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Drivin' trucks, huntin' bucks, and reading Aristotle?: The rural student's college choice dilemma

Rachel Mayes Strawn
William & Mary - School of Education

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Drivin’ Trucks, Huntin’ Bucks, and Reading Aristotle?:
The Rural Student’s College Choice Dilemma

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Education

The College of William & Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Rachel Mayes Strawn
April 2014
Drivin' Trucks, Huntin' Bucks and Reading Aristotle?:
The Rural Student’s College Choice Dilemma

by

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Drivin’ Trucks, Huntin’ Bucks, and Reading Aristotle?:
The Rural Student’s College Choice Dilemma

ABSTRACT

Even though rural students make up a fifth of the population of all American students, they do not attend college in numbers equivalent to urban and suburban students. The rural student faces influences related to college choice that differ from those of suburban and urban students. These influences, which could be considered problems or barriers, or conversely, simply matters of choice, are related to the rural environment in which they live.

College choice literature, which has been in existence for about the last 40 years, but which has expanded greatly in the last 30, attempts to provide an understanding of the influences on college going behavior. This study adds to the body of knowledge on college choice, specifically helping others understand what former rural high school students perceive as the factors that influenced their post-secondary plans regarding higher education. The study used Perna’s (2006a) model of college choice as a framework.

This study concluded that parental actions are more important than parental words. Rural parents who want their children to attend college should take concrete steps like visiting colleges, encouraging application to college, filling out financial aid forms, aiding in high school course selection, and having their student take the SAT.

It also concluded that individuals within rural schools and communities matter, including extended family members, teachers, guidance counselors, and mentors, and that these individuals have the opportunity to influence the behaviors of students towards, and...
away from higher education. Course-taking is also important, but not as critical as test taking and participating in the college application process. Rural students who do not take concrete steps towards college, by taking the SAT, applying to college, or filling out financial aid applications while in high school, are unlikely to enter higher education immediately after graduating. However, these students may return to higher education in the future, so it important to have many on ramps towards educational attainment.

keywords: rural students, college choice, higher education, college access, Perna

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Educational, Policy, Planning & Leadership

The College of William & Mary
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Social mobility is part of the American Dream and today, is now largely dependent on the acquisition of a college degree. This requirement for mobility is relatively new and has become marked in recent years as the disparity in income between those with a high school diploma and those with a bachelor’s degree has increased over time. In 1979, the difference in income for those with a college degree was 40% more than those with a high school diploma; however, by 2012, college graduates were making 74% more income compared to those with high school diplomas (Carnavale & Rose, 2011). The recent recession has reinforced this pattern. In 2011, the unemployment rate for those with bachelor’s degrees (5.4%) was half that of those with only a high school diploma (10.3%) (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011a) and college graduates continued to earn more. In 2005, the median earnings for a male four-year college graduate were $60,000, compared to $36,300 for a male with a high school diploma only (Baum & Ma, 2007). Those with master’s degrees earned three times as much a week ($66,144) as all of those with only a high school diploma ($23,088) (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011a).

The benefits of education reach beyond economic gains for individuals: higher levels of education correlate to lower levels of use of public assistance programs such as Medicaid, school lunch programs, and food stamps (Baum & Ma, 2007). Individuals with higher levels of education are also healthier and raise children who are better prepared for school (Baum & Ma, 2007). Despite the evidence of the value of postsecondary education, many individuals lack access due to funding, inadequate
preparation, or lack of cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), making the attainment of a college degree unlikely.

Access to college is difficult for those living in rural areas. Even though rural students make up a fifth of the population of all American students, they do not attend college in numbers equivalent to urban and suburban students (Provasnik, KewalRamani, Coleman, Gilbertson, Herring, & Xie, 2007; Stephens & Perry, 1991). Among those who are 25 to 35 years old and living in a rural area, 21% have achieved a bachelor’s degree compared to 34% of non-rural persons (Provasnik et al., 2007). Additionally, among 18 to 24 year olds, 27% of rural students were enrolled in college, compared to 37% of suburban and urban students (Provasnik et al., 2007). Rural students are likely to have better access to community colleges than four-year institutions (Cohen & Brawer, 2008), but rural community colleges are facing challenges serving their regions. Rural community colleges comprise 60% of all community colleges (Hardy & Katsinas, 2008) are the fastest growing of all community colleges in the country, but face limited resources and require increased federal funding for student support, particularly Pell Grants, to help serve their students (Nelson, 2010).

Though there has been ample research on college choice and access, it is largely without context; making it important to understand this topic in the rural context. The future of many rural communities is at stake because of the large number of college-aged students and the effect that their education level has on their community. As well, one third of all public schools in the United States are in rural areas (Provasnik et al., 2007), which makes the problem of rural college student attainment also a national concern. For rural students and rural communities, the issue of college choice is vital to their own
futures, as well as their communities. However, the barriers to access are different for rural students compared to their urban and suburban peers. These barriers include lack of adequate preparation, funding, and familial and cultural barriers.

Environmental factors that influence access may have a greater impact on college-going than previously considered. Turley (2009) found that geography plays an important role, high school students living within commuting proximity to a college had a greater chance of applying to any college. Community colleges boast a location within 25 miles of any student (Cohen & Brawer, 2008), which provides at least one site of higher education at closer range to rural students. Yet, even this proximity does not address all the barriers facing rural college student access to college. Other factors within the rural environment also affect college choice and access. Rural communities have smaller tax bases, fewer jobs, fewer college graduates, and less well-funded public schools. These schools cannot provide the access to college-preparatory classes that better funded schools can (Adelman, 2007). Most rural high school students (89%) report that they hope to attend some form of post-secondary education (Howley & Hambrick, 2011). Sixty-six percent state that they expect to earn at least a bachelor’s degree (Howley & Hambrick, 2011). However, in rural areas, the reality is that a smaller percentage of students enroll in college (27%) than in urban (37%) and suburban areas (37%) (Provasnik et al., 2007). A combination of factors keeps many of these rural students from pursuing higher education.

Socio-economics are a contributing factor to the college choice environment, as rural communities have less wealth per capita and less access to well-paying jobs (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2012). Rural students are more likely to consider low
expenses as an important factor when considering college relative to suburban students (Ingels, Planty, & Bozick, 2005). Students from the bottom quartile of SES (socio-economic status) make up only 7% of students at four-year colleges and only 3% of students at highly selective schools (Carnavale & Rose, 2003). Rural areas have higher rates of poverty, making college going less likely. Seventeen percent of rural Americans live in poverty, 3% more than those living in suburban and urban areas (Wright, 2011). Almost half of children living in rural America live in households that, though not truly impoverished, have incomes of less than twice the poverty level (Wright, 2011).

**Problem Statement**

A lower level of college graduates living in a community may also contribute to lower college-going rates. For example, consider two Virginia counties, separated by a river. In one, considered suburban, 41.5% of residents over age 25 have bachelor's degrees or higher while in the other, Brighton County (a pseudonym), considered rural and the focus of this study, only 19.1% have bachelor’s degrees (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Nationally, there are also large differences in college completion rates. In rural areas, 17.5% of the rural population has bachelor’s degrees, compared to 30% of the non-rural population (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2012). The community with fewer college graduates may explicitly or implicitly impart cultural beliefs to its high school students that de-value higher education.

Decreased funding in rural public schools also contributes to creating an environment less predisposed towards higher education. Rural schools, with smaller tax bases, pay teachers less than suburban schools. They also have a more difficult time finding highly qualified teachers. In 2004, the U.S. Department of Education had to
create new, more flexible standards to accommodate rural school systems. These provisions allow teachers to teach subjects for which they are not considered highly qualified for a period of three years (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Though this may help the rural school system, ultimately, it may short change the students. Rural schools, such as Brighton County’s high school, are also more likely to offer dual enrollment, rather than advanced placement courses. Advanced placement test results are viewed more favorably for college admissions as they are scored nationally, making students who take them more attractive to colleges.

Rural students are also less likely than suburban students to demonstrate mastery of higher level math skills (Ingels et al., 2005). These are the skills developed in math classes needed to gain access to selective colleges. Mathews (1998) identified 230 “top high schools” (pp. 289-295) in the United States that have the highest proportion of students taking AP courses. These schools are primarily located in suburban and urban communities. Further, Avery and Hoxby (2012) found that high-achieving, low-income students who do not come from one of 15 particular urban areas in the country do not even apply to more selective colleges, even though grants would make these schools less-expensive for them than less selective schools. Lack of funding, less access to high-level coursework, and cultural issues are among the factors that contribute to the underrepresentation of rural students in higher education.

Though recent studies have provided some insight into the post-secondary achievements of rural students, these studies have primarily used existing data sets and quantitative methods or focused on anticipated plans (Calzaferri, 2011; Diaz, 2008; Howley & Hambrick, 2011; Irvin, Meece, Byun, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2011).
Researchers have called for additional qualitative research on the college choice process, especially for underrepresented students (Bergerson, 2009).

High school students make choices about whether they will continue in formal education beyond graduation. Options may include attending a four-year institution immediately, attending a community college or technical school, or stopping or postponing any further education and entering the workforce or the military. This choice does not happen in a vacuum, students are influenced by their family, friends, teachers, school, colleges, their community, and the economic and political situation of the time.

The rural student faces influences related to college choice that differ from those of suburban and urban students. These influences, which could be considered problems or barriers, or conversely, simply matters of choice, are related to the rural environment in which they live.

College choice literature, which has been in existence for about the last 40 years, but which has expanded greatly in the last 30, attempts to provide an understanding of the influences on college going behavior (Bergenson, 2009; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler & Stage, 1992; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Perna, 2006a; Perna & Titus, 2005). The literature describes the myriad of influences on the college choice behavior of individuals. This study adds to the body of knowledge on college choice, specifically helping others understand what former rural high school students perceive as the factors that influenced their post-secondary plans regarding higher education.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to examine the influences that affect college choice from the perspective of rural students. Using narrative analysis and case studies, the
stories of individual students, who have differing post-high school educational paths, were studied to understand their perceptions of the conditions and factors that influenced their educational choices after high school. The theoretical framework for this research is based on factors identified in Perna’s (2006a) conceptual model of student college choice. This model argues that college choice is influenced by a number of interactive factors, not merely one. Perna (2006a) posits that college choice is influenced by factors located in various layers: habitus, school and community, higher education, social, economic and policy, and that these interact with supply and demand and available resources. This college choice model intertwines concepts of college choice and college access (Bergerson, 2009). This study seeks to determine how rural students perceive their college choice and to identify what factors help format this perception.

**Conceptual Framework**

This study focused on understanding how rural college students make choices concerning college attendance. I interpreted the data based on Perna’s (2006a) conceptual model of student college choice. Perna’s model draws on previous theories including Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1977) social reproduction theory, Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) college choice theory, and Bronfenbrenner’s (1993) ecological system’s theory. Each of these contributing theories is explicated below.

Social reproduction in modern society often occurs through schooling (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). This theory of social reproduction posits that the values of the parents are passed to their children, the children then use their knowledge of these values to navigate the educational system, and finally the children use their success in the
educational system to maintain or rise in social class. The values that the parents share include academic and social skills (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) assert that college choice decisions happen in three stages: predisposition, search, and choice. At each level, students made decisions about postsecondary education. The predisposition phase of college choice described by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) emphasizes the factors that affect a student’s likelihood of considering attending college. These factors are layered (home, school, colleges, and public policy) and exist out of the student’s control, yet all influence a student’s college choice. The search phase happens as students investigate colleges, and choice happens when students apply, are accepted, and attend (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

Student decisions are influenced by a variety of external and internal factors. These factors are what Bronfenbrenner (1993) would describe as systems. These systems include the student’s microsystem: peers, advisors, teachers, mentors, the mesosystem: the interaction of the microsystem with the larger environment, the exosystem: political, government, economic and educational, and religious systems, and the macrosystem: overarching values and beliefs of the society. The systems outlined by Bronfenbrenner (1993) relate to the layers that Perna (2006a) presented in her model: microsystem relates to the habitus, the mesosystem relates to the school and community context, the exosystem relates to the higher education context, and the macrosystem relates to the social, economic, and policy context layer.
Perna's (2006a) model is well-suited for studying college choice because it offers complexity as it considers the multiple layers of influence that interact to affect students' college choice. The first layer, habitus, includes the aspects of a student's life most
closely associated with them personally. This construct would include demographic characteristics, including race and gender, and demographic information related to their family, including educational levels and levels of knowledge about college. This layer is heavily influenced by the student's family, peers, and other individuals within their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1993).

The second layer, the school and community context layer, includes factors related to the student's school and community. Does the school employ college counselors? How many? Are they well informed? Does the community support higher education? How close is to the community to higher education? What size is the high school and does it offer advanced coursework? Questions such as these would provide information about the school and community context. For this study, some of this information was collected quantitatively from secondary data sources.

The third layer, the higher education context centers on the institutions of higher education. The information that they share with students may be conveyed passively or actively. Passive information may include their location, their sports teams, and their alumni. Active information may be marketing materials and their admission processes. Institutions of higher education send messages to potential students through recruitment processes and materials that the student interprets as part of college choice.

The fourth layer, the larger social, economic, and policy layer includes economic and demographic characteristics of the state or nation. It also includes policy decisions that may take place on the national level but have major impacts on students' college choice.
These layers combine with the student’s valuation of attending college, as they weigh the expected costs and benefits associated with higher education. They also interact with the supply and demand of higher education available for that student (Perna, 2006a).

Research Questions

I conducted a qualitative study to address the problem uncovered, namely because I sought to “make sense of actions, narratives, and the ways in which they intersect” (Glesne, 2011, p. 1). In doing so, I hoped to understand what rural high school students perceived as the factors influencing their post-secondary plans. A similar study to mine was recently conducted in Pennsylvania (Calzaferri, 2011). This study, also based on Perna’s (2006a) college choice model, focused on rural students while still in high school and thus investigated anticipated college plans. My study instead expanded the scope to include individuals two to three years out of high school with the intention to discover how their anticipated postsecondary plans changed into actions. My hope is that this study will help others better understand the voices and narratives of rural students.

My primary research question was:

What do former rural high school students perceive as the factors that influenced their post-secondary plans regarding higher education?

A. What challenges did rural students face in making choices regarding post-secondary education?

B. What supports did rural students have as they made choices regarding post-secondary education?
Significance

This study contributes to the bodies of knowledge regarding both rural students and college choice. Findings of this study may help policy makers understand the rural student perspective, as they seek to create policies that increase the number of college graduates in the United States. Findings may help college admissions officers understand how to better reach out to rural students. Findings of this study could be useful to school administrators, counselors, and teachers as they try to guide students in their post-secondary plans. This study may help rural parents and students understand the cultural influences on college-choice behaviors.

Overview of the Literature

The review of the literature outlines attributes of the rural environment and includes literature on the socioeconomics of rural communities and their K-12 schools. It also explores the issues of K-12 funding and the availability of courses. Elementary and secondary schools are a crucial part of the college choice equation because predispositions toward college are formed here. Further, it examines cultural and environmental issues of rural communities. These seldom studied communities have unique attributes. Lastly, it examines the literature on rural students as it may affect their post-secondary decisions.

Definition of Key Terms

College-Able- Students who identify themselves as having participated in regular, college-preparatory or advanced coursework in high school.

College Access- The ability of students to attend the postsecondary institution that they were qualified and desired to attend, a.k.a. distributional access (Adelman, 2007).
College Choice- The process through which students decide whether and where to go to college (Bergerson, 2009).

Rural Areas- Counties whose school districts are classified by the National Center for Education Statistics as rural.

Rural Students- Rural students are those who attend schools in districts classified as rural by the National Center for Education Statistics.

South- Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, Kentucky, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, Mississippi, Oklahoma, West Virginia, Maryland and Florida (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012)

Summary

College access and college choice have been studied intensively since the 1990’s (Adelman, 2007; Bergerson, 2009; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler & Stage, 1992; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Perna, 2006a; Perna & Titus, 2005). However, college choice research has traditionally not included a focus on the marginalized group that I studied, namely, rural students. Though rural students share attributes with both urban and suburban populations, there are unique factors that affect college choice for rural students. This study attempted to deepen the understanding of this population’s decision-making regarding postsecondary education.
CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

One third of all public schools in the United States are in rural areas and one in five public school students attend a school in a rural area (Provasnik et al., 2007; Stephens & Perry, 1991). These rural communities boast many qualities that make them excellent places to live and raise children and differentiate them from urban and suburban communities. Rural areas have perks of low crime rates, less pollution, inexpensive housing, relatively affordable land, a sense of place, and the ability to know one’s neighbors (Howley & Hambrick, 2011). However, when considering college choice for rural students, one must also look at the characteristics of these communities that may create barriers to higher education for the students that live there. College-able rural students have often not been a part of the discussion on college choice (Baum & Ma, 2007; Gibbs, 2000; Phelps & Prock, 1991). The lack of rural student college participation is troublesome, because a two or four-year degree, today’s equivalent of a high school diploma in 1940, is increasingly important for a middle-class subsistence (Carnevale & Rose, 2003; Davies, 2006; Shaw, Goldrick-Rab, Mazzeoa & Jacobs, 2006). Not attending college can put many rural students in a cycle of poverty and limit upward mobility.

Aside from the personal financial benefits, college attendance has been shown to increase critical thinking, reflective judgment, reasoning, verbal and quantitative skills, oral and written communication skills, and internal locus of control (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Though not every rural student will decide to attend college, it is important to individuals and communities that all students have equitable access.
is defined by Adelman (2007) as the ability of students to attend the college that they were both qualified and wanted to attend. Choice is the process through which students decide whether and where to go to college (Bergerson, 2009).

The benefits of college extend beyond the student, as communities benefit from students returning from college with critical thinking skills. Communities with higher levels of education amongst the citizenry also have higher levels of civic participation and members with greater openness to the opinions of others (Baum & Ma, 2007; Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010). Despite the number of rural students in the United States, and the known benefits of higher education, research on rural students and college choice is scarce (Calzaferri, 2011; Hardre, Sullivan, & Crowson, 2009).

Using Perna’s (2006a) conceptual model of student college choice, I examined how the social, economic and policy context; the higher education context; the school and community context; and the student’s habitus (combination of family, student, and community attitudes, values, and behaviors); along with the supply and demand (the availability of college to the student) and expected costs and benefits, affect a rural student’s college-going behavior. The assumption behind Perna’s (2006a) conceptual model is that, “student behavior cannot be fully understood without attention to the context in which the student lives” (Perna & Thomas, 2006, p. 10). All of the layers in Perna’s (2006a) model influence the student, and his or her family, in the decision making process. The context is crucial to studying rural students and college choice because prior educational research on college choice has focused on urban and suburban students (Gandara, Gutierrez, & O’Hara, 2001; Hardre et al., 2009).
In order to understand rural students and college choice, it is important to understand some of the unique qualities of rural communities. The following section gives an overview of the socioeconomics of rural communities, the funding of K-12 rural schools, and the availability of advanced coursework in rural schools. It also provides information on college graduates living in rural communities, some of the political and cultural aspects of rural communities, and a look at the literature on rural students.

**Socioeconomics of Rural Communities**

The intersection of the economic situation in a community with the social setting influences students in far-reaching ways. The socio-economic factors of poverty, crime, education level of community members, lack of economic resources, and minority population concerns all create challenges for rural students. Understanding more about the rural student context and its influence on college choice can help schools, parents, higher education institutions, communities, and policy makers better serve this population.

Rural communities, though idealized by some as Mayberry-like pastoral havens, have increasingly had to face many of the same problems that urban communities do. Recent changes in the economic environment of the United States have brought some urban challenges to rural communities. Traditional places of employment for rural workers have seen significant job losses since the 1960s. Agricultural employment in rural areas has dropped by half since 1970, and manufacturing jobs have largely gone overseas (Erickson, Reid, Nelson, O’Shaugnessy & Berube, 2008). This change in employment options has left 17% of rural families living below the poverty line compared to 14.6% in urban areas (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor & Smith, 2012). Rural
residents are in need of skills training for employment in the new economy to help make
the move out of poverty (Wright, 2011). Of particular concern for educators is the high
rate of child poverty in rural areas. Almost half of children living in rural communities
live in households with incomes of less than twice the poverty level (Wright, 2011).
Most of the American counties with the highest child poverty rates are rural, 48 out of 50
(Erickson et al., 2008).

National crime statistics show that while the rate of index crimes (robbery, 
murder, auto-theft, homicide, assault, larceny, rape, and burglary) fell for urban and
suburban communities from the 1990’s to the year 2000, the rate climbed for rural
communities (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2000). This change in crime rates may be
due to the decline in “civic robustness” that occurs when rural communities face
population changes due to outmigration and unemployment (Lee & Thomas, 2010, p.
135). A loss in civic engagement is detrimental to school systems in rural communities
who count on strong community-school relationships to support their schools and
students (Irvin et al., 2011). The decline in civic engagement is a national trend, Putnam
(1995) found that enrollments in Parent-Teacher Associations (PTA) had dropped by
about half from the 1960s. However, for less-well funded rural schools, it is particularly
difficult to lose this support. School valuing by both the community and students has
been shown to increase academic achievement, future academic plans, and expectation
for success amongst rural students (Irvin et al., 2011).

Though rural communities may appear to have more in common with suburban
communities than they do with urban ones, the problems of poverty and crime have made
some educational researchers contend that this is not the case (Bouck, 2004). Therefore,
some of the research focusing on urban students, particularly literature that focuses on low-income students, and college choice may be applicable to rural students. However, further research is needed to study this distinction and to help understand college choice issues for rural students.

Rural poverty, rather than being spread out amongst communities, has become more concentrated in recent decades (Erickson et al., 2008). Certain areas or neighborhoods within rural communities may house the poorest individuals, much as they do in urban areas. This creates problems for rural school systems, because more students in poverty strains already scant resources. Within rural communities, the pockets of poverty may feed into a specific school, creating equity issues for teachers and administrators, creating dichotomies between the schools that have the least qualified teachers, the students with the least educated parents, the least financial resources, and those with the most. Most studies on rural areas have focused on areas of the country with large swaths of poverty, such as Appalachia and the Indian reservations of the West (Erickson et al., 2008). Educational research, however, should also focus on rural areas with pockets of poverty, areas that exist throughout the country (Irvin et al., 2011). This study focused on a rural area that has pockets of poverty, rather than a completely impoverished community.

Rural school districts facing financial difficulties may limit course offerings, lay off teachers, and increase class sizes in an effort to save money. These changes may be detrimental to the achievement of students from those communities. Irvin and colleagues (2011) found in their quantitative, survey-based study, that rural youth from high-poverty communities had higher levels of academic achievement when they had low student-
teacher ratios. What remains unknown is how class size in rural areas influences college choice. Gathering information from rural schools about class sizes and from students about the class sizes they had in high school and how they believe that affected their achievement will aid me in understanding their post-secondary choices.

Hossler and Stage (1992) found that parental expectations have the strongest influence on a student's predisposition towards college. Lowered educational expectations are communicated by parents to students. Provasnik and colleagues (2007) found that over 10% of rural parents expected their children to receive no higher than a high school diploma compared to 7% for urban parents and 5% for suburban parents. Further qualitative research with rural students could uncover how the economic situation in their schools and communities affected their college choice process.

Rural areas are populated not just with those in poverty, but also the working poor. This group, made up of individuals who work but still have incomes somewhere near the poverty line, and who are largely employed in the service economy, has been growing. From 2007 to 2010, the number of low-income families, those that make less than 200 percent of the poverty level, has increased (Roberts, Povich, & Mather, 2011). The working poor are young, 40% of them are between the ages of 24 to 34 (McSwain & Davis, 2007). This age group represents those less likely to have completed college as well (Dynarski, 2008). Increasingly, college populations are made up of older students as adults realize they need a college education to improve their situations. Indeed, less than half of all college students are between the ages of 18-24 (Pusser & Turner, 2004). Thus, it is important to understand better how young adults are making the decision whether to attend college or not.
Interestingly, working poor adults between the ages of 24 to 64 are enrolled in college at half the rate of the nonworking poor, 6% compared to 13% (McSwain & Davis, 2007). Working poor students, both dependents and adults, struggle to pay for college. Working poor dependents, after considering their expected family contribution (EFC) and available financial aid, are left with, on average, a $2090 shortfall, whereas working poor adults are left with a $4300 shortfall (McSwain & Davis, 2007). These shortfalls are significant, and naturally prevent many rural students from attending college at all, or delaying attendance until tuition money can be acquired. McSwain and Davis’s (2007) study offered important insights into demographic information and college choice for the working poor. However, they failed to take into account ruralness as a factor. Research is needed on the dual factors of ruralness and working poor on college choice. This connection is especially important in the South, where a third or more of all families qualify as working poor (Roberts, Povich & Mather, 2011). For the purposes of this research, the South includes Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, Kentucky, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Florida.

Socioeconomic status is highly linked to college attendance (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Khattab (2005) found that no matter their own SES, students from schools with high SES populations had higher educational expectations than students from schools with low SES populations. The percentage of students eligible for the free and reduced lunch program is a marker for the socioeconomic situation of a public school. Sixty percent of all rural school districts have students participating in the free
and reduced national lunch program, a higher rate than both urban and suburban districts (Strizek, Pittsonberger, Riodan, Lyter, & Orlofsky, 2006, revised June 2007).

Students from low SES backgrounds are less likely to attend college, and less likely to attend selective colleges when they do attend (Espenshade, Hale, & Chung, 2005; Tinto, 1993; Walpole, 2003). Though a parent may try to counter this influence, studies show that their ability to influence their child’s likelihood of attending college varied based on their SES (Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, & Perna, 2008). Pointedly, low SES parents, including those from rural areas, may be less able or less interested in encouraging their child towards higher education than parents with higher incomes.

In a rural school system with a large number of low SES families, a parent’s ability to influence their child may be diminished. Perna and Titus (2005) found that a student’s likelihood of attending college was positively correlated not just with their own parent’s involvement, but also with the level of parental involvement at their school. Thus, even if a parent is supportive of their child attending college, the school environment and lack of support of other parents for their children’s education creates a climate less conducive to supporting college going behaviors. This climate creates an environment that may make it difficult for rural parents and students to make up for this diminished opportunity, and the lowered expectations of their community. In terms of influence on college choice, the school and community context layer is just outside the habitus in terms of influence on the student (Perna, 2006a). The study on contextual influences on college choice by Rowan and colleagues (2008) included current students in 9th and 11th grades and asked them about their educational plans. Perna and Titus’s (2005) study, though it included information on both college plans and actual attainment,
included data only up until 1992. Further research that considers more recent rural student perspectives on the school and community context combined with SES information of their community may offer new insights into their postsecondary decisions.

Rural areas have increasing numbers of minority populations, particularly Hispanics, and 25% of this population lives in poverty (U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, 2004). Minorities also make up over a third of working poor adults (McSwain & Davis, 2007). Rural school districts had a higher percentage of Limited English Proficiency students in 2003-04 than urban and suburban districts (Strizek et al., 2006, revised June 2007). Educating students for whom English is a second language creates a hardship for rural school districts with few resources. Perna (2006b) found that minority students were more likely to rely on high school personnel for information about college. This reliance may create a problem for minority students in rural areas with under-resourced schools and fewer counselors on staff (Irvin et al., 2011) because post-secondary preparation activities such as access to guidance counselors, college campus visits, and career exploration activities have been linked to increased educational attainment (Irvin et al., 2011).

Rural minority students are more likely to attend schools where over half of the students are eligible for the free and reduced lunch program (Provasnik et al., 2007). This creates hardships for college-able rural students living in these communities. Ellis (2010) found that for gifted rural minority students, several protective factors exist that increase academic achievement. The external factors include: a positive school environment, positive relationships with teachers and peers, and adults with high
expectations. Ellis’s (2010) qualitative study was limited to rural minority students who were identified as gifted. Since many rural students, both minority and not, who are college-able are not identified gifted, it would be useful to include these college-able students in future studies to determine how the school and community context affected college choice decisions for them.

**Funding of K-12 Schools in Rural Areas**

In 1991, Howley asked, “Is education a stronger cause of economic development or is economics a stronger cause of educational development?” (p. 74). When communities are challenged with paying for basic services, as many rural ones are, leaders may put school budgets on the chopping block. Economies of scale make it difficult for rural districts to offer all the classes that they would like. However, some states with large rural populations, like Kentucky, are realizing that there is an important relationship between social, health, economic, and education issues (Davies, 2006; McGuinness, 2008). Recently, policymakers in Kentucky have made strides in higher education reform that focus on strengthening communities (Davies, 2006, McGuinness, 2008). Understanding the link between the community and the students it produces is an important part of understanding college choice in rural areas.

Rural schools find it difficult to attract and retain highly qualified teachers. Though rural teachers are more likely to have graduated from a state approved teacher certification program with a major in the field they are to teach than urban and suburban teachers, they are less likely to have master’s degrees, and have lower passing rates on state tests of basic skills and lower rates of passing Praxis professional and content area tests (Strizek et al., 2006, revised June 2007). With their smaller scales of operation,
rural schools are more likely to have to cancel course offerings than suburban or urban areas due to teacher vacancies (Strizek et al., 2006, revised June 2007). Rural areas rely on distance learning in much greater numbers than urban and suburban areas due to their geographic isolation (Strizek et al., 2006, revised June 2007). However, rural communities have less access to the internet than suburban and urban communities. Seventy-six percent of Americans without access to broadband reside in rural areas and 28% percent of rural Americans do not use the internet (Blank & Strickling, 2011).

During the 2003-04 school year, rural school districts found it very difficult or were unable to fill vacancies in the following areas in greater percentages than urban and suburban districts: in Math, Science, Special Education, English, Social Studies, Computer Science, Physical Science, English as a Second Language, Foreign Language, Music, Art, and Technical and Vocational Education (Strizek et al., 2006, revised June 2007).

Rural school districts pay their teachers less at all levels than urban and suburban districts, with the disparity ranging from $4,300 to $13,200 (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Rural districts were also less likely to reward teachers with pay for achieving National Board Certification, excellence in teaching, or professional development than urban and suburban (Strizek et al., 2006, revised June 2007).

Though all these factors speak to the problems that rural school districts have in hiring and retaining high quality teachers, little is known about the relationship between rural teachers and their students, and how this relationship affects the postsecondary plans of the students. Dialogue with former students, both those who attended college
and those who did not, about their perceptions of their own teachers, would enrich the conversation.

Though rural areas had a higher percentage of students who graduated high school than urban and suburban areas, they have lower rates of attendance at four-year colleges than suburban students (Strizek et al., 2006, revised June 2007). Rural school districts, with fewer resources, provide fewer opportunities to provide college counseling for their students than other school systems even though these opportunities have been shown to increase educational attainment amongst rural students (Irvin et al., 2011). Rural areas have lower offerings of academic assistance, advancement, or enrichment for their students than suburban or urban areas (Strizek et al., 2006, revised June 2007). Discussions with rural students may further illuminate the role that college counseling and other pre-collegiate programs contributed to college-going behaviors.

**Less Availability of Advanced Courses**

A rigorous high school curriculum has been shown to be an effective measure of both admittance and success in college (Adelman, 1999). However, rural schools lack rigorous curriculums consisting of Advanced Placement (AP) and other upper level courses (Strizek et al., 2006, revised June 2007). Fifty percent of rural schools offer AP classes, compared to 77% in cities and 87% in suburban areas (Planty, Provasnik, & Daniel, 2007). Without the opportunity to take the same rigorous coursework as urban and suburban students, rural students may have difficulty competing for admittance to more selective four-year colleges. If they are accepted, they may find it difficult to keep up with more prepared suburban and urban students. Information on course-taking has primarily been statistical in nature (Adelman, 1999; Planty, et al., 2007). Hearing from
former students about their academic curriculum, college application process, and college acceptance may round out the story of how their coursework affected their decisions.

When rural schools are forced to cancel course offerings, they must make difficult choices about where to make the cuts. Unfortunately, many of the cuts are made to important advanced placement and high-level math offerings due to lack of students able to take these upper level classes and the lack of qualified teachers for this coursework. Though some of these shortfalls may be made up through on-line opportunities, a lack of availability of in person instruction may shortchange these students.

Math Availability

Math is an important predictor of college success. Of all the courses a student studies in high school, the strongest influence on bachelor’s degree completion is taking high-level math (Adelman, 1999). Greenburg and Teixeira (1998) found that rural students were much less likely to be enrolled in schools with higher-level coursework, such as calculus, than students in urban areas. If rural students are being denied acceptance to more selective four-year colleges (Holsapple & Posselt, 2010), which have higher graduation rates than less selective ones (Alon, 2009), or are not applying because of their lack of math skills, measures must be taken to increase the number of rural students who successfully complete higher-level math courses. Finding out from rural students themselves about their choices regarding math in middle and high school may help to explain why they make certain choices regarding college.

Testing

The SAT test, which is designed to be an objective measure of one’s ability to perform well in college, is believed by some to be a reflection of an individual’s
socioeconomic status. Sternberg (2010) argues that a student's score relates to the quality of their high school, which in turn, relates to the socioeconomic status of the student's community. However, four-year colleges use SAT scores, along with GPA, as a sorting criteria when deciding on applicants. Community colleges do not require SATs, which may make them more appealing to students who do not take the test or are not happy with their scores. Socioeconomic indicators such as the number of students receiving free and reduced lunch and the average education level of the parents of students at a school are highly correlated with SAT scores (Rothstein, 2004). Therefore, poor rural students attending schools with fewer resources typically have lower SAT scores. However, SAT scores have been found to be less predictive of a student's success in college when controlled for demographic indicators such as SES (Rothstein, 2004). For rural students in less affluent school systems, the SAT may reflect the student's habitus and the school and community context, not necessarily predicting their ability to perform well in college. Rothstein's (2004) study focused on quantitative data alone and may not give the full story from the student perspective that a qualitative study could. Qualitative information from students on their experience with the SAT would help illuminate how students viewed their own SAT scores and if they used them as a self-sorting criteria when deciding on their educational future.

**Low Percentage of College Graduates in Rural Areas**

A student's social environment in the home, school, and community forms the habitus that inculcates the student into a set of beliefs that influence their decision-making process in general and in regard to higher education (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). This process begins at birth and is reinforced as the child enters formal schooling.
It helps to create the predisposition phase of a student’s college choice process. For instance, a low percentage of college graduates in the community may influence the rural student towards a de-valuing of higher education.

A parent’s educational attainment correlates strongly with the educational attainment of their child (Choy, 2001). Aside from their influence on their students in the predisposition phase of college choice, parents without college degrees are also unlikely to be able to offer assistance to students struggling with upper-level coursework in which they have no experience. Further, low SES parents may find it difficult to pay for and transport students to tutoring opportunities in these subjects. Rural areas have fewer college graduates living in them and thus more students with less-educated parents. Only 20% of rural students have parents with bachelor’s degrees compared to 34% of urban students and 36% of suburban students (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012). Lower levels of parental education creates problems for today’s rural students. Educational attainment has been increasing nationwide (Alon, 2009) and the level of coursework taken by high school students has been increasing also. In 1982, 35% of high school graduates had completed upper level science courses, compared to 68% in 2004 (Planty et al., 2007). The percentage of students who had completed upper level math courses (any course above Algebra II) also increased, from 26% to 50%, as did the percentages of students studying foreign language (Planty et al., 2007). However, these increases are not spread out evenly geographically. Fewer rural students took courses in Geometry, Algebra II, Pre-Calculus, Statistics, and Calculus than suburban and urban students (Aud, Hussar, Johnson, Kena, & Roth, 2012). Additionally, fewer rural students took courses in Biology, Chemistry, and Physics (19.7%) than urban (31.6%) and suburban (38.6%)
students (Aud et al., 2012). Qualitative studies involving rural students may reveal why they do not participate in these college preparatory courses in the same numbers as urban and suburban students and conversations with rural students who successfully navigated upper-level coursework may reveal coping mechanisms that would be helpful to others.

Parents influence their children’s decision-making process about college, and may be conflicted in their message about college to their children as they worry about losing their college educated children to jobs in far-off places. Their fears are founded in the research, which shows that less than one third of rural students in seventh and eleventh grades aspire to remain in their home communities at age 30 (Demi, McLaughlin, & Snyder, 2009). Rural parents, some of whom have deep roots in their communities and a desire to have their children near them, may view “schooling much more suspiciously than members of the new, more footloose rural middle class- who anticipate separation from their adult children” (Howley, 2009, p. 545). Talking with rural students about their parents’ views of education and ties to their communities may give insight into how their parents, with their strong role as creators of the habitus in the student’s college choice model, may have encouraged them towards or away from higher education.

**Political and Cultural Context of Rural Areas**

Larger issues involving the political and cultural environment influence the post-high school experiences of rural students. Some of these influences create physical barriers to access, as in the distance from the rural student’s home to the higher education opportunity. Some of these create psychological barriers to access, as the student’s decision making is influenced by the attitudes and beliefs of those in their community.
Rural communities vary in their distances from metropolitan areas. Some of them may even have small college towns near them. Many rural areas, however, are far from opportunities for higher education. The institutions that are in close proximity may be very selective, or offer a limited number of degree programs. For many rural students seeking higher education, this means finding other options, which may include community colleges and online colleges.

Students from low SES backgrounds, as many rural students are, are more likely to attend two-year colleges and less likely to attend more selective four-year colleges (Alon, 2009). Students in the lowest SES quartile make up only 7% of students at more selective colleges and only 3% of students at the most selective colleges (Alon, 2009; Carnavale & Rose, 2003).

There are 1,690 community colleges in the United States, 60% are in rural areas and 62% have open admission policies (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Though students with low-incomes or whose parents haven’t attended college are less likely than other students to enroll in college, when they do, they are more likely to enroll in community colleges and less selective colleges (Baum & Ma, 2007; Perna, Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, Thomas, Chunyan, 2008; Shaw et al., 2006). Enrollment in a community college may reduce the likelihood of obtaining a bachelor’s degree by as much as 20% (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). However, for many, the attainment of an associate’s degree, rather than a bachelor’s, may be the goal; this is the fastest growing type of degree awarded in the last 35 years, and attainment of an associate’s increases the likelihood of seeking a bachelor’s (Hauptman, 2011). Rural students can share insights.
into their immediate and long-term goals regarding attaining associate’s or bachelor’s degrees..

Perna et al. (2008) call for further research into the types of federal and state policies designed to increase enrollment. Due to their geographic isolation, rural students may consider on-line for-profit colleges as an option. Over 17% of working poor dependent undergraduate students attend private for-profit institutions (McSwain & Davis, 2007). More research is needed to see how both community colleges and the for-profit sector has affected rural students.

Rural students and their parents may develop a distrust or disassociation with higher education for a variety of reasons. These may include a distrust that rises from fear of “brain drain” from rural communities, whereby students with the highest aspirations and educational achievement leave their home communities for opportunities elsewhere (Demi et al., 2009). This loss of important human capital further weakens rural communities and their economic viability (Demi et al., 2009).

Rural students may feel that the product that the higher education system is offering is ill-suited to their plans for their future. Proponents of place-based education suggest a curriculum that encompasses the environment where a rural student is raised be adopted, allowing college-able students to envision a future within their rural home communities (Howley, 2009). I attempted to find out how rural students viewed higher education through their predisposition phase. I hope to understand if students felt that higher education fit into their habitus, both currently, and in the future.

Considering high rates of poverty and relatively low incomes for many in rural areas, coupled with rising tuitions, college is unaffordable for many (Alexander, 2000;
McSwain and Davis (2007) found that for working poor students were left with a $3899 shortfall after accounting for financial aid and expected family contribution. Government funded scholarship programs, such as HOPE in Georgia, have cut back on benefits in recent years. Changes in policies such as these indicate that higher education is being seen increasingly as a private, rather than a public good (Baum & McPherson, 2011). However, individuals recognize the increasing importance of higher educational attainment (Immerwahr & Johnson, 2010). This may be especially true in rural communities, which have lost many of the manufacturing and agricultural jobs of the past. Researchers have noted the need for rural communities to develop new industries to provide jobs (Swaim, 1998), which will take an educated workforce. Policy makers, particularly in rural areas, need to see the important link between policies that educate rural students and the important role that these students can play in the future of their communities. Hearing from rural students firsthand about how current policies affected them will be useful to policy makers.

Rural Students

Rural students, while far from a homogenous group, share certain characteristics that influence their postsecondary experiences. One of these characteristics is having mixed feelings about their communities (Demi et al., 2009). Another characteristic is geographic isolation. This isolation affects both access to higher education and the ability to travel to urban centers, both elements of the habitus that affect college choice (Perna, 2006a). Study is needed to determine how these and other rural student characteristics affect their postsecondary educational experiences. Social identity theory
(Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010) may help to explain how rural students’ views of their own social identity affects their post-secondary plans.

Historically, educational research has focused on urban students (DeYoung, 1987). In recent decades, researchers have begun to study rural students, and their unique educational and lived experiences. Rural students have limited career opportunities in their communities, and unlike many suburban and urban students, may have to decide if choosing a certain career will mean giving up their hometown. The decision making process is complex, and the student is influenced by many factors. These include their academic abilities, their family, school, community, and the larger society. If a student has ambitious educational and career aspirations, and a strong desire to remain in their home community, they may face a great deal of conflict (Demi et al., 2009). When their rural communities are perceived by students as positive, they are more likely to express an interest in living there as adults (Demi et al., 2009). Since social identity is influential in decision-making (Evans et al., 2010), the rural student who feels their social identity is tied tightly to their rural community may hesitate to give up that community. Students who have negative views of their community may also be those who lack the academic, behavioral, and social skills to succeed in college and elsewhere (Petrin, Farmer, Meece, & Byun, 2011). Students with negative views of their community may also be more willing to give up that community, if their identity is not tightly tied to it (Evans et al., 2010). Research into what factors create these feelings of attachment in students may be useful to rural school systems and communities who hope to retain their best and brightest students and help those who are struggling.
College tuitions have been rising, as expenses have increased and states have cut funding for higher education. The financial aid that is available is usually offered primarily as loans (Shaw et al., 2006). This adds to the problem of access for rural students. If they leave their homes to pursue a higher education and hope to return, they face the potential that they must pay large student loans while living in areas with few high-paying jobs. Adding to the cost, the geographic isolation of rural communities means that most four-year colleges are far away, necessitating expensive long commutes or the costs of a secondary residence in a dormitory or apartment. Hahn and Price (2008) found that most college counselors reported that a lack of financial aid or high tuition was often the cause of college-able students not enrolling. In 2011, the average debt for a college student graduating with a bachelor’s degree was $26,600 (Reed & Cochrane, 2012). Houle (2012) found that for middle-income families, with household incomes between $40,000-$59,000, the average debt is even higher ($28,000). The median household income for the community I studied is $57,000, putting these students into the higher bracket for likely student loan debt. Hardy and Katsinas (2008) found that rural community colleges have a higher percentage of students receiving aid, including Pell Grants, than urban and suburban community college students, and that rural students incur more debt than suburban and urban community college students. It is important to further unpack the decision making process of rural students regarding the use of or fear of using financial aid.

Rural areas are often geographically isolated and may be far from towns or cities with colleges or universities. Geography is tied to identity, and may represent a privilege that rural students lack (Evans et al., 2010). Students and/or their parents may be fearful
of sending students away to areas with which they are unfamiliar. Research has shown that students with family or friends living in other areas develop a comfort level with areas beyond their own community, increasing the likelihood that they may seek education or careers in other places (Demi et al., 2009). Hearing from rural students firsthand their experiences with traveling or living elsewhere may give insights into what these experiences were and how they affected their post-high school planning.

The college aspirations of rural youth are dependent on a number of factors in their environment. Besides the factors in their internal, family, school, and external contexts (Perna, 2006b); another important part of the equation for rural students includes temporal factors. The timing associated with when a rural student makes a decision about their educational future has consequences. Particularly for low-income rural students, early educational ambitions strongly correlates with the likelihood of acquiring higher education (McGrath, Swisher, Elder, & Conger, 2001). A study completed by McGrath and associates (2001) showed that “lower-status youth,” one’s whose parents did not have college degrees or social and economic strengths, were half as likely to attend college as their higher SES peers (p. 260). However, a variety of factors influenced the chances that they would. These included: parents with some involvement in the community, some participation in school activities, attendance at church, and high educational ambitions by 7th grade (McGrath et al., 2001). Further research is needed to discover more about the temporal factors that relate to college ambition. If a plan to attend college in 7th grade increases the likelihood that a rural student will attend college does the likelihood increase with a decrease in decision-making age?
Summary

Rural students, a growing proportion of the student population (Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Klein, 2012), must be considered in the nation’s quest to increase the number of college graduates. At present, there are over 9.6 million rural public school students in the United States (Strange et al., 2012). Prior research on rural students has largely been quantitative (Howley & Hambrick, 2011; Irvin et al., 2011; Petrin et al., 2011; Yoder, 2007) or focused on specific populations such as international students (Buchmann & Dalton, 2002; Khattab, 2005). Qualitative studies have primarily focused on current students (Calzaferri, 2011; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008) or special populations such as gifted students (Ellis, 2010). A multi-layered approach, that takes into account all aspects of a rural student’s environment, including their perceptions of how local, state, and national policies have affected them, was helpful in understanding this population. This qualitative study yielded “valuable insights” or “unexpected findings,” (Fowler, 2009, p. 319) into the multiple layers of influence in the college choice process. Further, this study uncovered rural students’ actual enrollment behaviors, when they were two or more years beyond high school, uncovered how postsecondary plans were translated into postsecondary behaviors.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The factors that influence an individual’s decision or ability to attend college are complex and may not easily be reduced to simple data points of GPA, college major, or distance from home. Qualitative research methods were useful in studying college choice as interviews yielded “responses about people’s perceptions, opinions, feelings, and knowledge” (Patton, 2002, p. 4). Since I hoped to discover what former rural high school students perceive as the factors that influenced their post-secondary plans regarding higher education and what challenges and supports they encountered, a qualitative approach was most effective. This chapter describes the conceptual framework, perspective and research tradition that this study used to examine rural students’ college choice behavior. It also includes a description of the methods used for participant selection, data generation, collection, and analysis. Lastly, it includes the methods for insuring quality data and a discussion of ethical considerations.

Conceptual Framework

This study used Perna’s (2006a) conceptual framework of student college choice as a research guide. This model, which was explained in detail in chapter one, considers the many layers of factors that affect a student’s choices regarding higher education (see page 9). In this study, I used Perna’s (2006a) model to frame the interview questions aimed at discovering the thoughts, perceptions and beliefs of students about their post-secondary educational plans.

Questions in the interview protocol about the students’ experiences in, and feelings about, Brighton addressed aspects of the habitus layer of the conceptual model.
Questions about the students’ ideas and plans for the future addressed several layers of the model including: expected benefits, supply and demand, and the cultural and social capital aspects of the habitus layer. The school and community context layer was investigated with questions about the students’ high school experiences. The higher education layer of the model was covered by questions about the participants’ college knowledge and preparation. The social, economic and policy layer was addressed with questions specific to the participants’ college choice decisions.

**Perspective**

To understand all of the nuances related to how rural students made decisions about their post-secondary plans and ultimate choices, I set my study in the interpretivist paradigm (Patton, 2002). Interpretivism allowed me to understand how individuals within a group made meaning of their experiences and their choices to attend college or not; and helped me understand their thoughts, perceptions, and beliefs. I collected data from my participants and attempted to relate their individual realities and discover their commonalities of meaning. My goal was to understand and describe the experience of my participants as they reflected on influencing factors that led to their postsecondary choices (Glesne, 2011). I hoped to understand the major influences in their lives, including their community, family, peers, and schools. I attempted to understand when and how my participants made choices about college, and what internal and external factors in the environment affected their decision making process.

**Research Tradition**

The study was conducted using a collective case study strategy (Glesne, 2011) combined with the narrative analysis method (Patton, 2002). This approach allowed me
to investigate members of the rural population of a particular community and find commonalities and differences in their stories. Case study was combined with narrative analysis because case study alone is not considered to be a method, but rather an approach or strategy used to study a particular person or group (Glesne, 2011; Patton, 2002).

At the core of narrative analysis is the belief that individuals think of their lives as a story, with themselves as the main character and their actions and interactions with others as aspects of the plot (Patton, 2002). This plot takes place within a setting that includes the culture and environment where the individual exists (Josselson, 2011). This method works well with the conceptual model I am using as the individual makes sense of their world through the idea of their story, and the story has a beginning, middle, and end (Josselson, 2011). Participants' recollections of earlier parts of their stories gave information about the predisposition phase of their college choice experience, including decisions to attend college or not. Recollections of the middle gave insight into the influences of habitus, school, and community. Expressions about the end of the story revealed aspirations.

Narrative analysis involves interviewing a participant, or analyzing a participant's writing (Josselson, 2011). The stories of the participants were looked at on two levels—one face value, and the other an attempt to decode hidden meanings (Josselson, 2011). Data were analyzed to find common themes, which were coded and elements that did not fit into the common themes (Josselson, 2011). Interview questions based on Perna’s (2006a) college choice model were used to generate the data, and the model offered a method of analysis as answers were sorted into the different categories of her model. An
a priori coding schema based on Perna’s (2006a) model included the categories of: (a) habitus, which includes responses related to demographic characteristics; (b) cultural capital, including responses about the participant’s knowledge and feelings about the value of college; and responses related to (c) social capital, which included responses related to information the participant received about college and assistance with the college choice process. The next category includes responses related to the school and community context layer, including responses related to the availability and types of resources the participant encountered, and the participant’s experiences with supports and barriers. The third category includes responses related to the higher education context, including responses related to college marketing efforts the participant experienced, as well as responses related to the higher education institutions the participant mentions. The fourth category includes responses related the social, economic, and policy issues that affected the participant. Other categories include responses grouped around the ideas of supply and demand, including the participant’s academic preparation and achievement, and their family financial situation and financial aid. Lastly, responses were coded according to the expected costs and benefits of college, including responses related to monetary and non-monetary gains and costs of college.

Site Selection

I selected a rural community that is similar in many ways to other modern rural communities. Studying this community as a single case gave insight and shows connections to the issue of college choice for today’s rural young people (Glesne, 2011).

Brighton (pseudonym) is a county in Virginia. It has a large land mass, and is about 30 miles long and about 15 miles wide. It was established as a county in colonial
times and historically relied on farming, fishing and timber as the basis of its economy. In 2013, about 4000 people lived and worked in the community, another 10,000 Brighton residents commuted to jobs outside of the community, and over 5000 workers commuted to jobs in Brighton from other communities (Virginia Employment Commission, 2014). The largest employers in 2013 were the school system, the hospital, the graduate higher education institution, the county government, and the community college, followed by Wal Mart. Brighton has a population of about 36,000, about 20% of whom are under 18. It is largely a White community, with an almost 90% White population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

Brighton’s poverty rate is 10%, compared to 17% for rural counties nationally (DeNavas et al. 2012; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2010). However, over 14% of the children in the county live in poverty, amounting to over 1100 children total. The number of children living in poverty is the same as the state poverty rate for children, but less than the national rate of 21% (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2010). Though the community is not plagued with high rates of poverty, neither is it affluent. The median household income is about $57,000, near the national median of $54,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Even though Brighton has escaped extreme levels of poverty and has a higher median income level than the rest of the nation, the county is still plagued by pockets of poverty and exhibits traits of other rural poor regions. In particular, low public school academic achievement, low college educated populations, and fewer cultural amenities.

Brighton, though considered rural by the National Center for Education Statistics, is not an isolated rural area. Within about 60 miles are three medium to large
universities, two of which are within about 30 miles. Two of the institutions are considered selective, with higher transfer rates by the Carnegie classification (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2012). However, these universities are the furthest away, and commuting to them can be difficult, as Brighton is not serviced by an interstate and commuting requires traveling over bridges. The two closest universities are considered more selective, and have lower transfer rates (Carnegie, 2012). Brighton has a limited public transportation system that requires 24-hour notice for pick-up and operates between 6:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. It could be used to travel to the local community college but none of the four-year colleges (Bay Transit, 2012).

Brighton is home to a community college, which has a campus in Brighton and a campus in another community. Between the two campuses, the community college has over 3000 students and serves 12 counties (Carnegie, 2012). The community college is located at the far northern end of the county, 15 to 30 miles from the population centers of Brighton.

Brighton provides an ideal site for this research as it is a rural community that exhibits many of the markers of poverty, low college-going, and unemployment (5.1%) at about the state average (5.8) (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011b). Yet, the community is not isolated and is located within commuting distance for a range of higher education options. Thus, high school graduates have choices with respect to the type of institution they wish to attend. Knowing more from participants about why they opted to attend college or not can aid other rural locales in understanding better what supports or challenges students as they consider their postsecondary decisions.
Participants

The participants in this study graduated from a large centralized high school in rural Brighton County in 2009, 2010, or 2011. Senior class sizes for these years were around 500 students each year. This school was selected because it is typical of many rural high schools with respect to funding issues and graduation rates. It is the only high school in Brighton and has almost 1900 students in grades 9-12 (Virginia Department of Education, 2012a). The school receives 43% of its funding from Brighton, 51% from the state, and 6% from the federal government. In an effort to make up for a budget shortfall in 2010, Brighton decreased the number of days it students attended school from 180 to 160 for the 2010-2011 school year; a policy which is still in place as of the 2012-2013 school year. Local spending per pupil in 2011 was $3803, whereas the state average in Virginia was $5371 (Virginia Department of Education, 2012b). Brighton lagged behind other rural schools in the amount of funding provided locally by over $2000 (Virginia Department of Education, 2012b). This deficit was reflected in overall spending per pupil for Brighton, which was over $1500 less than other local rural school districts (Virginia Department of Education, 2012b). Per pupil expenditure totaled $9104, less than the state average of, $10,793 (Virginia Department of Education, 2012b). Brighton ranked 108th out of 131 counties and cities in Virginia in per student spending (Virginia Department of Education, 2012b).
Table 3.1

Brighton Student Enrollment by Institution Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VA Community College</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four-Year Private College</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four-Year Public College</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Four-Year College</strong></td>
<td><strong>117</strong></td>
<td><strong>86</strong></td>
<td><strong>125</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total College</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Cohort</td>
<td>515</td>
<td>521</td>
<td>545</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Despite lower levels of funding per student, the graduation rate from Brighton High School is only slightly less than the state average and is higher than national rates (81% compared to a state average of 82% and a national average of rural students of 77.5%) (Strange et al., 2012; Virginia Department of Education, 2013). The relatively high graduate rate made this a prime site for investigating the postsecondary options graduates pursue as the high school graduates have the opportunity to attend college. Less than half of a typical graduating class from Brighton enrolls in college the following year, with a higher percentage enrolling in community colleges than four-year colleges (see Table 3.1). This differs from the state as a whole, which has about 62% of its high school graduates enrolling in college, 25% in two-year colleges and 37% in four-year colleges (Holian & Mokher, 2011).

Participants were selected from those suggested by teachers as being college-able in high school and who took a college-preparatory curriculum or achieved a standard or advanced diploma. The students were identified through a nomination process involving teachers at the rural high school, other students, and friends in the community. These
students were invited to participate in the study. This sampling method is a convenience, snowball sampling method (Patton, 2002). This method created some bias, as teachers nominated students that they believed may have interesting, information-rich stories related to the college choice process (Patton, 2002). An email (see Appendix A) was sent to all the high school teachers who teach juniors and seniors. Conversations and communications with nominating teachers about their suggestions were added to the data collected. All study participants were at least 18 years of age and White, as Brighton is predominantly a White community.

A master list was created from the names provided by the teachers, consisting of about 35 students. Participants were divided into three categories based on feedback from teachers: those who attended a four-year college directly after high school, those who attended a two-year college or vocational or trade school, and those who did not pursue any higher education. These categories provided a good array of experiences and viewpoints. The master list was narrowed to a minimum of three students in each category which were studied so that each story could be examined in depth. Participants were selected in attempt to find the most "information-rich cases" (Patton, 2002, p. 242), based on the feedback from the teachers, which allowed for learning as much as possible about the collective group.

I also requested interviews with guidance counselors from the school (see Appendix B), in order to find out what they believe the primary challenges and supports are for Brighton students regarding higher education (see Appendix C for questions). Three counselors responded to my emailed request. None of the counselors employed by the school are native to the community. I interviewed all three counselors who responded
Data Generation

Data generation consisted of an initial interview with each of the nine student participants that lasted about an hour and brief follow-up interviews of about 15 minutes with five of the participants, to clarify points made and for fact-checking. Interview questions related to broader research questions (see Appendix D). Questions related to the temporal qualities of the college choice process, what Hossler and Gallagher (1987) would call the predisposition. Further questions related to the student's habitus, layer one of the Perna (2006a) model. Additional questions related to the school and community context layer and the higher education context layer of the model (Perna, 2006a). Questions addressed some of the elements of layer four, dealing with the larger social, economic, and policy issues (Perna, 2006a). Lastly, questions also related to the ideas of supply and demand and the expected costs and benefits of higher education (Perna, 2006a). Appendix E provides a crosswalk table that links the interview questions with the applicable research questions.

During interviews, questions (see Appendix D) served as the basis for the interviews. Themes were explored until thematic saturation occurred and no new ideas developed. In order to examine the community in detail, I considered the information included in the site selection section above as well as other statistical information about the community.

Data Analysis

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were then coded line by line. Initial codes were created a priori, developed from Perna's (2006a) model of college choice (see page 9). These codes were linked with specific
statements made by participants and also from meaning gleaned by the researcher from participant narratives. Additionally, I reviewed these narratives to reveal emergent codes among and across cases. My goal was to not just look at codes, but to discover how codes link together in themes for participants. I ultimately hoped to find how living in a rural community affects an individual’s college choice. To aid in member checking, a transcript of the interview was sent to the participants for review, commentary, and clarifications (Patton, 2002). Brief follow-up interviews were conducted with five of the participants, to expand and clarify ideas.

Statistical information about the community including school spending and employment information was considered as it revealed information about the school and community context, habitus, and social economic and policy layers of the model. This information was useful in addressing the school and community context layer of the model, as it revealed the availability and types of resources and structural supports and barriers at the school (Perna, 2006a).

**Quality and Rigor**

In keeping with the interpretive nature of narrative analysis, it is understood that the researcher is not an objective individual, and the intrinsic subjectivity was acknowledged and identified through the researcher as instrument statement (Josselson, 2003). Categorical analysis allowed me to make some comparisons between students, keeping in mind the context within which their stories are told (Maxwell, 1996). I also attempted to identify reasons for differences in participant stories, reasons beyond their secondary school experience. This includes examination of statistical information of the community. Comparison of cases within the same community helped to create credible
results through triangulation as the individual cases were compared against each other (Patton, 2002). To aid in data triangulation (Patton, 2002), I participated in weekly peer review meetings with colleagues not related to this project. Through sharing my ideas and interpretations with them, they challenged my thinking and helped me to expand my analysis.

A further aid to data triangulation (Patton, 2002) were interviews with guidance counselors at the school. These interviews added another perspective to the questions of what challenges and supports exist for Brighton students making post-secondary plans. By talking to one counselor native to the area, and one from outside the area, I had hoped to compare and contrast their ideas about the school and community context (Perna 2006a) and how it affects students. However, all of the counselors employed at the school come from outside the community.

I reviewed my notes immediately following interviews, expanding and elaborating on ideas that were developed. Interviews were transcribed within two weeks of completion. Categorical analysis allowed me to make some comparisons among program participants, keeping in mind the contexts within which their stories were told (Maxwell, 1996). Brief (twenty minutes or less) follow-up interviews, when needed for clarification were conducted with five of the participants, and participant reviews of interview summaries helped to insure quality data and credibility, as credibility is dependent on the believability of the data to the participant (Patton, 2002).

To validate the research study and insure trustworthiness, four specific areas were considered (Patton, 2002). Persuasiveness was created by finding and indicating when elements from narratives supported the theoretical framework.
between me and the participants lent trustworthiness to the study. This correspondence includes the participants' ability to review transcripts of their interviews.

Three major areas were considered in each interview to insure coherence (Reissman, 1993), which relates to the thickness of description from the interview (Reissman, 1993). These areas included global coherence, or understanding the overall idea that the participant is trying to share with their story. Local coherence involved paying attention to the details of the story, and focusing on how individual parts relate to others, including contradictions. Drawing out common themes from a participant's narrative resulted in thematic coherence. Providing rich descriptions of the research process and making original interview transcripts available resulted in a pragmatic study that allowed me to test my theories as they developed (Reissman, 1993).

An important part of narrative analysis is understanding the temporal and contextual nature of the participant's story. A co-constructed story is unique to the time and situation when it was recorded. My selection of questions and participation in the interview influenced the story and understanding and acknowledging this leads to credible results (Glesne, 2011; Patton, 2002).

**Ethical Considerations**

All participants signed a consent form and were informed that may stop participation in the study at any time (see appendix F). The study was approved by the ED-IRC Institutional Review Board of the College of William & Mary. All interview materials were kept in a locked cabinet and protected with passwords, if electronic. The names of the participants were protected by assigning pseudonyms and the name of the community and school was not identified.
The following statements appeared on the consent form:

“Please know that your name and other identifying information will be known only to the primary researcher and your personally identifiable information will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law.”

“Pseudonyms will be used in the final manuscript and in any publications or presentations, and there be no personally identifiable information used without prior written consent.”

“The audio recordings of interviews will be locked securely in the researcher’s files and will be erased when the study is finished.”

“Your participation is completely voluntary, and you may decline to participate or answer any questions during the interview.”

**Limitations and Delimitations**

This study expands the body of research about rural students and gives voice to rural students from a particular school district. Participants were volunteers, which is a limitation. Individuals who volunteer for a study may not be representative of the larger population. However, the goal of qualitative research is not to create generalizable and transferable results, but rather to understand a group of participants. I assumed the information that participants provided was true.

This research is delimited to one rural school district. This district has attributes which are unique to its location. Again, the results may not be generalizable to other rural areas, but can expand the knowledge about rural students and college choice. Additionally, this study took place following a major recession in the American
economy. The participants graduated from high school during this recession, which may make results different than they might have been during a more positive economic time.

**Researcher as Instrument**

In qualitative inquiry, the researcher is the instrument (Patton, 2002). My subjectivity was acknowledged and identified through this researcher as instrument statement. I acknowledge that I have bias towards the community to be studied, and an insider status as a community member. My familiarity with the community assisted me in gaining access to program participants and helped them to feel at ease with me.

As someone pursuing a terminal degree in the field of higher education, a bias towards the value of higher education is acknowledged. However, I also acknowledge relationships with others who did not pursue higher education whose opinions, intelligence, and beliefs I value. I believe that all students should have equal access to education and that higher education is a public, rather than a private good. To quote another College of William & Mary alumnus, “I feel . . . an ardent desire to see knowledge so disseminated through the mass of mankind that it may, at length, reach even the extremes of society: beggars and kings” (Jefferson, 1808).

**Summary**

Using Perna’s (2006a) college choice model as a framework, I completed a qualitative study of a group of young people who graduated from a rural public high school. I used a combination of individual case studies and narrative analysis to discover how the layers described in Perna’s (2006a) model influenced the decision-making process of the students regarding college choice.
CHAPTER FOUR

STUDENT PROFILES

This chapter includes the stories of nine students who graduated Brighton High School in 2009, 2010, or 2011. The names and identifiable information of the participants have been changed, to protect their privacy. The students are grouped into three categories: those who went to a community college or trade school, those who have not attended college since graduating high school, and those who went directly to a four-year college. The students received either an advanced diploma or a standard diploma. The advanced diploma required an additional math, science, and history course and the study of a foreign language. It also required two additional elective courses. A table can be found at the end of the chapter that includes information on the students’ post-secondary education, their parents’ education, whether the students took dual enrollment courses while in high school, their year of graduation, and their gender. These profiles represent a snapshot of the student’s educational path at a particular point in time. This background information forms the foundation for understanding the students’ perceptions of the factors that influenced their post-secondary educational plans and identifies the challenges and supports that they had in making these educational choices.

This chapter also includes the perspectives of three Brighton High School counselors on the challenges and supports facing Brighton students’ post-secondary educational choices. Their reflections add another view to the students’ stories, and provide an overall understanding of the school and community.
Community College Pathway

The students in this section graduated high school and enrolled in a community college. All three began attending classes at one of the two community colleges within 30-60 minutes of their homes in the fall after their high school graduation. One of these community colleges is located at the far northern end of the county, away from the population centers, although Brighton is part of its service area. The other community college is located across the river, with its main campus in a suburban part of a neighboring city. The students' paths diverged after their first year. One attended the local community college for a year as a full-time student, stopped for a year, and then returned part-time. One earned her associate's degree at the local community college and enrolled in a four-year university, and one began as a full-time student at the neighboring community college, then decided to earn a workforce certificate, entered the workforce, and stopped attending the community college.

Rebecca

Rebecca graduated from BHS in 2010 with an advanced diploma. She is 21 years old, married, and has a one-year old daughter. She works part-time for a local big box store and attends the local community college part-time. Rebecca's husband, who is a year older and not in college, works full-time during the day and Rebecca works in the evenings. This schedule allows them to take care of their daughter without relying on outside childcare. Rebecca and her husband are currently living with her mother, who also helps out with their daughter. Rebecca described herself in this way:

I’m very outgoing. I have matured a lot in the past year. I used to be very wild - not in a bad way, just in a crazy teenager kind of way. And in the past year I’ve
grown up a lot, so I'd say I'm pretty mature now. I'm a hard worker and I learn fast, so that makes things easier for me than most people, I feel like.

Rebecca grew up with her mother, father, and brother (until her parents divorced when she was three years old) in a house across the street from her grandparents. Her mother has an associate’s degree and her father was in the military. He did not attend college. Her mother remarried when Rebecca was nine, and her stepfather, who was also in the military, did not attend college. Her family is not native to the area, but all settled in Brighton when her grandfather retired from the military. She described growing up in Brighton:

It's been wonderful. I will say that when I was in high school I thought it was the most boring place ever because I didn’t really have much to do. The biggest thing to do was going to Walmart, but now that I’m a little bit older I definitely savor the fact that I grew up here because there hasn’t been much violence or anything. It's been very fun.

Rebecca’s goals for life focus on her family. She would like to be a stay-at-home mom for a while, but knows she needs to work. Rebecca stated that she wants her daughter to have a wonderful life and wants, “to do something where I’m not dreading going to work every day. I want to enjoy my job.” Rebecca would like to stay in Brighton, if she and her husband can find good jobs locally.

Rebecca had always planned on going to college, and was part of the Beta Club, which recognizes academic achievement, character, service and leadership. She applied for several scholarships and grants for college as a senior in high school. She chose the local community college because it allowed her an affordable way to get her required
courses completed, and because she got a grant that paid her tuition. She attended full-time her first semester, but said that she wasn’t used to having to study, goofed off, and failed two of her courses. As a result, she lost her scholarship and had to retake courses in her spring semester; she only completed 14 credits her first year at the community college. In the spring of 2011, a year after her high school graduation, she got pregnant and married. She took the next year off of school and resumed attending the community college part-time in the fall of 2013. Rebecca had planned on being a marine scientist, but is now considering a program that would let her work sooner, such as nursing, radiology, or ultrasound technology.

James

James attended BHS and graduated in 2010. He received good grades and was inducted into the National Honor Society. Health problems from birth necessitated two major surgeries in his life, one when he was eight, and one when he was 15. He started attending the community college across the river in a nearby city full-time in the fall of 2010, commuting about 45 minutes from his home in Brighton. He planned on pursuing an electrical engineering degree, but changed his mind and focused on finding employment directly out of the community college. In the spring of 2013, he was accepted into a marine electrician certificate program run through the community college which places students who pass a three-week course in jobs at the regional shipyard. James was excited to pass the course and began working at the shipyard. He plans to continue his studies at the community college and transition into the shipyard’s apprentice school.
James grew up in Brighton and plans to stay in the area. His parents grew up across the river, in another community, and moved to Brighton when they had James. Both of James’ grandfathers were in the military, which brought the families to the area. James’ mother went to a four-year college in the community where she grew up and his father is an electrician. James discussed his mother’s career:

She’s got a business degree and she’s working, and then she had me, and you know, I was so sick, having a half size kidney, and she began to be a stay-at-home mom until I was 19, then the divorce happened, and then she had to get back to work.

James explained that it has been difficult for his mother to return to the work force due to her lack of recent work experience and that she only makes $12 an hour. He lives at home and is proud that his new job will allow him to help out with his $16.50 an hour wage.

James’ paternal grandfather worked at the shipyard after retiring from the military, and his father worked there as an electrician, also, until he was laid off in the late 1990s when James was in elementary school. James discussed his grandfather’s and father’s experiences at the shipyard.

And when he [James’ paternal grandfather] got out of the Army, and then he got into the shipyard, and then he went in there for about 20, 30 years, retired, and then my dad worked in the shipyard and then he got laid off. So I’m hoping my path is more like my grandpa then my dad.

James’ original plan, formulated in eighth grade, was to work for NASCAR. When he got to high school he began to consider a career as an electrician. He though he
would go to a particular state university and study engineering. He was a fan of this school from an early age, and even has his truck decorated in their colors. He thought it was unlikely that he would get in straight from high school, and instead, thought he would transfer to this four-year university after two years at community college. James described the situation, “And you know, the shipyard thing came through, so I realized the engineering thing wasn’t really my route. And that’s basically all [the state university] is.”

During the summer of 2013, about two months after beginning his new job, James had another health concern, which required major surgery. He lost his job because of this absence as he was still in the probationary period for work. However, James appealed the decision and was finally medically cleared to return to work in January of 2014. As of the time of this writing in the spring of 2014; however, he had not been rehired and had resumed his high school job of working at a grocery store. James’ health problems, desire to help his mother, and pay off debts, may have contributed to his decision not to further his education at a four-year college.

Brittney

Brittney, who loves history, hunting and fishing, grew up in Brighton, and graduated Brighton High School in 2011. She shared her feelings about Brighton.

I mean, I love Brighton, and I kind of resented it growing up a little bit when I was younger just because there’s not a whole lot to do. But, now I love it. When I leave to go on vacation, I can’t wait to come back.

Brittney has always lived in the same house, and lives there now with her parents and younger brother. She also has an older sister. Brittney’s mother is from Brighton, as are
her maternal grandparents. Her father came to Brighton from Pennsylvania. Brittney said the military brought him to the area. Brittney would like to stay in Brighton, and her parents would like her to stay also. Brittney said that if she didn’t live in Brighton, she would live in another small town, but never a city. Brittney described growing up in Brighton:

It was fun. It was a lot of outdoorsy kind of activities you grow up with. I wasn’t allowed to use video games, or anything, so I never use them now. Like, I don’t think they’re fun at all. I don’t understand people that sit in front of a computer. I’d rather be outside or fishing, because that’s the way I grew up. It’s country living – real simple.

Brittney entered the local community college as a full-time student the fall after graduating high school and earned her associate’s degree in two years. She had come in with credit from one dual-enrollment course. She has since transferred to a four-year college located about an hour from her home. She is planning on majoring in history and going to graduate school for a master’s degree and teaching certification. She works part-time at a local museum as a costumed interpreter and ultimately would like to be a history professor at a college. She stated that in the meantime, “I’d like to teach high school or something higher level.”

Brittney has a strong passion for the study of history and a desire to teach. She is on course to obtain her bachelor’s degree within four years of graduating from high school. She is in a serious relationship with another Brighton graduate and plans to stay in the area. Her ultimate goal is to teach history at a level higher than high school, perhaps at a community or four-year college. In order to do this, she will need to pursue
a doctorate in history. There is one such program in the area, at a highly selective college within driving distance of Brighton.

**Straight to Work Pathway**

Andy, Mark, and Samantha went to work directly after high school. Their paths and goals are quite different, however. Andy is working and pursuing work force training through the local fire department. Mark is working and is planning on going to college later. Samantha is working in day care and is unsure of her future plans.

**Andy**

Andy described himself as “born and raised” in Brighton. He graduated Brighton High School in 2010 and is currently working in a mechanic’s shop, working on vehicles. He didn’t study auto mechanics in high school, but spent a lot of time hanging out in the auto mechanics classroom and stated, “I’ve been working on vehicles my whole life, just tinkering, and building, and stuff like that.” He also took two classes in marine trades in high school that included work on boat motors. He recently began taking basic EMT courses as part of a part-time six-month program offered at the local fire department, and is interested in a career in firefighting. He volunteers with the local volunteer fire department, and is applying for positions with some of the paid departments, which are located in other communities. He would like to stay in Brighton, but would consider moving if he got a good firefighting job, as he does not wish to pursue a career as a mechanic.

Both of Andy’s parents are from Brighton, as well as his grandparents. Andy described growing up in Brighton:
I love it. I think it’s a good place to grow up. I mean there’s several opportunities to do stuff- the environment, the people. Small town- everybody knows everything. That’s one of the bad things, but you know, also that could be a good thing. 

Andy loves the outdoors, and helping people. He likes to hunt and fish, and said that if he had the choice, he’d be “on the water 24/7.” His mother and father met at Brighton High School, and his mother went to a professional nursing school in the area. She is a nurse and his father works with computers. His father received training in an apprenticeship program at the shipyard but left for a better job with a smaller company.

Andy is considering getting a job at the shipyard, pursuing his advanced EMT certification, and trying to transfer to the shipyard’s fire department, for the professional experience. Andy explained:

So, I’m trying to get somewhere. What I kind of plan on doing is trying to get aboard in the shipyard and work for them, while in the meantime I’m making good money [working at the shipyard as a laborer]. And, then after I work for a certain amount of time, I can ask for a transfer so I can get transferred over to the fire department, hopefully. And, the minimum requirement for them is the EMT basic, which is what I’m taking now. And, you get like a $7,000 or $8,000 raise if you get that other [advanced EMT] class. And, then so I’ll automatically be a professional fire fighter on my record. Which, hopefully it will look better.

Andy has a steady girlfriend from Brighton, who he has dated for some time. They spend a lot of time with each other’s families, and are making plans for the future.
together. Though he still lives at home, Andy mentioned his desire to maintain his steady income, and would be reluctant to give this up to be a full-time college student.

**Mark**

Mark graduated Brighton High School in 2009. He only attended BHS for one year, as his father was in the military, and they moved often. Mark received an advanced diploma and graduated with a 3.6, without weighted classes. He has been working full-time since then, primarily as a motorcycle instructor for a defense contractor. This job requires an hour or more commute one way. He also teaches motorcycle lessons at the local community college. He recently received an offer from a local Harley Davidson dealer as a salesman and is considering this commission-based position.

Mark lived in another state before moving to Virginia just before his junior year. When he was a freshman and sophomore, he had definite plans to go to a state college, and was taking advanced courses. Mark explained his early college plans:

I absolutely did. When I was in my freshman year of high school I really, really, really wanted to go to school and I planned on going to Western Kentucky University. But then we moved and I just got pretty depressed I think is what happened. I just wasn't really adjusting to new places. I didn't really want to do anything- the motivation was gone. Yeah, I do remember initially definitely wanting to go to college.

During his junior year in high school, Mark lived in a community near Brighton, located across the river in a city. Mark did not like the urban environment of the school and described it as having lots of gangs. “It was pretty rough. Tough kids. A lot of drugs and kids skipping school, fights going on all the time.” His family moved to
Brighton before his senior year and he enrolled at BHS. Mark lost some course credit because of the move and though he had taken a dual enrollment course as a sophomore and was on the advanced math track, in Virginia he only took regular level courses, no honors classes or AP courses. During this time, he developed a plan to join the military, but ultimately developed severe allergies from a tick bite that kept him from joining.

Mark married a local girl two years after graduating high school and has a 15 month-old daughter. He plays guitar in a band with friends. He plans on going to college after his wife obtains her degree, but thinks he will go part-time so that he can keep working.

Samantha

Samantha graduated Brighton High School in 2010 with a regular diploma. She recently started working for a local day care center and is thinking about becoming a nurse or a teacher. She has lived her whole life in Brighton, in the same house, with her parents and younger brother. Samantha described herself as caring and organized. She described growing up in Brighton:

I thought it was great. I loved growing up here. I liked that it wasn't a city, you know, like how it is in [nearby city]. When I was little, I was allowed to go ride my bike down the road by myself and go walk to my friends' houses and stuff like that, that I wouldn't be allowed to do in the city.

Samantha loves animals, and volunteered at the humane society when she was younger. She likes to go to the beach, be outside, and hang out at her family's pool. She thinks she will stay in Brighton, but is also interested in living someplace warmer, like Florida. Neither of Samantha's parents went to college, nor did her grandparents. Her
father is a foreman for a regional road construction company and her mother is a supervisor for a small local manufacturer.

Four-Year College Pathway

Alan, Sarah, and Todd entered four-year colleges the fall after graduating high school. Alan and Todd went to the nearby highly selective college and Sarah went to a selective college over 200 miles away.

Alan

Alan graduated from Brighton High School in 2011. He enrolled at a highly selective Virginia college the fall after graduating high school where his is majoring in International Relations. He is also a pilot. He flies commercially for a local company and as an auxiliary reserve pilot for the U.S. Coast Guard. He received his training at a small, local airport while he was in high school.

Alan’s family moved to Brighton when he was about six years old. None of his family was from Brighton. Alan described growing up in Brighton:

I really liked growing up in [Brighton]. Despite what other people said, I thought it was a great place. It was very small, and I liked the sense of community. I liked the idea that a couple of times each year there would be a parade down on Main Street. I liked the idea that when you went to these parades on Main Street, you usually saw a lot of people you knew. It just had a very like small town USA feel to it, and I really appreciated that.

His parents were divorced when he was young and his father was not a large part of his life growing up. His mother was in the Coast Guard, and his father was in the military, which brought their family to the area. Neither of his parents went to college.
directly after high school, although his father went recently. One set of grandparents graduated from high school and had no further formal education.

Alan plans to stay in the area but does not specifically plan to remain in Brighton. He says that his parents do not care whether he stays in Brighton or not. Alan plans on attending Officer Candidate School in the Coast Guard after graduating college. After that, he thinks he might want to work for the government, and has considered F.B.I., C.I.A., and the State Department. Alan discussed whether his parent’s education and work lives influenced him:

I’d always wanted to work for the government, and that didn’t really come from my dad working for the government, or my mom previously working for the government. That came from just me thinking that’s how I could make an impact. And that’s how I could try to do some good in the world. So the plan was always to work for the government. Like where in the government I wanted to work, I didn’t really know.

Alan developed a passion for flying at an early age, which has greatly influenced his life thus far. The confidence that it takes to fly a plane carries over into other aspects of his personality. It is easy to imagine him as the military officer he plans to become. Though he has yet to determine exactly what course his life should take after that, his desire to be a public servant seems ingrained in his decision-making.

Sarah

Sarah graduated from Brighton High School in 2011. She enrolled in a selective Virginia college the fall after graduating, and is studying engineering there. Sarah’s
family moved to Brighton when she was 5, because her father was in the Coast Guard, and was stationed nearby. Sarah described growing up in Brighton.

It was nice because [Brighton] is small. You get to know a lot of people, so it was— I would say it was pretty tight-knit, especially where I lived, we knew the parents and other kids. And especially my mom’s work, we knew a lot of people from her work.

Her parents and grandparents were not from Brighton, both parents grew up in other states. Sarah does not think she will ever move back to Brighton, but added:

I don’t think so, unless I were an adult with a family and wanted somewhere to raise kids. But I’m kind of in this age group from 20’s into the 30’s, I would not.

Sarah doesn’t believe that her parents expect her to live in Brighton as an adult.

Sarah’s mother went to college, and is a social worker in Brighton. Her father went to a community college, and rose through the ranks in the Coast Guard, reaching the highest rank possible as an enlisted person. Her father’s parents did not go to college, but her maternal grandparents did.

Sarah has already started working. On breaks from school she works for an oil company in another state. The company pays her a salary, and that in combination with part of her father’s GI bill allows her to go to college without loans. Sarah described her goals for the future:

I think my biggest goals are definitely to become a professional at whatever field. Right now it’s chemical engineering, but if I go into graduate studies, which I’m considering, I can switch over to something else. So to be a professional and kind of secondary one is just to have a family and be happy in that aspect.
Sarah’s financial independence at such a young age is unusual. She has her own apartment, and her salary allows her financial independence from her parents. Sarah knows what she will be doing professionally in the immediate future, and plans on graduate study, although she is not sure in what field. Sarah is well spoken, seems mature beyond her 20 years, is a marathoner, and seemed very sure of her self compared to other students in this study.

Todd

Todd is a 2011 Brighton High School graduate currently enrolled in a highly selective Virginia college. He transferred to his current college after first spending a year at a less selective Virginia college that he did not feel was the right environment for him. His family moved to Brighton when he was three, when his father got a job as a commercial truck driver for the then newly opened landfill. Todd described himself as someone who likes to read, play music, and enjoys being outside in nature:

Personality-wise, I’m fairly reserved, introverted. And I guess definitely coming here, a lot of people here are kind of reserved and introverted, so I feel like I fit in in [at his college].

Todd enjoyed growing up in Brighton with his mother, father, and two sisters. His parents were from another community, about 45 minutes away, and his grandparents are also not from Brighton. Todd described growing up in Brighton:

I like [Brighton]. I like the fact that I grew up in a situation where I didn’t have to worry about things that some people in different environments have to worry about as far as crime and things like that, because we were very safe. And I’ve met wonderful people from [Brighton].
Neither of Todd’s parents went to college, and he doesn’t believe they expect him to stay in Brighton. Todd described his plans for the future:

I want to go to law school and become an attorney in a field that I care about – probably, you know, I said environmental law – possibly civil rights law or something that I care about. But specific things I want to do – like I just have a general path towards being that, so I don’t really have anything specific planned out. But I definitely think being here at [his college] is a good foundation.

Todd, a self-described introvert, is happy that he is at a college with other introverts. He says that when he tells others, not at his college, his plans to become an attorney, they think he is financially motivated. However, he says that though he knows financial stability is important, his primary motivation is to have a positive influence in the world.

**High School Counselors**

I interviewed three counselors at the high school to find out what they believed the supports and barriers were for high school students at Brighton in terms of their post-secondary education. Two were counselors employed by the high school and one was a career coach employed by the local community college and housed at the high school.

**Jim**

Jim has been a counselor at Brighton High School for 14 years. He was recently appointed to director of the counseling department. He is in his mid-forties and holds a bachelor’s and master’s degree in counseling. He does not live in the county, but commutes to Brighton from a nearby community across the river, and did not grow up there. He described the 1800 students at Brighton High School:
We’re kind of a cross section of the world here. So we’ve got kids who you know, are first generation kids. We’ve got kids who are well off. It’s just kind of a hodgepodge. We’re very, very heterogeneous. So there’s no typical kid.

Jim is one of five guidance counselors for the students at Brighton High School. Jim shared information about the counselor’s caseload:

So you know, I’m the director. I’ve got 200 kids. The other counselors, the other three counselors that have tenth through twelfth have about 350. And the ninth grade one has 450.

Jim said that the relatively high (80%) graduation rate indicates that education is important to the students at Brighton. However, he noted that in recent years, the percentage of students going to four-year colleges directly from Brighton has decreased from a high of about 35% to a lower rate of 25%. In that same time, the number of students going to community colleges has increased. He believes that this change is largely attributable to difficult financial situations for Brighton families.

Kevin

Kevin is a counselor at Brighton High, and has been working there for two years. He previously worked as a teacher in a wealthy suburban school about 70 miles away.

Kevin described Brighton as “more of a blue collar mix of kids.” He compared the two schools:

So compared to there, it’s just much different than here. The students don’t seem to feel as much entitlement as far as the school and that sort of thing as they did at my other school, so that’s something I noticed that’s much different. The parents still seem to have some impact and care, so I just find it to be much easier to work
with parents, much easier to work with kids due to the environment, I guess, that I’m in.

Kevin feels like the students at Brighton are less focused on earning large salaries when they graduate, and have a better understanding of the hard work required for financial stability than the students at his former school. However, he feels like the majority of students at Brighton do not have a clear idea of what they want to do when they graduate.

Karen

Karen is a career coach at Brighton High School, employed by the local community college under the Workforce Investment Act, not the high school. She has office hours at the high school four days a week and has been there for two years. She does not live in Brighton. She commutes from a city about 45 minutes away.

Karen described the students at Brighton as a mixed group: some have a clear idea and plan for their future, and others have none and have no parental guidance in that regard. Karen explained:

You have that certain percent that are very career focused. You have that certain group that is very sports focused, that want to go on and pursue something in college. You also have the kids that are just [Brighton], that just want to hunt, very blue collar, very simple.

Karen does not feel like the majority of students are planning for life after high school, and that the majority of students are scared and are anxious about their futures. She believes that about 25-30% of BHS students are prepared for their future, another 50% will figure it out within two years of graduating, and that the other 25%, “you don’t
know what’s going to happen.” Karen’s perception of Brighton’s students’ lack of readiness for life after high school evidences the limited influence she feels the other counselors and she can have on them, given their limited interaction. The school and community layer of Perna’s (2006a) model may be influencing the students, but not towards college. If the majority of Brighton students are not going to college, and the majority of community members have not gone to college, the influence may be away from, rather than towards, college.

Summary

This chapter included biographical information about the nine participants in the study and their thoughts and feelings about growing up in Brighton. It also included information about three counselors from Brighton High School, and their statements about the students at the high school, in general. The next chapter includes the findings that emerged from the interviews, categorized under theme headings.
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Table 4.1: Participant Characteristics
CHAPTER FIVE
FINDINGS

Codes were developed \textit{a priori}, from Perna's (2006a) model and aided in developing emerging themes from the data. I then used Perna's (2006a) model to organize these themes. The findings are first categorized according to which layer of Perna's (2006a) model they relate to: habitus, school and community context, higher education, and the social, economic, and policy layer. Next, emergent themes are reviewed. College choice is influenced by many aspects of the student's experience and environment, and in Perna's (2006a) model, those aspects are divided into layers, starting with elements closest to the student in geography and influence and moving out to elements farther from the student and with less influence.

\textbf{Habitus}

Habitus incorporates influences closest to the student, including demographic characteristics, and the social and cultural capital of the student (Perna 2006a). These influences largely relate to the home, and are a result of the interaction of the student with parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. These individuals may have influenced the student directly, by stating what they hoped the student would do after high school, or indirectly, through their own actions, inactions or experiences. The families' knowledge and valuation of college is passed on to the student (Perna, 2006a) and their assistance, or lack thereof, of in gaining information about college is important to the student in his or her decision-making (Perna, 2006a)
Parents

Parents form the first level of influence for their child’s future. Most of the participants mentioned their parent’s opinions as influential to their planning for college. Counselors also all mentioned the parental role of guiding or not guiding their student’s education. In some cases, students followed their parent’s advice, and in others they did not.

Parents that predisposed their children to college. Students in the study perceived that they developed ideas about college at different ages. However, research shows that the predisposition phase (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) starts at an early age and at home. Alan’s (4) early family experience with the college he now attends predisposed him positively towards the school. Alan recalled these repeated early experiences:

When I was young we used to – my family and I, we used to live in [the town where his college is]. And on nice spring days what we would do is we would come and walk around and of course, make a visit to campus. And I used to think that [where the college is] was where the entire Revolutionary War was fought. And my parents didn’t tell me otherwise, so I thought oh cool, that’s where I want to go. Because you know, I was young and I liked playing Army and I thought wow, you know.

College campuses are often beautifully maintained park-like settings. Alan’s parents’ use of the campus as a public park seeded feelings of belonging in Alan that lasted into his teens. Here, the college was viewed as part of the community and accessible.
Parents that did not predispose their children to college. Jim, one of the counselors at the high school, was keenly aware of the importance of predisposing students and their parents to the idea of college but was afraid that not enough Brighton parents were doing this.

I don’t think – either we aren’t getting to the kids early enough, or we’re not getting to the families early enough, to have them understand it [what’s needed to go to college]. We have to figure out how to get to families before the kids get to high school so that they keep that in their mind as a possibility. You know, if I go into an eighth grade class right now and I ask the kids how many of them are going to college, they all raise their hands. But then you ask them in tenth and eleventh grade, and they don’t.

Jim’s observations may indicate a cooling-out similar to what Clark (1960) described happening in junior colleges. Brighton students may be deciding on “alternative achievements” or “gradual disengagement” (Clark, 1960, p. 575). However, Clark’s description suggests a process of decision-making made based on guidance from counselors and past academic performance by young people in their late teens and early 20s, not students in their first years of high school.

The predisposition phase that Hossler and Gallagher (1987) described notes that attitudes towards college are formed during this early adolescent period. In my study, most of the students mentioned that their parents thought that they (the participants) should go to college; however, few mentioned early experiences at home that helped them form the attitude that they were future college students. The majority of participants were following similar educational paths as their parents, supporting the idea
that habitus (Perna, 2006a) has a very strong influence on the attitudes formed during the predisposition phase.

**Parental actions speak louder than words.** Parents have the earliest and the longest influence on their children and their expectations, both stated and implied, help drive the decision-making process of their children. Participants tended to follow in the footsteps of one or both of their parents. None of the students who went straight to work had parents who had bachelor's degrees. Four of the six students who were in community college or four-year colleges had parents with bachelor's degrees or higher. Mark's (W) mother had gone to community college and his father was in the military. Both of Mark's grandmothers and his paternal grandfather were in the Navy. Mark's paternal grandfather, who was an adoptive parent to Mark's dad, was a military doctor. Mark planned on joining the military, also. He talked about the influence of his family:

My dad planned on going to school but when I was born, he decided to keep the GI Bill for one of his kids. It looks like my [younger] sister will be the first one going to college. I can't remember really any of my family ever being about college. It was preached to us a lot about going to school and college. They definitely wanted us to go but it just didn't happen with us.

Mark recalled his family saying that college would benefit him in the long term. He added:

They said that if I would take it [school] more seriously and do another four years of college or even more then I would be set to go. That I would be able to find a better paying job and be able to support myself.
Despite this message, Mark decided he would join the military after high school. When this became an unlikely goal due to his medical condition, Mark decided to enter the workforce rather than attend college. Though Mark’s parents talked about college, they did not take any active steps to get him to apply, and did not encourage him to take the SAT or fill out college applications. Mark’s parents accepted that Mark would join the military, like his father. When the option of the military became impossible, Mark did not have a fall back plan. Even though Mark took dual enrollment classes while in high school, this experience did not translate to a decision to attend college immediately after high school. Mark noted that he would likely attend college later in life, but the time to degree completion would take longer as he has a family to support and will unlikely be able to attend full-time.

Andy’s (W) mom became an R.N. after attending a professional nursing school and his father graduated from the apprentice school at the shipyard located in a nearby city. His father eventually left the shipyard to work in computers with a smaller company. Andy recalled what his parents said about college, “They definitely recommended going, but if I’m just gonna drop out, then don’t go. But they definitely support it.” The message from his parents was twofold, college is a viable option, but only if you are serious.

Andy described his parents influence on his post-high school plans decision making, “It was pretty much my own. I guess I give my parents some credit for trying to keep me at it (finishing school).” Since Andy’s parents had supported a middle class lifestyle for their family without four-year degrees, Andy may have felt conflicted about the value of obtaining a college degree. Like Mark’s, Andy’s parents told him that
college was a good idea, but they may not have encouraged him to take any active steps towards attending. Andy did not take any dual enrollment classes in high school, thus did not experience the option of college level courses or what attending college might be like.

Sarah (4), on the other hand, always knew she was going straight to a four-year college, although she said her father had other ideas.

I always knew I wanted to go to college. My Dad was pushing for me to actually go to a two-year, but I knew that we had the resources to go straight to a four-year, so I really only considered the four-year.

The cost-savings of two-year colleges are attractive to families, but history shows that students starting at a two-year college do not always fulfill their initial aspirations of transfer to a four-year college (Clark, 1960). Sarah reflected further on the influence her parents had on her decisions.

I think coming out of high school being 17 – 18, a big part of deciding what you want to do afterwards is like pleasing – while you’re pleasing yourself, pleasing your parents, because they’re gonna expect you to go to college. So that was part of it, was the expectation that you should go to college.

The expectation of college attendance for Sarah was further supported by her parents as they took her on several college visits during her junior and senior year of high school.

We visited a lot of colleges. We visited a lot of places. A lot of checking around on their website and seeing what programs they offered. Never going as in-depth as looking at the materials and requirements for specific programs, we never went that far.
Sarah’s response indicates that her parents were actively involved in her college choice process, but that ultimately, the decision on where to go and what degree to pursue was hers. Thus, even though habitus provides an influencing factor for student decisions to attend college, internal desire and motivation drives the choice too.

Other students developed their ideas about their future later in their school years than others. Todd (4), a first-generation college student, said that his parents did not discuss college with him until later in high school. When they did bring it up, he began actively considering college. Todd shared:

It was probably tenth grade or something. I never really thought about — strangely, I didn’t really think about college early on. I mean, I thought about it as like an abstract idea like I might possibly go to college, but I never thought about anything concrete. So around tenth grade, I started thinking about what I should do with my life, what I should go to college for, where I should go to college, what are my interests, and what am I good at.

Todd said that his father encouraged him to plan a career path so that he would “have a clear path towards what I wanted to accomplish.” Todd would do research on different colleges and then share his findings with his father. However, Todd said, “Seeing as they didn’t go to college, they didn’t really have as much hands-on experience as some other people would.” As a result, Todd ended up spending his first year at a non-selective college where he felt he did not fit in socially or academically. He then transferred to the highly selective school he now attends.

Rebecca’s (CC) mother’s decision to allow her some financial independence influenced her decision to pursue an education. She described how experiences in her
teens influenced her planning and when she started thinking about her life after high school.

Probably when I got my first job just because my mom was really good about not – at the time I didn’t like it, but I appreciate it now because every year for school she’d take me school shopping and buy me clothes and stuff. But if I wanted other things throughout the year that weren’t a necessity she’s like, “Well, you have birthday money. You can get it yourself or you can get a job.” Of course, I wanted lots of things so I got a job when I was 15 and a half. [I was] just thinking about all the things I could have in life, and I think that’s when I really started thinking about it.

Rebeeca’s life experience with restricted finances influenced her educational choices. She understood the private good benefits of education and wanted to spend the least money possible, which in this case meant attending a community college, for what she considered the best return on investment. Though Rebecca has hit some stumbling blocks along the way to her pursue a higher education, this early experience, and her desire to provide for her daughter, have resulted in her returned pursuit of a higher education.

James (CC) explained that he started thinking about life after high school early on, when a high school counselor visited his school when he was in the 8th grade to tell classes of 8th graders about the educational opportunities available at the high school. Yet, James did not take any dual enrollment classes in high school. He originally thought about a career based on his interest in cars, but then looked to his father’s career path for inspiration.
In eighth grade when they come in and they recruit future classes. They talk about how all the opportunities that you can try to get through [Brighton] high school. And you know, it made me – at first you know, I was a NASCAR fan. I’m like oh, I’m going to be working on cars or be a NASCAR driver. And I was like you know, I went into an auto class in Brighton high school. I’m like aah, nah, maybe not. And then I told you my dad was working good hours, and you know, normal hours, and then he could still cover my medical bills and have a decent living. So I’m like oh, let me go into electricity where he’s going. And I took an electronics class and I liked that.

James was heavily influenced by his father’s career choice, because even though his father had been laid off from the shipyard, he had eventually found gainful employment as an electrician elsewhere. In this case, the actions of James’s father provided a role model of career options rather than the counselor’s talk about the value of post-secondary education.

Rebecca (CC) explained that a deal made with her father encouraged her to go to college.

My dad also told me – I remember this from when I was nine. He has a Jeep and he said that when I go to college I could have the Jeep and that was pretty much my motivation to really go to school. I know that sounds bad. But that was the first time I really thought, “Okay. Well, I have to go to college.” There was no question about it.
Rebecca did not elaborate on why she did not get the jeep, perhaps because she did not attend a four-year college or because she dropped out for a year. However, she continues to pursue a college degree. She talked further about the expectations of her parents.

They wanted me to go and they said that it was just the best thing I could do for my future, to get a college degree, and that would set me up for life.

Todd's decision to go to college was influenced by his father not wanting Todd to follow in his footsteps.

He drives a truck. But I wouldn't think about doing that. And I don't think- he would not- he told me not to do that, so he wouldn't expect me to follow in his footsteps in that regard.

Todd's father showed an interest in Todd's research on colleges, even though he did not have first-hand experience himself. His active interest in Todd's future as a college student influenced Todd towards college.

Brittney's mother has an associate's degree and her father was enlisted in the military before obtaining a bachelor's degree later in life through an online program. He is a maintenance manager at the museum where Brittney works. Though his degree was not necessary for this job, it helps him interact with others in an environment where many co-workers have bachelor's degrees or higher. Brittney's father valued higher education enough to seek a degree at a later age, and along with Brittney's mother, encouraged Brittney to attend college to broaden her horizons:

They really encouraged me to go to college because I'm not good with my hands, I'm not super at sports. So, I mean, I've got a pretty good brain in my head. They thought I should enhance what I know and open my eyes a little more.
Brittney’s parents were aware that she had limited experiences growing up in Brighton and living in the same house all of her life. Brittney expressed a desire to travel internationally during our interview, a plan encouraged by her parents and inspired by her education thus far. Brittney’s parents also recognized that Brittney did not have mechanical or technical abilities and would need a college education for a successful career. Brittney understood that if her father could get a college degree, so could she.

Mark’s (W) father, who recently retired from the military, influenced Mark’s original plan to follow in his footsteps, though his mother was not keen on the idea. When I asked him if his parents had wanted him to join the military he replied:

My mom really not so much, my dad, yes. He knew I would be good for it and it would be good for me and then my mom was really against it at first.

Mark began to plan on going into the military in his later years in high school and did not prepare for college by taking the SATs or visiting colleges, even though he maintained a 3.6 GPA. When he could not join the military, he felt he had no choice but to begin working.

Samantha’s (W) parents, who did not attend college, neither encouraged nor discouraged Samantha to attend. Samantha recognized that her family had a comfortable middle-class existence, even though neither of her parents had degrees beyond high school. Here, she was able to see how her parents’ choice allowed for a lifestyle not dependent upon having a degree.

Counselors on the role of parents. The counseling department at Brighton High School offers an array of programs geared to students and parents about college or the workforce. The counselors I spoke with seemed keenly aware of the positive and
negative attributes of the families with whom they work. Jim, the Director of the Counseling Department, talked about the difficulty of getting parents to understand the importance of higher education for their children.

I think that a lot of parents are stuck back in when they went to school, in that they don’t understand how it’s (the world) changed. I think that there’s still a perception of this current generation of parents that there’s more out there for their kids than there is if they’re not educated.

Kevin, a counselor who works with seniors at Brighton, noticed that many students were not actively planning for life after high school and often looked to their parents for ideas about what to do after graduation.

I mean not in a sense that any other high school kid does. I mean there are some that have – I mean I have some kids that are really focused and know exactly what they want to do and where they want to go and how they want to get there. But then the majority of ‘em are like, “I still don’t know what I want to do. I know I want to go to college ‘cause my parents went to college,” or, “I know I want to go to work ‘cause my dad works on the water,” or something like that.

Kevin’s thoughts reinforce the idea that habitus (Perna 2006a) is the most important influence on students’ college-going behavior; that students are looking to their parents for examples to follow.

Kevin felt like the programs that the school offered by the career coach and the counselors at the high school were helpful to parents who were not familiar with college, but that they were poorly attended, with less than 10% participation. Kevin also noted
that those parents that attended were the ones whose children were already likely to go to college.

And for us, getting out and talking to 11th grade and 12th grade parents on parents’ night and doing financial aid workshops and that sort of thing, it definitely opened the doors for those parents and students as far as college life and what that’s like.

Jim attended a conference a few years ago in Washington, D.C. where the subject of the biggest problems facing high schools today was discussed. According to Jim, the consensus was, “lack of parental support” and “the breakdown of the family structure.” Jim concluded, “What they were seeing in D.C. isn’t unlike what we’re seeing here.” Jim reflected on the difficulty in getting parents to come to college preparatory programs: We recently did a college night for eleventh grade parents to explain the process going into next year. You know, which is something a large number of first generation kids, many of their parents don’t have college degrees, we would like a huge turnout for that. And you know, we got about 35 families out of a class of 450.

Jim and the other counselors at Brighton were obviously frustrated by the disinterest most parents of Brighton students were showing towards taking an active role in seeking higher education for their children. Jim talked about how parental involvement drops off as students age, “Go to an elementary school PTA meeting, and the place is packed. You know, go to middle school and it’s half packed. Come here, and there’s no parent there.” Jim continued about his feelings on parental involvement:
Parents have an unrealistic view of what’s happening to their children. They think that they’re on their own before they are. They can start to drive, they can start to do things. The kids start talking to them less, and they just disengage.

Jim’s comment indicates that Brighton students may not be typical of other millennials in all ways, as their parents may be less engaged in their lives on a day-to-day basis.

**Extended Family**

Older siblings, cousins, and grandparents all form part of the habitus that may influence a student’s college plans. Andy (W), who has several sets of cousins in the area, may have developed the idea of going into firefighting from friends and family members.

I have a couple cousins that do it, a couple of my high school friends that were older that graduated working at the volunteer fire department. A couple of them got hired with various paid departments.

Rebecca (CC) was influenced by her grandmother, who lives across the street from her. Rebecca said that her grandmother had the biggest influence on her decision to pursue a college degree. Her grandmother, who along with Rebecca’s grandfather, went to college in another state.

Probably my grandma just because any chance she got she was cutting out newspaper clippings about all different scholarships and all my different options to kind of show me, “Hey, this is really what I want you to do.”

For both Andy and Rebecca, other family members than their parents helped reinforce ideas about post-secondary choices. Part of the fabric of rural areas are closer extended family ties.
Todd’s (4) sister went to college, and her experience had a major impact on his decision-making. The first college he attended was the same less selective one that she attended.

Well, she went to [less selective state college] first. That’s how I found out about the school. I had no idea it existed before she went there. And she majored in pre-pharmacy, and so I became- you know, the school was on my radar, and I went there a few times, and I visited, and it seemed like a pretty decent place, very cheap, which is the main reason I chose that school.

Todd’s choice of this less-selective college was primarily due to his limited exposure to other options. However, partway through his first semester, he realized the first college was not a good fit for him, and began looking for schools to transfer. Ultimately, he chose his current highly selective college.

Alan (4) believes he made his college going decisions on his own. Yet, Alan’s maternal grandparents both went to college, his grandfather majored in accounting, and his grandmother majored in nursing. However, he says they never talked to him about their experience and his mother joined the military rather than going to college. His father was not a part of his life growing up and according to Alan, “My mother really never influenced me one way or the other. You know, she wanted me to do well, but she didn’t care how I did well.” Alan chose not to follow in the footsteps of his older brother, who did not go to college.

I was really lucky that he was exactly four years older than me, because I saw. Okay, he graduated high school. He didn’t go to college. He’s not liking life right now. I don’t want to be in that situation.
Alan's decision not to follow in his brother's footsteps was deliberate. Alan was able to see first-hand that his brother's experience was one that he did not want to duplicate.

Brittney (CC) was also influenced by an older sister. Her sister’s college experience also influenced how their parents saw college choice options for Brittney. Her older sister went to a private college. Brittney explained:

I knew I had to go to community college first because I had an older sister, and she really messed up going straight to a college. She wasn’t mature enough for it. So, my parents learned with her that you have to – I needed a stepping-stone before I just went off to a college. She tried to make a career out of getting her bachelor’s. It took her like five and a half years. She didn’t do too good.

Watching negative experiences of family members often had profound influences on the choices the participants made.

None of Andy’s (W) grandparents went to college, but Andy described them as well off despite their lack of formal education. He also described a cousin’s situation, “One of my cousins/best friends, he got a job at a paper mill and he’s definitely making a good living.” (There is a local paper mill, located about 30 minutes from Brighton that employs about 500 people.) Andy saw relatives without college degrees supporting their families comfortably. The experiences of his family may have influenced Andy’s decision to pursue work immediately after high school.

Sarah (4) also was influenced by cousins, although hers lived in another state. She remembered that she opted to pursue engineering after summer visits with these family members. She recalled, “a lot of push from my family on my mom’s side- a lot of my cousins are engineers.” Both Sarah (4) and Andy (4) mentioned the influence of
cousins, a peer group that helps form habitus and reinforces the value system of the extended family in this rural community.

Participants had varied impressions of the role their parents and families played in their post-high school planning; however, research (Hossler & Stage, 1992) shows that parental expectations have the strongest influence on a student's predisposition towards college. These expectations were evident to the participants by not only hearing what the parents and family members said about the pros or cons of going to college, but also by their actions. The actions modeled two distinct pathways; first, evidence of the benefits of going to college and being successful, and second by watching relatives that went to college or work and who did not fare well. Students looked to their families for examples of what to do, and what not to do. The family, both directly and indirectly, begins influencing the child's future college choice behavior at an early age. The parents' most important role, however, seems to be in deed, not in thoughts. Some of the students indicated that their parents wanted them to attend college, but did not know how to support their children, or did not take action to get their child ready to go to college.

School Influence

Students spend more hours at school than at any other place besides home. The student's peers, teachers, coaches, and counselors communicate messages about potential futures for students, both explicitly and implicitly. The school and community form the second layer of influence in Perna's (2006a) college choice model. Participants shared information on the influence of their schools and what was communicated to them about their futures by their teachers, friends, and counselors.
Course-Taking

The courses that students take not only affect what they learn, but how they learn and with whom they learn. Participants in the study were typical of rural students nationally (Aud et al. 2012), in that most did not take upper level courses in math and science. Three of the participants stopped taking math after they completed Algebra II [James (CC), Brittney (CC), and Samantha (W)], and one, Andy (W) stopped at Geometry. Four students completed their math studies with Trigonometry [Rebecca (CC), Mark (W), and Todd (4)]. One student, Alan (4), took Statistics AB in an effort to avoid Calculus, and only one student, Sarah (4), completed Calculus. Only three of the participants took four years of math in high school: Sarah (4), Alan (4), and Mark (W). There appeared to be some disconnect between course-taking and college-going plans, with students considering college, but not taking the courses they might need for admission. Massey, Charles, Lundy, and Fischer (2003) found a similar disconnect between course-taking and plans among African American and Latino students, two other underrepresented groups in higher education. Like rural students, African American and Latino students did not take the concrete steps needed to prepare for college admission by taking rigorous courses. It is likely that students in this study were not aware of what courses they would need for college, and did not have enough time with counselors to develop an understanding.

Random course-taking. The counselors at Brighton have large caseloads, and reported that they can only spend on average, about an hour or less with each student per year. This lack of guidance showed up in the student's selection of courses, which were often random and not linked to future goals. Brighton counselors offered evening
programs to students and their parents to prepare for college, but reported that the primary participants were the children of the college-educated parents who were likely to attend college anyways. Most of the parents of participants in this study were not college educated, and were thus, less familiar with what their children needed to do to prepare for college. This lack of guidance from the adults in their lives showed up in the decisions students made about which courses they should take. Several themes arose which included: courses not aligning with future plans, confusion over dual enrollment versus Advanced Placement, and lack of math courses.

**Course-taking did not align with future plans.** Mark (W), who graduated from Brighton with a 3.6 GPA and an advanced (college preparatory) diploma, felt frustrated that some of his credits from a previous school did not transfer and did not like the consequences this had on him for course-taking. He had to take three freshman courses as a senior and remembered, “It was weird. It was crazy. I’m getting ready to graduate and it was like young kids.” Additionally, he remembered taking Earth Science as a senior and passing a final course assessment early in the year with an A. He recalls a discussion with his teacher, “She was like well; I guess you can stay in here.” Mark spent the rest of the year bored, spending the time in her class working on other subjects. Since Mark moved to Brighton just before his senior year, he did not have much time for counseling or assessment before his courses were scheduled. If he had, he might have instead had the option of taking an upper-level science course covering material he had not already mastered.

James (CC) recalled considering the various vocational programs available at Brighton High School, “You can go from [high school to] being a car mechanic to a chef
to a nurse.” He took an auto mechanics course in his first year, but did not like it, and switched to an electrical course the next year. By his sophomore year, he was considering trying for the advanced (college preparatory) diploma, but realized that he would not be able to complete the requirements.

You had to take that from like ninth, tenth grade or you’re not going to make it. And so if I had done that, I could have took a foreign language to get that advanced degree, it was too late because by eleventh grade, senior year, you know, they’re like oh, you don’t have enough time to do the credit.

James’s story shows the importance of counseling for students in the early grades of high school. Because the more rigorous, college preparatory, diploma requires three years of study of one foreign language or two years each of two different foreign languages, a decision to pursue this advanced diploma must be made before the sophomore year of high school.

James (CC) always cared about his grades in high school, and ended up being ranked 64th out of the approximately 400 students in his graduating class. He talked about his grades, “I would always try to get As and Bs, anything less than that was unacceptable.” James said that he was the top ranked of all of the students receiving a general education diploma, and that his GPA would have been higher if he had taken honors courses, which have weighted grades. The highest math class he took was Algebra II. James expressed an early interest in attending college, and was a diligent student. However, he also had some interest in the vocational programs offered at Brighton High School. He dabbled in these programs as a freshman and sophomore, and did not take a foreign language. This early high school course choice shut out the
possibility for the advanced diploma, and may have ultimately steered him away from pursuing a bachelor’s degree.

Rebecca (CC) originally planned to go to a highly selective state college and did receive an advanced diploma. But, she did not match her courses to these intended goals. She recalled:

I did kind of a bunch of random stuff. I did want to do some college courses, so I did the Childcare class and I forget what the other one was. But I did a few and they didn’t really work towards my final goal at all. They were just kind of random.

Yet, Rebecca also took Trigonometry, four science courses and two years each of Spanish and French. She also took honors English in 9th grade. Rebecca talked about this class:

I loved it. I did wonderful and I got an ‘A’ the whole time. I’m not really sure why I didn’t take Honors for any other classes or any other years, but that was the only Honors class that I took.

It is unclear why Rebecca did not continue in honors classes, if she did well and enjoyed the first one that she took. Honors classes are rigorous college preparatory courses, and if Rebecca would have continued to take honors classes, she may have been influenced by her peers in those classes, who would have been preparing to attend four-year colleges.

Samantha (W), who has yet to settle on a career or educational path, took a variety of courses in high school, with no clear purpose. She recalled one dual enrollment course in high school:
I took a criminal justice. I don't know why I took that; I really can't remember why I was – I don't know if someone maybe put me in that or what. But I didn't like that class at all, and I actually – I didn't get a good grade in it. I think I got a D in it or something 'cause I really was not interested in it.

Samantha would have benefitted from career, interest, and skills counseling while in high school, as she never developed a plan, and several years later has still not settled on a career path. Her experience with a college level dual enrollment class was negative, and may have deterred Samantha from thinking about college in the future too.

Brittney (CC), who had decided she wanted to teach history at an early age, tried to match her course-taking in high school with her future plans. However, she said this caused her some problems. She recalled, “I took so many history classes and honor classes in my 11th and 12th grade year that it almost sunk me.” Brittney struggled with the workload in these courses, though she was proud of her efforts and feels the hard work was worth it because, “I have all my history credit completely done.” Despite this, it is likely that the four-year institution she transferred to after receiving her Associate’s degree will want her to take some upper level history courses before awarding her degree in History.

*Students faced confusion over dual enrollment versus Advanced Placement.*

Students made choices about the courses that they took, although often with little guidance. Alan (4) explained his choice to take dual enrollment courses over AP courses.

There were a couple of classes that I had the choice between dual and AP. And really more than anything else I would always go for dual just because logistically to me it seemed more practical. Like I take the class and then I get the credit.
And it goes to the community college, and four-year colleges pretty much have to accept it. Whereas AP, I took the class, I took a test, and depending on how well I took the test, or how well I did on the test, schools might or might not accept it.

Alan (4), unlike most of his peers at the highly selective college he now attends, took mostly dual enrollment courses.

Most of the classes I took were dual enrollment. Only one was advanced placement. And most of them were in the Social Sciences or the Liberal Arts. Like my History classes, and English classes.

Alan received credit for his courses, and was pleased that he entered college with almost a year’s worth of college credits. Alan’s high school course-taking reinforced his college choice behavior, allowing him to prove himself as a successful college student while still in high school.

Todd (4) told me, “I didn’t take AP classes. I kind of centered around dual enrollment.” I asked him how he made that choice and he was unsure:

I don’t know. It was just – I guess I could have taken – I don’t know. I don’t really know why I didn’t choose AP over dual enrollment. I guess part of the reason was, you know, with dual enrollment you’re basically guaranteed college credit, but with AP you have to take the test at the end – which I’m sure I could have passed.

When I asked Todd more about the course selection process, he commented:

Well, yeah, we would just write out - like they would give us a sheet at a certain time of the year, and we would just like write down the codes in the booklet and
give it to the counselor, and they would figure out our schedule from that. But we would basically pick whatever we wanted to do.

Todd said that no one ever suggested that he take AP courses but that he sought out dual enrollment ones, even if he wasn’t that interested in the subject matter. Todd’s understanding of college as a private good, one that would have a cost and an ultimate benefit for him, influenced his choice to collect as many credits as he could while still in high school, for a reasonable price.

I took dual enrollment English my senior year and dual enrollment government and things like that in different classes. Even some classes that I didn’t realize – I took a criminal justice class. But I just – it was a college credit class. I just took it because it was college credit.

Todd’s dual enrollment courses has the positive effect of making him feel he could handle college-level coursework:

I think when I did well in dual enrollment classes, I was like, “Well, I can do well in college classes,” even though it was not that much different than an honors high school class or anything like that. But I remember thinking that – that if I can do well in dual enrollment, I can do well in college.

Todd (4) and Allan (4) both perceived that dual enrollment credits were a more portable option heading into college compared to Advanced Placement, and they both felt the dual enrollment experience helped prepare them for better success in college.

Brittney spoke specifically about her choices regarding AP and dual enrollment courses:
I took AP my 11th grade year, and I didn’t do so hot on my AP test. So, decided not to take AP my 12th grade. I did take dual enrollment. I’ve basically taken honors classes throughout my high school career.

Brittney recalled that her dual enrollment class was her favorite class, “but it was also the most difficult.” Facing the challenge of a dual enrollment course gave Brittney the confidence to continue on to community college, realizing that she had already experienced what it would be like to take a college-level course. The standardized test given for Advanced Placement has certain point levels that must be met for acceptance at some colleges, whereas dual enrollment credits are readily transferred into the community college in which the courses were credited.

Alan (4) only took one AP course in high school, but it (and the dual enrollment courses he took) challenged him and gave him an idea of what college work would be like. Yet, the benefits of this course-taking behavior occurred in a happenstance manner versus Alan choosing this route intentionally.

My AP was Spanish. It was Spanish V. And I definitely appreciated those classes because they did – for so long I’d been used to taking like you know, regular classes and Honors classes, and just breezing by. And so, taking these classes really kind of pushed me out of the envelope and you know, oh, this isn’t the typical high school class. So it really did prepare me for having a good work ethic in college.

Nationally, there is much confusion over dual enrollment versus Advanced Placement courses, with AP generally perceived as the more rigorous of the two (Klopfenstein & Lively, 2012; Matthews, 1998). However, attitudes are changing.
(Klopfenstein & Lively, 2012), as students, parents, and educators realized that there is not a clear winner between the two. Though one would expect dual enrollment students to enter community college after graduation, Davenport (2013), found that in Virginia, 36.6% of high school seniors in dual enrollment classes did not enroll in any higher education the next year. Those that did, were more likely to enroll in four-year institutions (Davenport, 2013). Students in this study generally pursued dual enrollment over AP courses for practical reasons, understanding that they were earning actual college credit while still in high school rather than having that credit hinge on their score on a final test. Seven of the nine participants took dual enrollment classes in high school. Two of these seven opted to go directly to work versus college and one of the students (James) who did not take any dual enrollment courses is attending a community college. Thus, there was not a predictive value associated with dual enrollment in high school and post-secondary plans.

**Students did not pursue upper-level math courses.** Several students talked about stopping their study of math, and not pursuing the most difficult math courses available to them. In Virginia, a typical math sequence would be: Pre-Algebra (completed in 7th or 8th grade), Algebra I (completed in 8th or 9th grade), Geometry (completed in 9th or 10th grade), Algebra II (completed in 10th or 11th grade), followed by Trigonometry and Calculus. Advanced students often take a combined course of Algebra II/Trigonometry in the 10th grade, as Todd (4) did. Todd reflected on his math courses in high school:

I just went up to trig. I should have taken more math, and I should have had – I never really had anybody tell me or motivated me to take more math. It's not like I was bad at math or anything, but it’s just like I didn’t feel it was as important as
other things I wanted to do, so I just kind of focused on other academic endeavors
than math.

Todd’s feelings about math course-taking show that he could have used more guidance in
his course selection. Todd (4) wished that, “Someone would have pushed me in that
direction to take more math, because I could have.” Todd’s story has a happy ending,
because after an early misstep, he ended up at a highly selective college where he is
succeeding academically. However, because he did not have parents familiar with
college, Todd would have benefitted from more one-on-one time with a counselor or
mentor.

Andy (W) said that he was not interested in math in high school, but blamed some
of his disinterest on his teachers:

I was horrible at math, but probably about three of the teachers weren’t good at
teaching. That was all. I mean, I’m sure you probably will hear that some more,
but it was definitely not my best subject.

The last math class Andy took in high school was Geometry. His math course-taking in
high school was incongruous with his plans to study science in the future, which would
require higher-level math courses:

When I have time, or I guess the money, I probably do want to study fire science.
You know, like it’s possible – the possibility of pharmacology. That’s when I
finish all my EMT stuff just to try it out. It’s really tough. You have to memorize
pills, and numbers, and dosages. But, I like science in general.

Andy may have benefitted from exploration of his interests and aptitudes so that he could
better match his choice of courses with his ultimate career plans.
**Rigorous course-taking.** Sarah (4) had the most rigorous course load of all the participants, although she did not see it that way, “In math I did the normal- Geometry, Algebra I, Algebra II, and I went up to Calculus.” Her course load prepared her for admission to the selective college she attended. She took four sciences, up through Spanish V, and two years of an additional language, French. She took AP Chemistry, AP Spanish, and two dual enrollment courses in history. She received credit for these courses at the college she now attends. Sarah’s conception of this course taking behavior as normal indicates her conception of her pathway as college going in high school. Her habitus and school/community levels of interaction supported this ideal.

None of the students in this study had two parents with bachelor’s degrees or higher. Sarah (4) was one of only two students in the study with two degreed parents, and the only student in the study with a parent with a master’s degree or higher. As such, she has more cultural capital than other students in the study, and espoused complete confidence in herself as a future college student.

Alan (4), who always did well in school and was tracked into taking mostly upper level classes, took advanced courses, such as honors level, which prepared him for success in the highly selective college that he now attends. Despite this, Alan said that he did not understand what effect taking these courses would have on his future.

I didn’t know when I was in high school how big of an impact those classes [AP, dual enrollment, higher level math] would have. I thought, “Oh good, it’ll be good for my GPA in high school. And it’ll look good to a college.” I had no idea that upon graduating I would come in a year ahead. And I had no idea of how much that meant. Like for saving tuition money, and stuff like that, and just
saving money and time in general. So I kind of had my deal like, “Oh, yeah, that’ll be good.” But I didn’t really know like how good that would be.

Course-taking is a crucial part of the college-choice process for students, and yet students in this study reported making choices in a haphazard manner, with little guidance from family members or counselors. This study reinforces the importance of the second layer of Perna’s (2006a) model, and shows that lack of a resource, in this case, adequate exposure to counseling, can negatively impact students.

**Standardized Tests**

Standardized tests are an important of the four-year college admissions process, although some researchers question their ability to measure a student’s ability to succeed in college (Sternberg, 2010). All of the students in the study were aware of the importance of SAT scores in the college admission process, yet not all of the students took the test. Only the three students who went directly to four-year colleges took the SAT: Sarah, Todd, and Alan.

**Adjusting ambitions based on scores.** James (CC), who said that he had always planned on attending [highly selective state college] recalled how his PSAT scores affected his plans for the future.

I took a bunch of like pre-PSAT classes, things like that. And you know, we did a lot of prepping, and then you know, [my] scores came back and it was like, “Whoa!” So we’re like you know, maybe community college wouldn’t be so bad. Because after a while it you get your Associate’s degree and transfer.

James made the decision not to pursue his education at any four-year college immediately after high school based on one set of disappointing PSAT scores, even
though he had good grades in high school and a desire to attend a four-year college. He never took the SATs, and never applied to any four-year colleges. The feedback from the PSAT set up an early divergence in his college going pathway that had a ripple effect on the choices James made.

In a similar manner, Brittney (CC) spoke about her experience with the PSAT in high school. I didn’t take the SAT. I took one PSAT and I did horrible. But, I took it in like 10th grade. I’m really bad at test taking. So, I went ahead and took it, and I did horrible. So, that knocked me down to reality.

Brittney and James had similar experiences with the PSAT, and despite their interest in attending four-year colleges, and their good grades, their score on the test stopped them from pursuing that goal immediately. The test had a “cooling out,” function (Clark, 1960) for both of these students, causing them to adjust their ambitions away from entering four-year colleges based on their scores. Brittney warmed up (Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006) again to the idea of further study towards a bachelor’s degree, while in community college.

Scores that were good enough. Sarah (4) took both the PSAT and SAT. She did not take preparation classes and did not really study for the tests. She talked about her SAT scores:

I’m a little bit disappointed by my SAT scores. They were a little bit lower than I would have liked, but I didn’t think they were going to prevent me from getting into a good school. But I actually took the SAT twice, but the second time I thought it was good enough, so I didn’t take it anymore.
Sarah has more cultural capital than other students in this study, and was more familiar with navigation through the educational system. She knew that the combination of her grades, rigorous course load, and adequate SAT scores were enough to allow her admission to one of her desired four-year colleges.

Alan (4), who had made up his mind about where he wanted to go to college at an early age, had a similar experience with the SAT:

I was pretty happy with my scores immediately. After I got deferred from [highly selective college’s] early decision, I kind of – I don’t know if it played directly into it, but I thought I should probably take the SAT again. My score was – it was in their mid-range for acceptance, and I thought I need to do better, and so I went back and I took it again, and I did do a little bit better. But more than the SAT influencing where I wanted to go to school, where I wanted to go to school influenced like how I did, or how many times I took the SAT.

Alan, from a young age, had set his sights on a particular, highly selective college. He was willing to work hard to get there, and despite his family’s lack of cultural capital, he kept reaching for his goal. Unlike some of the other students in the study, he did not let the setback (in his case, being deferred admission), cause him to stop pursuing his dream. Instead, he challenged himself to do better, and ended up scoring better on the SAT and getting admitted to his dream school.

Todd’s (4) experience with the SAT was similar to Alan’s. He also did not take a preparation course, did not take the PSAT, and only took the SAT once. Todd shared his score:
I think it was 1870. I didn’t – that’s not that fantastic. I took it without studying, and I was like, “This is all right. I can probably get into schools with this. So all right – I might as well not try to do it again.” I should have at least studied for it. Like, it was the night before, and I was like, “I have to look over this math that I haven’t looked at in years.”

Todd was the only student who voluntarily shared his SAT score, perhaps because of his lack of cultural capital, he did not feel particularly proud or ashamed of how well he had performed on the test. Alternatively, it could be that Sarah and Alan held little concern over their score because they ultimately got into the colleges of their choice, thus the SAT was no longer an important marker for them.

The majority of the students at Brighton were not planning on attending four-year colleges immediately after graduation. The fact that they were planning this set Alan (4), Todd (4), and Sarah (4) apart from the majority of their classmates. Because they were not at a school where most of the students were planning on college, they felt less of a push to prepare for the SAT through courses or to take the test multiple times to increase their scores.

No scores, fewer possibilities. Andy (W), Mark (W), Rebecca (CC), James (CC), Brittney (CC), and Samantha (W) never took the SATs, though Mark (W) said: I had great grades but I didn’t get around to taking my SATs. I kind of looked at it as a joke, honestly. And of course, looking back now I wish I would have taken it more seriously.
The impact of the first two layers of Perna’s (2006a) model show in Mark’s feelings about the SAT. Neither his habitus or friends at school influenced him towards taking the SAT, or taking the college admission process seriously. However, Mark said that counselors were encouraging him to take the test.

I basically thought that I could do it on my own. I could find a job that paid well enough without going to school. I maybe almost thought it was a waste of time, actually.

Mark (W) was conflicted about his plans after high school. His grades and pursuit of the advanced (college preparatory) diploma reflect an interest in attending college. However, he may have been influenced away from this goal by the overall non-college going environment of Brighton High School.

Rebecca (CC), who made all As and Bs in high school, also never took the SAT. I asked her why she did not:

I didn’t because I think by the time that it was getting close to taking that – I might have taken the PSAT, but I talked to [local community college] and they said that I didn’t have to do it there.

Rebecca was influenced by her interaction with the local community college, showing the importance of the third layer of Perna’s (2006a) model in the student college choice process. Rebecca, who had originally planned on attending a four-year college, never prepared to apply by taking the SAT, and let her discovery that it was not needed by the community college, drive her decision making not to take the test. Yet, inadvertently for Rebecca, this choice closed off the option for Rebecca to be considered
for four-year college admission. Rebecca followed the path of least resistance in choosing not to take the SAT.

Samantha (W) also did not take the PSAT or SAT. I told her that the PSAT was offered at school and she seemed surprised, “Oh, really? Yeah. I remember hearing stuff about it, but I know I never took that.” Samantha received no encouragement from family or counselors to take the PSAT or the SAT, which created limited options for her post-secondary choices.

Overall, participants under-valued the importance of the role of the SAT in their post-secondary plans. Though all participants planned on attending some form of higher education in the future, either immediately after high school or later, only three students, Sarah (4), Todd (4), and Alan (4), took the SATs. Two students, James and Brittney, were scared off from taking the SATs after receiving disappointing scores on the PSATs. None of the students took SAT preparation courses, and only Sarah and Alan took the test more than once. Since most of the students at Brighton are not attending four-year colleges immediately after high school, the school environment may unintentionally influence students away from, rather than towards, preparing for higher education.

**Influence of Teachers & Counselors**

Students in the study all mentioned teachers and counselors as influential, both positively and negatively. Most participants mentioned specific teachers by name who made an impression on them, or who had taken the time to encourage or help them. However, several students also talked about the negative role teachers played in their high school experience.
Engaging, encouraging teachers. Samantha (W), who is considering a career in nursing, recalled her Biology teacher:

I remember in tenth grade my biology teacher was extremely helpful. She was like the best teacher ever. I had teachers like her that were like- they would go- if I would miss a day or something, they would go above and beyond to help me make my work up and make sure I completed everything. And if I needed extra help, they would stay after school with me. Classes like that, when I had teachers like that, I actually wanted to go and wanted to have a good grades.

Despite her interest in biology and affinity towards this teacher, overall Samantha reported negative experiences with teachers and courses in high school. This one experience was not enough to override her other experiences.

Students had differing perspectives of their teachers, although it seems the students in the advanced classes had more positive impressions than students in regular classes. Students who are perceived to be college-bound are generally placed in college preparatory, upper level courses, such as honors, AP, or dual enrollment. Regular level classes are offered to other students.

Todd (4), who is a first-generation college student, had experience with both levels of courses. He recalled the teachers at Brighton positively.

For the most part, I – as far as going to school, I found that my teachers, for the most part, were great. It seems like most of the teachers that were – like [Fonella] and people who really impacted me on a personal level – were – I guess “different” is the way to put it. Because growing up in Brighton, there’s not really a lot of new ideas introduced all the time. It’s kind of like we – very
traditional as far as ideas go, but all the professors that – and teachers that were
great to me were the ones that introduced things that I never would have really
thought about before.

Todd (4) appreciated how some of his teachers expanded his thinking and exposed him to
ideas atypical of the mainstream thinking of Brighton.

I mean, you have some teachers talking about European philosophy and these
abstract ideas that were really more interesting than just day-to-day life. In
[Brighton] County, that’s just not something that’s ever discussed. It’s just –
we’re very traditional. We’re fairly conservative.

Todd’s experience in some of his courses was one of intellectual awakening. He
welcomed the exploration of new ideas, viewpoints, and concepts and appreciated being
exposed to ideas that he considered outside of the mainstream thinking of Brighton
county residents.

Todd went on to compare teachers at the high school:

I just found all that interesting. And that was always the greatest part that – you
know, most of the time you’d be in class and it would just be like, “Here’s this,"
whatever. But then you would go into a class where they would be talking about
things from different places and sharing their experiences like, you know,
[Fonella’s] from New York, so he would bring that with him when they came
here. So it was just interesting to get that from the public school education in
[Brighton].

Todd contrasted his experience in most of his classes with the experience he had in a few.
He appreciated the departure from rote delivery of material towards discussion of more
complex ideas and opinions. Teachers from outside the area brought a different type of world experience with them that reflected in their classroom teaching.

Todd recalled Mr. Fonella as the “biggest example of someone who helped me.” However, Todd went against the suggestion of Mr. Fonella when he only applied to the less selective college that Todd first attended, the same where his older sister was enrolled, “When he found out that I did not apply to [the highly selective college that he now attends] and [another highly selective state college], he was very angry. He did not want me to go to [less selective college].” Fonella did not want Todd to attend the first college because he felt it was not intellectually challenging enough for Todd.

I asked Todd why he made this choice, and he was unsure.

I don’t know. It’s not like I didn’t think I could get in. I felt like I could have. I think so. I think I could have gotten in at least to one of them. I don’t—I think it was just I had my mind made up that I was going to go to this school, [less selective college], for whatever reason. I got in there, and I just—I just didn’t apply to a lot of schools.

Todd’s (4) story shows both the importance, and limitations of one teacher, counselor, or mentor on a student, and congruently, the stronger role that habitus plays over school and community (Perna, 2006a). Though Todd’s teacher, who Todd respected, was urging Todd towards application to a highly selective college, the fact that Todd’s sister had gone to the less selective college, and caused him to have a comfort level with it, had a stronger influence on Todd. However, Todd remembered his teacher’s opinion of his abilities, and eventually transferred to that highly selective college after seeing firsthand what occurred during his year at the less selective college.
Sarah (4), who took many AP and Honors classes, and finished 5th in her class, recalled talking with teachers and attending college preparation seminars as she prepared for the future.

Mostly, I'd say it was my professors, especially the chemistry professor I had, Ms. [Black]. The professors – and as juniors and seniors in high school, you have a lot of seminars and things about college and what to do after you graduate.

Sarah also remembered talking to counselors at the high school about her plans and how they influenced her.

My counselor was Mr. [Smith]. I remember talking to him a lot, and he was really encouraging about everything and kind of helped push me into what schools are best at what I wanted to do and all that kind of thing.

Sarah’s counselors and teachers all knew that she was planning on attending college after high school. In this case, Sarah sought out her counselor versus waiting for the limited time the counselors have set aside for advisement. The focus and influence of her counselors and teachers centered on which college to attend and what program of study to consider. Her chemistry teacher encouraged her to apply for the chemical engineering program that she was accepted to at her college.

Other teachers offered advice, which students did not follow. Mark (W) recalled a teacher who was important to him at Brighton High.

He was a very big mentor to me and I looked up to him a whole lot. He helped me with my senior boards [a senior learning project required for graduation]. We talked about what I could do after school.

I asked Mark what they discussed about his future.
Go to college and then do the military. He wanted me to join the Navy as well but I couldn't really see myself as doing the Navy and they won't even accept me anyway with the allergies. But he definitely – I actually helped him all throughout the year. He owned a bookstore and one of the biggest online bookstores in [Brighton]. And we would go to all the local libraries and pick up old books and I would stack them in his - he had three huge storage sheds -full of books stuffed in banana boxes. And we got to talking about some crazy stuff, you know, school, military.

Mark told me that this teacher died two years after he graduated high school and that they had still been in contact up until the teacher’s death. Now this teacher is absent from Mark’s life, but his early influence remains. He also recalled a counselor at the high school who was someone he talked with about his future, his senior year.

She was actually very helpful as well. We talked about college all the time. Always on my butt about my SATs and trying to get me to figure what I wanted to do. I liked her a lot actually. She actually had this group that was seniors that were new to the school like myself. I kind of got to meet all the kids that were from not around here that moved here their senior year.

At least one teacher and one counselor at Brighton clearly recognized his potential to do well in college. However, Mark was only a student at Brighton for one year and they may not have had time to influence him towards college application.

Alan (4) discussed the influence of teachers at Brighton High School on his choice of college.
I didn’t talk with anyone at colleges exactly. Who gave the biggest impact were the teachers. Especially the teachers who went to [highly selective state college], because like I knew that I wanted to go to [there]. But talking to the teachers who went to [highly selective state college], they all seemed to really enjoy it. And so getting that perspective from them was very important for me to know what I would be getting myself into.

Alan had decided on the college he now attends at an early age, although he did apply to one other college. He sought out teachers at the high school who had gone to the college he now attends to learn about their experiences. These conversations reinforced his desire to attend this college. Alan’s experience highlights the importance of teachers sharing their college experiences with students, particularly ones with few other college-educated adults in their lives.

Alan’s (4) teachers even toured him around the campus in the nearby city where he ultimately enrolled, as he never went on a formal tour with the college’s admission office.

Never came to get official tours. I got tours from a couple of teachers that I knew close to graduation time. They took me – we all went to the school, and they showed me around and they gave me like the – you know, the rundown about it. But never an official tour where like I was told welcome to this part of the campus.

Alan told me that he did not have any older friends, or relatives who talked with him about college, so here again, he looked to teachers:
I didn’t really have older friends like who graduated before me or anything like that, really. The only exposure I had to people who could tell me about like the college life were just some of the teachers, and I would just occasionally try to pick their brains.

Alan was resourceful and determined in his goal to attend not just any college, but a highly selective one. He networked with, and accepted help and guidance from adults in his life who could contribute to his success.

Rebecca (CC) recalled the influence of counselors at the high school, and how she appreciated their presentation college information:

The counselors, they came to me with all of the information. They gave it to me, so it made it easier for me to be motivated to look at it all as opposed to doing my own research.

She recalled how she approached the guidance counselors with her plan to attend the local community college before transferring to a four-year college:

And then when I told them I wanted to do the transfer program, that’s when they gave me all the materials for all the schools that are available and the requirements for what I need from community college to be able to transfer to them.

Rebecca developed a plan, on her own and with assistance from the local community college, to attend that college. She then discussed her plan with her guidance counselor at the high school, who gave her additional information. Rebecca’s experience highlights the interaction of higher education institutions and schools in the college choice process of students.
James (W) said that he would approach his assigned counselor with an idea, and that she would help him think it through:

She would look at what career classes [Brighton] High School offers, or new programs or anything like that. And then when I said like oh, I want to be a mechanic, or community college or things like that, she would bring up what classes I could take to look better. So they are helpful at [Brighton] High School. If a kid comes there saying oh, I want to do this. They try to do what they can to steer them in the right direction.

James’ comments demonstrate a passive response from counselors, where students are making decisions and counselors are providing them with information to support their decisions. This type of interaction may be a result of the limited numbers of counselors, and the fact they have little time to spend with each student.

James also recalled a teacher he sought out who would help him think through his plans:

He was good help. I had him in ninth grade and tenth grade, and he was a resource teacher. He would just help me out on homework or any problems I had. Or like I said, career-wise if I was thinking about something, I would bring it up to him, and see what he would think. Because you know, he was one of those people if you work with someone like me for a long time, you realize you know, what my strengths and weaknesses are. And after a while that became a benefit, because of you know, just – they know you so it was not like you know, asking someone who doesn’t know you.
James sought out informal counseling from his teacher, which supplemented what was provided by his guidance counselor. James’ situation also highlights the need for more formalized information sharing avenues for teachers and counselors interacting with students at large high schools where this may not occur naturally.

Brittney (CC) took a dual enrollment English course in high school and described the impression the teacher, who was primarily employed by the high school, made on her. In his class, she expanded her life-long plan of being a teacher:

He was the most difficult teacher I ever had because he expected so much out of me, but I’ve never had a teacher challenge me so much, which was good for me. I realized that high school students are great, but I don’t think that’s the target group that I want to teach. I want to do something higher, and maybe just not even college – or dual enrollment maybe. Teach dual enrollment like Dr. [Jones]. Challenge people the way he challenged me.

Clearly, Brittney enjoyed being challenged as a scholar and despite set-backs (like not performing well on the PSAT), experiences like the one she had in his class, allowed her to think of herself as a college-ready student.

For some students at rural high school such as Brighton, teachers and counselors may be the only college-educated adults with whom students regularly interact. This makes their role extremely important, not just as teachers, but as mentors, and informal college guides.

**Stressed, discouraging teachers.** Participants reported that oftentimes, their teachers seemed stressed out and disengaged. Some students reported that their teachers discouraged them from pursuing higher education. Whether these messages were
implicit or explicit, students reported receiving them, particularly in regular level (non honors, dual enrollment, or AP) courses. Sarah (4) remembered that in her courses that were neither dual enrollment nor AP, “The professors [teachers] were a little more stressed and overwhelmed, had a harder time engaging people.” Sarah did not note whether this was due to the skill of the teacher or the level of the class they were teaching.

Andy (W), who took mostly regular level courses, discussed how his plans were influenced by his experiences with teachers at Brighton high school:

Well, in high school I really had a hard time with school. Some of the teachers in high school, they have so many troubled students that act up in class and destroy stuff to the point where it really does ruin it for everybody else.

Andy, who reported that he was trying to learn in these classes, found it difficult to learn, and reported that the teacher found it difficult to teach, because of the distracting, disruptive, students.

Alan (4) took courses at various levels while he was a student at Brighton High School. In ninth grade he took Honors English, and though he did well, he decided to take Regular English in tenth and eleventh grades before switching to AP English in his senior year. Alan (4) recalled the assumptions he felt the teachers made about their students in these various leveled courses:

It was like depending on what kind of class you were in, the teachers had different assumptions about what the students would do. Because you know, I wouldn’t always know. Like in ninth grade I knew like okay, I’m going to college after this. But I don’t expect a lot of my peers were the same. But in like the Honors
class, you know, especially early on, it was building the kids up. Like you know, you want to be successful after this. Being successful was synonymous with going to college.

The students in the honor's courses were presumed to be pursuing the advanced diploma, and college. It was somewhat unusual for a student like Alan (4) to shift back and forth between honors, AP, and regular level courses. However, his experience gave him insight into the expectations teachers had for students in these different leveled courses.

Alan’s experience with the way teachers treated the students in different leveled classes made an impression on him:

In eleventh and twelfth grade it was when you guys go to college. Not if. So when you guys go to college, you know. Assuming that every student would do that. But then just the previous year before that in like eleventh grade, you know, I was in a lot of regular classes. And the teachers didn’t have that expectation. Maybe that influenced the way they taught.

Alan recalled a specific teacher who did not try to teach his students because they were tracked in the regular classes, and not likely to go to college:

I definitely had one teacher, at least one, who thought that because he was not teaching an advanced class, that there was just too much work to be done. Like that he couldn’t have an influence on the kids, and that you know, he couldn’t teach them because they were going to do whatever they wanted to do. That it was too late to try to influence them. And he assumed also because it was a regular class, because I talked to him since, you know. Asked him, why did you
do it this way? And he said that you know, he didn’t expect a lot of kids – he expected a lot of the kids to stay in [Brighton], and he expected a lot of kids to just join the workforce. None of them would go to college. And because of that, that influenced the way he taught. Like he didn’t have as high expectations.

Alan, who is succeeding at a highly selective college, summed up his thoughts by this memory of a particular teacher:

I mean shoot, if I hadn’t already been planning on going to college, one of my eleventh grade teachers would have made me think that I wouldn’t have been able to make it in college.

Alan’s experience highlights the importance of the school and community layer of Perna’s (2006a) model. A student with less determination may have been influenced away from college by this eleventh grade teacher.

Todd (4) took dual enrollment courses in high school (which are taught by high school teachers) but no AP courses. Todd recalled the differences in the way teachers spoke to the classes, depending on the level:

I would say in dual enrollment classes, it was definitely – the teacher acted as if we were going to college without a doubt, and this class was preparing you for college or honors classes, they would talk about college. In regular classes – like non-honors and non-dual enrollment classes, I can’t remember someone specifically saying, “In college, you’ll do this.” It’s as if the teachers expected that not everybody would go to college in those classes.
Again, Todd’s experience shows that students are listening, and being influenced by teachers’ statements about their futures. A student who only takes regular level courses but is college-able may never hear the message that they could succeed in college.

Todd (4) offered insight into the thinking of the Brighton teachers, based on his experience:

For my senior awards project, I wrote a paper, and my mentor was a teacher there who didn’t – who wasn’t able to teach honors or dual enrollment classes, for whatever reason. I guess he just wasn’t assigned to those classes, and he would tell me about the students there, and how they would – they just didn’t care about the work. So I guess it’s kind of like the teacher would come to that school or whatever, and they’d have these great expectations, and then they would be presented with the students that aren’t interested at all for whatever reason. But they weren’t interested in succeeding or studying or reading or anything like that. So I guess after a while teachers who are in those environments kind of don’t think about their students going to college.

Todd understood that teachers had different expectations for their students, based on the level of the class they were teaching.

Rebecca (CC) recalled teachers in regular classes talking down to the class:

“When you’re out in the real world,” was one of the biggest things, and I’m like, “I am in the real world! What are you talking about? I’m in the real world right now.

It is clear that students were listening to what their teachers were telling them, and sometimes felt discouraged by the messages they were hearing. Rebecca, who had been
working part-time since she was 15 while attending school full-time, resented being told
that she wasn’t, “in the real world.” Her perception was that she was being treated like a
child, although she felt like she was functioning as a young adult. Additionally, she was
aware that this message was different than the one shared in advanced courses, which
was, “When you’re in college.”

Samantha (W) told me that she did not like being treated like a child, and felt like
she was talked down to by teachers.

I hated being treated like – I don't know, like college I feel like you're more
treated like an adult, and at high school I feel like you're just treated like such a
child.

Samantha knew that she would be treated differently in college, but was still discouraged
away from further study by the negative messages she received in high school.

Sarah (4), Rebecca (CC), Alan (4), Andy (W), Todd (4), and Samantha (W) all
clearly remembered discouraging statements made by teachers in their high school.

Several also reported being treated differently as learners depending on the level of the
class. Sarah (4), Todd (4), Alan (4), and Rebecca (CC) continued their education, despite
the negative messages they heard in high school. However, Andy (W) and Samantha (W)
decided to stop out for the educational pipeline because they needed a break.

**Hated School, Need a Break**

Two participants, neither of whom continued their education, said that they hated
school. Samantha (W) recalled:

Oh, I did not like school at all. I hated it. I absolutely hated getting up early. That
was one of the main things. And then I just hated the amount of work; like, I was
just tired of it. I hated homework and the projects and the deadlines and all that kind of stuff. I just completely hated it.

Samantha thought that some time away from school would be nice before she continued her education. She told me, “I always just thought I would take a break or something and after, then maybe do some kind of nursing program.”

Samantha had little cultural capital when it came to college, as neither of her parents had attended. She was uncomfortable with what was required of her and the restrictions that it placed on her life and time outside of school. She had a model for what the workday was like, with two hard-working parents, but had no model for the life of a student. Her situation emphasizes the strong impact of habitus on students.

Andy (W), shared Samantha’s feelings about school, saying, among other things, that he hated books, he told me, “So, I told myself that I was gonna go to college, but I was gonna take a year break just to celebrate I’m done with high school.”

Andy and Samantha stayed in high school through graduation, even though, at times, they hated it. They both thought they would take a break before continuing their education. However, almost four years later, neither one has earned a post-secondary credential. Andy developed a definite plan of becoming a fire fighter, and is studying for this through the local fire department, despite his distaste for books. However, it took him awhile to begin his journey, perhaps because he needed a practical application for studying. At the time of this writing, Samantha had not yet decided on a plan. The years that these two students were taking a break from education represent an opportunity cost, both for themselves and for their community.
The third student, Mark (W), who went straight to work reported much more positive experiences in high school, including close relationships with at least two teachers or counselors. However, his family had little experience with college, and he decided to follow his father’s footsteps into the military (a plan that did not work out), again indicating the importance of habitus (Perna, 2006a).

Rebecca’s (CC) experience with high school is emblematic of the challenges facing rural schools and students. Her goals and actions did not necessarily jive. She loved her freshman honors class, but never took another honors class. Other students reported that the message sent to students in general level classes was that they were not going to college. Therefore students like Rebecca (CC) and James (CC), who wanted to attend four-year colleges but were not in classes with other students pursuing this goal, may have unintentionally altered their plans.

**Perceptions of Peer Behavior**

Peer groups form an important part of a student’s educational environment. Chickering and Reisser (1993) noted the significance of peers as a key influencer in a student’s development. Participants in the study talked about their perceptions of their peers, both when they were in high school and currently. Some students seemed heavily influenced by their peer group, while others acted more independently.

**Influence of peers on postsecondary decisions.** Alan (4), who plans on joining the military after he graduates college, felt that he was different from his peers. He had decided on attending college early on, and followed through on his plan, although he felt it made him stand out from his peers.
I think that I was different in the fact that college had always been something that was a constant for me. I knew I was going to college. I didn’t care what would get in the way, I was going to go. And some of them, I think— a lot of the people I graduated with didn’t necessarily view it as much of a necessity as I did.

Alan actually looked to his peers for lessons in what not to do:

It was just kind of me looking at what others were doing around me, and they indirectly I guess influenced me in that way. But I never talked to anybody. Sat down with them and said okay, “What should I do? How do I go about it?” It was all just kind of like, “Well, he did that. I don’t want to do that. She did that. I don’t want to do that. So let me do the polar opposite.”

Alan’s strong independent streak, coupled with his academic ability, guided him on his path towards college. He chose to look to adults, rather than peers, as guides to the future. Todd (4) also felt like he was acting differently than most of his peers in pursuing college. He told me:

Well, a lot of people that I went to high school with, many of them, from what I’ve gathered, really haven’t gone to college. Maybe they went to [local community college] for a little bit, but they’ve found employment elsewhere.

Todd felt like attending college was not the norm for Brighton students, and that most had entered the workforce, because they had different expectations for their lives. James (CC) believed that he made the right choice in attending community college, rather than going away to a four-year college and not being ready.

Well, half of my friends you know, they went to universities, things like that.

And it’s interesting, because you know, my aunt had said you know, half my —
nearly all my friends who went to universities and got that freedom, and then had to come back home and do community college. And that’s what happened.

A narrative these students heard about post-secondary choices was created by what had happened in previous years for graduating students. In several cases, those who ventured out to four-year colleges were less successful and needed to come back and go to a community college. Another narrative was that graduates could go to work and be successful without college. There was less of a narrative about going to a four-year college and being successful.

Brittney (CC) also felt like she was different from her peers in her college and career path.

A lot of people – a lot of the girls – went for nursing. But, I mean, I guess I’m kind of different because not a lot of people want to be a teacher. They actually look at me like I’m crazy when I tell them I want to teach high school.

The students who went to college, either community or four-year, felt like they were acting differently than their peers. They all had familial support to do something different than the norm, which proved stronger than the influence of their peers. It is unclear how the experiences of these college going graduates will affect those currently attending Brighton High School.

**Feeling left behind peers.** Rebecca (CC), who had considered attending a four-year college but never applied, felt like she was not doing as well as many of her peers who went straight to four-year colleges. She told me:

Because I know some of my friends who were at four-year university and I think I could be there and I could have probably already been close to graduating. But I
guess that isn’t the path I was meant to take because I guess I wasn’t as
determined. I thought I was at the time because I had my own plan.

Here, the path not taken was viewed as holding more potential for Rebecca. Yet, the
counter narrative as expressed by James (CC) of friends going to a four-year college and
then retreating to a community college indicates there are two views of possible
outcomes for paths taken by others.

Samantha (W) also told me that most of her female friends were in college, and
were finishing degrees.

The majority of them – well, most of my friends that are girls all went to college,
or are in some kind of school or college right now, or are done with it – pretty
much almost all of my friends, actually, except maybe like two or three.

Nationally, 57% of all college students are women (National Center for Education
Statistics, 2012), thus Samantha’s interpretation of where the girls are from her
graduating class aligns with reality.

Mark (W) compared himself to a friend who went to four-year college directly
after high school:

One big thing I’m looking at now is I had a friend whose name is [Bob Jones],
he’s drinking, he’s doing drugs, lots of crazy stuff, he’s smoking the weed. We
were really, really good friends and I didn’t really see much going for him. But
now he’s finishing school at [highly selective state college]. He’s finishing his
junior year at [highly selective state college]. He’s going to be an account
manager for an instrument company. And looking at that now I’m like wow, total
flip around. I couldn’t have seen that coming from him compared to me when I
thought I was going to be joining the military and having it going on for me and he's got it going on for him.

Mark’s statement about his friend shows the strong influence of habitus on students. Mark understood that he had the same abilities as his friend, but was likely held back by what he imagined his future to be.

Andy (W), who has now settled on a career path, and who is hopeful about his future, had some perspective about his peers:

I mean, a handful of them probably don’t do nothing. I mean, they’re either in jail, dead, doing nothing, just laying at home, and then some of them are just going from job to job. But, then again, a lot of my older friends and my close friends – yeah, they’re doing really good.

Andy felt that he was more like his older and close friends, as he was now on a clear path towards a career.

Participants in this study compared their decisions to those of their peers. The students who attended college, community or four-year, felt like they were outside of the norm for their high school. Their perceptions were accurate: for students who entered Brighton High School in the 2006-2007 school year, only around 100 of the 521 had earned 30 or more credit hours within two years of graduation (Virginia Department of Education, 2014). Out of this cohort, 418 had graduated with either an advanced (178) (college preparatory diploma), or standard diploma (240). Another 31 had earned a GED instead of a high school diploma, 19 had earned a modified diploma for students with disabilities, and 50 had dropped out. (Virginia Department of Education, 2014) These outcomes translates to less than 25% of graduates active in their pursuit of a bachelor’s or
associate's degree. Students who had not entered college felt somewhat left behind by their peers, but were still hopeful about their own futures.

**Community Influence**

Perna’s (2006a) model groups the school and community layers together as the second group of influences on student college choice behavior. Because the rural location contributes so strongly to this research study, I have opted to discuss community influence separate from school influence. Young people experience their community before they enter formal education, and continue to be influence by it through involvement in church, sports, volunteering, and daily and recreational activities. Decisions the community makes about what it values are communicated to students, both directly and indirectly. Students also make decisions about how they value their community and whether it is a place they want to remain

**Interactions with Community Members Influence Decisions**

Students may be influenced by a combination of school requirements and community members. Alan (4), who stated that his father was not very present in his life growing up, found his life quite changed by an experience of volunteering at a local small airport.

I ended up needing community service hours for National Honors Society. He (the owner of a small airport) needed help out at the airport with this historic museum plane that he’d just purchased. And so I thought oh, that’s fun. I’ll go out there and help him do that stuff because you know, it’s a museum plane. So that counts for community service. And I went out there. My tradeoff was since I helped him, in addition to getting hours of community service time, he also took
me flying. And all of a sudden I realized that that was really, really cool, and I wanted to go back and help him out. And so slowly it went from me going out there and trading work for flights, like you know, playing around, to trading work for flight lessons, and so I did that. The day I turned 17, I was able to get my private pilot’s license. The day I turned 18, I tested and got my commercial license.

This community member added to the number of college-educated adults that Alan was influenced by and gave him different ideas about how he could envision his future. Also, Alan knew that this person was not being paid (as a teacher is) to mentor him, but rather saw Alan’s potential and encouraged it voluntarily.

I asked Alan if his mentor at the flight school discussed college or if the mentor encouraged Alan to attend college.

My actual flight instructor went to college in Germany, and so he had like a Master’s degree equivalent in the U.S., and he was very, very knowledgeable. So my exposure to him, it didn’t make me want to go to college because I’d already wanted to go to college, but it made me aspire to just gain – you know, to be a wealth of knowledge.

Reinforcement by this community member about the value of college contributed to Alan’s overall aspiration, desire, and planning to go to college.

Rebecca (CC) also mentioned community members who may have inadvertently influenced her decision to choose a community college rather than a 4-year to start her education, in an effort to avoid student loans.
I knew that I didn’t want to have to have this big loan to off when I got out of school because I talked to so many people that have a college degree and they’re working, but they always tell me that most of their – like my dentist, Dr. [Jones]. He’s been a dentist for years and years and years now, but he was telling me that he’s still paying off his student loans.

Community members, such as this dentist, may not be aware of the influence their statements and actions are having on the young people with whom they come into contact but they demonstrate the importance of the school and community context layer of Perna’s (2006a) model.

Andy (W) began to develop his plans for the future in high school, and he was likely influenced by his family and his community.

Well, actually, probably starting out in 9th and 10th grade I was thinking about what I want to do, and stuff. I’m jumping to and from different stuff. And, then my senior year I’m like, “Man, this is what I want to do. I want to become a firefighter.” Well, my 11th and 12th grade year I wanted to become a firefighter EMT. And, it just seemed like something that I would really, really love. And come to find out, I became a volunteer right out of high school, and I love every minute of it.

Brighton operates four firehouses, all staffed by volunteers. Nearly 10% of the population of Brighton volunteers with the fire department. Nationally, 70% of firefighters are volunteers, and these are concentrated in rural areas (Ray, 2012). Andy may have been influenced by the popularity of this enterprise in the community and by
his mother’s occupation as a nurse, as Andy described, “An EMT is like a nurse on wheels.”

Experiences with community members influenced the decision-making of Brighton students. What they were told, and what they were shown about their futures, influenced their choices.

**Ambivalence Towards Community**

Participants in this study exhibited the mixed feelings about their communities that Demi and colleagues (2009) described. Todd (4), when asked about Brighton, expressed ambivalence, but said that he felt like Brighton was a community that did not actively encourage pursuing higher education.

It just never was really talked about. It was just kind of like – and I guess that’s kind of a part of living in [Brighton] or any rural community where it’s just like we’re living in the here and now. Well, some of us live in the past, but living – just take it day by day, which I guess kind of influenced me – that whole mentality.

Todd’s perception of his community as a place where people are focused on the “here and now” could be interpreted in more than one-way. On one hand, it indicates a community where members are not ambitious or planning for the future. On the other hand, it speaks of a community that refuses to join the rat race and instead focuses on living in the moment.

**Higher Education Influence**

Higher education institutions played an important role in the college choice process for some of the students in this study. They visited area colleges formally or informally and developed ideas about them. Participants not attending college
mentioned almost no interaction with colleges or universities. Admissions and financial policies and practices played a role in participants’ decision to attend college or not. Proximity and informal experiences with colleges and universities also mattered.

**The Power of Proximity**

Several students interacted with colleges in the area, by doing campus visits, and these experiences influenced their decision-making, as they pre-disposed students towards these schools. It was surprising how little some students had visited area colleges, given that they are located within an hour of the community. Rebecca’s (CC) plans were influenced by the offerings of a college located near Brighton.

I originally wanted to go to a four-year. I wanted to go to [highly selective state college] because they work with marine science and that’s what I wanted to do. But then when I looked into it I saw that [local community college] has a [transfer] program. [Highly selective state college] does a transfer program, so I decided to go to [local community college] and I had printed off the requirements that [highly selective state college] had to transfer to their school. I had printed off the requirements that [highly selective state college] had and I put them on the bulletin board as kind of a motivation. But, you know, different things happened. Rebecca detoured from her original plan, without ever formally visiting or applying to her school of choice. Her primary reason was that she felt that community college would be more affordable. Even though she had considered attending this college for years, the school was unaware of her interest and she never applied for admission or for financial aid.

Alan (4) also had experienced a local four-year college first-hand, and his
experiences there as a child made him interested in attending the school later. He also was able to visit the school informally with his teachers, further cementing his interest. The opportunity to walk on the campus took away some of the mystique of attending college as Alan could see first-hand what the campus experience was like and begin to envision himself on campus.

Brittney (CC), who did not want to leave home, was happy that she could attend a local community college and then transfer to a local four-year university while still living in her childhood home. She was also able to continue working at a local history museum, adding to her income and increasing her experience in the area that would contributed to her aspiration to become a history teacher.

Financial Aid Made All the Difference

For one student in this study, a last minute financial aid decision by his college made the difference in him attending this four-year college or starting at a community college. Alan (4) shared his dramatic story with me:

Paying for college was kind of a really weird scenario for me. My parents were divorced, and there was a court decree, at least I was told that there was a court decree, that my father would have to pay for college. And so the plan was for my mother, who is my legal guardian, when you go to college, we tell your dad to pay for it. And my father said no, no, no. I don’t have to pay for college. So in a mad dash, my mother tried to get – then we need to get a lawyer and take him to court. And this was just weeks – you know, weeks before tuition was due. I was very much let down by my family. How serious they knew this was to me, and how non-seriously they approached it. And so you know, because that whole
time I had been told, no, don’t apply for scholarships. Don’t apply for loans. Your father has to pay for college. And there was me being young and you know, not knowing any better. So I ended up talking to my financial aid officer at the college, or who would have been my financial aid officer, and giving her the down-low on everything. And then she said okay, let me look into a few things. And a couple of days later she contacted me back and said that I qualified for a full ride.

Although Alan’s story is unusual, it demonstrates the need for increased communication between institutions of higher education, schools, and families and students about how to pay for college.

While not nearly as dramatic, Rebecca’s (CC) choices were also influenced by the availability of grants:

I applied for a bunch of scholarships and grants and things like that. That’s the reason why I went to [local community college] because it was a little bit more affordable to get my prerequisites done. And I also got a grant with them, so it paid for my classes.

Rebecca and Alan had an interest in the same nearby college, and Alan ending up attending it. He applied, was admitted, and eventually received a generous financial aid package from the school. Rebecca might have also qualified for financial aid at this school, but never applied.

**Economics & Policies**

The national, state, and local political and economic situation affects students more than they probably realize. The United States was engaged in two wars in the
Middle East during these students’ school days. The nation elected the first black President in history while they were in high school, although only 36% of Brighton residents voted for him. The country entered a recession in 2007, which some economists believe did not really end until late 2013 (Schoen, 2013). During the 2009-2010 school year, facing budget shortfalls, the Board of Supervisors of Brighton refused to alter the budget or raise taxes to give the schools more money, although the system had recently lost over $5 million from the state and federal government. This decision left the school system with a deficit, and the school board voted to shorten the school year by four weeks to make up the $445,000 budget shortfall. Students were no doubt aware of this, and the message received may have been, “When things get tight, forgo spending on education.” As well, the students experienced the very real outcome of attending high school for fewer days than they would have in the past. Less exposure to academics via classroom time and with the teachers of positive influence may have influenced the students in a variety of ways.

The Recession

The students in this study all attended high school during the Great Recession of the 2000’s, which officially began in 2007 and officially ended in 2009 (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2010). The extent to which this recession affected their choices is unclear; however, two students mentioned it as important to their post-high school plans. For others, it may have influenced their choices in less evident ways. Todd (4) said that the recession probably affected his decision to attend [the less selective college] he originally attended.
I didn’t want to spend a lot of money on tuition, and that’s definitely why I chose [less selective college] over other options, because it is so inexpensive.

Financially, the best decision was [less selective college]. That was the main reason I picked the school over applying elsewhere.

Yet, Todd changed his choice after his first year at this less selective college given his on campus experience and transferred to a more competitive university nearby.

Rebecca (CC) also remembered the recession affecting her decisions.

The recession definitely affected me because I couldn’t pay for the schooling that I wanted and my parents couldn’t. So the financial portion of it was the biggest reason I went to [local community college] instead of a four-year university.

Rebecca (CC) continued to tell me about her fears of accumulating debt while seeking a higher education.

So that really scared me because I could have had to weigh to option of I could either go to school and have to work my whole life to pay off going to school or I can just work and not have a big loan to pay. So I kind of had to figure out what I wanted to do there. Right now I’m not in debt because of school and I’ve gotten some schooling done, so that’s made me really happy.

The students in this study did not perceive finances as the primary motivator behind their decisions. All nine lived in houses owned by their parents and all nine had working parents. However, all of the participants mentioned finances and the importance of financial security. My impression was that although none of the students in this study has truly suffered financially, they were keenly aware of the role that finances played in any decision they made about their futures. Living in a rural area in which the per capita
income is less than other regions also created a context in which the students knew they would have less earning potential even with a college degree if they stayed in the region.

**Emergent Themes**

Several themes developed that could not be explained by Perna’s (2006a) model. A few students felt like they made decisions on their own about what they would do after high school, and imagined themselves as their own primary support. The students expressed high levels of individual agency in making their decisions. The idea of regret also arose, and though it may not have motivated students while in high school, it influenced their actions in the following years. The emergent themes included internal motivation and regret.

**Internal Motivation**

Perna’s (2006a) model does not account for internal student motivation. Alan (4), Sarah (4), and Rebecca (CC) all mentioned self-motivating behaviors. Alan talked about making decisions on his own.

*Just my exposure growing up I was kind of — like I was left to do everything on my own, you know. The whole family dynamic was never really there, so I was just used to doing things and coming up with my own plans, and making things work out for myself.*

Alan started thinking about his future at a young age, which made him different from his friends.

*I consider myself a freak. I started thinking about that when I was like 10. I knew that I wanted to go to [his college] when I was eight. I didn’t really know what that meant, or what that would mean for the rest of my life until I was ten.*
actually started thinking about it really, really hard. And so I started kind of coming up with what I wanted to make out of my life when I was in middle school. And I have stuck to it for the most part, which surprises me. I haven’t strayed much from my initial goals. But I always knew that I wanted to go to college, and I wanted to have a stable job, stable life, stable family upon graduation.

Alan had equated college attendance with stability in life. As he looked to adults in his life that he saw as having a more stable existence, he saw having a college education as a common theme. The active interest his teachers took in him, in particular by standing in for a traditional parent role in doing a college visit, helped support Alan’s ambitions.

Rebecca researched her local community college and compared costs with attending a four-year college. When she talked to counselors about her plans, she has already decided on where to go to college. She recalled:

They just listened to my plan and went with that. I’m sure that if I would have said that I wanted to do a four-year college they would have encouraged it. They kind of really encouraged whatever my plan was and helped me work towards my goal. But since that wasn’t my initial goal – well, it was originally but not when I talked to them. By then it had changed already.

Rebecca knew she was going to enter higher education, and wanted to make her own decision about where to go. He counselor served as a supporter, rather than as a guide, as Rebecca decided that she was only going to apply to her local community college.
Regrets

Several students talked about regrets that had over choices they made in high school. Andy (W), Rebecca (CC), and Samantha (W) all shared regrets they had over their choices to not study harder or over the courses they chose. Andy (W), wanted to continue his education, but felt discouraged by tests and the school environment, and decided to give himself a break. He told me:

And, it’s just – throughout the year and stuff I was thinking about college, but I hate books. I really do. And, I thought about going to college, but then I got to thinking. I’m like, “Man, I had a hard enough time staying in school to study and stuff.” Throughout my whole entire high school career I never did well on tests. I’ve always done my schoolwork and everything else, but I really had a hard time with tests. So, I told myself that I was gonna go to college, but I was gonna take a year break just to celebrate I’m done with high school. And, then I got a job where I was making $400 or $500 plus a week. And, I’m like, “Man, that’s cool. So, maybe I should stick with that and do something else.” But, I regret it now.

Andy was frustrated with disruptive classmates, testing, and attending school in general. He wanted to give himself a break before continuing with his education. Statistics show that young men are not doing as well in elementary or secondary school as young women, and are not attending college in the same numbers (Freeman, 2004). Once he started making an income, Andy was reluctant to give that up by quitting work and going to college, a decision he now regrets.

Rebecca (CC) regretted not being more purposeful in her course-taking in high school and not taking her first year in community college more seriously, causing her to
lose her Pell Grant. She was also ambivalent as to whether she should have applied to any four-year colleges, rather than just the community college she attends. She recalled:

I think I would have done that if I would have been given – I mean, I was given a choice and I was allowed to make my own decisions, obviously, because I did. But if everybody around me wasn’t so persistent on – they were trying to motivate me and I see that now, but at the time I felt like they’re all just telling me what to do. They’re trying to live through me because I know that my mom went to [local community college]. She wishes she would have gone to a four-year university and I understand that now, being a mom, you want better for your kids than you had for yourself. So when I was in high school, I don’t know. I just wanted to make my own decision and make that be my own decision. And since everybody wanted that to be my decision, I think if they would have just said, “Hey, we’ll support you fully. We’ll be here for you if you decide to go to a four-year university,” I don’t know. I don’t know what could have made a difference.

Rebecca’s response speaks to the challenge of positively influencing young people. She wanted to make her own decisions and was still unsure about how she made them. She was sure that she did not want to do what others wanted her to do, she wanted to guide her own future. She talked about her desire to undo mistakes of the past:

I mean, there’s so many times I wish I could go back to school and just do things differently. They even told me that. They’re like, “One day, some of you guys are going to wish you had done things a little bit differently or taken more of our advice.” And it’s true because when you’re a kid you don’t really have the
mindset to think about ten years down the road. I thought I did, but I really didn’t.

Samantha (W), like Rebecca, had regrets about her choices in high school:

If I would have tried harder, I know I could have made better grades when I think about it now, and I feel stupid, because I know that if I would have tried harder I could have made better grades. If I wouldn’t have skipped class and done stuff how I did, I would have done better and I probably would have liked school more.

I was surprised that the students that I interviewed had developed so much insight into their own behaviors. However, it was disheartening that their choice not to actively pursue higher education was one that they already regretted. It was clear that they were examining their past choices and using what they had learned to make different choices in the future.

**Summary**

The findings in this chapter are the result of interviews with 12 members of the Brighton community. Nine students and three counselors shared their thoughts on the supports and challenges facing students in their post-secondary educational planning. Overall, the findings align with previous research, although the importance a single individual or event could make to a student was remarkable, as in Alan’s case.

The findings indicate that Perna’s (2006a) model of college choice and the levels of influence concurrently influencing this choice was evident for the rural participants in my study. Family held the most sway in how the students contemplated post-high school planning, and the context of school and community operated to reinforce these ideas.

What differed was the additional role of the extended family as an influence on these
rural students, and the more powerful than expected role of individuals within the school and community layer. An unexpected finding was the importance of teacher attitude as perceived by the students. The effect of decisions related to course-taking, test taking, and the influence of peers was also important; as were the ideas of internal motivation and regret. The next chapter includes a discussion of the challenges and supports available to students, as well as recommendations and areas for further research.
CHAPTER SIX

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the influences that affect college choice from the perspective of rural students. Nine graduates of one rural high school were interviewed about their perceptions of what influenced them to choose one of three paths immediately after high school: work, community college, or a four-year college. Three counselors were also interviewed about their perceptions of the challenges and supports facing Brighton students in planning a post-secondary path.

Using narrative analysis and case studies, the stories of individual students, who have differing post-high school educational paths, were studied to understand their perceptions of the conditions and factors that influenced their educational choices after high school. All of the participants in this study reported an interest, while in high school, in attending some form of higher education after graduation, even those who went straight into the workforce. All graduated high school, half of them with advanced diplomas. Seven out of nine students reported having earned all As and Bs in their high school coursework. All of the participants were articulate and responsive, and high school teachers reported that all were college-able. However, 2 to 4 years after graduating high school, only four were attending college full-time and on track to receiving a bachelor’s degree within four years of graduating high school. One other student was enrolled part-time in a community college, and another that started out at a community college has since dropped out and is working. The remaining three students are all in the workplace.
The following table summarizes central family characteristics of the participants (See Table 6.1.) As Perna (2006a) argued, habitus is the first layer in the model of college choice. The patterns of cultural capital for the students are noted as linked to their parents’ college going behavior is outlined. Both Mark and Samantha had both parents with no college going experience, thus their immediate move to the workforce aligns with parental actions and history. Noteworthy, Andy’s parents both had post-secondary education that led to careers that did not require four-year degrees. Andy spoke optimistically about attending college at one point. The parents of Mark, Samantha, and Andy are still married and have strong family ties to the community, which have contributed to their desire to remain in the area.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pathway</th>
<th>Mother’s Education</th>
<th>Father’s Education</th>
<th>Parent’s Marital Status</th>
<th>Student’s Marital Status</th>
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<td>Married</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6.1: Additional Participant Characteristics

Perna’s (2006a) model is inserted in this chapter to allow for easy reference as the various findings are discussed. As noted, the role of family was a central theme in the findings.
Social, economic & policy context (layer 4)
- Demographic characteristics
- Economic characteristics
- Public policy characteristics

Higher education contexts (layer 3)
- Marketing and recruitment
- Location
- Institutional characteristics

School and community context layer (layer 2)
- Availability of resources
- Types of resources
- Structural supports and barriers

Habitus (layer 1)
- Demographic characteristics
  - Gender
  - Race/ethnicity
- Cultural capital
  - Cultural knowledge
  - Value of college attainment
- Social capital
  - Information about college
  - Assistance with college processes

Demand for higher education
- Academic preparation
- Academic achievement

Supply of resources
- Family Income
- Financial aid

Expected benefits
- Monetary
- Non-monetary

Expected costs
- College costs
- Forgone earnings

Figure 6.1: Perna's (2006a) Conceptual Model of Student College Choice

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The following sections include a discussion of the major themes generated by the study and focuses on the key findings: 1. the importance of planning for and providing assistance with college processes, 2. the influence of unforeseen elements of habitus, such as the extended family, 3. the rural student’s expanded view of the educational timeline and how that affected their decision-making, and 4. the powerful role that individuals within the school and community had on rural students.

**Planning for and Providing Assistance with College Processes**

Perna (2006a) reported on the importance of cultural and social capital in her model of college choice. My research validates this aspect of the model. The rural students in this study had little cultural knowledge of college, although they did place value on obtaining a higher education. They also lacked information about college and most importantly, some were provided little assistance with the college process from family or counselors. The college process includes the elements of search, application, visits, applying for financial aid, choosing, and course selection.

On one hand, all of the students in this study shared that one or both of their parents expected them to go to college. Five of the nine participants had at least one parent who attended either a two-year or four-year college. On the other hand, in keeping with social reproduction theory (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), students tended to follow in the footsteps of one of their parents, as the parents’ values had been passed to the children organically. Even though students remembered their parents telling them that they should go to college, they received little assistance from their parents in the last college choice stage of preparing for college in high school and ultimately, in applying to college (Hossler & Stage, 1992). Those students with internal motivation to pursue higher
education relied less on their parents for support, but for the rest, parents played a pivotal role. For example, only those students now attending a four-year college took the SATs in high school. Parental support or guidance regarding the role of the SATs in college decision making was absent for the remaining six participants. As well, teachers all identified the participants as college-able, but not all the parents provided support or guidance to help students in the application process or took students on college visits. The following is a discussion of some of the findings from this study related to college processes.

**College-able Students Not Taking the SATs**

Despite their interest in a higher education in the future, and the need for SAT scores for four-year college admission, only three of the nine students took the SAT, the three who went straight to four-year colleges. Only five of the nine students took the PSAT: Sarah (4), Todd (4), Alan (4), James (CC), and Brittney (CC). For Brittney and James, the PSAT was a change-agent, causing them to drop their plans of entering a four-year college immediately after high school in favor of attending a community college, which would not require SAT scores for admission. In a sense, the other college-able students in this study were invisible to colleges and universities. The SAT test is linked to college admission offices and triggers marketing material being sent to test takers from a range of colleges and universities. The students who do not take the test never began interacting with colleges because there were no SAT scores to be sent out for a college application. This group of students, who would be eligible for financial aid and scholarships at most universities, never found out about the opportunities that might be available to them.
High schools should make every attempt to get college-able students to take the SATs. Some communities, such as Spokane, Washington, are paying for all students to take the SAT test (Lawrence-Turner, 2013). In an effort to get more students to take the test, during the 2011-2012 school year, the College Board began offering SAT School Day, a program that allows an administration of the test on a school day, rather than on a weekend day, to districts that pay for all students to take the test (College Board, 2014). It would cost Brighton High School about $25,500 to test every student in a class of 500 students (recent senior classes have had 460-520 students). Yet, given recent budget shortfalls, this option seems unlikely for this rural community.

**Dual Enrollment—A Stepping Stone to College**

Though most of the students in this study took dual enrollment courses in high school (seven out of nine), these courses did not necessarily lead to college enrollment after high school. Dual enrollment courses give students the chance to earn college credit while still in high school and experience the pace and structure of a college level class. Most of the students in this study reported positive experiences in their dual enrollment courses, such as being challenged academically or reinforcing the idea that they could do college level work. Only one student, Samantha (W), reported having a bad experience in her dual enrollment course, which she attributed to the subject matter. Dual enrollment courses serve as excellent opportunities for community colleges to interact with high school students and for high school students to gain confidence in their ability to succeed in college, even if the experience does not translate into immediate college enrollment.
Yet, despite the participation in dual enrollment, there was little connection to the course selection by the students and ultimate major or career. For example, Todd (4) remembered being handed a sheet at a certain time of year, picking out whatever courses he wanted, and handing it to his counselor, with no opportunity for meaningful advising. Samantha (W) took a dual enrollment criminal justice course, even though she had no interest in the subject. Thus, while dual enrollment might provide a good bridge to college in theory, in practice, student participation in these courses did not always translate to college attendance for students who did not have other forms of support. However, for students like Alan (4), dual enrollment courses amounted to experience with college-level work and almost a year’s worth of college credit.

**College-able students Not Applying to College**

As obvious as it may seem, the most important step in reaching college, is applying. All of the participants in my study expressed an interest in attending college immediately or in the future. Despite that, only three students applied to four-year colleges. It should come as no surprise that these were the three who attended four-year colleges the fall after graduation. The three students who entered community college the fall after graduation only applied to the community college they ultimately attended.

Brittney (CC), who finished community college and now attends a four-year university, said that she was afraid of failure. She recalled why she did not apply to any four-year colleges while in high school:

I don’t want to apply somewhere and be rejected. That’s like my biggest fear, having someone tell me no. So, I didn’t really plan as much as I should have and
look around at schools as much as I should have. I could have applied to more places.

Brittney’s story highlights the successful relationship shared between community colleges and four-year colleges. Brittney was scared, and maybe not prepared, to enter a four-year college directly after high school, although her ultimate goal was to acquire at least a bachelor’s degree. She followed her plan, did well in her community college classes, transferred to a regional four-year college, and will graduate in four years, with her peers who entered four-year colleges immediately after high school.

Mark (W) visited one state university in a nearby city, and said that he really liked it; however, he recalled, “I didn’t apply, didn’t do anything.” With more active guidance on the part of the Mark’s parents and counselors, he might have taken the necessary steps to apply to college. Mark also did not take the SAT, a critical gatekeeping factor for four-year college applications.

Rural high schools should actively encourage college-able students to apply to colleges. Counselors at Brighton are trying, but their caseloads are large and they lack community support. The counselors at Brighton are stretched thin and unable to delve deeply into the post-secondary planning of all of their students. Students in this study reported making their own choices about courses, often with no adult guidance.

Steps that might encourage college application include: a weekday offering of the SATs with students encouraged to apply for fee waivers or fees paid by community organizations, a college application day staffed by volunteers and mentors who help students through the process, a mentoring program that matches first-generation college-able students with area college graduates, and participating in events that increase the
number of students that complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid. Colleges should limit the restrictions for application fee waivers, encouraging students who have limited means, but who are not necessarily poor, to apply.

**Extended Family**

Howley and Hambrick (2011) touted the benefits of rural communities, which include the ability to know your neighbors. For several students in this study, those neighbors included the extended family. Sarah (4), Andy (W), and Rebecca (CC) all mentioned cousins or grandparents as having some influence over their post-secondary choices. In each case, the student was considering the educational path, career choice, or educational aspiration the relative had for them when making their plans.

Though Perna’s (2006a) model encompasses the role of family within the habitus layer, it does not anticipate the influence of the extended family. Young people look to cousins as peers with comparable family backgrounds for ideas about what to do after high school. Sarah (4) and Andy (W) both talked about their cousins’ career and educational plans as inspirations for their own.

Grandparents also inspire their grandchildren. Most of the students in the study were aware of the educational levels of their grandparents. Some were also encouraged by their grandparents to pursue higher education. Rebecca (CC) talked about the influence of her grandmother, who encouraged her by sharing information about scholarships.

Extended family members of rural student should be aware of their influence and play an active role in the college process for their relatives. High school students can
visit cousins at nearby colleges and grandparents can take students on college visits and assist with the application process.

**Powerful Influence of the School and Community**

Perna’s (2006a) model of college choice illustrates the importance of the school and community context. My study validates this and emphasizes the importance of context for rural students. In rural areas, where there are smaller percentages of college graduates, students considering higher education have fewer models. Less than 20% of the population of Brighton over the age of 25 holds a bachelor’s degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). For many students, teachers and administrators may serve as their only college role models. If a rural community wants to increase the number of students obtaining education beyond high school, a concerted effort needs to be made by all to encourage education.

**Lack of a School-wide College Preparatory Environment**

Though Brighton High School offers a college-preparatory curriculum, evidenced by their advanced diploma, all participants in this study did not take advantage of the college-preparatory curriculum in the selection of their courses. The course taking choices participants made aligns with research on rural students in that rural students did not take advantage of the most rigorous courses available, particularly in math and science (Aud et al., 2012). Only one student in this study took Calculus, although 16% of students nationwide take this course (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Only three of the students in this study took math all four years of high school, two of whom went on to four-year colleges. College-able students should be encouraged to take a college-preparatory curriculum, including advanced science courses, four years of math, and dual
enrollment and AP courses. Even if these students do not immediately pursue post-secondary education, they will have had some exposure to college level courses.

The Need for Place-based Education

None of the students who went directly to four-year colleges indicated that they definitely planned on living in Brighton as adults. All of the students who went directly to work indicated that they planned on staying in the community, as did all of the students who went to community colleges. These students in the latter groups had tied their social identity closely to their community, a finding that is supported by the literature (Demi et al., 2009; Evans et al., 2010). The students that did not leave the community to attend a four-year institution were reluctant to abandon their community, because it was an important part of their sense of self. The students who went to four-year colleges either had developed mixed feelings about their community as a whole or did not feel like they would find gainful employment there. Rebecca (CC) expressed an early interest in working at one of the institutions of higher education in Brighton that focuses on the sciences. However, she had not developed a clear path towards this goal and was in the process of changing her plans so that she could find work more quickly.

It is not that there are no employment opportunities in Brighton. The community imports 5,400 workers from other communities (Virginia Employment Commission, 2014). Many of these jobs filled by people living outside the community and require postsecondary education. The top five employers are the schools, the two higher education institutions, the hospital, and county government (Virginia Employment Commission, 2014). Brighton may be well served by incorporating some of the tenets of place-based education that suggest that rural schools adopt a curriculum that considers
the environment where a rural student is raised, allowing college-able students to envision and prepare for careers within their rural home communities (Howley, 2009). Additionally, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013) recently identified 40 in-demand jobs that don’t require a bachelor’s degree that pay over $58,000 annually. Most of these jobs require an associate’s degree, which could be acquired locally, or extensive on-the-job training.

It is a false choice to believe that one cannot be a college student and a person with strong rural ties and values. Students could be encouraged to broaden their sense of self to include an identity as scholar and member of the rural community of Brighton. Exposure to community members serving as mentors who retain both identities may allow rural students to imagine themselves in new ways. As well, another false choice is considering four-year college attendance and graduation as the only option. As Cohen, Brawer, and Kisker (2014) point out that “the Bureau of Labor Statistics says that 31 percent of Americans hold a bachelor’s degree even though only 14 percent of jobs require one” (p. 443). Thus, attendance at community colleges and in workforce certification programs like Andy is attending for firefighting, provide a critical resource for the rural workforce.

**Teachers Sent the Wrong Message**

Several students reported that teachers in general level classes spoke to students in a way that implied that they would not be going to college. One student, now attending a highly selective state college, even said that one of his eleventh grade teachers implied that he would not be able to make it in college. In an era when the income disparity between those who have a college degree and those who do not continues to grow, to a
recently reported $45,500 versus $28,000, respectively (Pew Research Center, 2014), teachers need to understand that most students will need some education beyond a high school diploma for a comfortable life. They should also understand the strong influence they have on the college choice behaviors of their students. As Perna (2006a) notes in her model, the school and community context layer is second only to habitus on the influence it has over students.

Teachers can help by mentally preparing students for college, treating all students as learners, and using language that encourages students to think of themselves as capable of college-level work. Teachers can take more active roles, as some in this study did, by sharing information about their college experiences, setting high expectations for their students in terms of college choice, and even accompanying students on college visits. In-services that emphasize the importance of these behaviors may be useful for teachers to encourage and create a pro-higher education environment. Harper and Davis (2012) found that underrepresented students who were instilled with the belief in the “liberating potential of education” (p. 133) tended to pursue higher educational goals. It may also help to have the most experienced teachers teach both honors and regular level classes.

**Lack of Higher Education Engagement**

Students who became involved with colleges through visits and encouragement from teachers, counselors, and parents developed comfort levels with these colleges which resulted in them applying, and ultimately, attending college. Rural high schools should make every effort to expose students to different colleges, through visits, both formal and informal, and through exposure to community members with ties to colleges.
This opens the door for students to the higher education layer of Perna’s (2006a) model, which is an important aspect of the college choice process.

High school officials should retain or reestablish relationships with alumni who went on to college. These individuals could share experiences with current students, having really been in the same shoes. Higher education institutions should encourage these relationships and solicit alumni from underserved communities to work with local high schools to recruit students.

**Shutting Doors to the Future Too Early**

Anyone who has raised a teenager or remembers their own teen years knows that teens are very prone to making regrettable decisions. Arming high school students with as much information as possible about the consequences of their decisions is crucial. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) emphasized the importance of the predisposition phase (grades 7-9), which is largely controlled by parents, the school, and the community. Real time information about the job market, wages, and the cost of living should be shared with students, and they should be taught where to find this information on their own. Students should be encouraged to keep the doors open to as many opportunities as possible for as long as possible. Students should be supported, but not directed, by their families through the search phase (grades 10-12) (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) by being encouraged to take challenging courses, visit colleges, take the SATs, apply for financial aid, apply to colleges, and to have a plan B, should the original plan not work out.

**Not Enough Counselors**

Research shows the importance of counseling on college enrollment (Hurwitz & Howell, 2013). Though the students at Brighton reported positive interactions with
counselors, they did not spend much time together. Students who graduate without a plan enter no man’s land, where it is possible that no adult is guiding their future. Rural schools need to make sure that graduating seniors know what resources in the community are available to them, including community college offerings. As found in this study, the students with high intrinsic motivation sought out their counselors and created their own pathway based on their own desires. Those with less intrinsic motivation or those that lacked role models were more passive in their interactions with the high school counselors. It is these latter groups that schools must engage more.

**A Community Not Valuing Education**

When money was tight, Brighton government officials refused to invest in their schools, sending a message to students that education was not worth the sacrifice. If a community wants an educated populace ready to succeed in a knowledge-based economy, it must dedicate funds to education. Whether this means cutting other county services, hiring professional grant writers to seek out funds, or raising taxes, officials must stand up for the value of education.

**Expanded View of the Educational Timeline**

A surprising finding was that the rural students in this study seemed to have an expanded view of the educational timeline. For Brighton students, going to college immediately after high school was the exception, rather than the rule. In 2010-11, almost as many went directly to a four-year college (86) as dropped-out or obtained a GED (81) (State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, 2013; Virginia Department of Education, 2013). The effect this had on students was that they did not feel that higher education was something that had to be pursued in only one way, by immediately

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enrolling in a four-year college. They were comfortable with the idea of community college, as this was where many of their peers were going. Recent data on occupations shows that these students should be able to obtain family sustaining wages, should they pursue post-secondary education at a community college. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics recently identified 80 occupations that require less than a bachelor’s degree that have median annual wages above $50,000 (Torpey, 2012). Students who went straight into the workforce were planning on continuing their education, and were comfortable with doing that at a non-traditional age, in a non-traditional way. This non-linear path, now called “swirl” in the literature, is becoming more common, as students transfer from institution to institution as they collect credits towards a degree or credential (Selingo, 2012). Another non-traditional pattern is returning to school later in life. Two of the students in the study had parents who obtained bachelor’s degrees in their 30s or 40s, giving them a model for an extended educational timeline.

As well, even though these parents were college educated, they did not have the typical traditionally aged student college experience. Thus, in many ways, the students mirror first-generation student attributes. This anomaly may also contribute to the lack of attention on taking the SAT in high school or participating in college going course taking behaviors. With a longer view of the educational pipeline, the students envisioned they had time to obtain a degree.

Areas for Future Research

The issue of higher education for rural students is receiving more attention as of late. The Virginia Foundation for Community College Education (VFCCE) launched the Rural Horseshoe Initiative in 2011. This program is designed to increase the number of
high school graduates or GED recipients, increase the number of students who enroll in college and graduate, and increase workforce training opportunities in rural areas of Virginia (Landrum, 2014). Further research is needed to determine the long-term success rate of programs such as the Rural Horseshoe Initiative on rural student college enrollment and graduation rates.

Additional Studies

The participants in this study all plan to further their education, in some way or another. The students in four-year colleges planned to continue in graduate or professional school: Alan’s (4) plan was officer candidate school. Sarah’s (4) was a Master’s degree, and Todd’s (4) idea was to pursue a law degree. One of the students, Brittney (CC), who attended community college, planned to graduate from a four-year. Rebecca (CC) planned on earning an associate’s degree and becoming a nurse, radiologist, or ultrasound technician. James (CC) had earned a marine electrician certificate and hoped to eventually obtain his associate’s degree. Andy (W) was studying to become a fireman and planned taking courses toward certification as an advanced Emergency Medical Technician. Mark (W) planned on obtaining a bachelor’s degree in the future, and Samantha (W) was considering going back to school, although she was not sure for what occupation. A longitudinal study could follow this group of students, and see what paths their lives had taken in 10, 15, or 20 years.

The parents of all of the students in this study who went straight to work were married and remained in the community. Most of the parents of students who went to four-year or community colleges were divorced and some had left the community. An
additional study could look at the effect of divorce on students and how it linked to their educational plans, independence and resilience.

A survey of Brighton alumni could be sent to alumni from various decades. Results would create a template of the various pathways taken by students over time. Graduating high school students could be asked to take a survey on college going plans, and this could be followed up a year later to see if plans matched reality. Another survey could be to find out about the needs of the top five employers in Brighton and how many local residents they were employing versus how many they were importing from other areas.

**Changing the School and Community Environment**

This study found that, as expected based on Perna’s (2006a) model, parents played an important role in the post-secondary plans of their children. Participants tended to follow the educational pathway of at least one of their parents. In areas with low college going rates, this creates a cycle of low college attainment. Five participants had parents with college degrees, four with bachelor’s and one with an associate’s. Students in this study were following patterns similar to their parents. Four were on track to earn bachelor’s degrees, one had decided to earn an associate’s degree, and the other four were planning on obtaining more education in the future. Further research is needed to explore how schools and communities can create an environment that encourages college going among parents and students. Further research could include interventions, where higher education workshops were offered to middle and high school students and their effects measured. The effects of adding SAT preparation and college application
campaigns could also be measured to study their impacts on higher education enrollment and completion.

Financial Impacts

Though few stories of financial aid are as dramatic as Alan’s, financial aid policies can really make the difference for students. Further study could include a closer look at the financial environment for rural students. Surveys could reveal the knowledge level of students in regard to tuition, grants, scholarships, loans, and the application process. Key personnel at high schools could also be surveyed to discover insights into their practices and knowledge of the financial aid environment. Information could also be collected from institutions of higher education, to discover what and how they communicate to prospective students.

The Effect of Mentors and Counselors

Students in this study talked about the importance of caring adults in their lives who served as mentors. For Alan (4), it was the flight instructor who let him volunteer in exchange for flight lessons, for Sarah (4), it was the chemistry teacher who encouraged her towards the male-dominated field of chemical engineering, for Todd (4), it was Mr. Fonella, who exposed Todd to a world of ideas outside of Brighton and encouraged him towards the highly selective college he now attends. Sarah (CC), Brittney (CC), Mark (W), and James (CC) all mentioned teachers by name who mentored them.

Research has shown that young people with mentors set higher educational goals and are more likely to attend college than those without mentors (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014). However, at-risk youth are less likely to find naturally occurring mentors (Bruce
Bridgeland, 2014). Further research could study the effect of adding additional counselors and mentoring programs at rural schools.

**Implications for Practice**

Here I outline several recommendations for practices that should help increase college-going rates amongst students from rural areas.

1. Four-year colleges could do a better job of communicating what financial aid may be available to prospective rural students, instead of passively waiting for students to find out what scholarships exist. Marketing and recruiting should be specifically targeted towards rural schools with low-college going rates and towards younger high school students so that they can prepare for application. Community colleges should use their connection with dual enrollment students to maintain relationships that encourage future enrollment.

2. School systems should designate one counselor as the financial aid guru, and help that person become as knowledgeable as possible about all the opportunities that exist in the state.

3. On the state level, government officials should look to states like Tennessee, whose Governor has recently proposed free community college for any high school graduate, regardless of need or merit.

4. Students need experienced adults to guide them through their educational decisions. Rural school systems should develop strong structured mentoring programs, matching young people with teachers, administrators, and community members who will serve in the important role of guide. Counselors also serve an important role in guiding students. In order for them
to have the time to guide, rather than just support students, there need to be more of them.

5. Additional counselors should be added at Brighton High School as this could increase college enrollment by almost 50 students a year. An additional high school counselor is predicted to increase four-year college enrollment by 10% (Hurwitz & Howell, 2013).

6. A full seven of the nine students participated in dual enrollment in high school. These college courses can serve as a stepping stone for students in the community college or four-year university. High school counselors can partner with community college counselors to outline for students the relatively easy pathway for students to college after participating in dual enrollment courses. High school counselors can help students in selecting appropriate courses to take versus the current student driven selection process, as this open enrollment option may translate to students selecting courses based on convenience, the fact their friends are in the class, or other non-academic reasons.

7. Community members can support students by underwriting the cost of the SAT and college applications fees or planning a day of assisting students with the FAFSA and college applications.

Conclusion

Though at times during the writing of this dissertation I felt discouraged by statistics and stories that showed Brighton was not doing as much as it could for its
students, I complete it with hope. The students I spoke with were enthusiastic about their futures and had support systems that would help them reach their goals.

At the time of this writing, Brighton was considering a school budget for the 2014-2015 school year that would increase funding slightly, and had increased the number of school days in the year from 160 to 170. The Board was even considering a minor real estate tax increase to raise revenues.

Research and interest in the unique problems of rural schools and communities has increased nationwide, and programs such as the Virginia Community College System’s Rural Horseshoe Initiative have helped to shine a light on the educational needs of Virginia’s rural communities, such as Brighton. Initiatives such as the Rural Horseshoe aim to increase the education level of residents of rural areas of Virginia to prepare them for the workforce and improve their local economies.

This study drew several conclusions about the influences that affect college choice from the perspective of rural students. I concluded that parental actions are more important than parental words. Rural parents who want their children to attend college should take concrete steps like visiting colleges, encouraging application to college, filling out financial aid forms, aiding in high school course selection, and having their student take the SAT.

I also conclude that individuals within rural schools and communities matter, including extended family members, teachers, guidance counselors, and mentors, and that these individuals have the opportunity to influence the behaviors of students towards, and away from, higher education. Teachers’ words are heard by students, and statements
made by teachers to classes may have negative impacts on the aspirations of the whole class.

Course-taking matters, but not as much as test taking and participating in the college application process. Students who do not take concrete steps towards college, by taking the SAT, applying to college, or filling out financial aid applications while in high school, are unlikely to enter higher education immediately after graduating. However, these students may return to higher education in the future, so it important to have many on ramps towards educational attainment.

Rural education is important, as over 20% of American students live in rural areas (Provasnik et al., 2007). As rural areas recover from the loss of agricultural and manufacturing businesses, they are challenged to adjust to a more knowledge-based economy. While doing so, they seek to maintain their rural identities, which celebrate activities such as hunting, fishing, and driving trucks. The challenge is to let rural students know that they can be true to their rural roots and families, while still striving towards their educational goals; whether those goals are reading Aristotle, studying marine electronics, or becoming a firefighter.
Appendix A: Email to Teachers

Dear Colleague:

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for my degree in higher education at the College of William & Mary, I am conducting a study entitled, “Drivin’ Trucks, Huntin’ Bucks, and Reading Aristotle?: The Rural Student’s College Choice Dilemma.” The study is designed to help understand the college choice process for rural students.

I plan to interview former students, graduates of the classes of 2010 or 2011, who took one of two pathways after high school. They either attended a community college or a four-year college directly after high school, or did not attend college or a trade school and entered the workforce. Their insights into their post-secondary experiences are important in helping to understand how students from rural areas make decisions about their plans after high school.

My goal is talk to a minimum of nine former high school graduates, students who you would consider college-able. At least three will have attended a four-year college directly after high school, at least three will have attended a community college or trade school, and at least three will have not attended any further higher education as of yet.

The data collection for this study will take place in February 2013. Within this time frame, I will conduct one interview with each participant, lasting approximately one hour. After the interview, I will email a transcript for them to review for clarifications and corrections. I may request a brief follow-up interview if needed for clarification.

I will be conducting the study for my dissertation research, under the supervision of my dissertation chair, Dr. Pamela Eddy. Please know that your name and other identifying information will be known only to the primary researcher and your personally identifiable information will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. Pseudonyms will be used in the final manuscript and in any publications or presentations, and there be no personally identifiable information used without prior written consent. The audio recordings of interviews will be locked securely in the researcher’s files and will be erased when the study is finished.

If you know of former students who may have interesting stories or experiences to share related to this study, please respond to this email with their contact information and why you are recommending them for the study. Feel free to share this email with others who may suggest individuals for this study.

Thank you so much for your consideration.

Cordially,

Rachel Mayes Strawn

Contact Information
If you have questions or concerns about this study, please contact the researcher, Rachel Mayes Strawn (rmstrawn@wm.edu; 757-221-2509) at the College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, VA or her supervising professor, Dr. Pamela Eddy (peddy@wm.edu) at 757-221-2349. If you have additional questions or concerns about your rights as a participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact,
anonymously, if you wish, Dr. Tom Ward, EDIRC Chair at 757-221-2358 (EDIRC-L@wm.edu) or the Chair of the Protection of Human Subjects Committee, Dr. Lee Kirkpatrick at (consent@wm.edu) at 1-855-800-7187.
Appendix B: Email to Counselors

Dear Colleague:

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for my degree in higher education at the College of William & Mary, I am conducting a study entitled, “Drivin’ Trucks, Huntin’ Bucks and Reading Aristotle?: The Rural Student’s College Choice Dilemma.” The study is designed to help understand the college choice process for rural students.

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I will be conducting the study for my dissertation research, under the supervision of my dissertation chair, Dr. Pamela Eddy. Please know that your name and other identifying information will be known only to the primary researcher and your personally identifiable information will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. Pseudonyms will be used in the final manuscript and in any publications or presentations, and there be no personally identifiable information used without prior written consent. The audio recordings of interviews will be locked securely in the researcher’s files and will be erased when the study is finished.

I would also like to interview a minimum of two high counselors about the challenges and supports they believe students from the high school may face regarding their post-secondary plans. If you would be willing to participate in this capacity, please let me know.

Thank you so much for your consideration.

Cordially,

Rachel Mayes Strawn

Contact Information
If you have questions or concerns about this study, please contact the researcher, Rachel Mayes Strawn (rmstrawn@wm.edu; 757-221-2509) at the College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, VA or her supervising professor, Dr. Pamela Eddy (peddy@wm.edu) at 757-221-2349. If you have additional questions or concerns about your rights as a participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact, anonymously, if you wish, Dr. Tom Ward, EDIRC Chair at 757-221-2358 (EDIRC-L@wm.edu) or the Chair of the Protection of Human Subjects Committee, Dr. Lee Kirkpatrick at (consent@wm.edu) at 1-855-800-7187.
Appendix C: Counselor Interview Questions

- Tell me a little bit about the students at Brighton High School.
  - Probes:
    - What is important to them?
    - Do they plan for life after high school?
    - What do they think about doing after high school?
- In recent years, about 1/3 of Brighton graduates entered higher education within 2 years of graduating, what did the other do after graduating?
- What supports are available to Brighton students regarding college?
- Do you believe the Brighton community supports education?
  - Probes:
    - How does the community support education?
    - How does the community not support education?
- Do Brighton parents support education?
  - Probes:
    - How do Brighton parents encourage higher education for their children?
- What supports are available to Brighton students regarding college?
- What challenges do Brighton students face regarding college?
• What policies or programs are most useful to Brighton students who are interested in pursuing higher education?
Appendix D: Participant Interview Questions

• Tell me a little bit about yourself.
  o Probes:
  o How would you describe yourself to someone that you have just met?

• Tell me about your experiences in Brighton.
  o Probes:
  o How long have you lived here? Were you born here?
  o Were your parents? Grandparents?
  o What was like to grow up here?
  o Did you/do you plan to stay?
  o Do your parents want you to stay?

• What is important to you to accomplish in life?
  o Do you have career plans?
  o Do you plan to have a family?
  o Do you want to own a home?
  o Is financial stability important to you?

• When did you remember first thinking about life after school?
  o Probes:
  o Did you think about college? Why? Why not?
• What types of colleges did you think about- 4 year, community, on-line?

• Did you think how your future plans linked with planning for courses/experiences in high school such as taking college preparatory classes including AP and upper level math?

• Do you remember the context of when you first were thinking about life after school? E.g. counseling appointment; class assignment; family conversation? Etc.

• What did you imagine doing after high school?

  • Probes:

    • Was college in your plans?

    • Did you have a family business/family tradition?

    • Were you expected to do the same thing as an older sibling?

    • How have those ideas changed, if at all?

    • How do you think your plans compared to others that you went to high school with?

    • What do you think most of your classmates from high school ended up doing after high school?

• What does your family think about college?

  • Probes

    • Did your parents go to college? Grandparents
• How many years? Where?
• What did your parents say to you about college?
• Did they or do they want you to go?

• Who helped you think about your future in high school?
  • Probes:
    • Did your parents help?
    • Did counselors help you?
    • Did coaches or teachers help you?
    • Peers?

• Who has guided your plans for the future?
• What other factors have influenced your decisions?
• Did you talk to a college counselor or a guidance counselor about your plans?
• What did you know about colleges when you were in high school?
  • Probes:
    • Did you look at materials from colleges?
    • Did you talk with anyone at a college?
    • Did you visit any colleges?
    • Do you have any siblings in college/friends?
    • What do you know about their experiences?
    • Did you prepare to apply for college?
o What courses did you take in math, science, and language?

o How many students were in your classes?

o Did you take the SAT? The PSAT?

o How did your scores on these tests influence your decision?

Four-year college questions:

• How many colleges did you apply to? All four-year? How many did you get in?
• Did you apply for federal student loans?
• How was information about student loans communicated to you?
• Did the recession affect your decision to go to college or not?
• What colleges did you apply to?
• Why did you apply to those colleges?
• Which colleges accepted you?
• How did you choose which college to go to?
• Did finances affect your decision?

Community college questions:

• Did you apply to multiple community colleges and/or four-year universities?
• Did you apply for federal student loans?
• How was information about student loans communicated to you?
• Did the recession affect your decision to go to college or not?
• What colleges did you apply to?
• Why did you apply to those colleges?
• Which colleges accepted you?
• How did you choose which college to go to?
• Did finances affect your decision?
• Did you consider applying to a four-year college?
• Do you plan to transfer to a four-year college?

No college questions:
• Did you ever consider attending college while you were in middle or high school?
• Do you think you will attend college in the future?
• What influenced your decision not to go to college?
• Did finances play a role?
• Did you feel you were academically prepared for college?
## Appendix E: Interview Questions Crosswalk Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>What do former rural high school students perceive as the factors that influenced their post-secondary plans regarding higher education?</th>
<th>What challenges did rural students face in making choices regarding post-secondary education?</th>
<th>What supports did rural students have as they made choices regarding post-secondary education?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tell me a little bit about yourself.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would you describe yourself to someone that you have just met?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What would others say to describe you?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me about your experiences living in Brighton.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>How long have you lived here? Were you born here?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were your parents? Grandparents?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was it like to grow up here?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Did you/do you plan to stay?</td>
<td>X X X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do your parents want you to stay?</td>
<td>X X X</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Did your older siblings/cousins/friends stay?</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>What is important to you to accomplish in life?</td>
<td>X X X</td>
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<tr>
<td>What are some of your life dreams?</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you have career plans?</td>
<td>X X X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you plan to have a family?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you want to own a home?</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is financial stability important to you?</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>What other factors have influenced your decisions?</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>When did you remember first thinking about life after school?</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Did you think about college?</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Why/Why not?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What types of colleges did you think about- 4 year, community, on-line?</td>
<td>X X X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Did you think how your future plans linked with planning for courses/experiences in high school such as taking college preparatory classes including AP and upper level math?</td>
<td>X X X</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
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<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you remember the context of when you first were thinking about life after school? E.g. counseling appointment; class assignment; family conversation? Etc.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did you imagine doing after high school?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was college in your plans?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Did you have a family business/family tradition?</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Were you expected to do the same thing as an older sibling/cousin?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>How have those ideas changed, if at all?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>How do you think your plans compared to others that you went to high school with?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>What do you think most of your classmates from high school ended up doing after high school? Have you stayed in touch with high school friends?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What does your family think about college?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Did your parents go to college?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grandparents?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>How many years? Where?</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What did your parents say to you about college?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Did they or do they want you to go?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Did your family offer/plan to pay for college?</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Who helped you think about your future in high school?</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Did your parents help?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Did you talk to a college counselor or a guidance counselor about your plans?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Did coaches or teachers help you?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Peers?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other mentors? Who?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who has guided your plans for the future?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>What did you know about colleges when you were in high school?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Did you look at materials from colleges?</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Did you talk with anyone at a college?</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Did you visit any colleges?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have any siblings in college/friends?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>What do you know about their experiences?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Did you prepare to apply for college?</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>What courses did you take in math, science, and language?</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>How many students were in your classes?</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Did you take the SAT? The PSAT?</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Four-year college questions:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>How many colleges did you apply to? All four-year? How many did you get in?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What colleges did you apply to?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why did you apply to those colleges? How did you choose which college to go to?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which colleges accepted you?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you take any college courses at the community college while in high school?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Did you apply for federal student loans?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>How was information about student loans communicated to you?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Did the recession or personal finances affect your decision to go to college or not?</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community college questions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you apply to multiple community colleges and four-year universities?</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>What colleges did you apply to?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why did you apply to those colleges? Did you consider applying to a four-year college?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you take any courses at the community college while in high school?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Which colleges accepted you?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did you choose which college to go to?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Did you apply for federal student loans?</td>
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<td>How was information about student loans communicated to you?</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did the recession or personal finances affect your decision to go to college or not?</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>finances affect your decision to go to college or not?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you plan to transfer to a four-year college?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>No college questions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you ever consider attending college while you were in middle or high school?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think you will attend college in the future?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What influenced your decision not to go to college immediately after high school?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did finances play a role?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you feel you were academically prepared for college?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does your current job expect you to obtain more education in order to advance?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Question for All:</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As I try to understand the factors and background influences on your decisions for after high school planning, what may I have missed in our conversation that would be important to know? What do you see as the biggest factor that influenced your plans?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions for counselors:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me a little bit about the students at Brighton High School.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have most of the families been in the community a long time or is the community more transient?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is important to the high school students?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What/who influences their post-secondary decision-making the most?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do they plan for life after high school?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do they think about doing after high school?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In recent years, about 1/3 of Brighton graduates entered higher education within 2 years of graduating. Do you think this number has increased or decreased recently? What might contribute to this change?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do students do after graduating if they do not attend college?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What supports are available to Brighton students regarding college?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What type of message do students receive in the community about education?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is education valued? For all?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>How does the community support education? E.g. newspaper articles, funding support for extracurricular teams like Science Olympiad, etc.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What messages does the community send that shows a lack of support for education?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Do Brighton parents support education?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Are there high levels of parent support in the public schools?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>How do Brighton parents encourage higher education for their children?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What supports are available to Brighton students regarding college? E.g. financial aid seminars, trips to regional colleges, college admission counselors in the school.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What challenges do Brighton students face regarding college?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Financial barriers?</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of knowledge of the college going process?</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low academic preparation?</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of motivation?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What policies or programs are most useful to Brighton students who are interested in pursuing higher education?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Virginia Higher Education Act promotes careers in STEM and there is often funding available for students pursuing these careers. Workforce and department of labor policies are supporting career pathways for skilled workers. Any impact on the local level?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As I think about the factors influencing student choices regarding post-secondary plans.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
is there anything else I may not have asked or considered that would be important to know?
Appendix F: Research Participant Consent Form

Purpose of the Study
The title of the study is “Drivin’ Trucks, Huntin’ Bucks, and Reading Aristotle?: The Rural Student’s College Choice Dilemma.” The study is designed to help understand the college choice process for rural students.

Importance of Your Participation
Your participation is important because you graduated from a high school in a rural community within the last three years and consider yourself college-able. You took one of two pathways after high school. You either attended a community college or a four-year college directly after high school, or did not attend college or a trade school and entered the workforce. Your insights into your post-secondary experiences are important in helping to understand how students from rural areas make decisions about their plans after high school.

Study Participants
The goal is talk to a minimum of nine former high school graduates. At least three will have attended a four-year college directly after high school, at least three will have attended a community college or trade school, and at least three will have not attended any further higher education as of yet.

Timeline
The data collection for this study will take place in February 2013. Within this time frame, I will conduct one interview with each participant, lasting approximately one hour. After the interview, I will email you a transcript for you to review for clarifications and corrections. I may request a brief follow-up interview if needed for clarification.

Personnel
The interviewer and primary researcher will be Rachel Mayes Strawn, a Ph.D. student in the College of William & Mary School of Education and member of the community to be studied. I will be conducting the study for my dissertation research, under the supervision of her dissertation chair, Dr. Pamela Eddy. Please know that your name and other identifying information will be known only to the primary researcher and your personally identifiable information will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. Pseudonyms will be used in the final manuscript and in any publications or presentations, and there be no personally identifiable information used without prior written consent. The audio recordings of interviews will be locked securely in the researcher’s files and will be erased when the study is finished. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you may decline to participate or answer any questions during the interview. You may also withdraw from the study at any time by contacting the researcher by phone or email. A summary of the study results will be emailed to you upon completion of the study.

Contact Information
If you have questions or concerns about this study, please contact the researcher, Rachel Mayes Strawn (rmstrawn@wm.edu; 757-221-2509) at the College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, VA or her supervising professor, Dr. Pamela Eddy (peddy@wm.edu) at
757-221-2349. If you have additional questions or concerns about your rights as a participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact, anonymously, if you wish, Dr. Tom Ward at 757-221-2358 (EDIRC-L@wm.edu) or Dr. Lee Kirkpatrick (consent@wm.edu) at 1-855-800-7187.

By signing below, you are stating that you agree to voluntary participation in this study, and are confirming that you are at least 18 years of age.

A copy of this consent form will be given to you to keep.

Participant Signature: ________________________________

Date: ________________

Interviewer Signature: ________________________________

Date: ________________
References


Phenomenological psychology, grounded theory, discourse analysis, narrative research, and intuitive inquiry (pp. 224-242). New York, NY: Guilford Press.


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Johannes Brahms

Johannes Brahms was a composer. He was born on May seventh eighteen thirty-three in Hamburg, Germany. Brahms was the son of Johanna Jacobs and Christina Nissen Brahms. Brahms was a middle child. He had an older sister and a younger brother. They lived near the docks in Hamburg for six months. They then moved to a small city in Inner Alster.

At about age ten he was learning piano from named Otto Cosell. When he was ten years old he played at a concert. The pieces he played at that concert were not originals. When he was about eleven years old he started composing, however he destroyed most of these haphazardly made pieces. Today we don’t know what Brahms’ actual first piece was but the first one reported was a piano sonata sadly, that piece was destroyed also.

His second piano teacher was Eduard Marxesen. Marxesen knew Mozart, so that was a good connection for Brahms. By the time he was a teenager he was playing at local hotels and on the docks. Later in his teens he became a choir conductor. Brahms started careers early in life because his family was poor.

Brahms composed symphonies, concerti, chamber music, piano works, and choral compositions. He wrote over one hundred-fifty songs. He did not ever write any operas, maybe because they were a little out of date and not as popular as they were in the 1700s. Some of the songs he wrote include Schicksalslied (meaning “song of destiny”) in 1871. This song was based off of a poem written by a man named Friedrich Holderlin. Another piece was a Violin Concerto in D major. Many of his works took him ten to twenty years to complete because he always wanted to prefect them.
When Brahms was in his forties, he moved from Germany to Vienna, Austria for work reasons. When he was fifty-seven he decided to retire. In the years before Brahms died he composed a number of masterpieces including: the Clarinet trio and the Eleven Chorale for organs.

On April third, eighteen ninety-seven Brahms died of liver Cancer. He was sixty-three years old when he died. His liver failed probably of an excessive amount of alcohol consumption through out his life. He was buried in the Zentralfriedhof cemetery in Vienna. In the years after Brahms' death, other composers honored Johannes Brahms in their concerts such as Hubert Parry.

The couple things I like about this composer is that one- he kept composing until the year he died, and number two is that he came from a poor family and worked very hard every minute of his life to achieve success. I think that it was odd, yet nice that Brahms would walk around and give children candy. I think it was different that Brahms never married and never had children. Brahms was a very hard-working and generous man.

I listened to Brahms' sixteen waltzes OP39. At the beginning of the song it was soft then gradually got louder then softer again. I liked this song because it repeated the same melody while crecendoing and decrescendoing. Also, it used the violin and I think the violin is one of the prettiest sounding instruments. I think that Sixteen Waltzes OP39 was a beautiful song.

Brahms was an interesting man. Brahms created a number of famous masterpieces that musicians still praise today. Though he came from poverty, he became one of the most famous musicians in all of time.
Johannes Brahms was a composer. He was born on May seventh, eighteen thirty-three in Hamburg, Germany. Brahms was the son of Johanna Jacobs and Christina Nissen Brahms. Brahms was a middle child. He had an older sister and a younger brother. They lived near the docks in Hamburg for six months. They then moved to a small city in Inner Alster.

At about age ten he was learning piano from a man named Otto Cosell. When he was ten years old, he played at a concert. The pieces he played at that concert were not originals. When he was about eleven years, old he started composing; however, he destroyed most of these haphazardly made pieces. Today, we don’t know what Brahms’ actual first piece was. The first one reported was a piano sonata. Sadly that piece was destroyed, also.

His second piano teacher was Eduard Marxesen. Marxesen knew Mozart, so that was a good connection for Brahms. By the time he was a teenager, he was playing at local hotels and on the docks. Later, in his teens he became a choir conductor. Brahms started his career early in life because his family was poor.

Brahms composed symphonies, concerti, chamber music, piano works, and choral compositions. He wrote over one hundred-fifty songs. He did not ever write any operas, maybe because they were a little out of date and not as popular as they were in the 1700s. Some of the songs he wrote include Schicksalslied (meaning “song of destiny”) in 1871. This song was based off of a poem written by a man named Friedrich Holderlin. Another piece was a Violin Concerto in D major. Many of his works took him ten to twenty years to complete because he always wanted to perfect them.
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