

FACTORS AFFECTING THE ACADEMIC PERSISTENCE OF APPALACHIAN
FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

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by

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ABSTRACT

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This phenomenology examines the factors affecting the academic persistence of Appalachian first-generation student and the influence which academic support services has on their persistence. The participants were students from the Student Support Services program at West Virginia University. In a phenomenology, the themes need to flow from the data obtained from the research participants, rather than being presupposed by the researcher. The themes emerging from the experiences of these students were the importance of the family, financial concerns, the power of internal motivation, relationships and emotional support, the communication of information, and the influence of being Appalachian. Each of these has a significant impact on the students' academic persistence. It was found that their participation in academic support services, specifically Student Support Services, is instrumental in their persistence, not so much for the academic support, but because of relationships established.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

The Appalachian region of the United States stretches along the Appalachian Mountain Range, encompassing all of West Virginia and portions of 12 other states, from New York south to Mississippi (Appalachian Regional Commission, n.d.; Couto, 1994). It is a largely rural area, which has traditionally faced challenges of poverty, low rates of white-collar employment, and low rates of college attendance (Chenoweth & Gallilher, 2004; Matvey, 1987). A priority for the region is to increase participation in higher education in order to create a more educated workforce (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004). Statistics reveal a direct link between educational achievement and economic development. In 2000, 17.7% of the Appalachian adult population had a college degree, compared to 24.4 % of the U.S. adult population (ARC, 2004). According to 2002 figures, the average per capita income in Appalachia was \$25,470 compared to the U.S. average of \$30,906 (ARC, 2005). In considering these statistics, one of Haaga's (2004) biggest concerns is the effect of migration, that the Appalachian region is not "producing, retaining, or attracting college graduates" at a high enough rate to maintain a positive "balance of trade" (p. 10, 11). For the most part, the college-educated adults who are moving out of the region are not being replaced by immigrating adults with a similar education.

The Appalachian Regional Commission divides the region into three sub-regions: Northern, Central, and Southern. The most “distressed” counties according to the economic analysis of ARC (2005), fall within the central sub-region including eastern Kentucky, parts of Tennessee and Virginia, and southern West Virginia (see Appendix D). Understandably, the rural areas of Appalachia suffer the most; the metropolitan areas have much higher college going rates and higher income levels. For example, in many of the West Virginian rural counties, only 33-48% of 2002-2003 high school graduates attended college in the fall of 2003, while the national college-going average is 56% (WVHPC, 2004, p. 11). In 2000, only 14.8% of the West Virginia population over age 25 had a college degree, even lower than the Appalachian rate of 17.7% (ARC, 2004). See Appendix E for an Appalachian map of college completion rates.

Although this research is being performed within the framework of the whole of Appalachia, the focus will be on West Virginia since it is located entirely in the Appalachian Mountains and is primarily rural. West Virginia has a total of 15 distressed counties and several which are “at-risk” (ARC, 2005). As in the Appalachian region as a whole, an intense effort is being made in West Virginia to increase college graduation rates in order to better the economy. Again, statistics indicate the relationship between education and the economy. Between 1998 and 2001, 26.3% of West Virginia employees had a college degree compared to 36.1% in the nation. In 2000, only 27.9% of West Virginia’s employment was in jobs requiring a bachelor’s degree and yielding higher salaries (professional and management), compared to the national rate of 33.6% (National Collaborative on Postsecondary Education, 2004, p. 19-20; West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission, 2004; The National Center for Higher Education

Management Systems, 2002). See Table 1 for a summary of postsecondary and employment comparative statistics.

The education level of parents is a major factor in the high school student's decision of whether to go to college or not. In their study, Chenoweth and Gallilher (2004) revealed that students are much more likely to attend college if their parents did. Students whose parents did not graduate from college (or, by some definitions, even attend college) are called first-generation students. For these students, the college-going process is particularly challenging.

Getting students, especially first-generation students, to enroll in college is difficult. However, the battle has only just begun. They need to stay in college. Thus, this study examined the factors that affect the academic persistence of Appalachian, particularly West Virginian, first-generation students and sought to determine ways in which academic support services, such as Student Support Services of the TRIO program and tutoring, help these students to succeed. The phenomenological qualitative method was employed as it allowed the researcher to study a phenomenon as it is experienced in the lives of individuals, seeking to determine the shared elements of the phenomenon. The phenomenon being studied was the academic persistence of the Appalachian first-generation college student.

Rationale

There has been a significant amount of research completed on the Appalachian student's initial decision to attend college. However, there are few studies on the retention and academic success of the students once they have entered a college or university. Admittedly, the first step is to get a student through the doors of an institution

of higher education; however, little has been accomplished if they leave after one semester. Statistics reveal a startling reality regarding postsecondary retention in West Virginia. Between 1998 and 2001, 54% of high school graduates attended college right out of high school (as mentioned earlier, the rate is much lower in rural areas), ranking West Virginia as 33rd compared to other states. However, the Higher Education Report Card reveals a 71.6% (some sources report 68%) first to second-year retention rate, ranking West Virginia as 40th among all states. Finally, the 6-year graduation rate is 38.5%, ranking West Virginia as 45th among states (WVHEPC, 2004, p. 17, 29). These statistics clearly indicate the challenges that West Virginia face in the area of post-secondary retention. See Table 1 for a summary of comparative statistics.

Table 1

Postsecondary Degree Comparison, 1998-2001

	West Virginia	U. S. average	State ranking
Percentage of work force with college degree	26.3%	36.1%	----
Jobs requiring bachelor's degree	27.9%	33.6%	----
College-going rate of high school graduates (right out of high school)	54.0%	56.6%	33rd
First to second year post-secondary retention	71.6%	74.0%	40th
Six-year graduation rate	38.5%	53.0%	45 th

Note Dashes indicate no available ranking. Statistics obtained from the National Collaborative for Postsecondary Education Policy, 2005; the West Virginia Higher

Education Policy Commission, 2004; and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, 2002.

A direct link is drawn between educational attainment and the growth of the economy. “It All Adds Up” is a program of the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission to increase participation in higher education in order to have a better-trained workforce. West Virginia’s overall goal is “to align the West Virginia higher education system to contribute to the long-term growth and diversification of West Virginia’s economy” (WVHEPC, 2005, p. 1). Because the traditional jobs in mining and manufacturing are being lost, and there is growth in the professional and service industries, the workforce needs to be trained for these new opportunities.

Thus, not only do we need to discuss recruitment, but we also need to consider the issue of retention. Green (as cited in Noel, 1985) states that “stable enrollments ultimately depend on the retention of currently enrolled students as well as the steady inflow of new students.” The purpose of this study is to determine the factors which influence the academic persistence (retention) of Appalachian college students and to examine the efficacy of academic support services designed to help students persist.

Research Questions

1. What are the factors which influence the academic persistence of Appalachian (specifically West Virginian) first-generation college students?
2. How do academic support services (such as Student Support Services in the TRIO program, tutoring, and Supplemental Instruction) help Appalachian first-generation students to persist in college?

Definition of Terms

1. Academic persistence – “3rd through 6th semester students who are eligible to return to the same college for the next semester” (McLain, 2002).
2. Appalachia – according to the Appalachian Regional Commission, this region follows the spine of the Appalachian Mountains and consists of 406 counties in 13 states (all of West Virginia and portions of Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia).
3. Appalachian Regional Commission – created by the Appalachian Regional Development Act in 1965 to work with the people of Appalachia with the goal of “self-sustaining economic development and improved quality of life” (ARC, n.d., para. 1).
4. At-risk (high risk) students – “students who, by institutional standards, are deemed unlikely to complete their degree program” (Tinto, 1987, p. 75).
5. Barriers to success – obstacles to academic success, divided into the categories of situational, institutional, and psychological barriers (Cross, 1981).
6. First generation students – defined by TRIO as students whose parents have not obtained a baccalaureate degree. However, for the purposes of this study, defined as students whose parents have attended no college courses.
7. Non-traditional students – students who are older than traditional college-going age, live off campus, and often attend part-time because of jobs and/or family responsibilities.

8. PROMISE scholarship – “A West Virginia merit-based scholarship program designed to keep qualified students in West Virginia by making college affordable” (www.PROMISEscholarships.org). PROMISE stands for “Providing Real Opportunities for Maximizing In-state Student Excellence”
9. Retention – refers to the institution’s ability to keep a student until he/she graduates from that institution (Tinto, 1987, p. 3).
10. Self-efficacy – The sense of self-confidence that a person has in performing a task. This is an important aspect of intrinsic motivation.
11. Student Support Services (SSS) – a federally-funded TRIO program which provides academic assistance to first generation, low income, and disabled college students.
12. Traditional students – students who enroll in college directly, or almost directly, out of high school and normally attend full-time.
13. TRIO programs – programs begun in the 1960’s as a part of Lyndon Johnson’s Economic Opportunity Act. Now refers to Upward Bound, Talent Search, Student Support Services, Educational Opportunity Centers, and the McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program.
14. Upward Bound – a TRIO program which targets youth 13-19 years old who have experienced low academic success, and come from low-income, 1st generation families.
15. West Virginia University (WVU) – the largest university in West Virginia consisting of approximately 26,000 students, of whom 19,500 are undergraduates. WVU is located in Morgantown, an hour south of Pittsburgh, PA.

Delimitations of the Study

This study was delimited in the following ways:

1. All students participating in the study were participants in the Student Support Services program at West Virginia University located in Morgantown, West Virginia.
2. All students participating in the study were first generation, had attended college at least two semesters, and were from the Appalachian region, specifically from West Virginia. For the sake of simplicity, I chose only students from rural or small-town West Virginia, guided by the knowledge that West Virginia is in the heart of Appalachia and, although Appalachia is not homogeneous by any means, there are essential cultural similarities.
3. The researcher lives in the Appalachian region (Franklin, WV), however, was not raised there. This could have potentially limited the openness of students in the interviews.

Significance

Early in the morning on January 2, 2006, West Virginia received worldwide attention because of 13 miners trapped in the Sago coalmine in Tallmansville. The drama continued to unfold as rescue teams underwent the arduous task of trying to reach the coalminers, not even knowing if they would find them dead or alive. During this time of waiting, Samantha Lewis, wife of 28-year-old David Lewis, one of the trapped miners, made the comment, “This was a good way to make a living until we could find something different. It’s just a way of life. Unless you’re a coal miner or you have a college degree,

you don't make any money" ("Rescue teams," 2006). Twelve of the miners died including David Lewis.

Coal-miners play a vital role in the economy of West Virginia, the Appalachian region, and the nation. As has become evident in the Sago mine tragedy, however, many young men just out of high school do not see options other than coal mining; it was in their family's blood and their blood. As Samantha Lewis poignantly expressed, a college degree offers other options. More people are seeing these options, as the average age of the coal miner is "well above 45" (Sheehan, 2006). In fact, the majority of the trapped miners were over 50 years old.

Although this research will focus on West Virginia, its significance extends to the whole Appalachian region, the 12 other states which are partially included in this area. Stereotypes, many negative, abound concerning the Appalachians, and they have often become self-fulfilling prophecies. When Appalachian students in an Appalachian Studies course were asked to give adjectives describing this region, they gave negative words such as "poor, backward, and ignorant;" yet they also described Appalachians in a more positive light with words such as "rugged, independent, hardworking, and quaint" (Banker, 2002). Appalachians often struggle to accept who they are; these Appalachian Studies courses often give them an opportunity to tell their stories, helping them to understand and accept their identity. Fisher (2002), the instructor of an Appalachian Political Economy course at Emory and Henry College in Virginia, asserts, "As risky and challenging as the process may be, I am convinced that only when people have an opportunity to speak their minds-to tell their stories-does education have a chance to happen" (p. 422). Through this research, I sought to give Appalachian students an

opportunity to tell their stories, possibly allowing them to better appreciate their roots and identity; and through their stories, I gained (and hope to communicate to others) a better understanding of their experiences in higher education.

Not only does this research give a voice to individual students, but it also provides insight to the institutions of higher education as to how to best help their students to succeed academically. West Virginia's Independent Colleges and Universities is a consortium made up of 10 private colleges and universities. Forty percent of the WVICU students are first generation, the first in their family to even attend college (according to their definition) (WVICU, 2005). It is unclear how many of these first-generation students are of Appalachian origin, since there is a diverse population of students; nevertheless, the challenge is daunting. In the public colleges and universities, 31% of students enrolled were required to take developmental classes before beginning courses for academic credit – 22 % in four-year colleges and 63% in two-year colleges (WVHEPC, 2004, p. 5). These are the “at-risk” students, those who are likely to drop out after the first year. If higher education is to truly make a difference in Appalachia, the students who are recruited must be retained. These are the students who can make a choice in their occupation.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural Background of Appalachian Students

Stereotypes and Appalachian Studies. John O'Brien (2001), in a mission to better understand his family's origin, moved to West Virginia where his parents came from and set out to write about Appalachia. In his book *At Home in the Heart of Appalachia*, he wrote:

At the time I still did not know where Appalachia was or, for that matter, what it meant to be an Appalachian... I first heard the word in a college classroom. The professor, who was from out of state, told the class that all of West Virginia was Appalachia and that we—his students—were Appalachians. (p. 52)

O'Brien often talked about Appalachia as an invented place, used for the convenience of perpetuating stereotypes. He said, "One of my best friends told me that his father sometimes said that Appalachia had wheels on it. It rolled around the mountains, and like a traveling circus of hillbillies, stopped wherever the politicians wanted it to go" (p. 52).

It is true that when a particular culture or people are not understood, stereotypes often persist. Stereotypes are positive or negative generalizations which represent only a partial picture of the subject being described. This is true of Appalachia and the

Appalachians. The prevailing stereotypes of the Appalachian people are predominately negative: To outsiders, Appalachians are perceived as being hillbillies – backwards, poor, and uneducated. When such a stereotype is perpetuated long enough, and without significant counter-stereotypes, the people themselves begin to believe they are true. They view themselves as ignorant, not capable of obtaining a college education, a professional career, or other achievements (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004).

Fisher (2002), the instructor of an Appalachian Studies course, said, “During the first weeks of my Appalachian course, I encourage students to relate how Appalachian stereotypes have affected them. There is some initial reluctance, but soon the stories pour forth—angry, funny, painful, moving stories” (p. 422). Berry (2002), instructor of Appalachian Studies at Maryville College in Tennessee, described students as going through three stages in reflecting on their identity as Appalachians. First, they want to escape their Appalachian identity and past; many do not even want to admit that they are Appalachian and may lie about their origin. However, as they continue in the course, they learn to appreciate and even celebrate their culture, and in the final stage are able to critically analyze their culture, identifying both the negative and positive aspects. These courses in Appalachian Studies allow students to go beyond the stereotypes and take a more objective view of their culture; students leave the courses with a deeper appreciation for their own roots and yet an understanding of what needs to be changed.

Courses in Appalachian Studies have been an evolving development over the past 25 years. In 1977, the Appalachian Studies Conference was formed to promote writing, research and teaching about “things Appalachian” (Banks, Billings & Tice, 2002). Out of this initiative emerged courses in Appalachian Studies, leading to increased research and

activism. Many grassroots organizations have sprung out of this new activism, encouraging local citizens to be involved in reshaping their future. Postmodernist theory has also had an effect on Appalachian Studies, encouraging people to rethink their regional identities, to question stereotypes, and reexamine the relationship between scholarship and activism. Several postmodernist writers have challenged the “either/or of class versus culture,” recognizing and appreciating the differences and diversity in the region (Banks, et al, 2002, p. 32). Mooney (2002), Appalachian Studies instructor at Virginia Tech, confirmed this view:

If you keep working in the field, you come to see that the Hillbilly Nation is a vast and diverse place, staggeringly so... We are a beautiful and multi-hued patchwork (well, crazy) quilt, we hillbillies, and if we’ve got any sense, we will embrace each other and quick, and solve some of our regional issues, and then go to work on a national and international scale. (p. 436)

Economic considerations and working class. Poverty is an aspect of the Appalachian region which feeds many of the stereotypes. Appalachia has traditionally had a higher than average blue collar as compared to professional workforce. According to statistics presented to the National Collaborative on Postsecondary Education (2004), during the period of 1998-2001, 44.9% of the West Virginia jobs were in natural resources, factory, and low-skilled services, as compared to a 39% U.S. average (p. 19). Except for the category of natural resources, West Virginians earn consistently less than the U.S. average in each of the job types. The highest discrepancy occurs in the high tech category, with the West Virginia worker earning \$36,551 compared to the average U.S. high tech salary of \$49,689. The West Virginian average earnings are \$26,485 compared

to \$33,221 for the U.S. (p. 20). Perhaps the most striking statistic is that 23% of the West Virginian workforce is in the category of low-skilled service, with annual earnings of only \$14,423 (p. 21). Most of these low-skilled jobs are in the areas of mining and manufacturing, which in fact are now in a state of decline (NCPE, 2004). Thus almost a quarter of the workforce earns significantly below the poverty level, and even these jobs are in danger. See Table 2 for a comparative summary of employment and earnings.

Table 2

Employment and Earnings Comparison, 1998-2001

	West Virginia	U.S. average
Percentage of work force in blue collar jobs (natural resources, factory, low skills)	44.9%	39%
High tech yearly earnings	\$36, 551	\$49,689
Average yearly earnings	\$26,485	\$33,221

Note. Statistics obtained from the National Collaborative on Postsecondary Education, 2004.

With these figures in mind, West Virginian students, and most rural Appalachian students, would be defined as working class. However, the definition of “working class” is becoming more and more vague (Boiarsky, 2003). Is the difference between working class and middle class based only on economic considerations? This becomes more difficult to determine when a blue-collar factory worker (working class) may earn as much as or more than a teacher (considered professional, middle-class). For example, in West Virginia, a factory worker earns an average salary of \$27,878, just slightly less than

a teacher who earns \$28,059 (NCPE, 2004, p. 21). Thus cultural factors, such as lifestyle and level of education, must be considered. Some researchers want to use a four-year college degree as the boundary differentiating working-class and middle-class. Boiarsky stated that “they would replace ‘middle-class’ which implies an economic level, with the term ‘professional class’ which implies an educational level” (p. 9). Class, however, can also be a psychological phenomenon. Many working-class families do not even consider pursuing a college education because of cost and lifestyle. They feel that even if they could leave the working class by getting an education, they’re “stuck” where they are. Thus, perceptions come to be more significant than reality.

Historical considerations. Beyond merely describing the Appalachian condition, over the decades theorists have attempted to find plausible explanations. Why has the Appalachian region lagged behind economically, culturally, and academically? Matvey (1987) described two prevailing theories: Internalism, claiming that the problems are internal to the region due to cultural and geographic considerations, and Relationalism, blaming the problems on relations between regions and between classes. The proponents of cultural internalism state that the Appalachian culture, which enabled the local people to adapt effectively to the environment, now acts as a barrier to progress. The characteristics of individualism, traditionalism, stoicism, a fatalistic view of life, and person-orientation prevent Appalachians from embracing change and progress (Weller, 1965). Proponents of geographic internalism claim that geographical features have isolated Appalachians, blocking commerce and investment opportunities (Bradshaw, 1992).

Both orientations of internalism have been questioned, however. The cultural approach has been criticized because the values which are said to have created backwardness and poverty are the same qualities which enabled them to succeed in the coal industry. The entrepreneurial spirit was present in many small-scale coal operations. Rather than questioning the capitalistic work-ethic of the Appalachian, a more appropriate question would be why this work-ethic was never able to express itself in sectors other than the coal industry (Matvey, 1987). The geographic orientation is criticized because it singles out geography as the source of all problems. Critics point to other countries with similar geographical features, such as Switzerland, where economic growth has occurred despite rugged terrain (Caudill, as cited in Matvey, 1987).

Internalist theories were prevalent in the 1960's, but relationism offered another perspective. Rather than blaming the economic condition on backward values and geography, these theorists examined relations between regions and relations between classes (Caudill, 1963). Appalachia was viewed as the victim of internal colonialism, the colonizers being the outsiders who came in to control the coal industry. The area was exploited by these outsiders, capital flowed out, and the local area was left underdeveloped. The theory of colonialism also suggests an element of racism between the powerful colonizers and the "primitive natives." Walls (as cited in Matvey, 1987), however, maintains that the Appalachian situation does not suggest "an internal government within a government" as in the case of Native Americans (p. 11). In addition, the capitalists who came in were not different from other investors in the rest of the country during the period of industrial expansion. Finally, the case of racism is not

appropriate because the Appalachians share a common language, culture, and belief system with the rest of the U.S. (Arnett, as cited in Matvey, 1987).

A more plausible theory of relationism examines the relations of class in Appalachia. Proponents argue that poverty and underdevelopment are the result of a backward work and social relations in the coal industry, class structures, and poor management. The local inhabitants felt powerless to initiate change when faced by capitalist hegemony (Gaventa, 1980). Gaventa concludes that “time, of course, has brought changes in the [Appalachian] Valley – of technology, of culture, of social life – but, in the flux, the basic patterns of inequality and the supporting patterns of power and powerlessness have persisted, if not grown stronger” (p. 252).

Although both the internalist and relational models are useful, the relational orientation offers a more accurate explanation of the condition of Appalachia. Appalachia has not existed isolated from the rest of the world and thus must be studied in relationship to outside influences.

Localism, historicism, and familism. While Matvey emphasizes the economic aspects of Appalachian culture, Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) explain the culture in terms of a sense of belonging, focusing on localism, historicism and familism. Localism describes the sense of attachment that Appalachians have to the place where they were born and grew up. Baldwin (1996) describes this aspect of localism as “cultural place-boundness”; people want to stay in the same area that they grew up in. Not only are Appalachians committed to the land, but to their place in the history of that land. Likewise, they feel a strong bond to their family of origin, maintaining close family ties.

In their study, Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) looked for the influence of these three factors on the Appalachian's decision to go to college. There was a strong sense of familism, as the research revealed that high school students were much more likely to attend college if their parents, or even aunt or uncle had attended college. Males seemed to be particularly influenced by the education level of their parents, and by the profession of their fathers. Most males who decided not to attend college reported having fathers who were unemployed, unskilled or semiskilled. Strong Appalachian roots were reported by almost all of the students being surveyed, so it was difficult to determine the role of historicism in the college decision. Finally, localism did not seem to influence significantly a student's desire to attend college. However, as confirmed by Baldwin (1996) in his promotion of community colleges, localism does play a role in the decision of where to go to college.

First-generation College Students

At the core of John O'Brien's (2001) book about Appalachia is the relationship between himself, a graduate-school-educated writer, and his father, an Appalachian-raised factory worker. O'Brien offered this insight into their complex relationship:

My father put his head down, prayed, and walked to work every day. The idea that he had no choice kept him going. But if his son, who started with no more than he did, escaped that life, it meant that he might have done the same... My father was struggling to hold on to the meaning of his life.

(p. 231)

O'Brien felt that his father never understood the choices that he, his son, made. His father was a hard worker and did not understand how his son's education had helped

him and how writing could put food on the table. Father and son remained estranged until the father's death, and O'Brien did not even feel welcome at the funeral.

John O'Brien poignantly revealed the emotional side of what a first-generation student may experience. Other studies describe more objectively the nature of the Appalachian first-generation student. It is difficult to find statistics on the exact number of Appalachian first-generation students in higher education; however, the Appalachian Access and Success study (1992) found that among the Ohio Appalachians surveyed, 28.7% of high school seniors' fathers and 31.4% of their mothers had attended college (p. 2). With lower than average college-going rates, and as more students are being recruited, it can be assumed that an increasing number of these students will be the first in their family to graduate from college, or even to attend. Traditionally, "first generation" has meant that neither parent has graduated from college. However, a more accurate description for many families would be that neither parent has even attended a college course (Harrel & Forney, 2003).

As a result of their quantitative study involving 3,840 first-generation students, Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella and Nora (1996) claim that "first-generation students are more likely to come from low-income families, to have weaker cognitive skills (in reading, math, and critical thinking), to have lower degree aspirations, and to have been less involved with peers and teachers in high school" (p. 17). They continue to describe first-generation students as taking longer to complete degree programs, and receiving less support from their parents. They are, in other words, at risk academically, and their number will only be increasing on college campuses.

Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004) built on the research of Terenzini et al. (1996), following first-generation students through the first two years of college rather than just the first year. Their study incorporated the theory of cultural and social capital, suggesting that students with college-educated parents have an advantage over first-generation students in terms of better understanding the culture of higher education and having access to essential knowledge and information. They found that first-generation students came to college lacking in cultural and social capital, but were able to compensate for this deficiency by extracurricular and peer involvement on campus. They, therefore, benefited more from these campus activities than students with college-educated parents. Unfortunately, as stated in Terenzini et al., these students were also less likely to be involved on campus because of outside responsibilities.

London (1992) contributed significant research to first-generation college students, concluding that they “live on the margins” (p. 7). They do not want to break with the past, but aren’t fully accepted into the new culture. Often first-generation students try to become independent, but are bound to their parents; a relationship of dependency develops, which produces feelings of guilt in the child when he/she leaves the parents to attend college (London, 1989). The story of John O’Brien is a powerful illustration. In describing letters from his parents, he said, “In each letter, she asked the same question: Why have you done this to us out of the blue? We have done nothing, absolutely nothing to you. Each letter made me feel remorseful, guilty” (O’Brien, 2001, p. 81). According to London, if the child is encouraged to go to college, it is sometimes as a delegate, realizing unfulfilled dreams of the parent. Thus the child is still bound to the parent as one who is accomplishing the parent’s mission.

It is normal for adolescent and young adult children to experience conflict with their parents. However, conflict with college-educated parents would more likely center around topics such as majors, grades, or where to go to college, while first generation families would clash over whether or not to go to college at all. Pascarella et al. (2004) associate this difference to family cultural capital. The college expectations placed on a child are normally determined by the parents' own educational experience. Somers, Woodhouse and Cofer (2004) also discuss the role of values and expectations in the decisions of the first-generation student. Students have the most success when the values, beliefs, and expectations of their home life are similar to those of school. First-generation students experience much more incongruence in these areas than do students with college-educated parents.

Virtually all the research on first-generation students advocates for more involvement in student support services and bridge programs (involving high schools, community colleges, and four-year institutions), and establishing meaningful relationships with faculty and staff (Somers et al., 2004; Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996; Richardson & Skinner, 1992). Since many first-generation students work off-campus and have family responsibilities, increased exposure to the whole college experience is particularly important.

TRIO Programs

In discussing academic support for first-generation and lower income students, the name TRIO appears in much of the literature. The TRIO programs are a product of Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty" and the Economic Opportunity Act which he signed in August 1964. Upward Bound was the first TRIO program to be created,

targeting youth grades 9 through 12 who have experienced low academic success. Talent Search was then established, serving youth from disadvantaged backgrounds who show potential for succeeding in higher education. Student Support Services was formed in 1968 in order to help at-risk students succeed in college. All three programs became known as the TRIO programs and were transferred to the Office of Higher Education Programs. In 1972, the fourth program, Educational Opportunity Centers, was created to help adults (over 18) plan for postsecondary education. The Ronald McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program was formed in 1986 to assist academically successful low-income students prepare for doctoral study (McElory & Armesto, 1998; Coles, 1998).

Student Support Services (SSS) is the TRIO program which is particularly concerned with the retention of first-generation college students. The goal of SSS is “to increase the college retention and graduation rates of low-income, first-generation college students and students with disabilities and to facilitate their transition from one level of postsecondary education to the next” (U.S Department of Education, 2004, p. 1). Services provided by the authorizing legislation include basic skills instruction; individual and group tutoring; academic, financial, personal, and career counseling; mentoring; assistance in obtaining financial aid; cultural events; and help for LEP (limited English proficiency) students. According to 1997-1998 data, the most popular service was academic advising (received by 80% of participants), financial aid counseling (48%) and then personal counseling (41%) (U.S. Dept of Ed, p. ix).

Mixed results have been reported regarding the success of Student Support Services programs. The U.S. Department of Education (2004) reports that 67% of SSS

participants entering the program in 1997-98 remained enrolled in the same institution the following year. The following two years (1998-99 and 1999-2000), retention went up to 69% for SSS participants (p. x). Mahoney (1998) described a particularly successful SSS' program at California State University-Hayward. He found that between 1991 and 1995, 72% of EXCEL participants were retained compared to a 58.6% retention rate for non-EXCEL (but EXCEL eligible) participants, and a 67% rate for total undergraduate enrollment. Mahoney described the EXCEL program as being "responsive, synergistic, supportive, and successful" (p.382).

Other studies, looking particularly at graduation rates, do not indicate such dramatic results. In her dissertation focusing on the SSS program at West Virginia University, Dr. Copenhaver-Bailey found that the four and six-year graduation rates of SSS students were higher than those of eligible non-participants, but lower than students not eligible for the program (Copenhaver-Bailey, 2005). However, in an interview with Copenhaver-Bailey (personal communication, December 2, 2005), she noted the continual improvement of the program and anticipates that the six-year graduation rate of participants will surpass that of those who are not eligible. She also admitted that it is difficult to measure certain aspects of the program which make it successful, such as the personal relationships developed. In her research, Copenhaver-Bailey also noted other studies of SSS programs yielding similar results. Kharem's quantitative study of the SSS participants at The Pennsylvania State University revealed no significant difference in persistence between participants and non-participants. The participants, however, had entered the university with a higher GPA (as cited in Copenhaver-Bailey, 2005).

Thomas, Farrow, and Martinez (1998) reached a similar conclusion after research on the effect of support service programs: “None of the available research successfully links support services with college graduation rates” (p. 391). They conducted a quantitative study to determine the effectiveness of the Rutgers University Student Support Services Program (RSSSP). In investigating thirteen freshmen cohorts of RSSSP participants, they found that eleven of these cohorts achieved a graduation rate of over 50% (which is the goal of RSSSP), and three of the cohorts achieved a rate of over 60%, a significant accomplishment. Despite these positive outcomes, the researchers recognize the limitation of quantitative research in determining the connection between particular services and persistence. Other factors may be involved in a student’s success besides participation in the support services program.

Many quantitative studies state that further qualitative studies are needed to determine exactly how participants have been helped by the support programs. In one qualitative study, former Upward Bound students, White, Sakiestewa, and Shelley (1998) described how their experiences with Upward Bound were instrumental in their success in higher education and their subsequent decision to work with TRIO programs, helping others have the same opportunities. Wallace, Able, and Ropers-Huilman (2000) focused on mentoring relationships in their qualitative study of twenty TRIO participants, believing that these positive relationships can help bring down the barriers to college participation. The study participants described the benefits of both informal mentoring relationships with faculty, staff and peers, and formal relationships with TRIO staff. Some students described the TRIO staff as family, providing them with the encouragement and guidance needed to succeed in school. In her qualitative study of

participants in the SSS program at Southwest Texas State University (now Texas State University), McLain (2002) noted the opposite; there was not enough open communication between students and staff, resulting in unmet needs.

The stories revealed in qualitative research are powerful, but funding agencies want numbers. Thus, despite the testimonials, Talent Search and Upward Bound are on President Bush's "Program Termination" list for Fiscal Year 2006 budget cuts. This decision was based on results of the Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART) used by the government to evaluate programs. Talent Search received a "results not demonstrated" rating and Upward Bound received an "ineffective" rating on the PART (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Heather Campbell (as cited in Engblom, 2005), director of Upward Bound at St. Olaf College in Minnesota, defended Upward Bound saying, "The study did not measure the long-term effects of Upward Bound on its students, schools or communities. Also, the control group was not an accurate representation of non-Upward Bound students, with 25 percent of the students in the control group receiving services from other TRIO programs" (p. 1).

Barriers to Academic Persistence

One way to approach a study of the factors influencing academic persistence is by looking at the barriers to academic success. As mentioned in the preceding section, one of the goals of the TRIO programs is to remove these barriers. In her work on increasing adult participation in learning experiences, Cross (1981) outlined three major categories of barriers to learning: situational, institutional, and psychological. Situational barriers would be considered the practical aspects regarding a person's situation in life, such as job and home responsibilities, cost and time constraints, and lack of transportation.

Institutional barriers refer to the practices and procedures of the institution which may hinder a student from participating. These include scheduling conflicts, unavailability of courses, inability to meet requirements, lack of information, and too much red tape involved in enrollment. Psychological barriers relate to the student's attitudes and self-perception, such as fears because of past experiences, or fear of being too old. Students are often more apt to blame lack of participation or success on situational or institutional barriers than psychological barriers. It is more acceptable to say that a program costs too much than to admit low self-efficacy.

Barriers to college attendance and academic persistence in Appalachia. Most high school seniors in Appalachia want to attend college. In a study of Ohio Appalachians, 80% of high school seniors surveyed wanted to attend college. However, only about 30% actually did (Appalachian Access and Success, 1992, p. 1). What then is preventing so many students from attending college? The AAS identifies some barriers as being only perceived, such as lack of information and planning, but other barriers as actual, such as economic hardship.

The AAS study concluded that many of the barriers would be irrelevant if students were given more information about the resources available to them. Most parents are unable to save for a college education, but are unaware of the financial aid available. Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) also found that lack of finances and lack of information were primary barriers to attending college. Of the students surveyed, 29.4% cited financial constraints and 27.6% cited lack of information about college as primary concerns (p. 17).

Indirectly related to a lack of information and finances would be the level of education attained by parents. When neither parent has attended college, they likely have a lower income and are less informed about available resources and the procedure in obtaining aid. The importance of the education level of parents was confirmed in the study performed by Chenoweth and Galliher (2004). Boys in particular tended to follow the example set by their parents. The AAS study (1992) found that 60.1% of high school seniors ranked their parents as most influential in their decision to attend college. This same study revealed that 28.7% of the students' fathers and 31.4% of their mothers had attained some type of higher education (p. 2). Therefore, a majority of those 80% of high school seniors who wanted to attend college, would be first-generation students, a significant barrier to college access.

In her study of low-income SAT takers, King (1996) stated that 70% of the students surveyed responded that their parents were the most influential and helpful in making post-high school plans. Boiarsky (2003) described the role the working-class family would have in the college decision. She stated that "many working-class parents perceive education solely as a means for their children to move up the economic ladder; they seldom recognize that a college's goals are far broader than job training and that, therefore, their children need far more knowledge than just that required for a job" (p. 13). These parents may want their children to attend college, but have insufficient knowledge of all that is involved.

Another barrier to access in higher education is failure to complete college preparatory classes in high school. King (1996) found that those who completed four years of high school math, science, or foreign language are more likely than average to

attend a four-year college. Particularly, those who completed Advanced Placement courses are likely to attend a four-year college. In West Virginia in 2004, 30% of ACT test takers were enrolled in college preparatory courses, as compared to a 56% national average (WVHEPC, 2004, p. 2).

Lack of self-esteem represents a barrier not only in the initial decision to attend college, but also in succeeding once in college. Wayne White, executive director of the Ohio Appalachian Center for Higher Education (as cited in McDaniel, 2000), explained:

Sometimes people are embarrassed about where they came from and low self-esteem is the main reason most people in these counties don't attend college. People often believe that poverty is the number-one barrier to higher education, but not having the money to go to college is only a problem if one considers college [in the first place]. We had too many parents and children that seemed to have come to an independent decision that college wasn't for them—it was for other people. (p. 2)

The Appalachian Access and Success study (1992) also found evidence of low self-esteem in the seniors surveyed. A quarter of them felt they were not intelligent enough for college and another quarter felt that poor grades would be a barrier to attending college. Ross and Broh (2000) stated that “in the self-esteem model, adolescents who feel good about themselves do better in school than do those who have low self-worth” (p. 270).

Overcoming barriers to higher education in Appalachia. Appalachians are faced with many challenges in educating their population; however, they are also finding creative and innovative ways to overcome the barriers. One of the solutions is the

effective use of community colleges. Eldon Miller, president of West Virginia University at Parkersburg and chairman of Community Colleges of Appalachia said, “In Appalachia, every rural and distressed county is covered by a community college” (as cited in Baldwin, 1996, p. 1). Community colleges serve several important purposes in rural Appalachia. They have a role in economic development, attracting business to their area and training students in specific vocations. Gadsen State Community College in Northern Alabama has established a partnership with Bevill Center, a high-tech metal-working firm. Wytheville Community College in Virginia serves as the home for Manufacturing Technology Center (Baldwin, 1996). Former West Virginia Governor Gaston Caperton said, “the community and technical college system is central to West Virginia’s growing economic strength and stability” (as cited in Baldwin, p. 2). Community colleges also help to overcome the “place-boundedness” of Appalachia, offering local citizens the choice of attending college close to home. Distance learning represents another way of overcoming situational barriers of location. One of the goals of the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission is that “distance and media-enhanced enrollment will exceed 25 percent of total enrollments” (WVHEPC, 2005, p. 3).

The Ohio Appalachian Center for Higher Education (OACHE) is a consortium of ten public colleges and universities that was created in 1993 to increase the college-going rate among Appalachian Ohioans. This was the response to the findings of the Appalachian Access and Success project revealing that only 30 percent of high school students in that area went on to any type of higher education (AAS, 1992, p. 1). Through grant programs, arranging visits to campuses, career fairs, and other activities, the

organization seeks to increase access to higher education (McDaniel, 2000). By providing financial help and making information more available, OACHE helps to overcome situational and institutional barriers to education.

Other innovative approaches to overcoming the financial barriers have been colleges which exchange work for tuition. At Alice Lloyd College in Kentucky, students work 10 to 20 hours a week, and in return most receive scholarships that cover tuition, and more than half the students also get room and board free (Gose, 1998). Alice Lloyd allows students from the poorest counties in Appalachia to receive an education that they might otherwise never get. Other colleges with similar philosophies are Blackburn, Goddard, Warren Wilson Colleges, and the College of the Ozarks.

In 1999, West Virginia took a major step in overcoming the financial barriers with its PROMISE (Providing Real Opportunities for Maximizing In-state Student Excellence) Scholarship Program. This program offers each West Virginia high school graduate with a 3.0 GPA and a combined SAT score of 1000, a full tuition scholarship to a state college or university. The scholarship is only based on academic achievements, not on need (PROMISE Scholarship Program, 2005).

While many programs address situational barriers, such as financial need, TRIO programs help students overcome the institutional and psychological barriers by providing information and procedural help, and by offering academic support and advising. Upward Bound programs, focusing on low income high school students, are present in six West Virginian colleges and universities, as well as in high schools throughout the state. Student Support Services, targeting low income, first-generation

college students, has programs in nine West Virginian colleges and universities (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

Academic Persistence and Retention

When barriers to academic success are removed, students are able to persist in higher education. Unfortunately, many times universities are more concerned with retention for the sake of their own financial well-being, than for the sake of the individual student (Tinto, 1982). Despite having formulated a model which has become the foundation of many studies on attrition, Tinto recognizes that 100% retention is an unrealistic goal. In fact, over the past 100 years, dropout rates have remained constant at about 45%. Higher education may not be for everyone, and in trying to make college appropriate for everyone, the quality may be compromised. Tinto asserts,

There is little one can do at the national level to substantially reduce dropout from higher education without also altering the character of that education. Of course, we can and should act to reduce dropout among certain subgroups of the population where evidence supports the claim that those groups are being unjustly constrained from the completion of higher education. (p. 696)

Tinto and other researchers have a realistic view towards retention in higher education; nevertheless, their models and theories present significant themes which can assist in the effort of retention. The themes which will be discussed are that of academic and social integration, self-efficacy, locus of control, and self-regulation.

Academic and social integration. The essence of Tinto's model of academic persistence and withdrawal is that of academic and social integration (Tinto, 1975). Focusing on voluntary withdrawal, rather than academic failure, Tinto based his theory

on Durkheim's theory of suicide that "suicide is more likely to occur when individuals are insufficiently integrated into the fabric of society" (p. 91). In applying this theory to dropping out of college, Tinto claims that when students academic and intellectual needs are being met (academic integration) and/or when they have meaningful relationships with faculty and other students (social integration) they will be much more likely to make a commitment to that particular institution. Many other researchers have used Tinto's work as a foundation for their own studies.

Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) used this model in their study of freshman persistence. They found that the frequency of student-faculty informal contact had a significant impact on college persistence, confirming the importance of social integration. Using Tinto's model again, Pascarella and Chapman (1983) found that a student's commitment to a four-year residential institution is primarily because of social interactions. Academic integration, however, plays a larger role in two- and four-year commuter institutions. In their study on the effect of freshman mentoring and a unit registration program, Mangold, Bean, Adams, Schwab, and Lynch (2002-2003) confirmed Tinto's theory that social integration leads to higher retention rates. Gansemer-Topf and Schuh (2003-2004) used Tinto's model as the framework for studying the effect of academic support expenditures on retention and graduation. Spending more money on academic support, such as learning communities, first-year orientation and service learning, is a way of enhancing both academic and social integration. Sanchez (2000) also focused on the importance of learning communities in the retention of Hispanic and Native American students, allowing student to share their knowledge and be further integrated.

Studies have also focused on the role of mentoring, another aspect of integration, in academic success and retention. Wallace, Abel and Ropers-Huilman (2000) found that some students sensed a greater commitment to the university because of their relationships with university staff and faculty. Harrell and Forney (2003) in their research on retaining Hispanic and first-generation students, also emphasized the importance of mentoring. Not only will they need help and encouragement in getting to college, but “assistance may continue to be required in areas such as course selection, course scheduling, and locating resource materials” (p. 155). In their study, Bean and Eaton (2001-2002) examined the programs of service-learning, learning communities/Freshman Interest Groups, freshmen orientation seminars, and mentoring programs, showing how they contribute to academic and social integration.

Self-efficacy theory. Just as academic and social integration has formed the basis for many retention studies, so has self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is a model developed primarily in the social-cognitive work of Albert Bandura (1995) and refers to the sense of self-confidence that a person has in performing a particular task. Self-efficacy is an important aspect of Bean and Eaton’s (2001-2002) model of retention, as one of the psychological factors which enable students to become academically and socially integrated. In their study of first year college students, Chemers, Hu, and Garcia (2001), found that self-efficacy played a significant role in their academic performance and personal adjustment. According to Margolis and McCabe (2003), many struggling learners resist academics because they feel that they can’t succeed in the tasks required of them, such as homework. Thus teachers need to consistently address the issue of low self-efficacy in encouraging the students to overcome difficulties.

Pintrich (2003) related self-efficacy to expectancy-value theory; when people expect to do well, they will try harder, and perform better. Students who are confident in their ability, thus have a higher self-efficacy, will be more cognitively involved, increasing chances of persistence. As a result of his research, Pintrich proposed that self-efficacy affects three areas: behavioral engagement (determined by effort, persistence and help-seeking); cognitive engagement (characterized by thinking deeply about the subject and using appropriate learning strategies); and motivational engagement (as measured by personal interest, value, and emotional involvement). Schunk (1990) views self-efficacy in the context of self-regulated learning, a product of self-observation, self-judgment, and self-reaction. If perceived self-efficacy is high as a result of these three processes, the learner will be more likely to set (and achieve) difficult goals. Eccles (1983) presented another psychological model of retention, using the expectancies-value construct. As with self-efficacy theory, Eccles claims that a student's interpretation of events and perception of his/her abilities are more important than reality in determining persistence.

Locus of control and attribution theory Another aspect of Bean and Eaton's (2001-2002) psychological model of retention is locus of control and the attribution theory. Students with an internal locus of control will attribute success or failure to causes within their control (such as study habits), whereas students with an external locus of control feel that success or failure is due to chance or other uncontrollable forces. As with self-efficacy, Bean and Eaton regard locus of control as a determining factor in integration, saying "where locus of control is internal, we expect student's motivation to

study and to socialize to be high. We believe that these efforts will lead to academic and social integration” (p. 77).

In their study of 500 ethnically-mixed community college students, Grimes and David (1999) found that the under-prepared students scored differently from the college-ready students on many aspects of goals, values, and abilities. They concluded that the under-prepared student with an internal locus of control will accept responsibility for their actions, thus enabling success, whereas, the student with an external locus of control will blame failure on outside circumstances, perpetuating the sense of failure.

The attribution theory of motivation was originally developed by Bernard Weiner (1974) and has since been used as the basis for numerous studies on motivation. In this theory, Weiner attributes academic success or failure to different factors such as luck, ability (lack of ability), effort (lack of effort), using effective strategies, or task difficulty. The attribution theory incorporates locus of control as it differentiates between external and internal factors. A student who attributes success or failure to internal factors (internal locus of control) will perform better than one who attributes success or failure to external factors (external locus of control). According to Weiner, there is also a dichotomy between stable factors that cannot be easily changed (such as ability) and unstable factors that can be easily changed (such as effort). In his study of at-risk freshmen, Wambach (1993) found that 14 out of 19 of the students interviewed attributed their poor performance in high school to a lack of effort, not a lack of ability, indicating a belief they can change their performance.

Self-regulated learning and academic persistence. Schunk (1990) defined self-regulated learning as occurring “when students activate and sustain cognitions and

behaviors systematically oriented toward attainment of learning goals” (p. 71). The process of self-regulated learning involves both goal-setting and self-efficacy. As students make progress towards their goals, they will experience feelings of confidence (increased self-efficacy), leading to setting more challenging goals. Perry, Hladkyj, Pekrun, and Pelletier (2001) described self-regulation in terms of academic control and action control. Academic control refers to students’ beliefs about the causes of successes and failures, while action control refers to the amount of attention students give to the failure to achieve certain goals. According to their study, academic persistence is the highest with high-academic-control and high-failure-preoccupied students. These students set goals, create strategies to attain these goals, monitor progress towards the goals, and identify causes for failure.

Related to self-regulation is self-determination, giving students more control over their own learning. Hardre and Reeve (2003) contend that as teachers give students more autonomy, students experience higher levels of self-determined motivation and competency (higher self-efficacy), and thus are more likely to persist academically. Their study supports the theory that dropout intentions arise not only from poor achievement, but also directly from the motivation issues of perceived self-determination and perceived competency. Pintrich (2003) claimed that students who are intrinsically motivated, have higher levels of interest, and are thus more academically autonomous and self-determined.

Achievement goals. Pintrich (2003) also related self-regulated learning to the importance of setting multiple goals. Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, Carter, and Elliot (2000) referred to these as achievement goals, the specific goals which students have for

a certain course, and divide them into mastery and performance goals. Mastery goals refer to how much the student wants to learn from the course, and performance goals refer to the desired grade as compared to other students. In their study of the effect of these goals over a period of three semesters, Harackiewicz et al. found that mastery goals predicted interest in the course material (psychology) and performance goals predicted grades. Mastery goals, reflecting intrinsic motivation, more accurately predicted a long-term interest in psychology. Their conclusion was that in order to succeed in college, a multiple-goals approach is needed, since success depends on both grades and interest.

Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, and Elliot (2002) performed a follow-up study to measure the effect of mastery and performance goals from the freshman year through graduation. In this study, performance-approach goals (focus on being better than the competition), were separated from performance-avoidance goals (focus on avoiding negative judgment). As with the previous study, they found that students with mastery goals developed a stronger interest in psychology, whereas students who had adopted performance-approach goals made higher grades. One unexpected finding was that there was no positive effect of mastery goals on performance. Normally, mastery goals are associated with high self-efficacy and positive motivational outcomes, whereas performance goals are viewed as less effective in motivating academic achievement. However, Schunk (1990) maintains that self-efficacy is increased when performance goals are met, leading students to higher academic achievement. In his studies, he found that when students are engaged in self-regulation, they become motivated to change behavior, thus positively affecting self-efficacy.

Thus, in order to achieve maximum academic success and to increase the chances of retention, students need to adopt a multiple goals perspective including both performance and mastery goals.

Summary

This study sought to determine the factors which influence the academic persistence of Appalachian first-generation college students, and also examined the effectiveness of academic support programs designed to increase academic persistence. In order to provide a sufficient literary background to these questions, many areas were researched. Research on Appalachian culture provides insights into the history, values, and stereotypes of the region. An examination of literature on first-generation college students is essential in showing the effect that family background has on students. A discussion of Cross' barriers to learning reveals the significance of situational, institutional and psychological factors. The theme of barriers is pursued, examining the barriers to academic persistence in Appalachia and how these barriers are being overcome. TRIO programs are discussed as an important means of removing barriers to success. Finally, essential to an understanding of the research questions is the discussion of academic persistence and retention models, including a more thorough study of self-efficacy, locus of control, and self-regulated learning.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Phenomenological Approach

This research was conducted using the phenomenological approach, as I sought to find the underlying meaning of the experience of being an Appalachian first-generation college student, particularly focusing on the factors which affect their academic persistence. Phenomenological study allows the researcher to get at the “essence” of the individual experience, and at the same time derive universal meaning from the shared individual experiences (Creswell, 1998, p. 53). By using the phenomenological method, I was able to focus on the essence of what it means to be an Appalachian first-generation student, leaving a broader cultural or personal description to the other methods.

Bogdan and Taylor (1975) state that “in order to grasp the meanings of a person’s behavior, the phenomenologist attempts to see things from that person’s point of view” (p. 15). As the researcher, I sought to describe and analyze their experiences from their frame of reference. However, Phenomenology Online (2002) cautions against becoming so caught up in the individual experiences of our informants that we lose sight of the collective meaning:

From a phenomenological point of view we are not primarily interested in the subjective experiences of our so-called subjects or informants, for the sake of being able to report on how something is seen from their particular view,

perspective, or vantage point. Rather, the aim is to collect examples of possible experiences in order to reflect on the meanings that may inhere in them.

It was the purpose of this study to find a deeper meaning in the experiences of the students being studied, and through this discovery of meaning, be able to demonstrate a more universal understanding of the academic challenges faced by the wider population of Appalachian first-generation college students.

Phenomenological study is commonly used in the discipline of psychology, the study of why individuals behave or think the way they do. This approach fit well with my research questions as I tried to understand the factors behind the academic persistence of Appalachian first-generation students.

The study is based in both postmodern and critical theory in that a satisfactory response to the research questions should result in a deeper understanding of a “marginalized people” (Creswell, 1998, p. 79). In the language of critical theory, a positive outcome of the study would be the empowerment of Appalachian and first-generation students, enabling them to thrive in an academic environment, which to them may seem like a different world. However, postmodern theory goes a step beyond critical theory, in viewing a person as “constructed of multiple, shifting identities” (Capper, 1998, p. 366). The ideas of power and change often become messy and complex in postmodern theory, as there may be several possible solutions to difficult problems.

A phenomenology was the best way to incorporate these theories since it allowed me to begin with a theoretical framework upon which to base the phenomenon. This theory was in place before I begin my study, thus rendering the study somewhat

subjective. Creswell paraphrases Duke, saying that “Objective understanding is mediated by subjective experience, and that human experience is an inherent structural property of the experience itself, not constructed by an outside observer” (p. 86). I entered this study with the subjective perspective that Appalachian first-generation college students are at a disadvantage compared to other students, and that outside intervention, in the form of academic support, will help them. I also entered this study with a postmodernist perspective, that it may be a disservice to Appalachian students to label them as disadvantaged and in need of empowerment without examining all the implications. For example, in regard to Appalachia, Banks, Billings, and Tice (2002) caution against essentialism, that is reducing complex constructions to fixed absolutes.

In a phenomenology, the researcher must state his/her assumptions and then bracket them in order to better understand the experiences of the participants (Creswell, 1998). Pollio, Henley and Thompson (1997) state that “bracketing is a suspension of theoretical beliefs, preconceptions, and presuppositions” (p. 47). Psathas (1989) describes bracketing as “allowing me to see with clearer vision” (p. 16). Thus, before beginning the study, I recognized the biases mentioned in the previous paragraph, but tried to describe the experiences of the participants objectively, understanding that as an outside observer, I cannot construct their own experiences. My purpose was to draw out the essential elements of their experience as an Appalachian first-generation college student (the phenomenon).

Instruments

According to Creswell, the in-depth interview is the most common instrument used in a phenomenology. Thus, interviews were my primary source of data collecting.

Pollio, Henley, and Thompson (1997) describe the phenomenological interview in the following way: “All questions flow from the dialogue as it unfolds rather than having been determined in advance” (p. 30). They emphasize the importance of a dialogue which evokes description and focuses on specific experiences, not as a means to confirm theoretical hypotheses.

For my own sense of security, I felt that I needed to have some kind of structure to my interview. However, I tried to avoid yes/no questions, leaving them as open-ended as possible, and often strayed from my interview guide as one question seemed to lead to another not on my list. In creating the initial questions, I began with the interview questions used by McLain (2002) in her master’s thesis evaluating the TRIO programs at Southwest Texas State University (now Texas State University-San Marcos). She had created a list of nine interview questions for TRIO students, seeking to elicit thoughtful responses regarding the reasons and motivation for attending college and for persistence in college. I adapted these questions to focus primarily on the Appalachian first-generation student’s experience in college and the academic support he/she has received (see Appendix B for interview questions). During the months that I was trying to find subjects to interview, I continued to revise the questions based on my supervising professor’s input, my evolving experience living in rural West Virginia, and my experience teaching a developmental reading and study skills class at Eastern West Virginia Community and Technical College. Many of these students were also first-generation.

McLain also created a survey questionnaire designed to narrow down the potential pool of students to the students she wanted to interview. I modified this survey

as well in order to find fifteen students who would be willing to participate in the intensive interviews (see Appendix A for the survey used). If I began with fifteen students, I would have a better chance at keeping eight to ten throughout the study. The purpose of the survey was to determine their willingness to participate in an in-depth interview and a focus group, to confirm the fact that the student grew up in the Appalachian region (which I then narrowed to West Virginia) and to confirm that the student was first-generation (I differentiated between students whose parents had some college but did not graduate, and those whose parents had no college experience). The survey also began to identify potential factors affecting academic persistence and student support services received.

Procedure for Data Collection

Collecting data. I began by searching for a specific population of Appalachian first-generation students by contacting colleges near Pendleton County, West Virginia. I determined where all the TRIO programs are in West Virginia and wrote a letter to the TRIO directors, as well as writing to nearby colleges in the consortium of West Virginia's Independent Colleges and Universities, which publish a rate of 40% first-generation students. I then pursued a contact given to me by a friend, who in turn referred me to Dr. Barbara Copenhaver-Bailey, the director of Student Support Services at West Virginia University. She agreed to help me; having just completed her dissertation, she was sympathetic to my need for research participants. The Internal Review Board (IRB) process, however, proved to be complicated as it involved the Texas State IRB, the WVU IRB, myself, and the chairman of my committee. Finally, the Internal Review Boards at both universities communicated directly with each other and it

was agreed that I only needed approval from the board at Texas State and the permission of the specific department at WVU.

Thus I was able to proceed with my research. Copenhaver-Bailey agreed to e-mail the students in SSS who fit my criteria (first-generation, from West Virginia, and having completed at least two semesters), asking them to pick up a survey in the SSS office if they were interested in participating in my study. She e-mailed 121 students and 21 filled out a survey.

Out of these 21, I chose the students whose parents had attended no college. Among the students I contacted by phone to set up an interview, I tried to reach a fairly even mix of male/female with some ethnic diversity and traditional/nontraditional diversity. I ended up being able to interview five males and four females, one of whom was African American, and three of whom were non-traditional students. In order to complete these nine interviews (and an interview with the director of SSS) I made numerous phone calls to students, e-mailed them to confirm interview times and attach the consent form, and made five trips to the campus of WVU in Morgantown (a three-hour drive from my home). A couple other non-traditional students whom I contacted did not show up for the interviews, nor were able to reschedule, due to complications in their already busy lives.

The SSS office was able to reserve a room for me in the Mountainlair, the student building at WVU. Seven of my interviews were conducted there and two in the SSS office. These were both convenient locations for the students. In the Mountainlair, I met each interviewee at the big gumball machine just inside the entrance (a great landmark!),

and I told them I would be wearing my “Seneca Rocks, WV” cap so they could identify me. This worked well.

Prior to each interview, I had the participant sign the consent form (see Appendix C.). They had no problem with this, nor with my request to tape record the interviews. The interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 1½ hours. After the interview, I gave each of them a \$5 Starbucks gift card, to show my appreciation for the time they took to help me.

Following each trip to Morgantown, I transcribed the interviews which I had recorded. This served as a good review of the material, and gave me the chance to begin reflecting on meaningful themes before the next interviews. Eight of the interviews with students and the interview with the director of Student Support Services took place during the fall semester of 2005. The final student interview was held in January 2006, a few weeks into winter/spring semester.

As part of the survey and after most interviews, I asked if the participant would be able to participate in a focus group at a later date. Each said that they would. (Some of those responding to the surveys were willing to participate in an interview, but not a group session. I did not contact these people). In mid-January, after significant data analysis, I e-mailed the students I had interviewed to see if they could meet as a group at the Mountainlair to discuss my findings (over pizza!). A time was set at the end of January, a few weeks into their new semester, SSS provided pizza and drinks, and five students showed up for the focus group.

Analysis

Creswell (1998) organizes data analysis into the steps of data managing, reading and memoing, describing, classifying, interpreting, and representing and visualizing. I began by organizing my data into separate files for each person and printing out a hard copy of the interviews for the reading and memoing stage. Through the interviews and transcription of the interviews, as well as the time of reflection, I had already become familiar with the material and begun to notice consistent themes emerging from the data. I chose the primary six themes, matching each with a color, which I would use in highlighting the interview data.

As I read, I highlighted with the appropriate color, making some notes in the margin. After highlighting a few of the interviews in this manner, I revisited my themes to make sure I was continuing to use themes which were “flowing from the data” rather than preconceived themes or those taken from the literature. I also took time to remind myself of the purpose of a phenomenology, that it is to look for meaningful common experiences. In addition, I looked for significant statements as Riemen did in her phenomenology of nursing (Creswell, p. 271), and sought to organize these into “meaningful units” (p. 150), or I prefer to use the term “themes.”

In analyzing the data, I found that my initial tendency was to use categories obtained from other research, rather than letting the themes emerge from the data. I had begun using these predetermined categories, and then realized that this would be imposing my own presuppositions onto the data, which is not in keeping with the phenomenological method. It is impossible to approach data completely objectively, but I attempted to change my perspective and, as stated above, look at my data with “clearer

vision” (Psathas, 1989, p.16). Thus, my interpretation and analysis sought to answer the broader research questions without imposing a rigid structure.

These are the research questions I attempted to answer:

1. What are the factors which influence the academic persistence of Appalachian (specifically West Virginian) first-generation college students?
2. How do academic support services (such as Student Support Services in the TRIO program, tutoring, and Supplemental Instruction) help Appalachian first-generation students to persist in college?

Creswell (1998) outlines three types of description used in a phenomenology: a) textual – what happened? b) structural – how the phenomenon was experienced; and c) overall – the meaning and essence of the experience. I attempted to describe the experience of Appalachian, first-generation college students using these criteria. In the structural sense, I organized their experiences according to the common themes which emerged from the data. In the textual sense, I described their experiences in detail, often using their own words. Finally, I described the meaning and essence of the overall experience of being an Appalachian first-generation student.

Verification Creswell (1998) mentioned several ways to verify the accuracy and validity of the data and findings. The primary procedures which I employed were:

- Members checks, taking the data analyses, interpretations and conclusions back to the participants. I accomplished this with the focus group.
- Rich, thick description, allowing the reader to determine transferability of findings. This was accomplished through detailed description and using the participants’ own words.

- Triangulation, comparing research findings to results found in literature and studies already performed. This was accomplished by comparing my conclusions to research in my literature review.
- Negative case analysis, taking into account outliers and disconfirming evidence. I did not skew the data to fit my themes. Rather, I used these “negative cases” to question the themes as they were developing.

Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to determine the factors affecting the academic persistence of Appalachian first-generation students and to ascertain the effect of academic support services. The phenomenological method was chosen because it allows meaningful themes to emerge from the common experience of the participants. Study participants were determined by a survey made available to them at the Student Support Services office. Data were gathered through an in-depth interview with each of the nine participants. Interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed by looking for common themes. An interview with the director of Student Support Services midway through the interviews provided confirmation of initial ideas and themes. Following the analysis, a focus group was held with five of the participants to verify the results.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

In a phenomenology, the researcher attempts to describe human experience, to derive meaning from the data, all the while bracketing presuppositions and biases which may skew an accurate interpretation. Pollio, Henley, and Thompson (1997), however, admit that assumptions serve as a basis for phenomenological interpretation, but go on to state that “they do not presuppose what meanings any specific experience will have for any specific person in some situation” (p. 46). Thus, in communicating the results and interpretation of the research, I recognize the presuppositions I had before beginning this study as well as the judgments made or confirmed in reviewing the literature. In a sense, these assumptions form the foundation of my interpretation. However, I have tried to allow the themes to flow from an analysis of the data, rather than being bound by themes present in my mind or in the literature. In beginning my initial analysis, I realized how tempting it is to try to fit my data in pre-existing categories. In Chapter 5, the Summary and Discussion, I will, however, compare my findings with the themes present in literature, in a triangulation test of reliability and validity.

These are the research questions to which I respond in my results and conclusions:

1. What are the factors which influence the academic persistence of Appalachian (specifically West Virginian) first-generation college students?

2. How do academic support services (such as Student Support Services in the TRIO program, tutoring, and Supplemental Instruction) help Appalachian first-generation students to persist in college?

Since my study is qualitative in nature, I used surveys and interviews to obtain my results. Twenty-one students involved in WVU's Student Support Services program filled out my survey. I conducted in-depth interviews with nine of these students, one who had not filled out a survey, and the director of Student Support Services.

Student Profiles

Dr. Copenhaver-Bailey, director of Student Support Services, e-mailed students in the SSS program who fit my qualifications (first-generation, from West Virginia, and having completed at least two semesters of college), asking them to pick up a survey in the office if they were interested in participating in my study. Of the 121 students e-mailed, 21 filled out a survey. Of these 21, I contacted twelve and was able to interview nine. The ninth student I interviewed is the boyfriend of one of the interviewees; he had not filled out a survey, but asked to be interviewed when he learned of my topic. The students whom I chose not to interview, for the most part had parents who had attended some college. I preferred to interview students whose parents had attended no college.

I was particularly disappointed that I was not able to interview two of the students whom I had contacted. These were women, non-traditional students with children; originally they had agreed to the interview, but one did not show up because her apartment had caught on fire, and the other ended up having to work. I did not feel comfortable rescheduling with the first because she was still trying to get her life together after having lost almost everything (she kept attending classes), and the other I think was

too overwhelmed with the demands on her time to reschedule. Essentially, the reasons which kept them away were the same reasons that I would have liked to interview them.

In order to help the reader understand the students being interviewed, I will give a short profile of each student. Pseudonyms have been used throughout this section, except for the director of Student Support Services.

Craig: A non-traditional student from rural West Virginia. He was raised by his grandparents who did not finish high school. He was in the military before enrolling in WVU. He is Jill's long-term boyfriend.

Jenny: A traditional student from rural West Virginia. Her parents are high school graduates, and one brother dropped out of WVU. She has completed five semesters.

Jill: A non-traditional student from a small town in West Virginia, having spent several years working at various jobs. Her parents graduated from high school. She has completed two semesters at WVU. She is Craig's long-term girlfriend.

John: A traditional student who grew up in rural West Virginia. His parents both have high school degrees. He has completed three semesters of college.

Josh: A traditional student from rural West Virginia. His mother completed 9th grade and his father completed 8th grade. He has completed five semesters at WVU.

Luke: A traditional student who grew up in rural West Virginia. He is classified as a junior at WVU. His parents are high school graduates, and his siblings have college degrees.

Martha: An African-American traditional student who grew up in a West Virginian town. She has completed three semesters at WVU. Her mother and sister got their GED.

Michael: A non-traditional student from rural West Virginia, having spent time in the military and a Vo-Tech school before coming to WVU. His parents are high school graduates. He has completed seven semesters.

Sarah: A traditional student who grew up in rural West Virginia. She has completed five semesters at WVU. Both parents graduated from high school. Her siblings are also in college.

Background of Student Support Services at WVU

Just as it is helpful to have a brief background on the students interviewed, it is also important to learn more about Student Support Services since all of the students are part of this program. Dr. Barbara Copenhaver-Bailey has been the director for 7 ½ years and was the assistant director for three years before that. She just completed her Doctor of Education in Curriculum and Instruction, with a dissertation entitled “Impact of the West Virginia University Student Support Services/TRIO Program from 1998-2004.” Her dissertation compared three groups: the SSS students, students who were eligible but not in the program, and non-eligible students. I asked if she could briefly tell me the impact of SSS that was revealed in her research. This is her response:

I can't say I was pleased, but I wasn't totally surprised or disappointed by the data. When I came into the program, it had only been here two years, and they were still trying to get things set up. [SSS began in Fall, 1993]. They fired the first director, so there were some real issues, and I was not the director when I came in. The program was really struggling. So when I look at the 6-year graduation rates of those groups, I wasn't entirely surprised that they weren't great. We had slightly higher 6-year

graduation rates than the [group which was] eligible but not in my program. We did not have higher graduation rates than the overall population. But I anticipate that we will (personal communication, December 2, 2005).

The WVU Student Support Services program is funded by a federal TRIO grant to serve 200 students, but more students would like to participate. There is currently a waiting list of students who are eligible, but are not able to participate because of a lack of staff. Copenhaver-Bailey finds it difficult to turn students away because there are so many who could benefit from the services offered. The services provided include tutoring, academic and personal advising, free printing, workshops, and cultural and social events. However, as will be discussed in the following pages, the students benefit the most from the personalized attention, a service which is difficult to measure.

As was evident in my interview with her, Copenhaver-Bailey has a passion for this population of students (first-generation, and low income or disabled). She feels that they often fall through the cracks because they do not represent differences which are obvious to most people, such as ethnicity. She feels that of the WVU undergraduate population, possibly 60% could fit the criteria of either first-generation or low income, and hopes that the university will take more notice of these students, finding effective ways to serve them. She says, "This is a viable population; we need to focus on them [because] they're dropping out at too high a rate." She feels that her program has a good reputation

and makes a significant impact on the students it serves, but with only 200 students, does not get the recognition from the university that it deserves.

Factors Influencing the Persistence of Appalachian First-generation College Students

Before considering the separate factors affecting academic persistence, it is helpful to gain an overview by looking at the results of the initial surveys completed by the students. Not all of these students were interviewed; this, however, presents an interesting idea of factors which students considered most important to their academic success.

Table 3

Student Survey Results – Ranking of Factors Affecting Success in College

Student	Family	Peers	Faculty	Internal motivation	Academic performance	Student Support Services	Other student organ.	Other
Kevin	1	2	2	1	4	2	2	N/A
Jill	5	6	4	1	2	3	7	N/A
Josh	4	(5)	(5)	1	2	3	(5)	N/A
Holly	2	6	7	1	5	4	3	N/A
Dani	(6)	5	3	2	1	4	(6)	N/A
Jamie	1	6	2	1	2	1	5	N/A
?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A
?	1	(5)	(5)	4	2	3	(5)	N/A
Marla	2	1	3	4	6	5	2	N/A
Erin	1	4	4	1	1	5	4	N/A
Anna	6	4	2	3	5	1	7	N/A
Gerald	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	N/A
Haley	1	2	6	3	4	7	5	N/A
Michael	1	2	1	1	1	1	4	N/A
Jenny	3	2	4	5	1	6	7	N/A
Martha	2	3	7	5	4	6	8	1(religion)
Sarah	3	4	6	2	1	5	7	---

Luke	1	1	4	3	2	2	3	---
John	6	2	3	4	1	5	(7)	---
Amber	1	6	3	4	5	2	7	---
April	1	3	4	5	2	7	6	---
TOTAL	44	72	79	56	57	79	108	

Note. In order to obtain an accurate total for each of the categories, I filled in categories left blank with the next chronological ranking and enclosed it in parentheses (i.e. if a student's final ranking was "5", the blank category would be ranked "6".) The lower the total number, the higher the rating in terms of influencing academic persistence.

According to this sample of students, the family is the most influential in academic persistence, with internal motivation and academic success following fairly closely behind. However, each student has his/her own story, which is much more meaningful and even accurate than a numeric rating system. Their stories reflect why they gave a certain ranking to a specific factor, and also redeem the importance of the factors receiving lower rankings.

As I interviewed and reflected on the interviews, certain themes began to emerge common to all or the majority of interviewees. These were the importance of the family as either a positive or negative influence in academic persistence, financial concerns, the power of internal motivation, the significance of relationships and emotional support, the communication of information, and the influence of being Appalachian.

Role of family. As reflected in the above survey results, the family was deemed as the most important factor affecting success in college. However, it was only in the

interviews that I was able to understand the full extent of this influence, both negative and positive. In responding to the survey, the students most likely read this as meaning a positive influence (even though the question didn't specify either way; it only said "rank the factors that have affected your academic and personal success in college so far.") And it was true that with all but one of the students, the family was reported as being supportive.

It was interesting to note the short phrases of encouragement or advice which some of the students quoted from their close family members. Luke quoted his mother as saying, "If there's one thing people can't take away from you, it's an education." He said his parents did not force him to go to college, but "subliminally-messaged me into doing it." Sarah quoted her dad as saying, "The more you learn, the more you earn!" She said that her parents did not tell their children to go to college, but instilled in them the importance of it. In the last visit with her grandmother before her death, Jill remembers her saying to go on and get her degree. This was particularly powerful since the grandmother had discouraged Jill's mother (her daughter) from going to college by turning down a scholarship on her behalf.

As in the case of Luke and Sarah, most the students' parents did not force them to go to college, but encouraged, supported, and were thrilled when they made the step. Josh said, "Oh yeah, my parents were so thrilled. They're so happy that I'm here and doing well." John said his parents are supportive, but did not put any pressure on. Michael, a non-traditional student, is still supported by his parents, saying that "Anything and everything that I do in college is supported 100% by them. They show their appreciation for what I'm doing by being there for me anytime I need anything." Jenny's

parents may have been a little more forceful than most. She described her father as almost “cramming” it down their throats, saying, “You need to go to college! You need to do good in school now so you can go to college and get a better job than we did.” Jenny described her mom as arguing with her dad sometimes, saying, “You’re going to make your kids think that you’re not good enough.”

Some of the students, like Jenny, admitted their parents as feeling a certain amount of inferiority for not having gone to college. Most of them described their parents as holding low-paying and low-skilled jobs. Most are steady jobs, but some, as in the case of Jenny’s parents, frequently changed employment. Jenny’s mom was a homemaker, then a secretary, and now a bank teller. Her dad worked on planes in the Navy, worked at a printing press in Virginia, worked on yachts in Maryland, and now is an elevator mechanic. John’s father is a mechanic, working out of his own garage, and his mother works at a bank. Luke’s mom has been a cook at WVU for over 20 years and his father is a janitor at the Mountain School Board office. Michael’s parents are happily retired now; his mother drove a county transit bus for 25 years and his father worked for the state for 38 years. Jill’s mother earns \$8 an hour working the stain department of a local cabinetry company. Jill’s conclusion is, “She’s never going to earn anything.” Martha’s mother worked for a nursing home, but hurt her back while working so is now on disability. Martha has no contact with her father.

Many students feel the same way as Jill, describing their parents as being in “dead-end” jobs. Some say their parents are content; others describe them as being resigned to the jobs. Luke said his mother has always wanted to be a nurse, so he told her that she should do it. She responded, “Oh, I couldn’t do it; I’m not smart enough.” Luke

replied, “Yes, you are; you’re just as smart as I am!” To me, he concluded, “She doesn’t listen to me!” As described earlier, Jill’s mother wanted to go to college, and even had a scholarship, but was not allowed to because she had to take care of her siblings. When Jill was a child, her mother made a schoolroom in their house, stringing up letters and numbers like a clothesline across the room. I commented that she would have made a good teacher. Jill agreed, but went on to say that her mother met her father at the age of 17 or 18, left with him, and then had children so she never had the chance to go to college. Sarah’s father, however, hasn’t given up in resignation. By teaching himself, he has become proficient in computer skills (she said, “He’s smart; he could have been a doctor”) and is hoping to go to Fairmont or WVU and get credit based on his experience.

The students feel supported by their parents, but many of them express the feeling that they do not want to “end up like their parents,” in low-paying jobs. This provides much motivation for them to continue. Jill does not want her kids to have to struggle like she has with little money and an unsupportive father. She said,

And to think that my sisters and I have done nothing but struggle...

Things like that just drive me more... When I have kids, I want to live in an area where they can live with me if they want to go to school. I want to provide everything that they need. I don’t want to just throw them out and treat them like my dad has done.

In response to the question, “What influenced you the most to go to college?”

John replied, “Just to have more income.” To the same question, Josh said,

My parents are very low income; there were a lot times when we would struggle financially. That’s something that I didn’t want to have to go

through and put my kids through. That's probably the biggest thing for me, not wanting to end up having to struggle through life.

John O'Brien (2001), in his book *At Home in the Heart of Appalachia*, describes how his relationship with his father changed when he went on to further education. His father, a factory worker, did not understand the importance of a college education and how that constituted hard work. In interviewing the students, I was struck by the absence of this type of sentiment. Even though the students wanted a better life than their parents, they maintained a good relationship with them. In the course of my interview with Luke, I learned that he had read the same book in a high school English class, so I asked him his opinion, wondering what caused the difference. He responded, "I think it's a new generation. Anymore, the author of that book's generation was coal miner; you didn't need a college education to produce labor and have a decent life. Anymore, you pretty much have to."

A conversation with Copenhaver-Bailey shed further light on this question. I mentioned that I was surprised that all of the students maintained such good relationships with their parents despite the difference in ambitions and level of education. She said that there were definitely students in SSS who did not have good relationships with their parents. However, after a moment's reflection, she noted that these are the students who did not fill out the surveys and thus were not participating in my interviews. She remarked that the students who are supported at home must be the ones who are more willing to volunteer their time. This was reinforced in my interview with Jill. She told me that her boyfriend had not filled out one of the survey forms, but was part of SSS and would be perfect to interview.

I was finally able to interview her boyfriend, Craig. He is 34 years old and is pursuing college despite difficult family relationships. Describing his mother's family, he said, "If you're anywhere near them for any extended period of time, eventually their problems will become your problems." He went on to describe how his mother and her boyfriend had stolen his car, how his brothers, by starting a fight in their trailer, had caused him and Jill to be evicted, and how his brothers had even followed him to Florida to cause trouble. He concluded that the way his family deals with the educated is to "tar and feather them." Not only do they not understand his desire for education, but out of jealousy they try to hinder his success, to the point that he and Jill are probably going to move to Arizona to escape their reach.

In a vast contrast to Craig's experience, Copenhaver-Bailey noted that most of the students I interviewed are what she calls "golden children." The parents see them doing great things, becoming doctors and lawyers, and are "unbelievably supportive." Luke said his siblings refer to him as their parent's "chosen child," even though all of them are going to college. Michael said that he gets "bragged up a lot" by his parents. The reverse side, and the description which fits Jill's boyfriend, is that of "black sheep."

Copenhaver-Bailey noted that these tend to be the quieter students (although Craig is quite outspoken!) and the ones who are more at risk of dropping out.

Financial concerns. This theme or factor, relates closely to the influence of the students' families. As mentioned in the literature and confirmed by my conversation with Copenhaver-Bailey, first-generation is often associated with low-income. In the SSS office, she said they do not use the word "poor," but that is actually what they are. Their families may support them emotionally, but they are not able to support them financially.

Jill, a 27-year-old non-traditional student, spoke of going home to visit and her mother apologizing for not being able to give her money: "If I had money, I'd give it to you." Jill wants to break the cycle of poverty, saying, "You're in a poor family, most of the time it's going to be that way. You have to break the cycle. I'm trying to break the cycle." As mentioned in the previous section, other students also want to go to college because they want to earn more money than their parents.

This lack of income is a burden which accompanies the students throughout their whole college careers, affecting their ability to persist. Jill and her boyfriend, in fact, had to drop out of school fall semester because they did not have enough money. They were expecting veteran's assistance because of Craig's previous military service, but it did not come through in time to pay the bills. In interviewing Craig, he spoke extensively of the frustrations of trying to obtain financial aid and veteran's assistance, at one point waiting two years before a problem with the Department of Veteran's Affairs could be straightened out in order to use Chapter 30 funding. Right out of high school, he was offered a full agricultural scholarship at WVU, but was unable to use it because he did not even have the money to get to the WVU campus. This relates to his family issues and also to a lack of information.

Copenhaver-Bailey speaks of problems with money as the highest stress a student has to deal with. She gave the example of an art professor telling the students in the middle of the semester about a project, which would require \$70-80 in supplies. This particular student in SSS had a family to take care of, and had already budgeted her money at the beginning of the semester. Copenhaver-Bailey said, "It might as well have been \$5,000. People think that \$30 doesn't mean anything, but it really does." She also

made a “sign of the times” comment about cell phones: “I sometimes get frustrated because I see the students struggling, but they all have cell phones. Not all have them, though. That’s how you know; if they don’t have a cell phone, they’re really hard up for money.”

Because of financial concerns, all but one of the students I interviewed are working, some a couple of jobs:

- Sarah has a work-study job on campus and also works at Dollar General. She gets frustrated because she cannot get to homework until after 9:30 or 10:00 at night, and feels that she could get a 4.0 if she didn’t have to work. She said, “My roommate from first year, she’s kind of like a rich girl from Chicago and she doesn’t understand why I have to have a job.” Sometimes she wishes her family could help her financially, but also feels proud that she is doing it on her own. One thing she regrets is not having internet at home.
- Martha, like many of the traditional students, is on the PROMISE Scholarship (which pays her tuition) and also has other grants. She also works for Health Line at West Virginia Hospital, transferring calls to doctors or nurses.
- After dropping out of school in the fall, both Jill and her boyfriend, Craig, began working at Target as seasonal employees. They returned to school in January, but unfortunately will most likely drop out again to move away from his family.
- Michael, a non-traditional student, receives money from several sources including the Veteran’s Administration and the Division of Rehabilitation Services, so does not have to work and is concentrating fully on his studies.

- Josh has a work-study job in the Student Support Services office. He felt that the biggest barrier to entering college was paying for it; now it is more incidental expenses that are stressful. He says, “A lot of times when you have to spend a little bit of money here and there, like on books; that’s a little rough sometimes.”
- John is on the PROMISE Scholarship, but needs to work about 30 hours a week to cover expenses other than tuition.
- Jenny’s tuition is paid by the PROMISE Scholarship and she receives financial aid for room and board. She also works two jobs in order to pay for other expenses such as cell phone bill, extra food, and car insurance. She works as many hours as she can because her parents cannot send her money.

Another expense that students incur is printing. Many of them mentioned that one of the things they appreciate most about SSS is the free printing privilege they get.

At the beginning of the semester, Copenhaver-Bailey and her staff sit down with students and discuss their needs; she has found that before even discussing academic needs, she first must ask the basic questions: “Do you have food?” or “Are you good with your landlord?” As depicted in Maslow’s hierarchy, she has found that the basic needs of these students need to be met before they can begin address the cognitive and psychological aspects.

Internal motivation. After speaking with these students, I was able to understand why these were the ones who would be willing to fill out a survey and volunteer their time to be interviewed despite busy schedules. Each one of them has a drive and determination to succeed that enables them to surmount difficult obstacles. They have clear goals and pursue them with courage even when family is not supportive, when

finances are tough, and courses are challenging. I asked many of the students what it takes to succeed in college. Invariably, their responses reflect a personal responsibility for success – if they get a poor grade, it is because they have not worked hard enough, and when they do well, they are proud because they know it is not just luck. In their responses, they complain about certain aspects of university life, but they do not attribute failure or success outside of themselves.

Here are their responses to the question, “What do you think it takes to be successful in college?” or in some cases, “What are your biggest barriers to success?”

Josh: “Determination, trying your hardest, doing whatever it takes to get the grades you need... I just keep myself motivated.”

Michael: “Focus. Definitely have to be focused and self-motivated. You have to be driven. That’s how I approach every day.”

Sarah: “Know what your goal is.”

John: “Just the attitude.”

Luke: “Intelligence is good.” In response to barriers to success, he said, “My biggest barrier for me was work ethic. No one really stops me from trying. It’s just me getting up and doing it.”

Martha: Responds to the question of barriers saying, “I don’t feel like I really have any besides myself. I’m the only person who can stop me from continuing. So I just have to have the motivation, be determined to finish. I’ll never drop out, maybe let my grades drop, but never drop out.”

As mentioned earlier, often times this intense drive comes from the desire to avoid a lifestyle they do not want. After describing to me all the financial and family

difficulties which she and her boyfriend had experienced, Jill concluded, “You just want to give up!” I responded sympathetically, “So why don’t you give up?” Jill replied, “Because I see how my mother lives, and I’ve done factory work. I’ve had years of experience doing that on and off, and you can only earn six, seven, or eight dollars an hour.” Other students also expressed this same desire to avoid the life of their parents. They have an intense internal motivation, but it is sparked by a longing for a more rewarding career both emotionally and financially.

The realization of these aspirations would not be possible without a strong inner motivation. Jenny is enrolled in a five-year program which will culminate in a master’s degree in elementary education with three specializations. Jill wants to be a nurse, and her boyfriend is speaking with the McNair Scholars program about the possibility of continuing for a PhD. Martha has always wanted to be an OB-GYN and is considering medical schools now. John is studying accounting with the goal of going to graduate school and becoming the chief financial officer of a company. Luke is planning on becoming a nurse, but also eventually wants to pursue an eventual PhD in counseling psychology. Sarah is interested in juvenile delinquency and is planning on going to graduate school probably in a branch of psychology. Michael wants to pursue a graduate degree to become a landscape architect. When I asked him if he was thinking about further education, he responded affirmatively, saying, “I’d just as well go for the gusto! I can’t hit the stars if I don’t at least shoot for the moon!” Josh wants to go on and get a master’s degree in exercise physiology.

Most of these students do not have trouble academically. This is definitely an advantage for them. A few of them, however, had difficult first semesters, and they

persisted largely because of their inner resources. Michael said his first semester was stressful, that he does not think he was completely prepared for it, but he made it through. I asked him what helped him the most to persist. He responded, “I guess I’m hard-headed! I wasn’t taking ‘no’ for an answer. I worked at it much harder. If I was having problems with something, I found tutors, or other students who had been through the course.” Jenny also had a difficult first semester, but admits it was her own fault. She made good grades in high school without studying, so thought college would be the same. She ended the semester with a 1.9 GPA, and was in danger of losing the PROMISE Scholarship. She said, “I was terrified because if I couldn’t keep it, I couldn’t go [to school]. It pretty much scared me into working my a-- off.” In order to keep the scholarship, she had to take 20 credits the next semester and make good grades. Because of her determination, she went from being on academic probation to getting a 3.4 GPA in the spring. Josh also did poorly his first semester, but dropping out never crossed his mind. He said, “I knew that I could have done a lot better my freshman year, so I just started trying harder.”

Some of the students have had to rely on their own self-confidence and inner strength to persevere despite discouraging feedback from others. Craig describes his family as never being supportive of his accomplishments, only judging him for being in college and not earning more money, as well as trying to overtly hinder his progress. Jenny described a high school counselor as saying, “I don’t know if you’ll succeed. Low socio-economic students don’t do very well.” She confidently responded that she had already been accepted and would do fine. If anything, this comment made her more determined to succeed.

Sarah realized that external motivation is not enough to keep students persisting throughout college. She said,

I know that I have to take care of myself. I'm not going to have anybody to take care of me. If kids go to college just because their parents want them to, I don't know if they're going to be able to deal with it. They might do well just because their parents are pushing them to, but in their heart they're not going to want to do well. You have to do it for yourself.

She also realized that if she did not do well, she could lose her scholarships. No one could step in and bail her out. Luke agrees. He has been giving advice to a friend who is at risk of dropping out. He puts it quite bluntly:

I think... students blame the university when it's ultimately their fault for being lazy and not doing their part. Because I have a lot of friends that are like 'I'm just a number to them. They don't really care about me or anything.' I'm like, 'No, they don't care about you. They only care about your money and they want to keep your money so they have programs out there to help you get through college. So if you want to continue whining about it, feel free, but you're incorrect.' The university has done what they're supposed to get you through, now you just go out and do your part. Then I shoo them away.

Luke has already begun his counseling career!

Craig tries desperately to take responsibility for his own success, but has found the external pressures of his family and financial situation overwhelming at times. When asked what keeps him going, he said, "I have always been a bit of an optimist and I show

no fear. I have read in the past that what prevents most people from advancing in life is fear. The fear of trying, the fear of failure.” However, Craig also admitted being motivated by an intense anger towards his family, verging on rage at times. He is fighting to maintain a strong internal locus of control, but is at the same time battling circumstances which are often beyond his control.

Relationships and emotional support. After the first few interviews, the importance of relationships, both on and off campus, was obvious. Students need to feel connected in some way, whether it be to peers, family, or faculty. All of these students are involved in SSS to some extent, some more than others. Relatively few students were involved in other organizations, which I found interesting. For them, however, the social benefit was outweighed by the time factor; with work and studying, they did not have time to participate in clubs.

Of all the students, Luke is the most involved in a club as the secretary of the “Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, Transgender Mountaineers Club.” He has found friends and support through this group and enjoys the social gatherings. However, he also still hangs out with high school friends and has particularly found support in one of the advisors at SSS. He admitted to having “huge problems” with depression when he first arrived, and his main support was his SSS advisor who is trained in counseling as well. In fact he benefits from her more as a counselor than an advisor; he only needs an advisor for the PIN number, but needs a counselor to talk to. He says that one advantage of working in the SSS office is being able to talk to her whenever he wants. Jenny also has found valuable relationships in the SSS office. She mentioned being close to several of the staff members, saying, “I don’t think I would have been able to get through after fall semester

if it weren't for them." In fact, her first summer, she lived with one of the SSS staff members because she couldn't live on campus. Jenny also benefits from the social events offered by SSS.

Both Luke and Jenny also cultivate relationships with their professors. Jenny said, "I'm such a dork in my classes. I sit in the front row and all my professors know me and talk to me outside of class. I think that makes a huge difference." Because WVU is such a large campus, students will remain just a number unless they take the initiative to get to know professors, especially before getting into their major. Jenny admitted, "I kind of force myself on them. I'm doing everything opposite of what I did in the fall of my freshman year. I would sit in the back and socialize, and not worry about the grade." Luke said, "If you can pick out one of the professors that you would think you'd enjoy getting to know, I would suggest you do it." His reasoning is that they will be more likely to help with academic problems and with personal issues, such as the need to reschedule an exam in a family emergency. Michael is closer in age to his professors than to most of the students, so he particularly enjoys having an open dialog with them, but not necessarily "being personal." He feels that it is important that they understand his perspective, and in turn, he understands their perspective. Like most the other students, he does not just want to be another number on campus.

The other students do not make such an effort to get to know professors, but will go to them when they need help. Josh said, "If I need help, I go to them. I don't know any of them really closely, but I'll talk to them occasionally." Sarah admits going to her professors more this semester because she has needed help. However, normally she does not like asking too many questions because she said, "I need to figure it out myself."

Many students mentioned that once they got into their major, more of a relationship was developed with professors.

Most of the traditional students grew up within a couple hours of the WVU campus and have high school friends attending school. Their social group is made up of these friends and new friends that they have made on campus. They seem comfortable with this mix, and talk about introducing new friends to old friends. John, however, seems to have made a fairly clean break from high school. Most of his friends come from his classes. He began as a music major and alluded to the fact that these students' lives revolve around the music department, including socializing. He changed majors, but his social group still consists mostly of music majors.

Jill struggles with the idea of friendships and socializing. She thinks she needs to make more of an effort to make friends, but also does not have time for social events or establishing close relationships. She admits also that difficult family relationships and feelings of inferiority because of her weight contribute to a reluctance go out and make more friends. In the past, however, she participated in one of SSS' cultural events, a dinner theater, and enjoyed it. Jill's emotional support seems to come almost entirely from her relationship with her boyfriend, Craig. They understand each other's struggles, have similar academic goals, and share a drive to succeed despite the many obstacles they encounter. It was Craig who helped her get through her parents' divorce 12 years ago, and they continue to be a mutual support. Craig mentioned that the strength of their relationship was another thing that causes his family to be jealous.

Martha also attributes her emotional survival to one particular person, whom she called her counselor, and then later mentioned that he was actually her uncle and pastor.

She said, “I talk to my counselor if I’m too stressed or there’s a lot going on in my life. Not as far as school goes, but people. Like if I’m having difficulty with one of my friends.” She appreciates the fact that he has known her for her whole life, so she can share personal issues.

Few of these students mentioned academic struggles once they got past the first semester. What many did express, however, was the need for emotional support. Copenhaver-Bailey confirmed this saying,

When we go out and talk to groups on campus (faculty, financial aid, etc.), I almost always end with, ‘But our greatest attribute is that we are able to build one-on-one relationships with our students.’ That’s really the biggest thing that I think we can do. They can get a lot of these services someplace else on campus – tutoring, academic advising – but they don’t get personalized attention.

The personalized attention is what the students appreciated most about SSS, especially regarding advising; their biggest complaint about university advising was that it was so impersonal. Jenny summed it up by saying, “I definitely think that a huge problem with the university is the changing of advisors every single time you go for advising.” She said that outside of SSS, any other advisor would never have allowed her to take 20 credits her second semester. At SSS, they knew her well enough to know that she could do it. Other students said that they had heard “horror stories” about students going through the advising process. Once in their major, it generally got better, but beforehand, students’ files were passed around from advisor to advisor without any effort

at consistency. Some students would bring friends to the SSS office to try to get more personalized help for them.

Copenhaver-Bailey noted that more and more students are in need of counseling services now. In the SSS office, they try to avoid doing actual therapy and call themselves *academic* counselors, but she says, “If a student comes in with an issue, if they come in crying because their mother called for the 6th time, and there’s no money and they’re turning the gas off at home, I do some real quick therapy.” Sometimes, she said, students just need someone to talk to. She’s well aware of the importance of numbers and retention rates in order to keep their grant, but she also said,

It’s hard to calculate the personal relationship... It’s really that one-on-one relationship that is what keeps students. What tells me that this program is successful is that we don’t have enough room out here [in the office lobby] for all the kids that want to hang out.

Communication of information. In the literature on first-generation students, one common theme is that their parents may be emotionally supportive, but they just do not know the process of applying for college and financial aid. I found this in speaking with the students. John provides a particularly poignant example. I asked him if he received the PROMISE Scholarship. He said that his counselor in high school kept telling him, “You’re eligible for it, you’re eligible for it.” But they failed to tell him that he had to actually apply for it. He thought, understandably, that if he were eligible for it that he had received it and did not need to do anything about it. Unfortunately, because of this lack of communication, he missed the deadline and did not get the PROMISE Scholarship, affecting his whole college career.

Craig feels strongly about the detrimental effect which a lack of information has had in his academic career. Much of the intensity of his feeling comes from his high school experience, graduating in 1989, but referring to John's experience, he feels that not much has changed. Craig feels that high school teachers do an inadequate job sharing information, believing that parents should already know it and be able to help their children. He equates knowledge with power, and feels that sometimes this knowledge is purposely withheld. Craig feels that his financial troubles would have been significantly reduced if he had had adequate information regarding the financial aid process. He says, "There are people out there now who have never heard of financial aid...If they don't know that financial aid exists and people in high school aren't doing anything to help, how are they going to figure it out on their own." After being separated from the military, he wanted to attend WVU so submitted the FAFSA (financial aid form), but had it denied. He has since been told that there is a letter he could have submitted to appeal the decision, but no one told him at the time, resulting in another five year delay of his education.

Jenny made the comment that she thinks that universities need to make services more known. She feels that students outside of Student Support Services do not have the support they need, or at least do not know what the options are. Jill spoke of the advisors at SSS, informing them of everything that SSS could do for them. They obtained help filling out financial forms as well as help with letters petitioning other university departments. At one point, Jill was going to have to pay back a grant because she was one credit short of the required 24 hours. She was able to get help from SSS and obtain an emergency loan which also gave her some additional money. Student Support

Services also helped Matthew figure out the financial aid process his first semester.

Sarah appreciates SSS for the information they have given her on graduate schools. She also advised that the university should try to pack as much into orientation classes as possible. She said that a lot of students do not know much, such as the fact that they can get free tutoring or that there is an information desk. She has directed friends to various offices on campus, and since her mom works there, Sarah tells her friends to use her as a resource.

Michael wishes there were more information about non-traditional student groups. He said that he saw something in the paper once about a 30s and older group, but has not seen anything since. He feels that most the outreach programs are designed for younger students, possibly because the university thinks that the older students know more how to get help. He said, however, "I don't think they understand that sometimes we don't know where we need to go to get this help if we need it, or who to approach."

A few of the students were involved in Upward Bound, the TRIO program designed to encourage high school first generation students to attend college. Sarah cited this program as being instrumental in helping her with the procedural aspects of going to college. When asked what kind of impact Upward Bound had on her going to college, she said, "I wasn't scared. I knew about the campus because we had stayed on campus. They helped with us taking the ACT and SAT and they gave you recommendations about different majors." Jenny said that she was not able to participate in Upward Bound, but a lot of her friends did, and all of them ended up going to college. She did participate in Educational Talent Search (another TRIO program), however, and benefited from the college visits and the procedural help. After her difficult first semester, Jenny related that

her mother said, “Well, I hope you can find a good job somewhere.” To her mother, a 1.9 GPA meant that she was coming home, that there were not any other options. Jenny was thankful for her advisor at SSS who showed her other options and told her what she had to do to keep her scholarship.

As is especially clear in the cases of Jenny, John, Jill and Craig, adequate information translates into money and often the ability to stay enrolled in school. Fortunately, John was able to obtain other means of financing his education when he did not obtain the PROMISE Scholarship, but for many students, this would have probably been a barrier too difficult to overcome.

Copenhaver-Bailey said that when she first became director of Student Support Services, many students enrolled in the program did not even know what it was, let alone the services offered. Now SSS works hard at communicating with students and promoting the program, so she is confident that if she were to call any participant, they would be able to say what SSS is and who their advisor is. This in itself is a major accomplishment.

Being Appalachian. I find this factor the most difficult to relate to a student’s ability to persist in college. It is not concrete like money; either you have money or you don’t, you can pay or you can’t. It’s something that influences a student in subtle ways, ways that they often do not recognize. When questioning students on this topic, I was often amused by their responses. Martha practically laughed and said the first time she heard “that word” (Appalachian) was in her Psychology 241 class when they were trying to identify different dialects. The second time she heard it was just a couple weeks previous to this interview. She said, “For me, I’m like, what is Appalachia? I don’t even

know myself. I'm just associated with this region! I don't even know what being Appalachian really is!" Sarah's reaction was not quite so strong, but she said, "It was funny, the other day, someone was talking to my dad and he said, 'I'm an Appalachian American.' I've never heard anyone say that." I thought again of John O'Brien's book *At Home in the Heart of Appalachia* and how he himself struggled with the concept of Appalachia and what it meant to be Appalachian. Most the students understood what I meant by Appalachia, but said that they identify more with West Virginia than with the Appalachian region.

Craig, probably because he is older than most the students, had the most sophisticated understanding of Appalachian culture. He said, "There's a concept of 'God's will be done' where a lot of the impoverished citizens tend to view life as if God wanted them to be rich, they would have been born wealthy." He recognizes this as a fatalistic view, and the philosophy of his grandparents who were only educated through elementary school. He was raised by his grandparents, and attributes many of their communication problems to this worldview that external circumstances controlled their lives. Ironically, Craig describes his grandmother as being a "control freak," wanting to make all his decisions for him.

Even if most the students are not aware of the subtleties of Appalachian culture, all of them are conscious of negative stereotypes associated with West Virginia. Jill rattled off the stereotypes like a formula: "You know, West Virginia is looked down on as a poor, redneck, backwards, barefoot, pregnant state; it always has been." Jenny offered a few more stereotypes, such as "Oh, do you drink mint juleps and go to the outhouse behind your house?" or "Do you carry a Rebel flag?" or "Well, why don't you

talk funny?” What seemed to irritate the students the most, however, was the seemingly widespread misconception (outside of West Virginia and Virginia) that West Virginia is *Western* Virginia, in other words, still part of Virginia. Luke particularly found this irksome, saying emphatically, “Yes, they still think this even after almost 200 years. And I promptly correct them of this because we are NOT Virginians, we are West Virginians. And we are not WestERN Virginia, we are WEST Virginia.” Martha also was quick to clear misunderstandings, saying,

No I live in WEST Virginia [not Virginia]; it’s completely different.

We’ve been a state for 100 some years. Why don’t you look at a map?!

We don’t run around barefoot, people aren’t missing any teeth, and there’s not incest running around all over the place.

Martha talked about the couch burnings at WVU last spring when the basketball team was doing so well. She was ashamed that when the school should have been getting good publicity for doing so well in basketball, they were getting the bad press about couch and car burnings.

Craig, having traveled extensively with the military, found that the view of West Virginia was not positive. He mentioned the same stereotypes of backwards hillbillies that the others had, but he also said that Californians he met thought that all West Virginians hunt and fish. In the focus group, Craig said, “I was born and raised in this state, and I don’t hunt or fish!” Josh replied, “Why shouldn’t we, though. We have all this nature, why don’t we use it!”

As Josh’ comment indicates, the students are proud of their state, and defend West Virginia to outsiders. Luke has made it a personal goal to dispel stereotypes: “Yes,

I am all about tearing down stereotypes. That is actually one of my main goals in life, is to attempt to move humanity beyond stereotypes, which won't happen, but I can still try."

Michael said,

I'm not so proud of the stereotypes and I think a lot of people add to that.

I'm just proud of my state, period. It's a beautiful place to live... I want to do everything I can to bolster the image of this state.

Jenny defends herself and the state saying that she does not fit any of those stereotypes, nor has she seen them. She thinks West Virginia is "gorgeous." Almost all of the students said how proud they are of the West Virginia's beauty and the mountains. Josh said, "I'm not ashamed of it or anything. It's where I'm from. I like it here; it's a nice place." Many of the students mentioned how glad they were to be in a place relatively free of crime and violence; they compared West Virginia to large metropolitan areas and felt fortunate to live in a more rural environment. Luke, ever with his dry sense of humor, quipped, "I don't see a problem with not having a city in the state that's filled with gangs and drive-by shootings, and there's only one tree in a 10 mile radius." Sarah said, "People are more human here... Where I'm from everyone waves when you pass by." The biggest need that she sees is getting everyone educated.

The students like living in West Virginia, and consider moving out of the state for graduate school or possibly to live in a more metropolitan area if their job requires it, but they do not want to move far away. Martha said,

Realistically, I won't leave. If I go anywhere, I'm going to apply [for graduate school] here or at Marshall [also in West Virginia]. I don't see

myself leaving just because my great grandmother and my grandmother are still alive and they're such a big part of my life.

Josh said he probably will not stay in West Virginia because of his job possibilities, but is thinking of Virginia because it is still close to home and not a "real bad place." Luke sees himself living within a 10 mile radius of Morgantown [where WVU is located], saying, "I honestly don't think I could ever leave this area; I've lived here all my life. I could leave, but I would be home a lot." Michael would like to travel in order to broaden his horizons; in fact during Christmas vacation he traveled to Chile as a part of one of his classes. However, he admits that most people who leave, come back. In fact, he said that most people have never even left. Jenny has already moved around several times in her life, outside of West Virginia, so is not attached to any one place. However, she said that it would be "weird" to live where there aren't any mountains and it would be hard to be away from her family. She said, "I wouldn't mind staying in West Virginia to try and fix things." Sarah would like to stay in West Virginia, but will go to Ohio for graduate school if that's the best thing.

John, Jill, and Craig are the only students who expressed a definite desire to leave. John wants to go to a bigger city. When I asked if he would get sick of the city and think of the mountains back home, he responded, "probably not." His mom, however, has asked him to come home and go to the nearby community college. He does not want to even go home on the weekends, saying, "There's not enough to do there." Jill regrets not having taken the opportunity to leave when her boyfriend suggested moving to Florida a few years ago. She lived for a year in Maryland during elementary school, and thinks things would have been much different (better) if she had stayed in Maryland. Her

mother, however, missed West Virginia too much, so moved the family back after only a year. Craig, Jill's boyfriend, wants to leave, but only because of a desire to escape the malice of his family. He has tried many years to make things work in West Virginia.

One of the first questions that Copenhaver-Bailey asks new students is how often they plan on returning home. She says that if they go home every weekend, there is a great risk that one of those weekends they will not return to school. As is evident with the students I interviewed, the draw of home is powerful. These students, however, are integrated enough on campus with friends, jobs, and classes that they do not feel the need to return home often. Martha tries to go home as often as she can to go to her home church, but she is never tempted to stay. Freshmen are at particular risk because they may still have a girlfriend or boyfriend at home, they may still be trying to work at home on weekends, and their family, particularly if they do not understand the value of college, may exert pressure to stay.

Copenhaver-Bailey also made the observation many people do not understand the culture of Appalachia. She said,

When I'm meeting with faculty, I see it in their eyes sometimes. [They don't believe me]. Sometimes I'll say, 'I'm not asking anybody to give these students an easy ride or special treatment; you need to be aware and you need to be compassionate.'

The Influence of Academic Support Services

As I have noted before, most of the students I interviewed mentioned being aware of tutoring services and learning centers on campus in general, but as far as I could tell, none of them have used these services. I also inquired about Supplemental Instruction

and was told that it is not offered on the WVU campus. Relatively few of the students seemed to have even used the tutoring services at Student Support Services. Michael mentioned getting tutoring help, Jenny used tutoring for trigonometry once, and in the focus group, Martha said she is using tutoring for a couple of her harder classes. She mentioned, however, that because the tutors are students themselves, that it is often hard to schedule sessions with them.

The students I interviewed found SSS to be influential in their persistence in college, but it was not because of the tutoring or the seminars on topics such as test-taking or time management. The students found SSS to be most helpful in the areas of academic advising, personal relationships, cultural and social events, administrative help, and free printing. As mentioned in the preceding sections, students value having one consistent advisor at SSS, as opposed to the advising system of the university where a student may see a different advisor each semester. Naturally, an advisor who has established a relationship with a student is able to help more effectively than someone looking at a file for the first time. This was illustrated in the case of Jenny who was able to take 20 credits her second semester because her SSS advisor trusted that she would be able to handle it. In the case of Luke, his advisor also functions as a counselor, a need that he had particularly his first year. He may not have persisted in college if this need had not been met.

For several of the students I interviewed, including Jenny and Luke, Student Support Services forms part of their social and support network. They like to hang out there because they feel accepted and welcome. I actually conducted my interview with Josh in the open office area during his work-study time; it was a comfortable enough

atmosphere for him to feel free to suggest meeting there. Jenny is close to most the staff at SSS and feels confident that she would not have been able to get through her first year without them. She said, “I know people who don’t really utilize it [the services at SSS], but I think they’re great.” She feels comfortable bringing her struggling friends to see if they can get help at SSS, and said, “I think there should be services like SSS for people who aren’t first-generation students.” To repeat what Copenhaver-Bailey said, “Our greatest attribute is that we are able to build one-on-one relationships with our students.” They can get services such as tutoring and academic advising elsewhere on campus, but they do not get the personalized attention.

Copenhaver-Bailey tells a story about a couple of their students, one whose parent died during the semester and another whose parent got cancer so he had to drop out. He came back later with his head shaved in order to identify with his mother who was going through chemotherapy. The staff at Student Support Services went through these traumatic events with these two students and they graduated after seven years. Unfortunately, SSS does not get credit for these graduations, because their success is measured according to a six-year graduation rate. However, the staff at SSS knows that they contributed to the success of these students. They received personalized attention that they would not have gotten on the wider campus. Most of their professors would not have known why they were missing classes or why one of them had to drop out a semester. Some students do not even need that much help, but just someone to talk with. The day that I was interviewing Copenhaver-Bailey, she had had a student come in that morning who wanted to talk because he felt overwhelmed. He did not need to change anything, but just needed a listening ear. Not all of the students I interviewed have taken

advantage of the social and cultural events offered, but some do and enjoy themselves. Others, such as Sarah, would like to take advantage of these opportunities but cannot find the time with school and studying.

The administrative help which students receive from Student Support Services comes in the form of assistance with financial aid process and acting as an advocate on behalf of the students. This was particularly important in Jill's case when she was having trouble with her grant. When students need help with administrative questions, they feel comfortable starting at the SSS office and progressing from there. Just as practical as information is the free printing that SSS students get; normally students have to pay to print on campus. A couple of the students mentioned how much money they have saved by doing their printing in the SSS office.

It's interesting to note that on paper the primary service of Student Support Services is tutoring (according to the director). In reality, however, the students benefit from SSS in many different ways, ways that have a vital impact on their persistence in college, but not in a direct academic sense.

Summary

The purpose of this study is to determine the factors which influence the academic persistence of first-generation, Appalachian students, and assess the impact of academic support services. In a phenomenology, the themes need to flow from the data obtained from the research participants. Thus, as I was interviewing the nine students, all of whom are involved in the Student Support Services program at West Virginia University, I looked for the common themes in their experience as first-generation students from the Appalachian region, specifically West Virginia. The themes which emerged were the

importance of the family, financial concerns, the power of internal motivation, the significance of relationships and emotional support, the communication of information, and the influence of being Appalachian. Each of these aspects is a meaningful element in the experience of all the study participants.

The nine students I interviewed make little or no use of academic support services outside of Student Support Services. Even in SSS, they rarely use the tutoring provided. However, they find the personalized advising, the relationships with staff and other students within SSS, the administrative help, and the free printing to be helpful.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research has been to determine the factors which influence the academic persistence of Appalachian first-generation college students, and to ascertain the impact which academic support services, such as TRIO's Student Support Services, have had in their persistence. All of the study participants grew up in West Virginia and participate in Student Support Services at West Virginia University. The phenomenological method was used because this allowed the researcher to find the underlying meaning behind the experience of being a first-generation student from this region. In using this method, assumptions must be set aside and the significant themes must flow from the data, rather than trying to fit the data into preconceived categories. Hopefully, this has been accomplished in the analysis of the results.

In this section, the results to each of the research questions will be summarized and discussed, keeping the same thematic organization as Chapter 4. Findings will be compared to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, providing further insight into the topic and also testing the reliability and validity of the results. Finally, limitations to the study will be discussed and suggestions for practitioners and future research will be given.

Research Questions

1. What are the factors which influence the academic persistence of Appalachian (specifically West Virginian) first-generation college students?
2. How do academic support services (such as Student Support Services in the TRIO program, tutoring, and Supplemental Instruction) help Appalachian first-generation students to persist in college?

Discussion of First Research Question

McLain (2002), in her case study of TRIO students at Southwest Texas State University, examined the factors affecting their academic aspirations and persistence. She divided the factors into the categories of family background, peer relationships, institutional factors, psychological/self-related factors, and societal factors. These categories are similar to the themes which emerged from the present phenomenological study on Appalachian first-generation students, contributing to the validity of the data analysis.

The themes emerging from this research are the role of the family, financial concerns, internal motivation, relationships and emotional support, communication of information, and being Appalachian. Although these themes will be discussed separately, it is crucial to note that they interact with one another often in causal relationships. For example, research is clear that because a student's parents have not attended college, they are more likely to be low-income and have inadequate information regarding the college experience (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004; Somers, Woodhouse & Cofer, 2004; Harrel & Forney, 2003; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella & Noral, 1996). There is also considerable research linking Appalachia to low income, often

poverty levels (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2005; Haaga, 2004; National Collaborative on Postsecondary Education, 2004). In addition, as indicated in the previous chapter, the lack of information may cause further financial difficulties. Thus, throughout the discussion of the factors influencing the academic persistence of Appalachian first-generation college students, it is important to remember that each factor cannot be viewed in isolation.

On a further aspect of validity, it is interesting to note that the themes emerging from this study also correspond to the barriers to success in higher education discussed in the literature. The only barrier indicated in the literature review that did not emerge as one of the significant themes is “failure to complete college preparation classes.” Literature reveals this to be a definite concern in the case of first-generations students, and some of the students mentioned that they did not feel adequately prepared by their high school experience. However, it did not appear to significantly affect their ability to persist in college.

Role of the family. The term first-generation student, since it is defined according to the education level of the parents, places the role of the family in a position of primary importance. It is impossible to discuss the situation of the first-generation student without first examining the role which the family plays in the student’s life and college experience. As already indicated, the students who filled out the initial survey rated their family as being most influential in their decision to attend college. Most of the students found this influence as being positive and encouraging. One student, Craig, however, found that his family tried to thwart every effort to advance himself, to the point of

forcing him to relocate just to escape their negative influence. Out of jealousy, they tried to prevent him from escaping the life in which they were trapped.

There have been powerful accounts written of the struggle which further education introduces into a family where neither parent has attended college. O'Brien (2001), college-educated and a writer, describes the continual struggle he had with his family, particularly his father. His father did not seem to recognize the importance of an education, valuing only hard work. Like Craig, when O'Brien sought a path different from the rest of the family, communication broke down. In Craig's case, however, it seems that there was never positive communication, as his family attempted to undermine his efforts from the beginning.

Fortunately, as mentioned earlier, the other students did not have the same experience as Craig or O'Brien. A couple of the other students noted that their parents may have felt a certain amount of inferiority or envy, but in general were content with their lives, or had at least resigned themselves to that life and their jobs. When asked about this difference in perspective, one of the students said that it could be a generational issue. O'Brien is from an earlier generation, and Craig is at least ten years older than most the other students. As Copenhaver-Bailey noted (personal communication, December 2, 2005), many of the students in Student Support Services actually do not come from supportive families, but these were not the ones who filled out the surveys to be interviewed.

In his research on first-generation students London (1992) concluded that they "live on the margins" (p. 7), that they do not want to break with the past, but are not completely accepted into the new culture. London describes a relationship of

dependency between the student and the parent, producing feelings of guilt in the student when he/she leaves. In viewing their experience through postmodernist theory, these students could be considered as having multiple identities: their college identity and their home identity. London's statement that first-generation students "live on the margins" is also striking in its reference to marginalization, an important aspect of critical theory.

Both aspects of multiple identities and marginalization are struggles for the students interviewed, but in the course of their college experience, they seem to have found appropriate ways of reconciliation. They balance their identities by recognizing the importance of their family without feeling guilty for leaving them. One of the students said that his mother wanted him to attend the nearby community college, and particularly asked him to stay home this semester because his brother died. He responded, however, that he needed to continue at WVU or else he might lose his scholarships. Another student said that his parents miss him and it is hard for them when he leaves after a visit, but he does not feel guilty for returning to school. The students are marginalized to a certain extent in that they don't have time for outside organizations because they have to work; yet they find other ways to integrate into the community. Their work in itself gives them more power as it provides enough money for status symbols such as cell phones and clothes, and in itself gives them a community to belong to. These aspects will be discussed more in the sections of financial concerns and relationships and support.

London (1989) also describes some students as acting as "delegates" of the family, realizing the unfulfilled dreams of the parents. Copenhaver-Bailey (personal communication, December 2, 2005) refers to these students as "golden children"; they are

chosen by the parents to fulfill their mission. Most of the students interviewed fit this description. Luke says his siblings refer to him as the “chosen child,” Michael says he gets “bragged up a lot” by his parents, and most the others said that their parents are proud and supportive. When the students described their parents as being supportive, however, they normally meant emotionally supportive. Few of their parents were able to help them financially or assist them with the process of going to college (such as filling out financial aid forms).

Most of the students have good relationships with their parents (Craig, of course, being the exception), but still cited one of their main motivations for going to college was to have a better life than their parents. Jill said, “I see how my mother lives.” Jill does not want her children to have to struggle in the same way that she and her sisters have. John said, “My parents are very low income; there were a lot times when we would struggle financially. That’s something that I didn’t want to have to go through and put my kids through.” Sarah thinks that parents are not doing their job if they do not raise their kids to be better than themselves; this possibly fits into London’s (1989) definition of “delegate.”

In addition to being low-income, Terenzini et al. (1996) describe first-generation students as having weaker cognitive skills, lower degree aspirations, and as being less involved in high school. Apart from being low-income, this description does not fit any of the students interviewed in this study. Most of the students excelled academically in high school, some in the top 10%, and all of them but one have aspirations for graduate school. Craig is not considering graduate school at the moment, but this is because the external circumstances are so difficult right now, that he is wondering if he will even be

able to finish his bachelor's degree. He was the model high school student, however, graduating in the top 10% of his class, involved in the National Honor Society, and holding an office in Future Farmers of America. As confirmed by their use (or lack of use) of academic tutoring services, these students seem to have little trouble with the academic rigors of college.

Financial concerns. As indicated earlier, being low income is often connected to being first-generation and being Appalachian. Terenzini et al (1996) claim that "first-generation students are more likely to come from low-income families..." (p. 17), and researchers of Appalachia assert that Appalachia is faced with poverty, low rates of white-collar employment, and low rates of college attendance (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Matvey, 1987). The students participating in this study all had financial concerns. All but one of them work in order to pay bills (even if they have scholarships and loans for room and board), affecting their ability to be involved in campus organizations. Sarah in particular lamented the fact that she probably could have a 4.0 if she did not have to work so much. Most of the students have financial assistance through the PROMISE scholarship, Veteran's Administration, or other grants and loans. Both Craig and Jill were not able to begin college when they wanted to because of complications with financial aid and veteran's funding; they finally re-enrolled in Fall 2005, but had to drop out because the promised veteran's funding did not come in time. As noted in the previous chapter, Copenhaver-Bailey (personal communication, December 2, 2005) says that financial pressure exerts extreme stress on the students. When counseling them at the beginning of the semester, she has to ask them first if their basic needs are being met before addressing academic concerns.

A couple of the students spoke of a cycle of poverty in their family and wanting to break it; they do not want to end up like their parents with “dead-end” blue-collar jobs. In terms of critical theory, most of the students have grown up without much money and understand that more money means more power. They feel that college will provide them with this advantage that their families have not been able to give them. As emphasized by Boiarsky (2003), they also recognize that the difference between working class and middle class is defined not only in financial terms, but also in quality of life. In the focus group discussion, Craig compared his uncle, a miner with a decent income, to his cousin who is college-educated but earning half the income. His uncle ridicules his daughter (Craig’s cousin) for having a college degree and not making much money, saying “You’re wasting your d--- time and went into debt just for a bunch of useless information.” / Craig, however, notes that at least her profession will not kill her. The students acknowledge the fact that a college education means more than just financial success, saying that it “helps you learn about yourself and be a well-rounded person”; however, most of them are still there in order to be more financially successful.

Financial considerations are what keep many of the students going. John said he could not sit out a semester because he might lose his scholarships. Similarly, Jenny, after a rough first semester, struggled through 20 credits her second semester and ended up with a 3.4 GPA so she wouldn’t lose her PROMISE scholarship. Both students knew that if they lost their scholarships, they would not be able to attend school.

Somers, Woodhouse, and Cofer (2004) discuss the influence of accumulated debt as a deterrent to students’ persistence. None of the students participating in this study mentioned an aversion to accumulating debt. However, the fact that most of them are on

the PROMISE scholarship which provides tuition, receive veteran's assistance or other grants and scholarships, and work, may mean that they are not accumulating a lot of loan debt. Somers et al. also talk about the importance of informing parents and students in the process of financial aid, so loan debt is not perceived as such a barrier. As will be discussed later, this effective communication of information is extremely important to the students.

Internal motivation. Internal motivation can also be described as an internal locus of control. According to Grimes and David (1999), students with an internal locus of control will accept responsibility for their own actions, realizing that their academic achievement is under their control. On the other hand, students with an external locus of control see their circumstances as beyond their control. Pintrich (2003) goes on to claim that there is a positive correlation between internal motivation and better academic performance.

On the survey ranking factors affecting academic persistence, the students rated internal motivation as second only to the role of the family. The fact that the students feel responsible for their own success was present throughout each of the interviews. When asked what it takes to be successful in college, invariably they gave responses such as determination, focus, motivation, and knowing your goal. They never responded with external factors like luck, good teachers, or enough money; they did not, however, deny the importance of these external circumstances. Sarah summed up the student's responsibility saying, "If kids go to college just because their parents want them to, I don't know if they're going to be able to deal with it... You have to do it for yourself." Luke said, "I think students blame the university when it's ultimately their fault for being

lazy and not doing their part... I'm like 'the university has done what they're supposed to to get you through; now you just go out and do your part!'"

Many of these students have friends who have dropped out; they recognize that external factors such as lack of money or a difficult family life play a role in their failure to persist, but, as illustrated in the advice which Luke gives, they know that ultimately the responsibility is their own. As asserted by Pintrich (2003), high internal (or intrinsic) motivation has enabled these study participants to excel academically and also to work towards career and graduate degree goals, an example of Schunk's (1990) self-regulated learning. Each of these students seem to have mastered the art of setting goals, creating strategies to reach the goals, and monitoring progress. Unfortunately, in Craig's case, external circumstances have hindered progress to the extent that he wonders if he will be able to realize them. However, after the focus group where this was discussed, his parting comment was something to the effect of "I'll work at keeping that internal locus of control." Despite all the external factors which he could blame, he still is struggling to maintain responsibility for his own success.

Pintrich (2003) also discussed the importance of setting both mastery goals, referring to how much a student wants to learn, and performance goals, referring to the desired grade. Although mastery goals reflect intrinsic motivation, studies revealed that both are needed to achieve academic success (Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, & Elliot, 2002; Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, Carter, & Elliot, 2000). Understandably, each of the students interviewed is performance-oriented because universities define success according to grades and scholarships are kept or lost according to GPA. However, the students also are interested in mastering content, revealed by comments such as, "I want

to learn all I can.” Most of the students are taking classes in their majors now and so are motivated by the course content. Each of the students expresses high academic confidence, bolstered by their past successes. The students’ academic success confirms Schunk’s (1990) assertion that as students continue to experience success in meeting their goals, their self-efficacy increases, leading to higher achievements.

Relationships and emotional support. In his model of academic persistence and withdrawal, Tinto (1975) focused on academic and social integration. He claimed that students are less likely to drop out when they are integrated academically (their academic and intellectual needs are being met), and socially (they have meaningful relationships with faculty and other students). Other studies focus on the importance of informal contact between students and faculty, learning communities (Harold & Forney, 2003; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980) and mentoring (Sanchez, 2000; Wallace, Abel & Ropers-Huilman, 2000).

As mentioned earlier, few of the students have academic difficulties. When they do, they feel comfortable signing up for tutoring in the Student Support Services office. They know the procedure and know what is available. On the flip side, neither do they indicate feelings of boredom or lack of challenge. Thus, it seems that their academic and intellectual needs are being met.

As far as being socially integrated, only one of the study participants is heavily involved in a campus organization outside of Student Support Services. Thus, either these students *are not* socially integrated into campus life and rely on other factors for the strength to persist, or they have found more informal means of social integration. The latter seems to be true. Several of the students mentioned having cultivated important

relationships with staff in the SSS office. A few of them work there and they all benefit from the personalized advising, a benefit which is not available on the wider campus. Three of the students in particular make an effort to get to know the professors so that they will not be viewed as “just a number,” a fact of life on a large campus such as WVU. Most the students spoke of friends with whom they hang out, often composed of a mix of old high school friends now attending WVU and friends from the dorm, classes, or work. The non-traditional students seem to be more socially isolated. Jill spoke of difficulties making friends and simply not having the time, and Craig spoke of a lack of time. Both seem to rely heavily on each other for support.

As mentioned earlier, most of the students also count their family among their most supportive relationships. Their families want them to attend college and help them with the emotional aspect of persistence. The students do not mention having specific mentoring relationships, but some of them described significant relationships, one with a pastor, one with an SSS counselor, another with an SSS staff member, all of which seemed to be similar to mentoring. These students referred to these relationships as being instrumental in keeping them going.

Thus, in reviewing the relationships and support systems of the students interviewed, it appears that they are indeed socially integrated, but primarily in informal ways. They may appear marginalized in terms of involvement on the wider campus, but have found ways to compensate. This informal social integration plays in an important role in the students’ academic persistence, and most likely in WVU’s ability to retain them.

Communication of information. Cross (1981) identified three major barriers to participation in educational programs: situational, institutional, and psychological. Lack of information was considered to be an institutional barrier, but was later identified as its own barrier. Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) discuss the relationship between the educational level of the parents and the information available to the students. Often being first generation means having insufficient information regarding the college application and financial aid processes.

The students interviewed were clear about the relationship between the availability of information and the ability to afford college. John did not get the PROMISE scholarship because his high school advisors only said that he was eligible for it, failing to mention that he had to actually apply for the scholarship. Craig was particularly strong in his indictment of high schools, claiming that they withhold information, assuming that parents and students should know the system. He said he received an agricultural scholarship to WVU upon high school graduation, but because of insufficient help and information, was not able to use it. Several students were more fortunate, having had good high school advisors, or having had the opportunity to participate in the Upward Bound program, which is specifically designed to help first-generation students understand the college process while they are still in high school.

Most of the literature discusses the need for information in the initial decision to attend college; however, the students also emphasized that the importance of clearly communicated information does not stop once they are in college. Many of them have relied on Student Support Services for continuing help with the financial aid process, for assistance in communicating with different university departments, or help in considering

graduate schools. Sarah's mom works on campus, and Sarah often encourages her friends to use her as a resource. Michael wishes there were more information about nontraditional student groups. Craig has struggled repeatedly with veteran's administration and financial aid issues; one time in particular, he found out too late that he would have been able to keep his financial aid by submitting a letter of appeal. Coming from his own experience, he made the emphatic statement "information is power!" This statement is particularly interesting coming from Craig because he of all the students could be considered the most marginalized, suffering the consequences of a lack of power. Thus critical theory becomes especially evident as a lack of information translates into powerlessness.

In another form of information deficit, Boiarsky (2003) notes that parents who have not attended college fail to understand that the value of college extends beyond economic benefits. Again, this is revealed most blatantly in Craig's family who equates attending college with more money, and if this is not the result, college is a waste of time. As discussed previously, the families of the other students are supportive of them, not questioning the ability to earn money afterwards. This is perhaps because all of these students have stated their goals clearly, each showing interest in a profitable and rewarding profession.

Being Appalachian. John O'Brien (2001) in his book *At Home in the Heart of Appalachia* mentioned not even hearing the word "Appalachia" until he was in college at WVU. Even while writing a book about Appalachia, he struggled to determine exactly what it meant to be Appalachian. He expresses this with the statement, "One of my best friends told me that his father sometimes said that Appalachia had wheels on it. It rolled

around the mountains, and like a traveling circus of hillbillies, stopped wherever the politicians wanted it to go” (p. 52). Not surprisingly, the research participants did not know what to make of “Appalachia” either. Some talked of only hearing “that word” a couple times previously, and one student in the focus group asked exactly where Appalachia was.

Since many of the students did not know exactly where Appalachia was, they understandably were not able to express what it meant to be Appalachian; however, they had a lot to say about being West Virginian. They readily listed off the same stereotypes for West Virginia that literature uses in referring to both Appalachia as a whole and West Virginia specifically. In their Appalachian Studies courses, Banker (2002) and Fisher (2002) discuss the Appalachian stereotypes of poor, backwards, ignorant hillbillies; the students in this study used these same words to describe outsiders’ perceptions of West Virginia.

Although only a couple of the students have participated in Appalachian Studies courses or have had an Appalachian component in another course, they seem to have already accomplished one of the goals of these courses: the ability to move beyond the stereotypes to an appreciation of their “homeland.” All of them are aware of the stereotypes, but are quick to defend West Virginia, saying that they do not often see those stereotypes, that it is a beautiful place to live, for the most part free of crime, and that people care about each other. Perhaps a course would help them understand how West Virginia fits into the larger region of Appalachia, and how they can better understand their families and themselves by understanding Appalachian culture. For now, though,

they are happy to proclaim, “I don’t live in Virginia, I live in WEST Virginia,” and they seem genuinely proud of that fact.

If the students were to participate in an Appalachian Studies course, they would probably learn how important the terms localism, historicism and familism are even as they relate to their lives as college students (Chenowith & Galliher, 2004). These refer to the sense of attachment that Appalachians feel towards the land, that is the place where they were born and grew up, to the history of that land, and to their family. Baldwin (1996) uses the term “place-boundedness” to refer to the tendency of Appalachians to stay in the same area where they grew up.

Many of the students interviewed said that they would leave West Virginia for graduate school or to get a job, but that they would probably come back or live nearby in Virginia. Some said that if they left, they would miss the mountains. John’s mother would like him to attend the local community college so he could live closer to home. Luke, expressing the sentiment of several of the students, said, “I honestly don’t think I could ever leave his area; I’ve lived here all my life. I could leave, but I would be home a lot.” Craig and Jill, who have been living together for several years, are the ones most likely to leave, but again this is to get away from Craig’s family. They tried to make it work in West Virginia for ten years because Jill did not want to live far from her mother. When Jill was younger, her mother had taken the family to Maryland to live, but missed West Virginia so much that she returned after only a year.

Thus, even these students, who are independent and successful, are affected by this culture of place-boundedness. It is interesting to note, that each of the students interviewed live within a couple hours of WVU. Although WVU is the largest and most

prestigious postsecondary institution in West Virginia, it still seems to attract more local students. Copenhaver-Bailey (personal communication, December 2, 2005) made the comment that students from farther away may initially enroll at WVU because of the name, but end up transferring to a more local institution. Because she is aware of the cultural tendency to stay close to home, she asks her SSS students how often they go home, and makes sure they realize that returning home frequently increases the likelihood of eventually dropping out; one of those weekends they might not come back.

Discussion of Second Research Question

Research on first-generation students suggests the need for effective bridge programs, comprehensive orientation programs, tutoring services, learning laboratories, intrusive academic advising, and mentoring (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella & Nora, 1996; Richardson & Skinner, 1992). Terenzini et al., however, focus on Rendon's research which emphasizes the importance of "validating experiences," encounters with faculty and other students which affirm them as being competent learners (p. 17).

As stated earlier, West Virginia University has resources for tutoring and academic support, but the students participating in this study do not take advantage of these services. In fact, they do not seem to be aware of services available on the wider campus. What they value are the validating experiences which are available at Student Support Services. Some of the students use the tutoring offered by SSSv, but they seem to benefit the most from the relationships formed with the SSS staff. Two of the students in particular may not have been able to continue past the first year if they had not developed those vital relationships. These relationships strongly resemble mentoring relationships, the focus of Wallace, Able, and Ropers-Huilman's (2000) qualitative study

of twenty TRIO participants. The other students interviewed may not benefit in such a personal way, but they each seem to profit from the personalized and consistent advising, a service which, according to the students, is woefully lacking in the general advising process of WVU.

As stated in the literature review, the federal goal of Student Support Services is “to increase the college retention and graduation rates of low-income, first-generation college students and students with disabilities and to facilitate their transition from one level of postsecondary education to the next” (U.S Department of Education, 2004, p. 1). Copenhaver-Bailey (2005) concluded in her dissertation that the four and six-year graduation rates of participants were higher than non-participants who were eligible to participate, but lower than non-participants who were not eligible. However, she believes that this will change, and SSS participants will soon have higher retention and graduation rate than both groups. In a personal conversation (December 2, 2005), she noted that one of the most important changes they have made in the past few years is to make personal contact with each of the 200 students early in the semester. Then during the students’ first semester, contact is maintained each week through a one-credit study skills course. Copenhaver-Bailey feels that SSS’ greatest attribute is the personal relationships which are developed with students, something they cannot get on the wider campus.

According to the authorizing legislation, Student Support Services must provide services such as basic skills instruction; tutoring, academic, financial, personal, and career counseling; mentoring; assistance in obtaining financial aid; cultural events; and help for Limited English Proficiency students (U.S Department of Education, 2004). Most of these services include the element of personalized attention, whether it is

responding to academic, social, personal, financial, or career advisement needs. The students interviewed reported being helped by SSS in each of these areas. Student Support Services has often acted as an “information broker” when needed and as an advocate for them when they were unable to figure things out on their own. Whatever the service provided, the students feel validated by SSS; they are treated as valuable people and not just a number as many have found elsewhere on the WVU campus.

In many cases, it is difficult to discern if the students would have dropped out had it not been for the help of Student Support Services. The students I interviewed are all motivated and resourceful, so they might have found a way to succeed, just as John did when he did not receive the PROMISE scholarship because of lack of information. But then again, if these students had not received that extra attention and assistance during the first couple semesters, they may not have persisted. The students know that Student Support Services is on their side and will help out in any way possible.

Limitations of the Study

1. The director of Student Support Services at WVU noted that the students who filled out the survey, showing willingness to be interviewed, tended to be more highly motivated and have more supportive families than those who didn't complete the surveys. Thus, results reflect a "select" group of first-generation students.
2. Three of the students I contacted did not show up for the interview and could not reschedule. These students would have offered a valuable perspective, as two of them were non-traditional.
3. None of the students I interviewed are from economically "distressed counties," primarily found in central and southern West Virginia. Students from these counties may offer a different perspective.
4. I did not do a formal pilot on my instruments with a population from Appalachia. However, I adapted them from the instruments used by McLain (2002) in a similar (and successful) study. I also made ongoing revisions based on suggestions from my supervising professor and on my experience living in the Appalachian culture and in a Developmental Reading and Study Skills course I was teaching at the time (at Eastern West Virginia Community and Technical College). I made slight adjustments to the interview questions as the interviews progressed; however, I found that the initial questions were quite adequate. I also found that the survey yielded all the necessary information.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

West Virginia and the whole of Appalachia have become all too aware of the extent to which they have fallen behind economically and academically compared with the rest of the country. Organizations such as the Appalachian Regional Commission and the Ohio Appalachian Center for Higher Education have been established to try to close this gap and overcome the barriers (Appalachian Regional Commission, n.d.; Appalachian Access and Success, 1992). A few innovative solutions have been the creation of more community colleges, a response to the “culture-boundedness” of Appalachians, the PROMISE scholarship in West Virginia, making education more affordable, and colleges which offer virtually free room and board in return for work. TRIO programs have also contributed greatly, particularly helping students and their parents overcome the information barrier.

These innovative measures need to continue. They are definitely making a difference in the ability of Appalachian, first-generation students to persist in obtaining a college education. Students whose parents know nothing of the college process and make only a subsistence income are able to attend college and succeed. However, the momentum cannot stop here. Large institutions such as WVU need to be particularly aware of this special population of students, who because they are not a minority or disabled, often fall through the cracks. As Copenhaver-Bailey (personal communication, December 2, 2005) said, Student Support Services at WVU serves a little over 200 students, but there are over 15,000 [actually 19,500] undergraduates at WVU, forty percent of whom might qualify for SSS. How are these students being helped? They

need the same personal attention, the same consistent advising, and the same meaningful contact with university faculty and staff that SSS participants get.

According to the students, the best place to start for the university would be to restructure the undergraduate advising system. Rather than having a different advisor during each registration period, the students should keep the same advisor, so that some kind of relationship could be built. Advising should be more than just a way to get the PIN to register. This would not only help the students, but, as Tinto (1987) maintains, this type of social integration also helps the institution retain students.

Although this research was concerned primarily with the question of how students persist once they are in college, it is impossible to ignore the question of how to get students into college in the first place. Regarding this issue, many of the students had strong feelings about their high school experience, particularly concerning how information about college was communicated. A simple recommendation to high schools would be, “Don’t assume anything!” Don’t assume that the parents know the process, don’t assume that because they are bright students they know where to get information, and don’t assume they once they know *what* to do that they will know *how* to do it. After all, as one of the students so strongly stated, “Information is power!”

A recommendation for TRIO programs would be to keep in mind the needs of the students. Even if tutoring is the primary component of the program, the students’ most urgent needs may not be academic. As with the participants in this study, their need may be to talk with someone about personal issues, to talk over financial aid problems, or to have a letter written to another department on their behalf. Or maybe, as is the case at the WVU Student Support Services office, maybe they just need a safe place to hang out and

eat their lunch. After all, students are just as (or more) apt to drop out for personal and financial reasons as they are for academic reasons. Retention and graduation rates are vital because that is how the grant is won or lost, but it is also important to remember that sometimes it is difficult to measure the influence that a personal relationship has on a student. Maybe certain students will not graduate within the six-year parameter, or maybe they will transfer to another institution, but they *will* persist in their education.

Recommendations for Future Research

It would be interesting and revealing to compare the results of this study with the following potential research projects:

1. Perform a longitudinal study with the students interviewed to track their progress throughout college and into graduate school or a career;
2. Conduct a quantitative study of all the students in the WVU SSS program to determine what factors most influence their persistence;
3. Conduct a quantitative study of all the undergraduate students at WVU to determine how many fit the criteria of Student Support Services. Conduct a qualitative study with some of these students (not involved in SSS) to determine the factors which influence their persistence, and how their needs are being met.
4. Interview students in the WVU Student Support Services program who did *not* fill out one of my surveys, to determine if they do in fact differ from those who filled out the survey;
5. Conduct similar interviews with students from the southern counties of West Virginia, typically the more “distressed” counties;

6. Conduct a similar study with first-generation students on other campuses in the Appalachian area.
7. Compare Appalachian students to other typically marginalized student populations, such as non-traditional students, Hispanic students, and African-American students.

Summary

By using the phenomenological qualitative method, the researcher was able to gain a deeper understanding of what it means to be an Appalachian first-generation student as it relates to academic persistence. The perspectives of postmodernism and critical theory have provided an important backdrop to understanding the experience of first-generation Appalachian students. They are marginalized through lack of money and information, seeking college as a means of empowerment. They also find themselves trying to balance shifting identities, that of a student and that of their parents' child raised in Appalachian culture.

Six factors emerged from the data as being particularly significant. Family is extremely important, normally playing a supportive role emotionally, but not usually able to help with finances or information. In some cases, the family acts as a deterrent to progress because of feelings of jealousy or envy. Financial stress is real, sometimes forcing a student to drop out, but more often causing the student to work at least one job to pay for extra expenses. The lack of information is often related to financial stress; adequate information can make the difference in whether a student is able to persist or not. A strong internal motivation can often make up for a deficit in other areas, such as family support, finances, or information. However, sometimes external factors can

become so overwhelming that even the most motivated person must drop out.

Relationships are extremely important; however, they normally take the form of informal relationships with faculty, staff, and other students, as most of the students don't have the time to be involved in campus organizations. Finally, the fact that they are Appalachian has an impact on academic persistence in that they are affected by a culture which encourages place-boundedness, staying close to home and family.

The students participating in this study do not turn to academic support services, such as tutoring, available on the wider campus; rather they turn to Student Support Services to meet their tutoring and advising needs. The greatest benefit they have found in SSS is a more relational and holistic approach to advising, including assistance in financial and career decisions, as well as personal counseling and a comfortable place to just hang out.

In addition to discussing the two research questions, this chapter has discussed limitations to the study, provided recommendations for practice to high schools, post-secondary institutions and TRIO programs, and offered suggestions for further research.

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APPENDIX A

Student Survey

Please take a few minutes to complete this survey. All responses will be kept confidential. You are under no obligation to participate in this study.

1. Would you be willing to participate in a one-on-one interview concerning your college experience and factors affecting this experience (such as family background)?

_____ yes

_____ no

2. Would you be willing to participate in a student focus group with 3-4 other students (including pizza!) to discuss your experiences?

_____ yes

_____ no

3. If you answered “yes” to questions 1 and 2, please let me know the best way to contact you:

Name: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

Other: _____

4. What is the education level of your parents?

5. Where (town and state) are you from? Is this a town/city or rural location?

6. How long have you been a student at West Virginia University?

7. How long have you participated in Student Support Services?
8. Are you involved in other campus organizations?
9. Rank (1 being the highest or most important) the factors that have affected your academic and personal success in college so far. If something is listed that is not a factor for you, please leave it blank.

____ Relationships with family members
 ____ Relationships with peers
 ____ Relationships with faculty and staff
 ____ Good attitude and/or motivation level
 ____ Academic performance
 ____ Participation in Student Support Services
 ____ Participation in other student organizations
 ____ Other (please specify: _____)

10. Please respond to the next two questions:

I am a successful college student.

____ Strongly Agree ____ Agree ____ Somewhat Agree
 ____ Disagree ____ Strongly Disagree

11. I find college to be a struggle.

____ Strongly Agree ____ Agree ____ Somewhat Agree
 ____ Disagree ____ Strongly Disagree

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

Regarding decision to go to college:

1. How have your family members affected the decisions you've made so far about your education? Give me some examples or stories that illustrate this. (Include the occupations and education levels of family members – including extended family).
2. How have your friends and other peers affected your educational decisions? Give me some examples or stories for illustration.
3. How have teachers, counselors or other school staff affected your educational decisions? Examples and stories.
4. What within yourself helped you decide to go to college?
5. If you had to choose, which of the above factors – family, friends/peers, school personnel, or self-related factors most influenced your decision to attend college?
6. What other factors have influenced your decision to attend college?

Regarding persistence in college:

7. How has the education level of your parents affected your college experience? How do they feel about your being in college?
8. How did high school prepare you for college? If it didn't, why not?
9. In general, what do you think it takes to be successful in college? What has led to your own persistence in college? (What motivates you to stay in school?)
10. What do you feel were the biggest barriers to your entering college and are now to your persisting in college?
11. How have student support services helped you to succeed in college? What suggestions do you have for colleges to attract students and then to help them succeed?

12. What, if any, are your educational goals beyond a bachelor's (or associate's) degree? How likely are you to pursue a graduate degree?
13. What do you see yourself doing as a career? What educational experiences or credentials will that career require?

Regarding being Appalachian:

14. Do you identify yourself as being from the Appalachian region? What aspects of being from this region make you the most proud? What, if anything, makes you not so proud?
15. How many generations of your family have lived in this region?
16. Where do you see yourself living after college?
17. What courses, if any, have you taken in Appalachian Studies (including high school courses)? How important do you feel these courses are?

APPENDIX C

Consent Form Factors Affecting the Academic Persistence of Appalachian First-generation College Students

You are invited to participate in a study of the factors affecting the academic persistence of Appalachian first-generation college students. I am a graduate student at Texas State University (but now living in Franklin, WV) earning a degree in Developmental and Adult Education. I hope to learn what has most influenced your decision to attend college and what you think it takes to be successful in college. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are from the Appalachian region and you are the first generation in your family to attend college. You will be one of about eight students to participate in the study.

If you decide to participate, you will take part in a one-on-one interview and a focus group discussion (with up to three or four other students). You would also need to be available for a possible follow-up interview and focus group session. The interview and focus group will last 1 ½ to 2 hours each. The possible risks to your participation include psychological or social harm from having the other students in the focus group hear your stories or from recalling something from your past that may have been hurtful or embarrassing to you. Benefits to your participation could include an increased awareness about your decision to attend college and what is necessary to succeed in college.

The finished product of this study will be published as a master's thesis. Thus your stories, anecdotes, or comments may appear in print. However, pseudonyms will be used to protect your identity.

If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without consequences. If you have any questions, please ask me. If you have additional questions, feel free to contact Dr. Emily Payne, my Committee Chair, at (512) 245-2303 or ep02@txstate.edu and she will be happy to answer them.

You are making a decision whether or not to participate in this study. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided to participate. After signing this form, you may withdraw at any time without consequence.

You will be offered a copy of this form to keep.

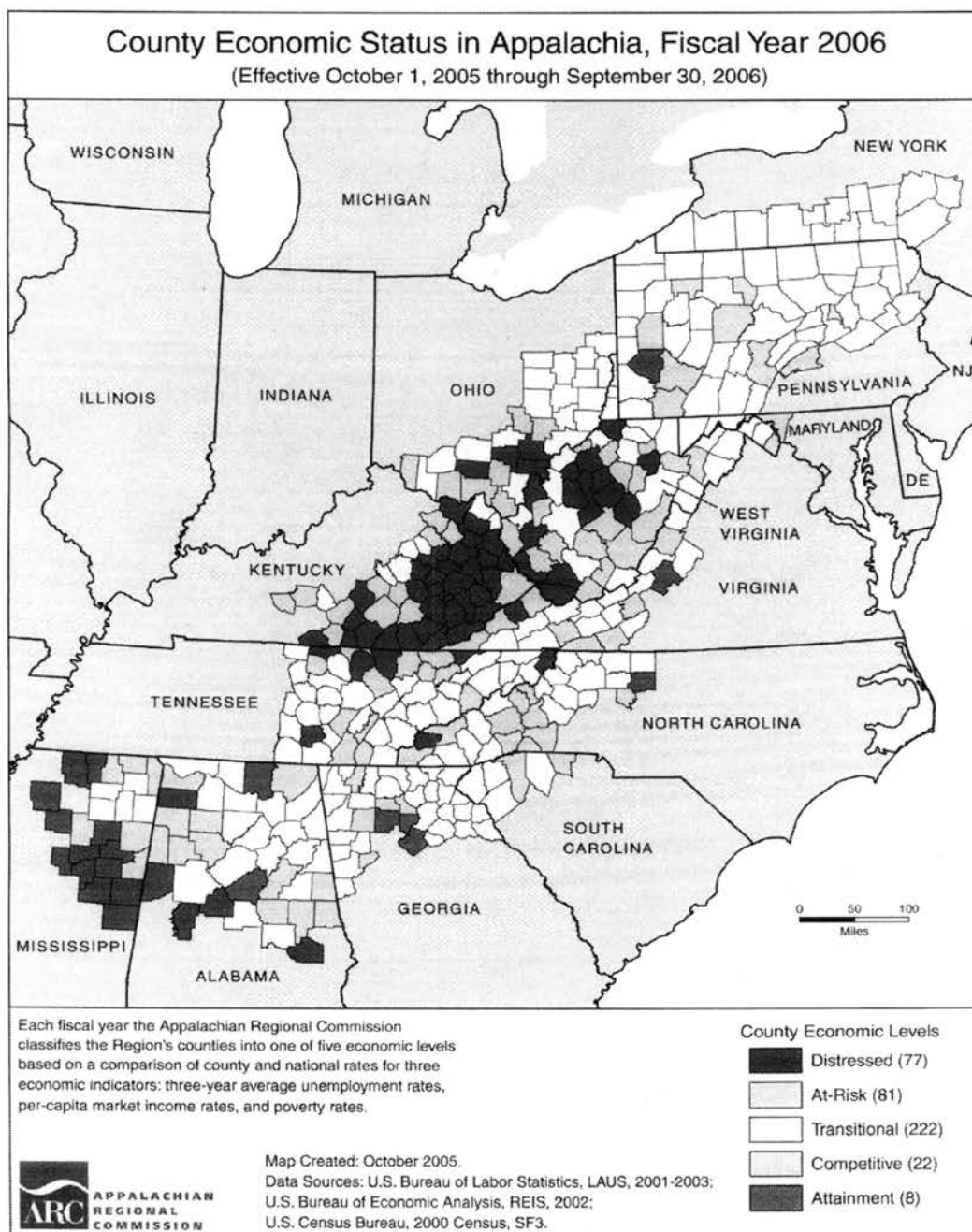
Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Investigator

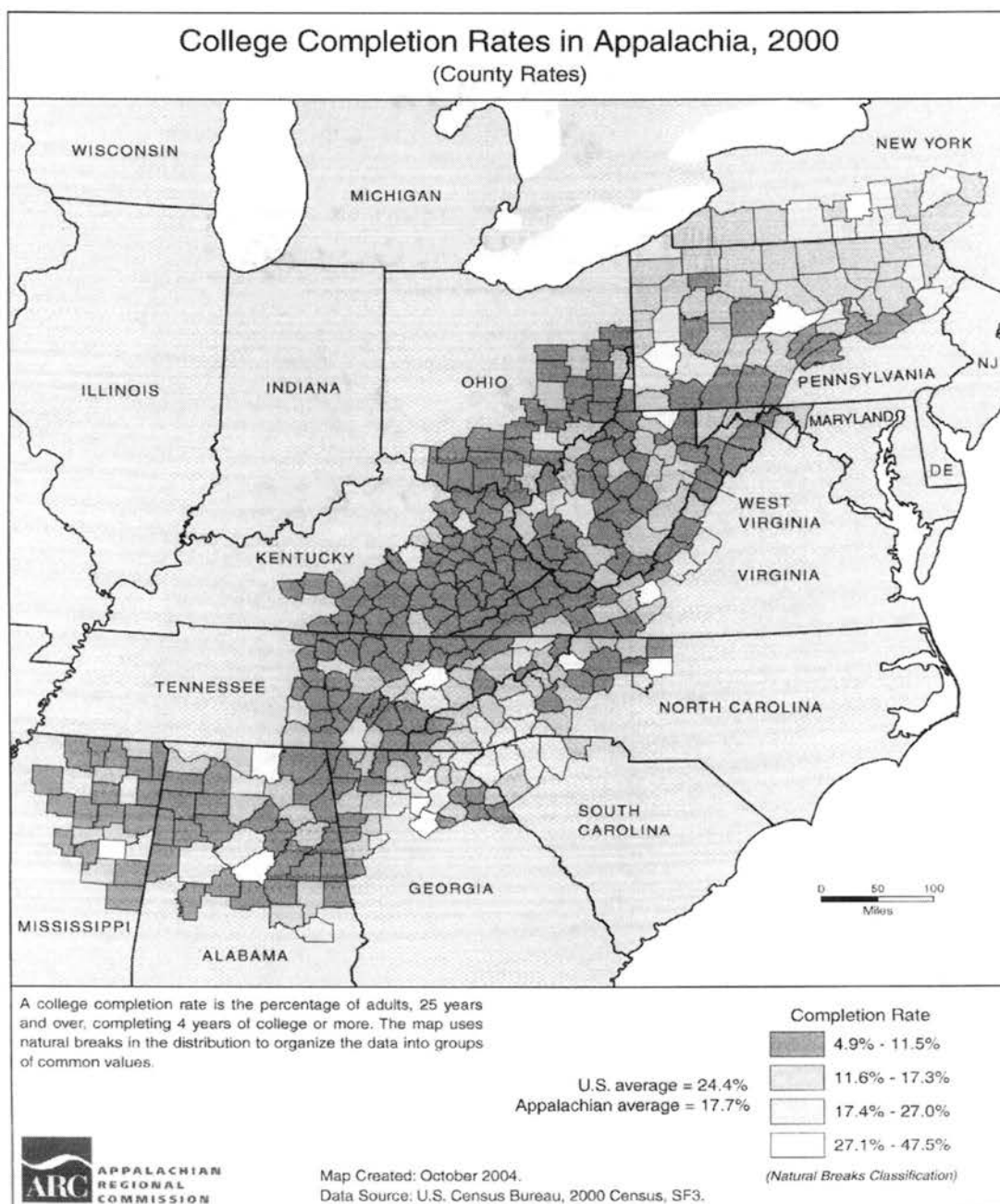
Date

APPENDIX D



Source: Appalachian Regional Commission, 2005

APPENDIX E



Source: Appalachian Regional Commission, 2004

VITA

Christie Hand was born in Seattle, Washington on September 7, 1961, the daughter of Don and Laverne Meekhof. She graduated from Ellensburg High School in Ellensburg, Washington and went on to complete a B.A. in European Studies from Seattle Pacific University in 1984. After a year overseas, she returned and obtained a B.A. in Teaching English as a Second Language from Central Washington University in 1986. Following these degrees, she took graduate courses in linguistics from the University of Texas at Arlington and then spent several years abroad in France and Cameroon doing literacy work with Wycliffe Bible Translators. She moved to Texas in 1999, began teaching in the Texas State Intensive English program, and in 2002 began her graduate study in Developmental and Adult Education at Texas State University-San Marcos. She is currently living in Franklin, West Virginia and working for Literacy West Virginia as a Regional Technical Assistant.

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