged respondents to reply with whatever that meant to them, and this prompt in the first interviews led to subsequently including "what does rural mean to you" in the rest of the interviews.

It was not until getting into the interviews that I learned about the grants these schools were working on to improve their college and career readiness. This provided for new college/career coaches who would work with students specifically in this area. This study was limited to interviewing one school counselor at each school with the intention of using their interviews for context on the schools and perspectives on working with the students as they made their plans, since the focus of this study was to find out how respondents made their decisions from their own points of view. Talking to the new college/career coaches could have provided useful information on how students work on their plans, additional school personnel interviews may have given more insight into

things that shaped the process within the school and could have informed additional interview questions to ask the students.

Another area of importance that was identified during the interviews that may have become apparent in pilot tests was the potential influence of religion. Jacob was a possibly extreme example of how deeply his beliefs affected his considerations for the future. Other respondents mentioned going to church in passing, but no others indicated that their religion was a factor in their post-secondary choices. They may have had more to say if religion had been specifically included as a question in the interview guide, and future research should examine this potential influence.

Finally, this study was limited to Kentucky. There is no one version of “rurality” and school districts were chosen with varying census designations and rural-urban commuting codes to increase potential diversity within the consideration of “rural.” Even still, respondents’ plans and major influences did not vary considerably across gender or schools, which is why they were discussed holistically. This further keeps the schools and respondents confidential so that it is harder to place a respondent within a particular community. But this also means that there may be factors relevant specifically to Kentucky and the schools selected that could impact respondents’ experiences. The state’s focus on college and career readiness may give Kentucky youth a different perspective on this process than young adults from other rural areas. Additional research should include rural youth from other states.

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Appendix A

Student Screening Questionnaire

Hello! I'm a graduate student at Penn State University doing research on what high school students want or plan to do after high school. If you might be interested in being interviewed for this research and sharing your plans with me, please answer the questions below and you may be selected for an interview. You will be contacted within in a week or two if you are chosen for an interview.

1. Name:

2. Age:

3. Gender:

4. Phone:

5. Email:

6. What is the best way for me to contact you? _____

7. What do you plan to do after graduation? (circle all that apply)

a. Attend a 4-year college.

b. Attend a 2-year college.

c. Attend a technical school.

d. Join the military.

e. Find/get a job as a: _____.

f. Something else: _____.

g. I'm not sure.

8. Are you proficient in the English language? yes/no

9. Do you have an IEP: yes/no

Thank you for your interest in talking to me!

Jennifer Lynn Corra

Penn State University

Ph.D. Candidate, Rural Sociology

Department of Agricultural Economics, Sociology, and Education

[Included my home mailing address, email address, and phone number at the time]

Appendix B

Interview Guide for Secondary School Counselors

Participant Name:

School District:

Introduction: Thank you again for taking the time to talk with me today. The questions I am going to ask you will help me better understand, from your perspective, how high school students make decisions about what they want to do after high school. Some of the questions will help me to better understand the school environment that may influence these decisions. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Primary Role

1. What are your primary responsibilities as the student counselor? Are you the only student counselor in the school/district?
2. In what ways do you interact with students?
 - a. One on one or in groups? In classes?
 - b. What kinds of help do you offer? Resources for colleges or job information? Application assistance? Writing letters of recommendation?
3. How often do you interact with students? Do you see almost all students at some point? Or do you tend to be sought out by the same students and so see them several times?
4. How would you describe those students you see most frequently? What about those who never come to talk with you, how would you describe them?
5. How often do students talk with you about their plans after high school graduation?
6. What are the most common plans you hear about? What concerns do students have when they talk with you about their plans?
7. How often do students ask you for advice about what you think they should do? How do you respond to those questions? How do you guide students in making these decisions?
8. What kinds of information and assistance about planning for the future is provided to students by your office and the school or school district?

- a. E.g., information about 2- or 4- year colleges
 - b. Assistance with applications or financial aid?
 - c. Information about the military or employment opportunities in the area?
9. How often do you interact with representatives from local employers, higher education institutions or career services, the local or state employment office? What is the focus of those interactions?
- a. Are there specific institutions that you interact with; e.g. four or two year colleges, local employers, government offices or military, etc? Do you initiate these contacts or do they?
10. Does your high school host a college and career day? If so, who is usually represented?
- a. Do you or anyone in the school organize visits to any four year or two year colleges? If so, to which schools and why those schools?
 - b. Do you or anyone in the school organize visits to any trade or vocational colleges? If so, to which schools and why those schools?
 - c. Do employers or professional or military recruiters come into your school? If so, how are these visits organized?

School Background

1. What are the requirements for graduation? Would I be able to have a copy of any documents they may need to submit?
2. Do students complete any classes or programs that encourage them to explore their career options? If so, please tell me about it/them.
3. Roughly what percentage of students pursue higher education?
 - a. 2 year college?
 - b. 4 year college?
 - c. The military?
 - d. Enter the workforce?
4. Does the school provide any kind of college prep classes such as AP courses or specific SAT/ACT prep?
 - a. If so, what are the requirements to take the course?
 - b. When are the courses offered?
 - c. Is there an additional cost?
 - d. How successful are the courses both in enrollment/participation?

5. Considering extracurricular activities, are any academically oriented (like NHS) or career oriented?
6. Tell me about the school.
 - a. How many students?
 - b. How many faculty/teachers?
 - c. Support staff?
 - d. What is your graduation rate?
 - e. Are there any designated career counselors who work with advising students? Any teachers or paraprofessionals who perform advising functions?
7. Is there anything else you think I should know about your role as a school counselor, especially as it relates to helping students identify and achieve career and educational opportunities after high school? Or is there anything you think that I should have asked about?
8. If needed, would I be able to contact you to clarify information?

Conclusion: Thank you so much for talking with me. Do you have any questions for me? I appreciate your help with my research.

Appendix C

Interview Guide for Students

Participant Name:

School District:

Introduction: Thank you again for taking the time to talk with me today. The questions I am going to ask you will help me better understand in your own words how you make decisions about what you want to do after high school. This interview will be recorded. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Aspirations

1. Tell me what you like best about high school. What do you dislike about high school?
2. What are you going to do after high school?
 - a. Leave it broad then prompt for education and/or occupation
3. Thinking back over the last year, what have you done to prepare to pursue this choice?
 - a. E.g., college prep work, talk to parents/teachers/guidance counselor, school projects, talk to military recruiters, apply for jobs or start working, research information about your options
 - b. Would you be willing to share your preparation materials with me?
 - i. E.g., college application materials, capstone project, job applications, military recruiting materials, etc.
4. What alternatives did you consider?
5. How did you decide on this?
 - a. When did you know that this was what you wanted to do?
6. Why did you make this choice over the alternatives?
7. Who or what influenced your decision about what you want to do after high school?
 - a. E.g., costs, benefits, other aspirations such as residence, influence of family/friends/school
8. How hard was it to make this decision? What made the decision easy/difficult?
9. Who has supported your decision? Has anyone not been supportive?
 - a. E.g., family (parents, older or younger siblings, aunts and uncles, cousins, grandparents, etc) teachers, friends
 - b. How do you define support?

10. Who has been most influential in actually helping you to achieve your plans?
Specifically what have they done to be helpful?
11. Thinking about your closest friends, what are they planning to do?
12. Do you feel like anyone had specific expectations for you?
 - a. If so, what were those expectations and who had those expectations for you?
13. How do you describe the area in which you live now? How do you feel about where you live now? What do you like about living there? What don't you like?
14. Can you do [whatever plans are] in the area in which you live now?
15. Was this a factor in your decision?
16. Did you consider where you want to live as an adult when you decided on your plans for after high school?
17. Where would you like to live as an adult?
18. Do you identify yourself as a rural/urban/suburban person?
 - a. What does that mean to you?
 - b. Has your community shaped your sense of identity?

School

1. What kind of grades do you get?
2. How do you do think you've done? Do you consider yourself a good student?
3. What classes do you like the most?
 - a. What classes do you like?
 - b. Why, or what do you like about them?
4. Are you involved in any activities or extracurricular programs?
 - a. Are you involved in any similar activities in the community, outside of school?
5. Do you feel that the teachers and administration support or encourage you?
6. Are there things you don't like about school?
7. Do you like school overall?

Background

1. Tell me about your family.
2. Growing up, what was your family's attitude towards education?
 - a. Did you often talk about the future?
3. Who lives with you?
4. What does your [mother figure] do?
5. What does your [father figure] do?
6. How much education does your [mother figure] have?
7. How much education does your [father figure] have?
8. Do you feel that you can afford the same things other families around you can afford?
9. Is there anything you would like to tell me that I didn't ask related to what you want to do, your family and friends, or school? Or is there anything you think that I should have asked about?
10. If I have more questions later, can I contact you again?
 - a. What is the best method of contact?

Conclusion: Thank you so much for talking with me. Do you have any questions for me? I appreciate your help with my research.

Appendix D

Recommendations for School Counselors

Finding	Recommendation
Individualized Learning Plans (ILPs) were underutilized. Respondents barely remembered filling them out, and the main take away anyone had was doing research on their career choices.	Most respondents made career choices based on other influences, but they did utilize the ILP model that required them to find out more information on what kind of education is needed for each career to be useful. Requiring students to do this kind of research will be more engaging outside the ILP, and this research may increase the options students consider as realistic possibilities for themselves.
Respondents internalized external expectations, whether that meant to graduate from high school or go on to college, and they considered support and encouragement essential.	Most respondents already appreciated their close-knit school environment, but this is an area that can have a big impact. Respondents who talked to others – whether family or teachers or counselors – mirrored the expectations set for them and were more likely to be taking actions in line with attaining those aspirations. Respondents valued teachers who listened to their concerns. Seeking out students who may not be forthcoming may help them take steps towards concrete post-secondary plans.
Respondents were anxious about the transition to life outside of high school. They know that their entire world is about to change, and many expressed a general concern about how to navigate their new scenarios.	College orientation helps those who enroll, but fear of the unknown after high school may hold others back from ever getting that far. Consider including discussions about “what to expect” in high school class meetings. This could include conversations on “what to expect” across residential colleges, commuting to community colleges, the military recruiting process, or getting a job.
Respondents chose colleges and careers with which they were already familiar, whether because they knew someone who already has that career or someone they know told them about more options. No respondent spoke of pursuing a career that he or she had identified alone.	Expand the options students have available to them beyond their home communities. Students already have visibility into local business, but introducing career choices to students may help them consider these possibilities for their own futures. Combined with researching these options as recommended above, students may become aware of careers they did not know existed or would not have considered for themselves.

Vita

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