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Embracing Rural First-Generation College Student Scholar Identity: Wading Waist Deep in Unfamiliar Waters

Robert Hayes
University of Kentucky, robert.hayes@uky.edu
Author ORCID Identifier:
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4093-920X
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Embracing Rural First-Generation College Student Scholar Identity:
Wading Waist Deep in Unfamiliar Waters

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DISSERTATION
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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
College of Education
at the University of Kentucky

By
Robert Hayes
Lexington, Kentucky
Director: Dr. Jane McEldowney Jensen, Professor of Educational Policy Studies and
Evaluation
Lexington, Kentucky
2023

ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Embracing First-Generation College Student Scholar Identity:
Wading Waist Deep in Unfamiliar Waters

First-generation college students do not persist to degree completion at the same rate as their continuing generation peers. There is a wide range of research focusing on the challenges and opportunities that first-generation college students experience, ranging from pre-matriculation factors, the transition period to college, and throughout the undergraduate years. The achievement gap, in terms of persistence to degree, has been a consistent focus of research as first-generation students routinely do not earn college degrees at the same rate as their continuing generation peers. This research takes a holistic approach to understanding the first-generation college student experience that does not solely focus on achievement gaps. This project focused on the journey of students from Eastern Kentucky to the flagship institution of the commonwealth. The purpose of this study was to identify what authorizes this group of first-generation college students to embrace their emerging scholar identity. This project utilized semi-structured interviews with 12 currently enrolled students from Eastern Kentucky that were enrolled at the University of Kentucky at the time of interview. Data were sorted and clarified using the process of thematic analysis (TA). Elements such as process awareness, comfort engaging with professors and other key stakeholders, as well as discussions why certain resources were utilized or not were considerations brought forth by the students.

Robert Hayes
(Name of Student)

1/30/2023
Date

Embracing Rural First-Generation College Student Scholar Identity:
Wading Waist Deep in Unfamiliar Waters

By
Robert Hayes

Dr. Jane McEldowney Jensen
Director of Dissertation

Dr. Jane McEldowney Jensen
Director of Graduate Studies

1/30/2023
Date

DEDICATION

To all those folks who never thought they could.

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INTRODUCTION

Background

Imagine you have recently moved to a new city for an exciting new employment opportunity with excellent pay and benefits (relative to your past employment opportunities) and are out with your new colleagues at their favorite restaurant. They often go there and refer to this restaurant as 'their place'. The evening has gone well considering this place and the people are new. You're comfortable and just taking it all in. The time comes to order dessert. The menu is straightforward and filled with many great options. The menu does not represent an array of exotic dishes, necessarily. In fact, you have a sense of familiarity with what the dishes are (even if you have yet to enjoy them, for yourself) and the financial means to order what you wish. For all intents and purposes, your choices seem to only be bound by your preferences at that moment. While your dining mates order crème brûlée and panna cotta, you elect to go with the pecan pie. Pecan pie is fine, but you have heard your colleagues rave about the lovely chocolate crème brûlée. Something, however, held you back from placing that order. You just did not feel comfortable in that setting making that choice; not yet, anyway. It could be you need more time to get acclimated in this new setting or you just wanted the order you were comfortable with. It's what you always order, and it is familiar. While you might have felt uncertainty about those other items, you knew this one and that's what you went with.

Being in the first year or so of college, a first-generation student must feel this way many times when navigating a space that is at the same time familiar, but also potentially uncomfortable. Actions that are typically associated with successful

undergraduate student behaviors, such as visiting professor office hours or going to group study sessions are likely scenarios many students have had the opportunity to experience or to engage from the beginning of the academic journey. It is possible that many students have heard of the benefits of these actions, for the first time, in their orientation session or through discussions with their academic advisor (which is also a concept that is both familiar and unfamiliar), other students, or residence hall staff. These first-generation students have access to the menu that every student gets, but do not always immediately select the options that will best serve them in their efforts to earn a college degree. Though first-generation students might make different choices later in their academic career, should they persist, those early decisions can have lasting impacts on their educational journey. While this is true of continuing generation students, as well, for first-generation college students, the stakes are potentially higher as there might not exist as many opportunities to 'fall back on' as many of their continuing generation peers. To be clear, not all continuing generation college students navigate their educational path with greater privilege than first-generation students, but many do. Further, it is important to clarify that many continuing generation students face challenges with selecting field of study, potential struggles with sense of belonging, and knowing how to navigate higher education. On the other hand, many first-generation college students do not face the same challenges as others in their first-generation cohort.

The Issue in Context

There is a wide range of research on the success and challenges that first-generation college students face, ranging from pre-matriculation factors, the transition to college and through their undergraduate years. It is well documented that first-generation

students do not progress through college at the same rate as their continuing-generation peers. The achievement gap, in terms of persistence to degree, remains a steady focus of research as first-generation students routinely do not earn college degrees at the same rate of their continuing generation peers (Cahalan & Perna, 2015; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Means & Pyne, 2017)[1]. There is also substantial research focusing on rural schooling and research focusing on the Appalachian region. There is increasing research examining the first-generation college student from rural areas attending a flagship or prestigious institution. (Ardoin, 2017; Beasley, 2011; Goldman, 2019; Sims & Ferrare, 2021). There is not an abundance of research that has specifically focused on the journey of students from Eastern Kentucky to the flagship institution of the commonwealth, however. The layers of being a first-generation student from rural Eastern Kentucky adds additional complexity to the issue being explored. In other words, first-generation student tendencies and performance indicators are well established, if not entirely understood, along with several studies focusing on rural or Appalachia, but not precisely in the manner this research focuses.

The achievement gaps between first-generation college students and their continuing generation peers consistently appear when considering persistence to degree and retention in college. This gap can be seen when comparing first-generation and continuing generation 6-year graduation rates, advanced-level mathematics course completion as an undergraduate, as well as persistence rates at first institution enrolled, among other measures (Dittmann & Stephens, 2017; Townsend, Stephens, Smallets, &

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[1]Viewing the first-generation student experience through the lens of standard success outcomes solely, exacerbates racist and classist language regarding these students (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Quinn, 2020). This deficit-minded approach was not taken with this project.

Hamedani, 2019). The 'what' has been established; there are achievement gaps in first-generation and continuation generation peers. The 'why' is less clear, and, in fact, the multiple and varying 'whys' present challenges to investigate. An assumption behind this research is that first-generation students gain access to the playbook and are often aware of processes that their continuing generation peers use to navigate higher education, but do not always act on this knowledge in the same timeframe or always in the same way as their continuing generation peers. The 'playbook' can consist of information from an academic bulletin, schedule of courses, course syllabus, or a list of key dates that is introduced to students during orientation and early meetings with course instructors and academic advisors.

Despite the volume of research examining the first-generation student experience, much of the existing research is presented through a lens of a deficit or shortcoming with the first-generation student and does not offer a broader perspective that invites a holistic appreciation of the student experience. Focusing on the standard achievement gaps of persistence to degree or retention rates could prove either limiting or misleading. For example, existing research has shown that focusing on 'achievement gaps', in this case, through the lens of race, the negative racial stereotypes tended to be more exaggerated (Quinn, 2020).   In other words, this sort of view reinforces negative perceptions and inform how these folks are engaged with. Another argument in opposition to solely focusing on achievement gaps suggests that this focus distracts from examining historical systemic issues that were contributing factors to these achievement gaps (Ladson-Billings, 2006). In addition, this deficit minded approach to analyzing the first-generation experience has the potential to minimize the individuality and unique

circumstances of first-generation students while diminishing first-generation student's contributions to the (higher) educational process. Academic achievement-based perspectives offer partial narratives of first-generation students and have the potential to overlook structural and systemic issues that could warrant critical examination. When professionals in higher education base their rationales of the first-generation student's lack of success in their college on assumptions of what the student is 'lacking', this serves to reinforce bias and limit discussions. Or at the least, frames the discussion in terms of how can 'these students' get better prepared for college or how can 'they' better utilize the resources that institutions of higher education have established for them.

Purpose of Study

Academic preparation and resource utilization are certainly factors that impact how first-generation college students navigate higher education. This research project assumes there is more to first-generation student success than academic preparation (often out of the control of the student) and resource utilization once in college. The purpose of this qualitative study is to continue the conversation about how some first-generation college students navigate their higher education experience and to share their stories. Those that are experiencing the phenomenon being studied have a unique and valuable experience to share and this research sought to integrate more of the student voice into the discussion. Rural students' voices tend to not be included in the conversations and research focusing on them (Jehangir, 2010; Williams, 2020). Appalachian students, despite the volume of research focusing on sense of place or family values as a rationale for why they do not excel in college, are often spoken 'for' and not regular participants in the research (Hendrickson, 2012). In particular, first-

generation students from Eastern Kentucky, as with many folks from this region, have regularly had others speak on their behalf with limited opportunities to weigh in and offer additional context. Those voices on the margins can provide valuable insight into complex issues as a primary source of expertise on the lived experience.

To be clear, this is not simply an exploration of how students navigate the hidden curriculum of higher education, though that is a factor that warrants additional consideration as this notion of the hidden curriculum has the potential to further complicate the student experience (Margolis, 2001). There is, in fact, significance to this notion that first-generation students lack procedural knowledge of 'how college works.' Increasingly, however, first-generation, and continuing generation students are often provided a look behind the curtain, even if fleeting with not enough time to absorb all the information, at the hidden curriculum early and often. The hidden curriculum, or 'how to do college' is often a focus for students from their first orientation experience, then through talks with student panels, academic advisors, TA's, RA's, etc. Despite first-generation students being informed of the supposed hidden curriculum and the exposed curriculum, this has done little to change their persistence to degree rates. In fact, oftentimes, strategies and direct communications that are intended to assist students along the way are shared with all first-year college students, including first-generation, by various faculty and staff, but those directions and advice do not always yield positive results in terms of degree attainment. This is not to discount process awareness for navigating higher education. Understanding the process of how to do something increases comfort and certainly is an important factor to consider when analyzing the persistence of a student along their educational journey, but there must be more than this

awareness of how college works that extends to the action taking phase. Otherwise, it stands to reason there would likely be increasingly positive trends in student success outcomes, as process information sharing can be straightforward. Thus, turning to the students for their insights, those who are actively engaging this higher educational experience, to share their voice was critical to begin addressing the concerns that prompted the pursuit of this project.

Research Questions

1. In what ways do first-generation students act, or not, on higher education navigational information shared with them?

2. What are contributing circumstances that 'authorize' first-generation students to embrace their emergent scholar identity?

Regarding the first question, this information shared by institutional players is intended to ease the path to degree, after all. If there is something impeding the progress of the first-generation student, or causing them to reconsider the advice to which they have been exposed, what does that look like for the student and their decision-making process? Coming to what I call 'Emergent Scholar Identity', for the sake of this study, is the point in time in which the first-generation college students were more comfortable navigating their college experience. Continued persistence and intellectual engagement along the path to an eventual degree with the primary focus being on degree attainment and not the obstacles to the degree are markers of 'Emergent Scholar Identity'. What are some of the reasons for student decision making that potentially varies from the playbook to which they have been exposed? If the same information is shared, and seemingly capable of being understood by all students, first-generation or otherwise, are there other factors at

play that influence how students act on this information along their journey, either to degree, transferring, or stopping out? What does the process look like for students grappling with their scholar identities and what are the contributing factors in aiding their sense of belonging, if belonging is, in fact, part of what enables the student to cross over into this new community?

The significance of a study such as this has potential to affect local changes at an institution directed at positively impacting the first-generation student experience. Of course, broader implications of complicating the narrative around the first-generation student's experience in higher education offers significant opportunity for future research. A student affairs professional or faculty member, for example, might review the findings from this research project in order to develop strategic interventions and consider policy changes that would positively impact the first-generation student experience, particularly those from Eastern Kentucky at this specific institution. Or, training for academic advisors or first-year faculty targeting how to best interact with and engage first-generation students could develop from the findings. The specific focus of this project on rural Appalachian students at a Research I university has potential for greater student impact, in terms of academic interventions intended to increase persistence rates for all students, not just the first-generation students in this study. To wit, the 'rising tide' analogy supports the notion that work supporting certain student populations has the potential to better accommodate all students as what is 'good' for those students on the margins tends to also provide additional support for the majority of students. This flow can be one directional, however and techniques used to improve student success for one group of under-represented populations, such as first-generation

college students, will have transferability to other student populations that might not face the same obstacles, whereas the inverse is not always true. Strategies that work for already high achieving students might not have direct transferability to lower achieving students as these strategies often fail to take into account the circumstances of the latter (Thayer, 2000).

Regarding the latter implication of this research suggesting broader implications than academic interventions, this notion of adding complexity and nuance to the research and narrative of the first-generation student experience has the potential to spark new questions explored through unique perspectives that might not otherwise be represented in the existing literature. Adding the voices of students from mostly rural areas in Eastern Kentucky is also significant to enrich their narrative as it has often been written by others without their feedback, or when feedback has been included, it can be without context that might produce misleading or miscategorized findings.

Research Design

This study focused on currently (at the time of recruitment) enrolled first-generation students at the University of Kentucky who are from Eastern Kentucky. Fall 2017 was selected as the starting point as this was the first term that the University of Kentucky had one accepted definition of first-generation (that neither parent nor guardian had earned a bachelor's degree, regardless of siblings or other relatives) and the students had experienced their first years of college pre-Covid-19. All interviews took place after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic when students had returned to campus and could participate in in-person classes. The semi-structured interview format of approximately

one hour (give or take) consisted of primary questions with probing questions available to pursue topics of discussion further.

Participants

Prior to interview solicitation, there were 430 third and fourth-year students from Eastern Kentucky enrolled at the University of Kentucky, with 178 of those students defined by the university as first-generation college students. For context, first-generation cohort enrollments at the University of Kentucky tend to average between ¼ and 1/3 of each incoming class. Starting with the 2017 cohort and including all subsequent cohorts, these students were categorized by a clarified definition of first-generation status on the institution's admissions application in which students are asked, "Have either of your parents (or if residing with one parent, just your primary parent) completed a bachelor's or four-year degree?". This clarification of the definition at the institution revealed there were more first-generation students enrolled than previously assumed[2]. The first-generation pool of students recruited from had a gender breakdown of approximately 53% female and 47% male. Of the first-generation pool, the percentage of underrepresented minority (URM) was nearly 10% of the total at 18.

Of the 178 currently enrolled first-generation students from Eastern Kentucky, 12 students elected to participate in the interview process. Of those that participated, 5 students were male, and 7 participants were female. Of the 12, there were two interviewees who were classified as URM as defined by the Council on Post-Secondary Education (CPE). However, a third student's ethnicity was reported as 'unknown'.

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[2] Defining 'first-generation college student' has presented several challenges. Students whose parents earned an Associate's Degree, had some college, but did not earn a 4-year degree, if parents earned a degree outside of the US, and if the biological parent had a degree, but student was raised by guardians with no degree represent situations that have helped clarify the first-generation definition.

Demographic data and student contact information was provided by request to Institutional Research and Advanced Analytics (IRADS) upon showing evidence of IRB approval to conduct this project.

I recruited students using the official university email provided with the data set. I describe the recruitment process in greater detail later. The recruitment effort commenced near the end of the semester prior to a break, which was not necessarily ideal for the greatest yield. However, the final number of respondents provided ample rich data for analysis.

Conceptual Framework

A premise that is a foundational assumption for this project is that social capital differences between first-generation and continuing generation college students likely account for some of the differences in how both groups navigate higher education. The approach taken with this project relied less upon the concept of cultural capital as a private resource, and tended to focus more on the idea that the individual first-generation student's journey through higher education reflects values or "habitus" that are expressed by the interactions between people and other people as well as non- human agents or systems. It is these interactions within and among the various actants that will be explored for greater insight (Bourdieu, 2011; Moberg, 2018; Portes, 2000).

How effectively students interact with and utilize available resources (tutoring, academic and supplemental advisors, financial aid counselors, instructors, etc.) can impact their journey to earning a degree. On the one hand, first-generation students might begin their journey with a social capital deficit in comparison to their continuing generation peers but have a higher ceiling for gaining additional insights and skillsets

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along the way to degree through other forms of capital (Yosso & Burciaga, 2016). For this project, social capital is to be viewed through a lens of context and social networks (Almeida, Byrne, Smith, & Ruiz, 2019). The resources accessed from the individual's network of social relationships is a key element in students possessing the knowledge and skills to advance through the complex system of higher education. Continuing-generation college students, those whose parents earned a college degree, have greater access to information about college through these prior established networks (Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, & Perna, 2009). These many relations or networks (which can be inclusive of many people, things, technologies) in which a student is engaged factors into their post-secondary aspirations and decision making. A student's various social networks prove critical in informing how the student navigates the educational setting as well as that student's sense of "individual agency or judgment" (Plank & Jordan, 2001).

A perspective that is helpful to view differences between first-generation and continuing generation student's social capital resources, is through the lens of self-authorship. Building on prior work by Kegan's exploration of the "mental demands of adults in modern society", Baxter Magolda defines self-authorship as "the internal capacity to define ones' beliefs, identity and social relations" (Harkins, 1994; Kegan, 1994; Magolda, 2004). The challenges that most first-generation college students endure to earn a degree (financial, feelings of abandoning their family or community, social capital deficit or lacking academic preparedness) could also prove to be just the type of circumstances that become opportunities that can lead one closer to self-authorship. These otherwise negative factors have the ability to provide opportunities for dissonance necessary for self-authorship development (Carpenter & Peña, 2017; Jehangir, Williams,

& Pete, 2011; Pizzolato, Nguyen, Johnston, & Wang, 2012).   However, a student needs to have the proper mindset and support systems to be able to seize on these challenges as opportunities for growth (Carpenter & Peña, 2017; Pizzolato, 2003). Students need to reflect on their challenges, learn from the process, and prepare to move forward. This repeating cycle of reflection and progression helps create a more mature student that is developing a toolbox of skills and behaviors to navigate their educational path. When students are unable to advance in this manner, the challenges can feel cumulative and ultimately prove overwhelming and leave the student in a place where succeeding in college seems like an unattainable goal. In other words, it is not simply that one experiences difficulty and is set on a path to self-authorship, but how one responds, based on the scaffolding provided by peer groups, family, or schools, that leads a student to progress toward self-authorship (Carpenter & Peña, 2017).

Self-authorship does not usually emerge in traditional aged college students, as there are circumstances that might inhibit this development (Magolda, M. 2004; Pizzolato & Olson, 2016).   For many traditional aged college students, there is a lack of need to self-author due to the structure and formulaic aspects of their college experience (Magolda, 2004; Pizzolato & Olson, 2016). In other words, sometimes the script for success is mostly provided and does not require the student to intensely engage in the process toward self-authorship. In contrast, some students, such as first-generation students or students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, might have had life experiences that force greater reflection and introspection; a questioning of their evolving lived experience out of the need to survive and advance, (Pizzolato, 2003; Pizzolato & Olson, 2016).   As a result, many first-generation students, but not all, are uniquely

positioned to begin their path to self-authorship before some of their continuing generation peers. For these students, it was out of necessity that they had to learn the formulas, but then evaluate how to apply them in shifting circumstances for a better future outcome. Pizzolato provides the example of the potential first-generation college student announcing their intentions to go to college to their family and community. This act may prompt the student being socially distanced or face ridicule that requires them to develop their internal foundations to stay on track to college (Pizzolato, 2003). In order to make it through college, these students might also have to navigate different processes (formulas) for funding their experience (Pizzolato, 2003). These situations can create a dissonance for the individual that requires them to intensely revisit their thinking on the process, explore options and create new networks to navigate their shifting reality. Though first-generation students are likely not to have progressed through the phases of self-authorship by the conclusion of their undergraduate degree, many have the potential to be further along than some of their continuing generation students who might have had the privilege of comfort in their experience. Even more promising, there is research that suggests that, depending on the type of circumstances that first-generation students have encountered and the systems in place to help them navigate those, first-generation students can self-author at the final phase during their undergraduate experience (Carpenter & Peña, 2017).

This process of accelerated progress toward self-authorship through negotiating challenges does not neatly align with a notion that there must be a quality that some students have that others do not. For example, there is research suggesting that certain key non-cognitive factors of student success, in general, can be attributed to the student's

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ability to exercise 'self-control' as well as the student's level of 'grit' (Duckworth &

Duckworth, 2016; Duckworth & Gross, 2014).   Self-control is just that; an ability to

focus despite temptation, emotions, or distraction, essentially (Duckworth & Gross,

2014). Grit embodies being in a state such as one has the ability to persevere despite

setbacks and obstacles over the long haul while both pursuing and maintaining interest in

the goal (Duckworth & Duckworth, 2016). Grit is a relatively recent higher education

buzzword, and despite a more recent leveling off, 'lack of grit' is sometimes offered as a

rationale for why students struggle, or 'having grit' as a partial reason for success. Non-

cognitive factors such as grit or other personality traits have the potential to impact a

student's ability to persist to degree completion; however, Almeida et al (2019), posit that

grit is less of a GPA predictor for a first-generation student than their "access to social

capital with faculty and staff".   Though this concept of grit can offer valuable insight, a

concern I have with this concept is that it has the potential for professionals in higher

education, who might not have a thorough understanding of the term, to misapply their

interpretation of grit in a manner that student is seen as a scapegoat.   This supposed 'lack

of grit', then, is a convenient explanation for why certain students struggle in college.

This deficit-minded approach to what the student is lacking (academic preparation is

most often cited) can inform institutions to double down on offering tutoring services as

opposed to developing first-year instructor training programs that help all students 'do

college'. Resources devoted to services, such as tutoring and instructor development, are

equally important. In other words, when the student is seen as problematic because of

what they are or are not bringing to the institution, or how their AP or dual credits do not

compare favorably with their peers, this has significant potential to distract from systemic concerns that could be contributing to one student group or another's lack of success.

Varying levels of academic preparation along with resource awareness and utilization are factors that impact how first-generation college students navigate higher education. This research project is driven by the assumption that there is more to the issue than academic preparation and resource utilization. A consideration I explore further in later chapters is the notion of intellectual belonging. While belonging is increasingly discussed in higher education, for the purpose of this study, intellectual belonging describes when students are able to transition beyond obstacles and shift greater focus to their studies and intellectual growth in college. Ultimately, it is my hope to contribute to the conversation about how some first-generation college students navigate their higher education experience by sharing the student voice and intently listening to what they tell us.

Summary

This study is presented through six chapters. The following four chapters focus on the following. Chapter 2 offers a review of existing related literature that explores past and current trends in the research. Chapter 3 delineates the methodology employed in the study as well as the research design. This chapter includes the interview protocol, the procedures followed to collect the data, along with discussion about how the sample was selected. Chapter 4 introduces the major findings of the research, largely through the accounts of five of the respondents. Chapter 5 provides an opportunity to dig deeper into self-authorship, agency, and what 'being authorized' looks like. Chapter 6, then provides a summary of the study, along with conclusions and discussion regarding potential future

research stemming from this project. The bibliography and appendices follow the final

chapter.

LITERATURE REVIEW & CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

There is a wide range of research on the success and challenges that first-generation college students face, ranging from pre-matriculation factors, the transition period to college, and through their undergraduate years. It is well documented that first-generation students do not persist nor are retained at the same rate as their continuing-generation peers. The achievement gap, in terms of persistence to degree, remains a steady focus of research as first-generation students routinely do not earn college degrees at the same rate of their continuing generation peers (Cahalan & Perna, 2015; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Means & Pyne, 2017). There is also substantial research focusing on rural schooling and research focusing on the Appalachian region. However, there is not an abundance of research that has focused on the journey of students from rural regions like Appalachia, particularly regions like Eastern Kentucky to the flagship institution in the state. Being a first-generation college student combined with being from Eastern Kentucky, offers up unique perspectives to the lived experience of these students. In other words, first-generation student tendencies and performance indicators are well established and understood, along with several studies focusing on rural or Appalachia, but not precisely in the manner this project has examined these issues.

The 'what' has been established time and again; there are gaps between first-generation college students and their continuing generation peers. This gap can be measured in terms of standard achievement measures such as graduation and persistence rate. However, it has been argued that the achievement gap is the result of accumulation of systemic inequality in terms of how marginalized students have been served, or not, by existing systems (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Examining this issue primarily through the

lens of standard success measures has the potential to focus on supposed shortcomings of the student as opposed to deeper exploration of systems and processes in place that have played a role in perpetuating this achievement gap. A postulation driving this research is that first-generation students eventually gain access to the playbook that their continuing generation peers use to navigate higher education, but do not always act on this knowledge in the same timeframe or always in the same way as their continuing generation peers. What are the contributing factors that 'authorize' first-generation students to embrace their emergent scholar identity? 'Emergent Scholar Identity', for the sake of this study, is the state in which the first-generation college students were comfortable navigating their college experience as demonstrated by their continued persistence and academic engagement.   What are some of the reasons for student decision making that potentially varies from the playbook to which they have been exposed? And, what are the contributing factors that enable the student to cross over into this new community?

The following will highlight the type of research that typically focuses on first-generation students and students from rural areas. To be clear, 'rural' is used as a proxy for 'Eastern Kentucky' for several reasons. First, per many measures considered by the U.S. Census Bureau (2020), the overwhelming majority of the areas where the participants in this study are from is considered rural, with a few county seats with populations that would register, albeit it low, on an urban scale. Some measures classify the entirety of the region as rural/nonmetro (www.whitehouse.gov/omb/) or entirely rural as it relates to Business and Industry loans via the U.S. Department of Agriculture (www.rd.usda.gove/). Suffice to say that Eastern Kentucky is mostly rural. In addition,

much of the literature that has an Eastern Kentucky focus tends to identify supposed

pathologies of the region or issues to be corrected through the lens of economics, culture,

or education. This project narrows the focus from previous studies of first-generation

students in general to first-generation students attending the state's flagship institution

who are from this Appalachian region.   I will begin by outlining key aspects of the first-

generation and rural student identity while addressing the established higher education

achievement measure tendencies. The discussion will then shift to an examination of the

factors that influenced the postsecondary aspirations of these students, based on the

assumption that this context can provide insight into the decision-making processes of the

student upon their transition to college. As the lifecycle of the student transitions to

college, elements of the literature that focuses on persistence and retention will be further

examined. Finally, the discussion shifts to circumstances that have proven beneficial for

some first-generation students, when acted upon in a precise manner, to navigate the

college experience more successfully.

Research on first-generation students tends to fall into categories that 1) address

college preparedness and demographics, 2) focuses on the transition to higher education,

or 3) examines degree attainment, persistence to degree and undergraduate retention

(Atherton, 2014; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Pratt, Harwood,

Cavazos, & Ditzfeld, 2019). Though there is an abundance of first-generation student

related research, one of the concerns identified in this field is the preponderance of

academic success outcomes-based research that, without context, makes it challenging to

understand the student's lived experience. For example, when first-generation student

persistence is viewed through the lens of academic preparedness only, it can produce

over-simplified findings that could prove tempting for those seeking black and white answers found in quantitative measures of test scores and GPAs. Findings from research with such boundaries might not prove as enlightening, much less profound. For instance, when viewed through such a lens of test scores and GPA, there is research highlighting that students that are more academically prepared for college are more likely to persist to their degree (Stewart, Lim, & Kim, 2015). On the one hand, this finding seems obvious, but many first-generation students that are comparably well prepared for college, by these measures, fall through the cracks despite their academic preparation. These perspectives offer partial narratives on first-generation students and fail to appreciate the diverse first-generation student experience. When the first-generation/continuing generation achievement gap is analyzed through such a lens, contextual information that could complicate the discussion might not be introduced into the conversation. A narrowed perspective into the issue could potentially result in a view of a deficit in ability or potential of the student without considering the other influences or reasons for why first-generation students are not persisting to degrees at the same rate as their continuing generation peers (Macias, 2013; Means & Pyne, 2017). An example of the approach that takes an asset-based perspective is that of work done around community cultural wealth (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Yosso & Burciaga, 2016) which calls for an approach that is not grounded in a deficit mindset and which recognizes systematic inequalities. Rationales based on something about the student 'lacking' can reinforce structural biases and exacerbate the problem. A hopeful outcome of this research is to help disrupt the common deficit language that can be applied to first-generation research when only looking at more narrow outcomes, such as through the lens of academic preparation.

First-Gen and Rural Identity

While the definition most widely accepted for categorizing a student as first-generation, that neither parent has earned a bachelor's degree, is increasingly accepted in higher education, that categorization of the first-generation student in higher education literature tends to minimize the individuality of these students. The inherent danger in this perspective is the 'one size fits all' approach when higher education professionals implement retention and persistence strategies. The intersectionality of other points of identity (race, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, ability, gender, sexual identity, etc.) complicate the notion of 'first-generation' as these identifiers, obviously, coexist with the first-generation identity (Orbe, 2004; Stieha, 2010). A first-generation identity may or may not be more salient for some students than the other identities they also possess at various points of their undergraduate career. In other words, as with any group of students frequently marginalized or historically excluded, there is a tendency to other first-generation students and limit their identity to whatever preconceived notions are held about first-generation students regardless of their intersectional identities. Thus, the previously mentioned brief definition of how we define first-generation college students does very little to identify who these students are as individuals.

The first-generation student identity is rich with many points of intersectionality that complicates generalizations about these students as a group. Though many first-generation students exhibit greater financial need, not all do. And while it is the case that many first-generation students might hold a minoritized identity, it is not true for all. In an interview with a first-generation student, Stieha discusses the type of student that has

the potential to 'slip through the cracks', presumably because of something regarding her first- generation identity, but not because of other factors often associated with heightened risk of attrition:

> Particularly for Alli, a White working-class student, statistics have the potential to blur the realities of her situation. She is not receiving financial aid, she did not enter the university needing remediation, she does not fall into any of the traditional high-risk categories and yet, her story reveals she is at risk of dropping out. Hers is the type of case that confounds what I had come to expect from the institutional retention reports that crossed my desk. (Stieha, 2010).

Though time intensive, institutions of higher education would be well served to analyze other identifiers these students might possess and avoid total reliance on aggregate data to better appreciate the nuanced identity of the student (Stieha, 2010).

Race is an important factor that impacts how students navigate the space of higher education, for example. Though college access is greater for most, now, many of the non-White students entering higher education are first-generation college students that face unique challenges connected to their racial identity (Cho, Hudley, Lee, Barry, & Kelly, 2008; Hines, Cooper, & Corral, 2019; Miyazaki & Janosik, 2009). Black students navigating systems that have historically excluded them adds an important layer of complexity to consider. When comparing White and Black student persistence rates, White student persistence rates tend to be higher than Black persistence rates (Leppel, 2002). This is likely due to several factors, from limited opportunities for deeper social integration with fewer Black students enrolled in Predominately White Institutions (PWI), to the issues that confront non-White students in systems that did not have them in

mind when created. Even the establishment of Historically Black Colleges and

Universities (HBCU) is rooted in a system better designed to support White cultural

norms and expectations. White control of HBCU's, heavily influenced by missionaries

who were Baptist, Methodists, and Presbyterians, focused on curriculum that did not, to

say the least, focus on the African American experience (Harper, Patton, & Wooden,

2009).   Through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT), the very establishment of

HBCU's was to support White power systems and to limit African American enrollments

at predominantly white or historically white institutions (PWI's)[3] (Harper et al., 2009).

These practices have long standing historical implications. With the White donors

holding control of the HBCU's administration until the 1930's and 1940's, this served to

control the curriculum at HBCU's and limit enrollments at PWI's. Brown v. Board in

1954, however, was an initial step that this notion of 'separate, but equal' was not legal.

Brown v. Board and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act increased access for minorities by

increasing numbers enrolled in PWI's. This action, then, had a negative impact on

enrollments at HBCU's (Harper et al., 2009).   The 1986 reauthorization of the Higher

Education Act provided $100 million for HBCU. Disproportionate funding issues

persisted, however and in the early 2000's, 'per-student' expenditures at HBCU's was

just over $6000 compared to over $10,000 at PWI (Harper et al., 2009).

Language is another core facet of student identity to consider. Depending on the

context and the circumstances, this element of identity can be a significant factor

influencing the student's sense of belonging and fit. Dunstan et al argue that diversity on

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[3] While PWI is not an official designation of an institution of higher education in higher education and
Historically White Institution (HWI) is called for use by scholars, the PWI naming convention is
commonly used in many of the cited sources in this project.

college campuses takes into consideration a range of facets of identity such as race, ethnicity, gender, etc., but frequently fail to take into account language variation (Dunstan, Wolfram, Jaeger, & Crandall, 2015). Speakers of dialects or language outside of the mainstream language spoken on campus might feel marginalized compared to the majority, and for good reason (Dunstan et al., 2015). There is existing research that has shown that features of speech, such as cadence and volume, can serve as cues for the listener that inform assumptions of the speaker's competency or potentially assumed inadequacy. In other words, perceived personality traits can be inferred by the sound and delivery of the speaker (Clopper & Pisoni, 2004).

Variants of the mainstream spoken language have a greater likelihood of being perceived as 'degenerate'; a view held often by the speakers of the variation, as well as those who speak the mainstream form (Siegel, 2006). In other words, the speakers themselves tend to feel that their language is not 'correct'. There can also be alignment between speakers of a variant with groups that are seen as marginalized. Perceptions of one's language can also be intertwined with racial or cultural assumptions. Negative attitudes toward certain variations of the mainstream language have been attributed to other underlying factors, such as race (Hill, 2001; Siegel, 2006).

Even for native speakers of English, dialect is an integral part of individual and social identity, whose connections can prove resistant to change from systems attempting to do so, such as found in schools and other places where standard language is the expectation (Wolfram & Schilling, 2015). Connecting this discussion back to the focused region of Eastern Kentucky, While overt discrimination based on sad tropes,

such as the 'hillbilly,' are increasingly less common, the notion of 'linguistic prejudice' is prevalent and largely accepted in many polite spaces (A. D. Clark & Hayward, 2013).

As stated, speakers of non-mainstream language often have their variation interpreted as 'incorrect' in comparison to the standard language, thus drawing parallels between their use of an 'incorrect' version of speech and their perceived intelligence (Wolfram & Schilling, 2015). Examples abound in discussions of Ebonics, various Latino dialects, Hawaiian Creole, etc. Student speakers of Appalachian English reported that in-class behaviors, lack of class participation, how their professors used their accent as proxy for intelligence, impacted their sense of belonging on campus (Dunstan et al., 2015). Students from rural Southern Appalachia reported reluctance in speaking out in class due to concerns over drawing unwanted negative attention (Dunstan et al., 2015). Students who spoke a dialect outside of the mainstream language reported feeling they had to work harder to prove their intelligence to both faculty and their peers (Dunstan et al., 2015). Children with parents who speak a variation of the standard language tend to face more challenges or formal education settings than those children whose parents speak mainstream language, though not necessarily with the language itself, but with the biased practices deployed such as standardized tests that are based on linguistic norms (A. D. Clark & Hayward, 2013).

It is a misconception that speakers of variant or vernacular language were simply those that had failed at acquiring the mainstream language, and in fact, this can be part of a linguistic strategy to engage the broader community (A. D. Clark & Hayward, 2013). Code switching, intentionally used through the lens of contrastive analysis, can be

utilized to give the speakers of vernacular speech strategies to navigate different spaces that have varying linguistic expectations (A. D. Clark & Hayward, 2013).

In a study exploring the issue of 'code switching' among Black students in education systems, Hudley and Malinson identify several concerns with the practice. One issue is that code switching, when not carefully implemented, can be demeaning to the culture and identity of the speakers of the dialect (Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2018). Code switching has the potential to influence students in such a way as to internalize that their cultural and social identities do not belong in the educational setting (Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2018). Students who become adept at using mainstream language, dependent on context, face tension of 'being true' to their original accent and speech when conversing with friends and family from home. On the one hand, using the standard form can feel like a necessity in the classroom and other formal settings, but can also create distance and tension with family and friends 'back home' who might perceive this as the speaker 'thinking they are better than' those from home (A. D. Clark & Hayward, 2013).

In the educational setting, implementing 'community-generated' models that utilizes the student's dialect as well as incorporating Standard American English (SAE), there is greater potential to have students positively engage in the formal educational experiences. Models such as this that use as a foundation of community, culture and inclusion, have a greater potential to encourage "linguistic agency" among both students and teachers as the values associated with the speaker's dialect as well as SAE are valued and communicated as having value (Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2018). Research has shown that inclusive environments that factor in race, ethnicity, culture, and linguistic

considerations foster a sense of academic belonging among students (Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2018). Dialect awareness incorporated into first-year writing courses improved student "understanding and tolerance" of non-mainstream dialects (Dunstan et al., 2015; Siegel, 2006).

Another aspect of the first-generation student identity to consider is their chosen field of study. Per existing research, the processes that inform this decision can be contextualized by understanding how intersectional points of their identity such as class and gender impact the decision. Mullen asserts that while access to higher education opportunities in the United States has increased, where students choose to attend college and what they study has links to class and gender, thus reinforcing stratifying effects of higher education (Mullen, 2011). While class and gender impact the decision-making process, the combination of these two elements of identity help to better understand the process on a more systemic level.

Examining this process through an intersectional identity lens is helpful in that it complicates the discussion beyond the already multi-faceted elements of gender or class on the major selection process. In her study that focused on a 'state' school and an 'Ivy League' institution in the New England area, Mullen (2011) found those students from more privileged backgrounds that attended the Ivy League institution tended to pursue fields of study traditionally labeled as more in the liberal arts while attendees of the state institution tended toward applied and pre-professional fields. These findings suggest that class impacts how students see the function of their pursuit of higher education in relation to Men tended to pursue majors that would place them in more favorable market conditions, regardless of social class, and women, regardless of social class, tended to

pursue fields of study that would likely yield lower 'market payoffs' (Mullen, 2011). In a prior study by Sax (1992), similar findings were reported. Men reported that eventual economic outcomes were more likely to influence their field of study, while women reported being more drawn to the 'social good' of their studies (Sax, 1992).

This phenomenon is often framed through the discussion of 'hard' and 'soft' sciences, with more men tending toward the hard sciences and women toward the soft sciences. Sax, who was researching persistence of men and women in stem fields, found that over 20% of men aspired to majors in hard sciences and approximately 6% of women had this aspiration (Sax, 1992). In Mullen's study, men from higher SES backgrounds enrolled at the elite institution would tend toward math and science fields and women toward the humanities. Men from lower SES backgrounds enrolled in the state institution sought out fields like Engineering and women tended toward areas such as education. Evidence of this process can be found in professions such as the medical field. Jobs in the medical field are gendered in that many nurses are women and more doctors are men, just as one example to consider (Sithole et al., 2017).

Regarding first-generation students, in general, the initial selection of a STEM field of study could be the result of recommendations to secure greater economic benefits of the undergraduate degree upon graduation (Bettencourt, Manly, Kimball, & Wells, 2020). Regardless of first-generation or continuing generation status, students who initially pursue STEM fields of study tend to be more likely of changing their major or field of study to a non-STEM path or for those students who are not successful in STEM to stop out without a credential (Sithole et al., 2017). An area of additional inquiry to

examine further is if first-generation degree completion outcomes are disproportionate in certain fields of study when compared to continuing generation peers.

On the one hand, these choices in fields of study could suggest a stronger value for the intrinsic nature of higher education for the Ivy League students and a greater appreciation for the applied nature of education for the students enrolled in the state college. Another perspective, however, is that while students from higher SES backgrounds are more free from the burden of selecting a major or field of study that would lead directly to a well-paying occupation, as more of these students would go on to graduate studies, but, more importantly would tap into valuable networks that help to connect these students to even greater opportunities (Mullen, 2011). The perspective of higher education through a utilitarian lens is a common discussion around first-generation college student research and will be revisited later. Suffice to say, however, that the complex nature of how students have grown up, the networks they have engaged, and the opportunities they perceive to be within reach inform many of the decisions made in choice of college and field of study.

As it is important to complicate the identity narrative of the first-generation student, it is also necessary to address aspects of the narrative about what these students know or do not know about navigating college. In other words, it is important to clarify the actions of first-generation college students are not always because the student is unaware of what the expectations are, or even that they do not understand how to navigate certain processes. Some higher education practitioners perceive a greater knowledge gap in college expectations for first-generation students than likely exists. This point will be revisited later in the discussion, as well. There are often multi-layered

influences and stressors impacting the decision making of the first-generation student that might cause them to factor work or family life/family expectations into their regular routines out of perceived necessity, not necessarily out of ignorance of expectations. An example shared by Stieha (2010), through a series of interviews with a former first-generation student, who would often identify what she 'should be' doing, but would then explain the limitation as to why she could not, was often because of work and family obligations or family influences (Stieha, 2010).   As previously stated, not all first-generation students are obligated to work or feel the pull back to their home or community, however these are the influencing factors that warrant additional discovery through research.

Preconceived notions of how certain student populations behave tend to originate from decontextualized information. Within the structure that exists in higher education, there are rules of thumb and predictions about how first-generation and rural students will fare in college that tend to hold true. It is likely that a combination of institutional processes combined with student behaviors perpetuate and reinforce challenges first-generation students face. In other words, the gap does not exist solely because of what the student brings to the table. It is important to consider some of these tendencies, however. On a very fundamental level, it seems there is a concession that simply being a first-generation college student puts a student at risk of not enjoying success at the same rate of their continuing generation peers for a variety of reasons (S. y. Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012). To wit, some of concerns regarding first-generation college students are that they:

"tend to be at a distinct disadvantage with respect to basic knowledge about

postsecondary education (e.g., costs and application process), level of family

income and support, educational degree expectations and plans, and academic

preparation in high school (Pascarella et al., 2004)."

Keeping with this theme, first-generation students tend to be less likely to engage

with faculty outside of the traditional classroom setting. This lack of social connection

with a key player in their college experience has the potential to be negatively impactful

as increased time with faculty, particularly outside of the classroom, is a strong predictor

of the student's likelihood to persist (Tinto, 1990). There are many reasons why a first-

generation student might not engage with faculty outside of class from work obligations

to a lack of clear understanding of the expectations of that relationship. Continuing

generation students are more likely to have a broader understanding of the expectations

of engaging faculty as a means to succeed in college, as compared to first-generation

students, who might employ independent strategies (Yee, 2016). Continuing generation

students might have a sense of familiarity with certain terms and processes from

conversations in the home, for example. Some first-generation students have indicated

that they see the role of faculty as either 'gatekeepers' or in a more extreme view of being

'obstacles' seeking to 'weed out' students, and do not feel it is their role to engage with

students outside of the classroom (i.e.: office hours) (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice,

2008). This perspective is important and begs the question of why and how does this

perspective evolve over the student's time in college? What were the processes and who

were the people that helped shape this point of view? Other first-generation students

have suggested they do not wish 'to bother' their faculty outside of the classroom, even if

they did not perceive them to fill the gatekeeping or weeding out role (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008). Regardless of whether the student perceives the faculty member in the more extreme view of keeping them from earning a degree or if the student simply does not want to engage due to their understanding of the expectations of engaging (or not) in these critical networks, these perspectives of engaging with faculty or other key staff members is of interest in this research. It is well established that connections to and with the institution tend to be seen as requisite for persistence to degree, whether that is faculty, staff, peers, or other mentors and this is an area in need of additional exploration.

Layering in 'rural' and first-generation identifiers only reinforces many of the previously discussed tendencies. Not unlike first-generation research, research with a rural focus often addresses the issues from a deficit perspective. Research is presented to address what has historically been understood as the "backwoods or backward" (Tieken & San Antonio, 2016) 'rural school problem' (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). Per Tieken and San Antonio, 'rural aspiration' research has become the new 'rural school problem' (DeYoung, 1995), with the notion of rural brain-drain being a regular focus of research. Not unlike much of the first-generation college student focused research, a preponderance of this perspective represented in existing literature neither increases the breadth nor depth of understanding college students from rural areas.

There are parallels in the research on rural students and first-generation students in many aspects. Rural students tend to compare well with peers in more urban and suburban places while in high school, but do, in fact, exhibit a gap in achievement in terms of college success and completion (S.-y. Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Gibbs, 1998; McDonough, Gildersleeve, & Jarsky, 2010). There are many reasons to help

explain this gap in achievement that also help to explain why rural students participate in

higher education at lower rates, often 10% or greater (Provasnik et al., 2007), than urban

and suburban students. Students in rural places tend to face financial challenges more

often than students in urban spaces, thus limiting access to higher education (S.-y. Byun

et al., 2012). The changing rural economy, transitioning from agricultural based to

extractive and industrial, tends to put constraints on rural regions due to cycles of initial

boom/bust that tend to lead to persistent economic struggle (Billings & Blee, 2000; Eller,

1982, 2008; Tieken, 2016). To underscore this point, regardless of high achievement or

lofty postsecondary aspirations, youth from more economically privileged families are

more likely to attend college, even if they were not as successful during their high school

career (Gerald & Haycock, 2006). The economic advantage, or disadvantage for many

rural students, is a strong factor in post-secondary attainment. Students from Eastern

Kentucky participating in this study are from counties historically classified as

'economically distressed' by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), though this

is not a point of distinction in Central Appalachia (www.arc.gov/). The region has

persistently struggled with poverty. Many of the counties' economies have been at one

point in the past, or are currently, based on extractive industries including timber and coal

which has led to cycles of boom and bust (Eller, 2008).

There also tends to be curricular challenges, in terms of academic preparation,

that rural students face more often than their urban and suburban peers. Academic rigor,

as represented by Advanced Placement (AP) or the International Baccalaureate, is

perceived lower than schools in suburban and urban schools as these programs are

offered less in rural schools (Provasnik et al., 2007).   This gets further complicated in

that students in rural schools are also more likely to be in school systems unable to offer academic and career counseling (Sutton Jr & Pearson, 2002). Students in rural areas are more likely to be potential first-generation college students, as their parents are less likely to have earned a college degree than their urban and suburban counterparts, as well (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Provasnik et al., 2007).

Living in rural spaces can add challenges to attending college. Proximity, in that most rural students are not geographically close to institutions of higher education, brings along added stressors for rural students, from as basic as travel to campus to longer periods away from home and community (Schafft, 2016). As a point of clarification, the population (First-Generation students from Eastern Kentucky) in this study are relatively close to institutions of higher education; however, these are most frequently community or technical colleges, though there are regional institutions as well as smaller 4-year colleges. The proximity to institutions of higher education in the region does serve to complicate the trope of Central Appalachian geographic isolation somewhat. Does the proximity to this type of institution influence how college is discussed, or not, in the home and school to the point where these students are more prone to being "cooled out" from advanced degrees due to an emphasis on training over education (B. R. Clark, 1980)?

Contextualizing the Factors Influencing Post-Secondary Aspiration

Better understanding who rural first-generation students are and what outcomes they tend to have in college helps to contextualize the discussion on post-secondary aspirations. These formative years that help shape the vision of going to college leaves an impact on the student upon their transition to higher education, in that how they

engaged with certain influential adults before college likely impacts how they engage with authority figures upon their transition to college. While this degree of carryover influence on behaviors is not clear, this added context helps to better understand how relationships with key stakeholders are initially handled by first-generation students. To be clear, there is research suggesting that post-secondary aspirations tend to be a good predictor for college success for first-generation students (Pike & Kuh, 2005). This could imply that a positive mindset about college, based on how aspirations were nurtured, lays a better foundation for a successful experience. Expectations of the college experience (Do I belong there? Will I be successful? I am not like them…) are influenced and informed prior to matriculation and it is through that lens that first-generation students navigate this new space (Baldwin, 2006). In other words, if a student has a preconceived notion of 'not belonging' in a place, this can create apprehension and doubt that manifests in what might prove to be a series of compounding unfamiliar situations. There are ways, however, where these challenges become unique opportunities, which will be examined in the conceptual framework for this study.

Historically, post-secondary aspiration has been analyzed through lenses such as rural and urban (DeYoung, 1987, 1995; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999), social network influences on post-secondary aspirations (Plank & Jordan, 2001; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995), religious influences on college choice (Al-Fadhli & Kersen, 2010; Rhodes & Nam, 1970), and cultural influences on college aspirations (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Gonzalez, Stein, & Huq, 2013). Recently, trends in research have indicated greater interest from various agencies, from government to policy and research institutes, that are more closely examining rural postsecondary aspirations, as well as the

role of the school in this process, thus there is an increasing volume of research to pull from (Strange, 2011; Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Klein, 2012; Tieken & San Antonio, 2016).

The three areas of focus on rural aspirational research are most often career goals, choices about furthering education, and decisions about residency (Tieken & San Antonio, 2016). The family influence, which often surfaces in the residency discussion is not separate, of course, from the career goals focus. Parents in rural settings, particularly those who did not earn a college degree, are more likely to provide their students messaging advocating higher education that is slanted in the direction of being a means to more immediate job placement (Tieken, 2016). It is important to acknowledge the significance of parental/family influence as this has been a primary factor prior to and sustained through the college years for many first-generation students. First-generation student parental influence, taking into consideration the parental inexperience with higher education, is a very significant factor in shaping the discussions and understanding of post-secondary aspirations. Parents of potential first-generation college going students are less likely to understand what is necessary for their child to seek higher education, even if they promote college as a postsecondary option (Tieken, 2016). In a study examining the contributing factors for minority students to persist in STEM fields, Foltz et al. found that parents would strongly advocate for higher education, despite having not earned a degree themselves or having limited knowledge of the college experience (Foltz, Gannon, & Kirschmann, 2014). On the other hand, while some family members were strong positive influencers for students to pursue a college education, others in the family were likely to be a point of discouragement. Family influence, whether positive,

negative, or neutral, is a strong factor for first-generation and historically excluded

populations (Foltz et al., 2014). For the student, regardless of the type of influence the

family exerted, this is likely a challenge to navigate. Being encouraged to do something

that the parents did not might present opportunities for feelings of doubt to creep in, or

equally damaging, an increased sense of confidence in the future experience without the

additional information from home to help the student transition successfully to college.

On the other hand, dealing with regular discouragement from home can impact the

student, as well.

As for many first-generation students coming from Eastern Kentucky, the

economic considerations for framing higher education aspirations is rational and makes

good sense. This narrowed focus, however, on the utilitarian qualities of higher

education has a limiting effect on the larger discussion of additional benefits of seeking

higher education. This economically rational aspiration model diminishes other

arguments for attaining higher education, such as intellectual growth, social growth

through development of new relationships, and a broader cultural expansion (Tieken,

2016). Admittedly, when compared to persistent poverty, these other reasons for higher

education likely would take a backseat in the daily life of the student. Nonetheless, this

sort of framing can prove limiting to the student's mindset about college, despite the best

of intentions it likely was conveyed. In fact, first-generation students with such a mindset

about college have an increased likelihood of not feeling fully connected to college upon

their arrival as they are not likely to hear such direct language linking their degree

pursuits to employment. For the student, the look and feel of course delivery and how

these conversations are held early on with advisors and faculty, are typically not framed

as narrowly as simply being a means to an end (degree=job). To the student, this exposes

the norms of the institution as being 'alienating' for first-generation students, who are

more likely to need to balance their classroom experience with work (both while a

student and linking their studies to future work) instead of becoming more involved and

integrated into the campus (Bergerson, 2007; Stieha, 2010).

There are numerous nuanced ways that parents and family members of first-

generation students ultimately impact their engagement once on campus. Research has

shown that many first-generation students report suffering from feelings of guilt, in

particular, feelings of moving away from or beyond their families, and this is a factor in

limiting the potential to become more immersed in the campus culture (Covarrubias &

Fryberg, 2015).   For many first-generation students, particularly those from rural areas,

there is often a reported strong connection to one's hometown/county and a desire to be

there. These markers from home help inform notions of the 'good life' that potentially

factors into the decision of choosing to leave or remain in a community. For some, there

is an expressed importance in staying close to family or a connection to place. The

tension of leaving home for a certain period or permanently are significant factors in both

shaping postsecondary aspirations, as well as lingering factors after the student

matriculates to college (Sherman & Sage, 2011).   When combined with local economic

conditions, the push and pull of wanting to leave or stay near 'home' is a significant

factor in influencing some student's postsecondary aspirations, potentially even more so

than the advice provided by educators or levels of poverty in the high schools (Petrin,

Schafft, & Meece, 2014).   This is more than homesickness. The family and community

social network are significant factors in shaping the educational aspirations of first-

generation college students and those ties cannot simply be severed once the student enrolls in college. In other words, the influence of home and community is strong and can weigh heavily on the decision making of first-generation students, both in terms of shaping their thoughts about going to college, but also how to navigate that new space once on campus.

Depending on the local economy, parental influence might even impact the networks of influence the student encounters in high school (interactions with teachers, guidance counselors, etc.). For example, in challenging economic circumstances, parents might seem less supportive of higher education, potentially due to not having enjoyed its benefits, and convey this sentiment directly or indirectly to the student and school. This can be perceived by guidance counselors and other professionals working with these students as part of the rural 'culture problem' that their work is trying to overcome (Tieken, 2016). Messaging students hear in high school about the prospects of college may or may not align with what they hear at home. Do these points of dissonance that students potentially experience serve to make the prospects of higher education seem that much more daunting and potentially foreign? Another question to consider is the potential impact of how uncomfortable or conflicting relationships with authority figures might inform how students navigate their new space upon matriculation to college?

Parents and family members are primary players shaping post-secondary aspirations, but potential first-generation students are influenced by several other authority figures. This network of aspirational influencers includes high school guidance counselors, college admissions officers (or more specifically college recruiters), and staff of community-based organizations that work with high school youth (Coles, 2012;

Fallon, 1997; Griffin, Hutchins, & Meece, 2011; McDonough, 2005). It is important to consider that despite the many influences on post-secondary aspirations, including peer influence, adults frame the discussion, even if they are not the sole voice (Tieken, 2016). These authority figures, such as guidance counselors, establish boundaries to understand the prospects of higher education through expanding the student's options to college for some, or possibly rationalizing a community college path for others, or suggesting a path leading directly to work for others (McDonough, 1997).

The guidance counselor seems to stand out as a key influencer to consider. For many students, they have had an opportunity to engage in college discussions with their guidance counselor. And, though not quite a direct parallel, depending on the type of institution a student enrolls, the academic advisor will serve a similar role in helping the student to navigate their curriculum choices and college, in general. In the 1960's, guidance counselors were viewed as important players in shaping schooling processes and student success outcomes that were more on the local or school level (Armor, 1969; Cicourel & Kitsuse, 1963). Through their work on this local level, guidance counselors were seen to be conveyors of social reproduction (Smith, 2011). During these periods, potential first-generation students were likely not advised to consider college. But, in keeping with the transition to mass higher education access, the roles of guidance counseling shifted. Toward the middle to late 1990's, Smith (2011) indicates that guidance counselors had transitioned from restricting students' access to college to more broadly advising college across the board with a 'College for All' approach. Due to the increased volume of work with this changing focus, Smith asserts that this era of guidance counselor work is most closely associated with what he calls, 'Impartial

Cultivators', (Smith, 2011) that are charged with introducing college, in some form, to most students. Because of a need to serve more students, student-counselor ratios have increased significantly (Association, 2011), putting constraints on time spent with individuals, which would also impact the finely detailed work of sorting, as compared to the past.   Thus, for a first-generation student not receiving the same type of information from their home as a continuing generation student would, the interactions with this key influencer were significant. While the guidance counseling experiences can vary significantly from school to school, the guidance experience for a first-generation student could prove more impactful than to their continuing generation peers, in shaping how they viewed their prospects on going to college.

Compounding the discussion, more recent research has suggested the role of guidance counselors has grown to further limit their time with students, partly because of the shift away from the localized scene and administration of the school, to the growing external demands placed on guidance counselors. Again, for first-generation students, this has the potential to be more consequential as their social capital acquisition from home has a greater likelihood to be more limited compared to their continuing generation peers. Taking these shifts of duty into account, it stands to reason that for students that need more intentional guidance, such as first-generation students, that there is more room for confusion and misinformation to influence the student's perception of the college experience. There is existing research that acknowledges that the absence of information and quality guidance likely exacerbates the problem of students in lower SES not fulfilling their potential, in terms of measures such as college-going (Plank & Jordan, 2001). When guidance and information is more integrated to the student's experience,

their likelihood of seeking higher education opportunities improves (Plank & Jordan, 2001). In other words, while the role of guidance counseling has shifted over time, it is clear that in the absence of effective guidance, student outcomes are less likely to be positive.

Though research on guidance counseling has suggested the profession to have evolved from being a maintainer of the existing social order, there is still a remnant of that function that garners attention. As it relates to the first-generation experience, the practice of 'tracking' or 'sorting' of students is still an issue that draws attention in the literature, and is still an active process in which guidance counselors engage, even if not at the levels of specificity as before. Per Smith's (2011) framework, the concerted gatekeeper model operated on the assumption that members of a non-dominant class were groomed for   blue-collar work and middle-class students were tracked for more white-collar professional career paths. For rural first-generation students, while higher education might be more often recommended, it could be framed as a means to an end; to a job and not necessarily framed in a broader experience. This can be limiting for the first-generation student as a point of dissonance upon arrival on campus once the realization that higher education is not necessarily like the vocational preparation they might have envisioned. Or, the messaging about college could be more direct to first-generation college students with a recommendation for a quicker or more immediately 'cost-effective' option, such as community or technical colleges to be recommended to these students (Tieken, 2016). This is not unlike McDonough's (1997) concept of 'bounded rationality' that addresses the framing of options for specific student populations in particular schools. Framing the postsecondary discussion with students is

a valuable practice, especially for first-generation students who lack a familiar frame of reference. The difficulty emerges when the framing is too narrow to allow for the student's potential to be realized both in terms of college options and how to navigate upon matriculation.

The guidance counselor functions, to varying degrees, in ways that have the potential to put students into tracks through labeling and sorting based on the student's current class standing or expectations as established by the student's various networks. As previously discussed, historically, guidance counselors were part of the group that weeded out certain students and encouraged more middle-class students toward their path bound for college. Tracking students based on perceived skills "ignores the social, cultural, and structural forces that mediate readiness", which "encourages the segregation of students into either/or categories that privilege some and stigmatize others" (Duncheon & Relles, 2018). The role of the guidance counselor sharing critical information about college or other postsecondary options effectively limits the 'college-going' identity of some students while opening doors for others (Cooper & Liou, 2007). How a student interprets their 'fit' in their school (are they college bound or likely to stay home and hope to find a job), then, influences their academic behavior and post-secondary aspirations (Duncheon & Relles, 2018). Thus, tracking students effectively limits opportunities, at least initially, for some students and paves the way for more opportunities for others (Sherman & Sage, 2011). When students view higher education through the lens of a consumer, the cost analysis will prove to limit their post-secondary considerations. Thus, how the key educational figure (the high school guidance counselor, teacher, whomever made a strong connection), frames the discussion of post-

secondary aspirations for the student is critically important. Guidance counselors, or other key adults, can have significant positive impact, however, through individual advising, particularly when it occurs within an empowering 'counseling infrastructure' (Smith, 2011). This sort of intervention with the student has the potential to instill greater confidence in future educational pursuits by normalizing that as an expectation and reasonable aspiration.

Transition to College and Persistence to Degree

As this research seeks to expand the understanding of what authorizes first-generation students to embrace their emergent scholar identity, I feel it is important to consider the transition period to college as well as the student's persistence to degree. To be clear, persisting to a degree does not guarantee that a student has found their scholar identity. For some students, degree requirements can be met without an 'aha moment' or a sense of enlightenment that they are engaging in the process fully. For a first-generation student, however, examining aspects of persistence to degree is important to assist in identifying factors that proved to be impediments along the way, or conversely, facets of their experience that proved beneficial.

For all students, and especially first-generation college students, research has shown the first year in college is important in establishing a sense of belonging through establishing social connections and identifying academic supports (Bradbury & Mather, 2009; Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007; Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002; Means & Pyne, 2017; Strayhorn, 2018). Acknowledging the significance of this transition period for first-generation

students, shortly after the student has arrived on campus, many institutions initiate outreach that is designed to help the student to persist on their path.   This first semester of the first year is critical to the student being 'incorporated' into the campus community and is impactful in developing the student's sense of belonging (Tinto, 1988). Persisting to earning a college degree is a greater challenge to students who are unable to address their transition concerns in their first semester and first year of college (Raab & Adam, 2005; Stewart et al., 2015). Likewise, integration into the campus community is a predictor to the likelihood that a student will be retained at the institution (Bean & Eaton, 2000; Strauss & Volkwein, 2004; Swecker, Fifolt, & Searby, 2013). In sum, research has consistently supported the notion that the first year of college is a critical transition point that has lasting ramifications for students on their path to a degree.

While the 'work' of retaining students is often housed in student affairs offices, the connection to faculty is often cited as critical for the student to build a stronger connection to their field of study and to persist in their chosen field (Foltz et al., 2014; Tinto, 1999). Tinto argues that for students to persist to their degree, that they must be integrated into formal and informal academic systems, as well as formal and informal integration into social systems (Tinto, 1990). In other words, if students are fully integrated into their academic experience and engaging in class, interacting with faculty and staff networks outside of class, all the while participating in extracurricular activities and joining clubs or peer groups, they are more likely to be retained.   Full integration and engagement are key elements of this line of thinking and is easier to achieve for some students than others, as first-generation students frequently have other competing interests for their time, such as work or family obligations. To this point, Tinto's theory

on student persistence has been criticized on many fronts for shortcomings in generalizability, in that it does not address commuter students, non-traditional students, or students who tend to be underrepresented in higher education (Stieha, 2010). In addition, Bassett argues that the challenge of integration is even greater for first-generation college students as these represent spaces and systems that do not have them in mind (Bassett, 2021).

This connection and integration to the campus can be operationalized through various networks. Networking is an important element of engagement for all students but could be critical for first-generation students in navigating this new space. Peer relationships are very important but are often challenging to find and then maintain (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). These connections are certainly worth the effort in making, however as research has confirmed that first-generation students that do engage in formal social interaction outside of the classroom (clubs, Greek Life, intramurals, etc.) glean a greater benefit from this engagement than do their continuing generation peers (Pascarella et al., 2004). This is likely attributed to feelings of belonging and connectedness to the institution, as these behaviors mirror a continuing-generation behavior. In other words, when first-generation students have the comfort and time available to engage in the same type of activities than their continuing generation peers do, they stand to reap a greater reward as they have more room to grow in that area. It could be that this feeling of belonging is a key piece in allowing the emergent scholar identity to be realized through these actions.

Means and Pyne (2017) found that support structures that bolstered sense of belonging among first-generation students, lower income students, or students with

minoritized identities, included programming associated with need-based scholarships, social identity-based student organizations, community-building within residence halls, supportive faculty, academic support services, and HIP's such as education abroad. Many students would turn to these resources when feelings of being 'the other' emerged or when they were aware of their need for more support. This combination of support from services such as those previously identified offer up a diverse network of peers and staff that can help inform the student's ability to contemplate their identity and move toward self-advocacy (Means & Pyne, 2017). Students would relay how their experiences with their scholarship program felt "like family" or how an individual positive interaction with a faculty member could prove to change their trajectory (Means & Pyne, 2017).

There is a distinction between learning communities with a sole focus on student interest (field of study or identity) compared to learning communities that combine the interest of the student with intentional integration into the larger campus community (Sithole et al., 2017).   This underscores the value of first-generation students having multifaceted social networks to offer support and to bolster their own expectations of what is possible for them in college and after.   While the value of adult influence is significant, it can prove a more palatable experience to learn the hidden curriculum from a peer than from a faculty or staff member. Therefore, it stands to reason that when organizations and engagement opportunities are intentionally designed to foster the building of relationships and access to social capital among various critical networks, that first-generation college students are more likely to succeed (Strayhorn, 2007). Thus, this puts a premium on the first-generation student's ability to capitalize on the relationships

formed with peers and mentors on campus, to successfully navigate toward their degree (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). Careful selection of these peer networks can better position the first-generation student for longer term success. For example, if first-generation students form networks with peers that have parents who earned a college degree, they are better positioned than if their peer network is strictly with other first-generation students, in terms of their 'motivation and intellectual development' (Pascarella et al., 2004). This is not to say that there is not value in having peer groups with similar identities as that is a necessary part of the socialization to college. It does, however, highlight the value of learning from peers that began their college journey more readily acclimated to the requirements of the institution.

As previously discussed, an underlying theme in much of the discussion thus far has been the impact of students integrating into the college experience through relationships with key stakeholders. These interactions can be very important in shaping how first-generation students navigate the college experience. These opportunities help build necessary social capital to persist to degree. Social capital, in this sense, is to be viewed through a lens of context and social networks (Almeida, Byrne, Smith, & Ruiz, 2019). The resources accessed from the individual's network of social relationships is a key element in students possessing the knowledge and skills to advance through the complex system of higher education. Continuing-generation college students, those whose parents earned a college degree, have greater access to information about college through these prior established networks (Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, & Perna, 2009).

Beyond engagement with faculty, integration into other networks can have positive impacts on the first-generation student experience. Specifically, research has

shown that interactions with faculty, staff, and key peer groups create more favorable conditions for a student to persist to degree (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), but there can be structural impediments at play. It has been suggested that large class sizes could inhibit this access to social capital gained through these critical interaction spaces (Beattie & Thiele, 2016). Beattie and Thiele (2016) found that larger class sizes had a 'significant negative association' in terms of how the class discussed materials and assignments, regardless of race or first-generation status. In terms of engaging faculty or TA's, these larger class sizes had a significant negative impact on first-generation students, compared to other identities (Beattie & Thiele, 2016). Continuing generation students, however, increased their engagement with faculty and TA's when in larger classes (Beattie & Thiele, 2016). Though the researcher describes this behavior as anomalous, it is only insofar as it differed from the first-generation experience. This type of behavior from a continuing generation student reinforces the supposition that they would have greater comfort in navigating this circumstance. As important as understanding why first-generation students tended to not engage more is why continuing generation students did engage more. Did the continuing generation student know how to better navigate this space or have a greater comfort in doing so? This is not to say that the first-generation student could not behave as the continuing generation student. What were the reasons for the first-generation student not doing so? A potential problem for some students could be that first-generation students did not witness the interactions outside of the classroom space (instructor office-hours or chats with the TA after the class) that contributed to these behaviors. Lack of familiarity with the expectations likely accounts for some of the behaviors, but questions about belonging and having comfort to

act in such a way is also worth consideration. This level of comfort is impacted by factors such as the degree of confidence that a student might have in the subject matter of a particular class or if the student has confidence in what they are 'supposed to do' or whether they fit in that space. There is research on how students manage their uncertainty in the classroom that suggests that while academic concerns are common, the socioemotional needs of students is also an important consideration (Sollitto, Brott, Cole, Gil, & Selim, 2018).

There is research, however, that challenges the significance of the perceived social capital deficit between first-generation and continuing generation students. For example, there is research suggesting that the perceived gap in social capital between first-generation and continuing generation students exists but might not be as wide of a gap as assumed. Using a 'Name and Resource Generator' method, Martin et al assert that while first-generation students did exhibit slightly more of a social capital deficit per their research, they also had access to capital, but from different sources than continuing generation. For example, a question asking how information was acquired about the field of Engineering was more likely to be answered with 'parents/family' for continuing generation students and 'middle or high school teachers' for first-generation students (Martin, Miller, & Simmons, 2014). This research presents limitations to consider. The research fails to acknowledge the potential for feelings of alienation as first-generation students tend to take a different path to access information compared to their continuing-generation peers. Another limiting factor is that only students who persisted were surveyed and this research is specific to a field of study.   That the gap in social capital was measurable between the first-generation and continuing generation students,

considering both groups had persisted in college, is noteworthy in that there was still 'something' that separated the two groups, despite the supposedly comparable social capital acquisition. Moreover, had the students who stopped out earlier been included in the research, the results would have potentially highlighted an increased gap. In other words, despite the researcher's assertions of a diminished gap of social capital, considering the factors of the study and the interpretation, the findings are not conclusive to support a diminished view of the significance of social capital to the first-generation student experience.

The timing and depth of exposure to processes and networks informs the social capital of students and can serve as a marker of predictability for future academic success. Academic advising is considered one of the most common approaches to getting first-generation students better connected to faculty, college processes, and mentors (Schwartz et al., 2018). For some first-generation students, the function of the academic advisor might initially seem comparable to their guidance counselor. For those students who academic advisors as familiar, this might present the opportunity to exploit this new network for insight to navigate college. Academic advising is often cited as an effective intervention strategy to increase student retention, in part because of the perceived accessibility of academic advisors to students, as well as their positioning to impact student satisfaction with the institution (Habley & McClanahan, 2004; Swecker et al., 2013; Tinto, 2006). In fact, institutions have strategically utilized academic advisors to reach those students who are most likely to not be retained or in danger of stopping out (Schwebel, Walburn, Jacobsen, Jerrolds, & Klyce, 2008; Swecker et al., 2013; Vander Schee, 2007). For example, there is existing research that shows a correlation between

the number of advising appointments and the likelihood that a student will be retained at their institution. With each advising appointment, the probability of being retained increases incrementally (Swecker et al., 2013).

Academic advising is not the silver bullet intervention for closing the first-generation achievement gap, of course. Without strategies to intentionally engage, on a personal and academic level, first-generation students, reports of dissatisfaction with the advising experience or feelings of discomfort in engaging with an advisor are often reported (Allard & Parashar, 2013). If the role of the academic advisor takes on the role of a trusted member of the student's network, for example, the student is more likely to use their guidance to help navigate their higher education experience. In other words, the notion of advisors as mentors has the potential to influence useful behaviors for the first-generation student to adopt to navigate college. This connection of the process of navigating college, which is less familiar, with the personal relationships that first-generation students are more familiar with, could be important in understanding how first-generation students navigate their college experience. Building on this idea of mentorship, assigning formal mentors to first-generation students has been shown to help foster community and belonging on the campus (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Schwartz et al., 2018). There exists a wide range of reasons why first-generation students might not fully engage the advising experience, or with faculty or other key stakeholders for that matter, and conceding that each institution's advising strategy differs, this is an approach to the question worth further exploration.

Conceptual Framework

While this research does not seek to identify the precise development point of a particular student along their way to self-authoring, the concept of self-authorship informs the theoretical lens for interpreting some findings from this research. Many first-generation students will have had life events that offer the potential to advance toward self-authorship at a quicker pace than continuing generation peers. The emergence of self-authorship is less likely among typical aged college students due to circumstances that might have proven an inhibiting factor (Magolda, 2004; Pizzolato & Olson, 2016). Due to systems in place, many students will not have had to navigate the challenges that would have encouraged this development (Magolda, 2004; Pizzolato & Olson, 2016). In other words, there is not the need to work toward self-authorship in the absence of significant challenges or obstacles. Some students, however, potentially first-generation students or otherwise marginalized students, might have had to engage in greater self-examination that would have gotten them closer to self-authorship (Pizzolato, 2003; Pizzolato & Olson, 2016). Due to circumstances born out of necessity, first-generation students can be better positioned to begin their path to self-authorship at an earlier age than their continuing generation peers. Examples of these challenging circumstances can be as simple as sharing intent to go to college in an environment when that is not an expectation, or for others, trying to piece together a plan for paying for college could lead to greater introspection that will further the student toward self-authorship. These challenging situations and obstacles create conditions that allow for intense reflection and planning (learning new processes or connecting with other networks) that adds to the likelihood of accelerated progress toward self-authorship.

The challenges that most first-generation students need to overcome to earn a college degree, whether that is financial, feelings of abandoning their family or community, social capital deficit or lacking academic preparedness can create opportunities that can lead to self-authorship. These otherwise negative factors could provide opportunities for dissonance necessary for self-authorship development (Carpenter & Peña, 2017; Jehangir, Williams, & Pete, 2011; Pizzolato, Nguyen, Johnston, & Wang, 2012). However, the student needs to have the proper mindset and support systems to be able to seize on these challenges as opportunities for growth (Carpenter & Peña, 2017; Pizzolato, 2003). Otherwise, many of life's challenges can prove overwhelming and leave the student in a place where succeeding in college seems like an unattainable goal. In other words, it is not simply that one experiences difficulty and is set on a path to self-authorship, but how one responds, based on the scaffolding provided by peer groups, family, or schools, that a student can progress toward self-authorship (Carpenter & Peña, 2017).

The key for success is to approach challenges as opportunities and not simply as impediments that likely cannot be overcome. Clark and Brooms (2018) conducted research on how Black Male Initiatives on college campuses are successful in helping to transition Black male students toward self-authorship. The processes of building relationships on and off campus with peer groups helped to progress these students from the 'Crossroads' phase to a feeling of connection and sense of belonging on the campus (J. S. Clark & Brooms, 2018). These programs also help in the 'Becoming the Author of One's Life' by moving to a place of self- awareness that embraces the potential and away from the negativity and stereotypes that many of these students deal with (J. S.

Clark & Brooms, 2018). The strength that can be gained from lived struggles can fuel transformation to better position the student for a successful future in college. Of course, for this to come to pass, this process must be intentional and framed in such a way to grow from the challenges, but this approach offers hope for a narrowing of the achievement gap of first-generation and continuing generation students.

Carpenter and Peña (2017) identified three key catalysts promoting self-authorship. Students who had to a) overcome difficult life events, family conflicts/mediating conflict b) encountered epistemological dissonance and reconstruction of meaning, and c) role modeling, which was more likely to occur in postsecondary settings through interactions with an impactful faculty member or academic advisor (Carpenter & Peña, 2017). Research complementing Small's (2009) work states that organizations add to social capital stores via the routine social interactions, while Cox (2017) suggests that the organization structures, themselves, can work to embed students in beneficial social networks. The resources within a network and the structure of the network impact social capital. The social networks with 'horizontal' connections with peers and 'vertical' connections with more experienced students that have broad range within the social network are more likely to positively impact social capital acquisition (Cox, 2017; Small, 2009). These horizontal ties serve as a support network of individuals dealing with similar circumstances, while the vertical ties give access across various cohorts of students with more experience and access to information (Cox, 2017).

Becoming Authorized

It has been established that social backgrounds and gender of students play a significant role in shaping their higher educational experience (Mullen, 2011). Despite increased access to higher education and institution type, those students from privileged backgrounds, such that a greater familiarity with the norms of higher education is more typical, are initially better positioned for success in higher education than students with backgrounds that informed a different perspective on the prospects of higher education. Per Mullen, those students attending the elite institution viewed the college experience as a time of intellectual growth and enrichment, while those students at a master's granting institution, tended to view their college experience to secure better career opportunities. Bourdieu's concept of habitus, or social norms that inform how we think and behave, help in understanding the replication of processes such as how college choice is determined and how higher education is viewed. Further, Bourdieu's concept of 'disposition' speaks to one's both rational and intuitive understanding of the social order and how one acts within it. For this project, this notion of becoming authorized to embrace one's scholarly identity marks a time when students have transitioned to moving through the space of higher education in a more comfortable/natural manner. It marks a move away from students feeling they are a guest moving though processes that are both familiar and unfamiliar, but not quite right based on their lived experiences up to that point.

Conclusion

First-generation students continue to make up a significant number of students entering college each year and consistently persist to degree at a lower rate than their continuing generation peers. That a persistent achievement gap exists warrants additional research on how first-generation students navigate the space of higher education. The research exposes some inherent dangers in analyzing this student population through too narrow of a lens, in that it promotes conditions for a deficit mindset analysis to be employed. This deficit minded approach can have implications in shaping potential first-generation students' postsecondary aspirations as well as their sense of fit and belonging once on campus. Interpreting first-generation student success strictly from student achievement outcomes can prove to exacerbate existing structural problems. The body of research does support the notion that social capital plays a significant factor in the first-generation student's journey to college and then on to a degree, but clearly exposes that there is a great need to better examine 'why' students succeed in some circumstances and not in others. The next chapter will provide additional information on the details of this research project, including questions driving the inquiry, methodology, and participants.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative study is to continue the conversation about how first-generation college students navigate their higher education experience. Specifically, the focus is on first-generation students from Eastern Kentucky that began their studies in 2017 and were enrolled at the University of Kentucky at the time of this project began, Spring semester 2021. It has been well established that there are achievement gaps between first-generation college students and their continuing generation peers. Arguments abound about why this is the case, a definitive 'why' is yet to emerge. The postulation driving this research is that first-generation students eventually gain access to the playbook that their continuing generation peers use to navigate higher education, but do not always act on this knowledge in the same timeframe or the same way as their continuing generation peers.

As opposed to examining this issue from a deficit perspective, attempting to identity what 'went wrong' along the way, the project explores the issue through the lens of self-authorship to examine some of the events along the student's educational journey that might have proven to be problematic or was an 'aha moment'. This study explores factors that authorize these students to embrace their emergent scholar identity. Being 'authorized' to embrace scholar identity, for this study, is the state in which students have acquired the skill set and sense of comfort and belonging to engage their formal educational experience. In other words, this research highlights what the students perceived to have been important experiences, people, or processes that allowed them to feel they were integrated into the process of their college experience.

Research Questions

1. In what ways do first-generation students act, or not, on higher education navigational information shared with them?

2. What are contributing circumstances that 'authorize' first-generation students to embrace their emergent scholar identity?

Research Design

A qualitative methodology is most appropriate for this research as the words of the interviewees provide meaning and context to the issue being examined (Maxwell, 2012). The qualitative data collected and analyzed provided an in-depth look at the social world of the participants based on their meaning making within it (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013). The rich data generated from qualitative research provides a foundation for understanding the day to day nuanced experience. Per Yin, "the social, institutional, and environmental conditions within which people's lives take place…these contextual conditions may strongly influence all human events" (Yin, 2011). The semi-structured interview method implemented in this project was selected to allow for a conversational style to encourage comfort of conversation with the interviewee. In addition, this method has enough structure to ensure the topic is covered, but is flexible to allow for probing questions and follow ups, as necessary (Adams, 2015).

Site Selection

The University of Kentucky is both the commonwealth's flagship institution as well as the land grant institution. This university has a combined student enrollment of just over 31,000, with approximately 22,000 of those students being undergraduates (https://www.uky.edu/irads/enrollment-demographics). As the largest institution in

Kentucky, an initial consideration for this site is that there would be a higher volume of students to recruit from. Prior to recruitment, there were just over 175 first-generation students from Eastern Kentucky enrolled that would make up the pool of potential recruits. Beyond providing a larger pool to recruit from, the University of Kentucky also represented an institution that might be slightly less comfortable than regional institutions or community colleges that many first-generation students might select after high school. While the University of Kentucky (UK) is typically held in high regard by residents of Eastern Kentucky, it is not typically viewed as a realistic option to attend in the same way as Morehead State University or Eastern Kentucky University are. Morehead State and Eastern Kentucky are seen as safer options that will have a greater density of students enrolled from the region. That the regional institutions are viewed as a more likely landing spot for many Eastern Kentucky students does not speak negatively about the quality of institution, but more about what is perceived as safer and adequate. This framing can be described as an option informed by the 'bounded-rationality' of those from the region, where a safe or satisfactory college is selected and not necessarily the dream 'Ivy'(McDonough, 1997). UK on the other hand, is sometimes that place that students are offered a word of caution about, in terms of how large it is or how students from Eastern Kentucky would 'fit in' in that place. My experience attending a high school in Eastern Kentucky was such that UK was the college with the excellent basketball team and medical facilities, but not necessarily an institution that I would feel comfortable attending. That students from Eastern Kentucky do attend UK, however, provided an opportunity to discuss what elements of their experience created dissonance

with how they viewed their college experience and to discuss challenges that students dealt with along the way.

The following will provide additional context to better understand the significance of the selection criterion of being from Eastern Kentucky. Eastern Kentucky is defined as those counties that are categorized as Central Appalachian by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC). Central Appalachia encompasses Eastern Kentucky, southwestern Virginia, West Virginia, southeast Ohio, East Tennessee, and northwest North Carolina (ARC). This region within Appalachia often serves as proxy for the larger region and tends to be the general area envisioned when the term 'Appalachia' is invoked. This is an important consideration as the region's portrayal has historically been negative in popular culture and has a tendency of being narrowly discussed in the research (Cooke-Jackson & Hansen, 2008; Cooper, Knotts, & Livingston, 2010; Speer, 1993). Most of the students in this research project self-identified their feelings of being slightly on the outside due to being from Eastern Kentucky, which was evident to many of their peers and instructors soon after hearing how they talked. The participants regularly shared how negative imagery of Eastern Kentucky was a regular occurrence they either had to deal with or ignore and that they had to deal with battling stereotypes from both peers and instructors.

While negative portrayals of the region persist, the fact remains that 97% of the Central Appalachian region examined in this study has been classified as 'economically distressed' by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC). The region has persistently struggled with poverty (Billings & Blee, 2000) and many of the counties' economies have at one point in the past, or are currently, been based on extractive industries,

including timber and coal, which has led to cycles of boom and bust (Eller, 2008). This is not to say, however, that all people from Eastern Kentucky are poor or even that the region lacks distinction among its counties. For example, it is not uncommon for significant income discrepancies to exist among residents of former coal producing counties. This research project adds student voices to the discussion to further complicate the narrative of Eastern Kentucky and to expand the literature beyond what is frequently framed in a deficit minded perspective.

Participants

This study focused on first-generation students, who attended high school in Eastern Kentucky, that were enrolled in their third or fourth year at the University of Kentucky. The years of enrollment aspect of the selection criteria was determined for two primary reasons. First, this criterion was a consideration of the global Covid-19 pandemic that took hold in the year 2020. Second, the criterion was established to allow for an interviewee pool that would have persisted through at least two years of college. Regarding the pandemic, students in their third or fourth year of college would have had at least one year without the effects of the pandemic, or what would have been a comparably 'normal' first year of college. Whether enrolled in a partially hybrid modality course schedule, online, or completely face to face, the pandemic changed how students navigated the space of higher education. Students in their third or fourth year also have more experience to draw upon and reflect that enriched the data generated in the interview session. While focusing on those students who began their college career in a pandemic is worthy of exploration, this study did not focus on that complicated

transition period, but acknowledgements on behalf of the interviewees regarding the pandemic did come up along the way.

At the time of commencing the recruitment process, 178 first-generation students from Eastern Kentucky were enrolled at the University of Kentucky. These students made up the recruitment pool. First-generation cohort enrollments at the University of Kentucky tend to average between one quarter and one third of each incoming class dating back to 2017. 2017 cohorts and later were categorized by a clarified definition of first-generation status on the admissions application (that neither parent nor guardian had earned a bachelor's degree, regardless of siblings or other relatives) as opposed to providing several options for consideration prior. The simplified definition of a first-generation college student that UK uses also is more in alignment with the federal definition. This clarification of the definition at the institution resulted in reporting increases in the number of first-generation students in each cohort compared to previous years. Specifically, as it relates to this research, students who are from Eastern Kentucky are slightly more likely to be first-generation when compared to the overall in-state population. In other words, students from Eastern Kentucky that attend the University of Kentucky are more likely to be first-generation when compared to their peers across the state. The first-generation pool of students recruited from had a gender breakdown of approximately 53% female and 47% male. Of the first-generation pool, the percentage of underrepresented minority (URM) was nearly 10% of the total at 18.

After securing IRB approval, I recruited potential participants via email from addresses provided by the institution through Institutional Research and Advanced Analytics. The recruitment email (see appendix A) identified the researcher, the nature

of the research and the commitment of time, as well as the $25 incentive provided to respondents. Per IRB recommendations, the opportunity to receive the incentive was near the end of the recruitment email to avoid leading with a prospect of financial gain by participating. The initial email was sent to all eligible students (178 total) on April 30, 2021. Of this group, 10 students indicated willingness to participate and received a link to schedule the meeting along with the consent to participate (see appendix B) for review on May 2, 2021. One of these students failed to show to their scheduled interview and did not respond to follow ups. A reminder email was sent to the remainder of the group on May 5. This yielded two additional respondents that I followed up with a scheduling link and consent document. A second reminder email was sent on May 17, 2021. This yielded two more students with one of those being a 'no show'.   Thus, the group of 12 interviewees resulted from securing nine participants from the first outreach, two participants from a subsequent email, and one additional from a final call.

The goals of the recruitment were ultimately to secure a broad range of representative voices of first-generation students attending UK from Eastern Kentucky. While I targeted all the eligible cohort with recruitment efforts, the hope was that I would secure a panel with diversity represented through lenses of gender, race and ethnicity, and field of study. Of this group that I recruited to participate in the research project, 12 students comprised the final interviewee panel. While a larger initial interview panel would have been welcomed, the goals of the recruitment were satisfied in that there were multiple layers of diversity represented in the final number of interviewees. Seven participants

identified as a woman[4] and five students identified as being a man. This gender split is comparable to that of the overall undergraduate student body. Additionally, of the 12-member panel, nine participants identified as 'White', with one student each identifying as 'Asian', 'Hispanic/Latino', and another as 'unknown'. Considering the demographic makeup of the Eastern Kentucky region and of those from the region that attended UK, race and ethnicity were moderately well represented. The fields of study were largely split between the hard and soft sciences with respondents indicating their majors being within areas in the social, natural, and medical sciences, among others (see Table 1). The GPA range for the respondents was from 2.60-4.00 cumulative. The average cumulative GPA for this group of students was 3.37.

Table 1

	Race	Field of study	Gender	GPA*
Student 1	White	Biological Sciences (BS)	woman	3.60
Student 2	White	Social Sciences (BA)	woman	4.00
Student 3	White	Fine Arts (BA)	man	3.60
Student 4	White	Social Sciences (BA)	man	3.10
Student 5	White	Health/Physical Science (BS)	woman	3.50
Student 6	White	Engineering (BS)	man	3.00
Student 7	White	Biological Sciences (BS)	woman	3.80
Student 8	White	Social Sciences (BA)	man	4.00
Student 9	White	Social Sciences (BS)	woman	2.60
Student 10	Hispanic/Latino	Medical Sciences (BS)	man	3.10
Student 11	Asian	Social Sciences (BA)	woman	3.30
Student 12	Unknown	Medical Sciences (BS)	woman	2.80
		*Cumulative GPA at time of interview		

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[4]No student from the interview panel presented as non-binary or gender non-conforming. I am mindful, however, of the use of 'female' and 'woman' when speaking in terms of a biological aspect of one's identity as compared to a more holistic identifier.

Positionality of Researcher

There were aspects of this research that made it complicated and I was wary of the potential to generate a negative reaction if the process was not engaged carefully. There was the chance that members of the community could resent some of the findings based on if they felt there to be an unfair portrayal of them as an individual or the community they represented. Feelings of shame or pride could be invoked as the research unfolded dependent upon how each person interprets the study and its findings. That Eastern Kentucky is a focus of this research is a consideration mentioned at the onset and has been a point of reflection throughout the process. For me, personally, I was reminded time and time again of similar experiences that I had as an undergraduate and throughout my professional career. This place, Eastern Kentucky, is one that has seen its image portrayed on a national level that is almost exclusively less than positive. From John Fox's early 20th Century novel, *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine,* to early 21st Century news 'documentaries' such as Diane Sawyer's, *Hidden America: Children of the Mountains*, the images of Appalachia are often a blending of fictionalized Scotch-Irish heritage with a bit of 'Mountain Dew mouth' thrown in for good measure (Eller, 1982, 2008; Sawyer, Weinraub, Gray, Dawson, & Ferrari, 2013).

Caution was exercised to ensure that stories told are fairly represented, hopefully limiting the likelihood that the false narrative associated with negative stereotypes are unintentionally propagated. One approach that I took with this project was to rely on and have confidence on intuition throughout the process as a relative insider of the community to help ensure I represented the voices of the students in the most authentic

manner. I am from Eastern Kentucky and acutely aware of misrepresentations of cultural

aspects of the Appalachian region. On the one hand, the inherent bias that comes with

being from the community being studied shapes the findings to some degree. This

relative insider status does provide, however, a deeper level understanding and

appreciation for the habitus of interviewees that helps to contextualize their words. This

is a critical point to make because it is through these interactions that life occurs, and

someone with less familiarity with the region could be prone to misinterpreting what is

happening or what was said. Ideally, this positions me to appreciate subtleties revealed

through interviews that might otherwise go unnoticed that could provide insights for

future inquiry. Thus, on the one hand, the insider status can benefit the research via these

insights. On the other hand, however, this insider status runs the risk of limiting the

research as the scope could become too narrowly defined or the findings could be

misrepresented due to lack of objectivity. Fortunately, I am not entrenched in the

community and have been removed, in terms of time and geography, away from the

region, to help counter this concern with greater objectivity (Margaret D LeCompte &

Goetz, 1982; Margaret Diane LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). Ideally this set of

circumstances will enrich the analysis of the data collected and yield insights that can be

attributed to this duality.

In many ways, this panel of undergraduate students was familiar to me. Their

collective stories were similar to and relatable to my own. I am from the same region as

these students, and despite having been over 20 years removed from my undergraduate

experience, many of their discussion points resonated with me. To this day, when I travel

back 'home', there is an element of intentional mindfulness of the space that I am about

to enter and of myself existing in that space. Not quite 10 minutes into my trip on the

Bert T. Combs Mountain Parkway, I see a familiar sight that always causes me to pause

and reflect. There is a certain point where the hills suddenly emerge on the horizon. The

flat land remains, of course, but now one can appreciate where the drive is

leading. These hills are a familiar gate that has a way of causing a shift in mindset each

time I approach them. It is not so much a nostalgic recollection of days gone by, nor is it

a suggestion that this place is so unique that it feels foreign. All the life that happens

beyond the chain of hills happens within, even if it looks a bit differently. But for me,

this place is more personal as it is where I am from. It is the place I 'left' once I went to

study at Berea College. It is a return to this place that makes me reflect on my speech

patterns and how I will interact with family and friends who have remained. It is about

right here on 'the Parkway' that I begin to remind myself to be mindful of how my 'I's'

are to be pronounced once I arrive at my destination. It's akin to a very mild type of

code-switching. I have the ability to engage in this process with a sense of authenticity as

I am a citizen of both places. It is as much to make those around me comfortable as it is

for me to feel comfortable and part of this place, even if for the fleeting moments of my

visit.

I did not always have this mindfulness of how my voice would sound once I

arrived at 'home'. Certainly, before college, I rarely gave it a second thought. My accent

was not noteworthy and sounded, to me, just like nearly all those voices around

me. Teachers, doctors, classmates; we all sounded similar. Through much of college, I

heard many voices that sounded just like my own and even took classes that suggested

that my dialect, despite not being Standard American English, was equally acceptable and

possibly an older variant of English spoken in the United States. There was a bit of a defiant pride with the 'I's' consistently coming out closer to the 'ahh' sound. When I dropped something and picked it up, I had 'retched' down to retrieve the item, I had not reached down. There was a distinct point along my professional journey, however, that caused me to reconsider how my voice sounded in different spaces. Upon graduation from college, I taught at a middle school in Lexington, Ky. This was a demographically diverse school and had students representing a broad range of cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds. Though being among the very few at this school with an accent like mine, I still felt a sense of belonging among the group due to the diversity within it. Until, that is, the day one of my 'I's' was called out by one of my partner teachers. I taught special needs language arts and shared classrooms with several different teachers. While finishing a lesson, the teacher, whose classroom I was using, loudly repeated the work 'time' after I had just spoken this to my class. She repeated it once more with a smile on her face. Later, she approached me to clarify, 'Hayes, I wasn't makin' fun of you; just havin' fun with you. No offense.' The students heard the 'call out' much in the same way I did; that it was poking fun and suggested that maybe, just possibly, this was a space that folks who talked like me did not belong. My colleague's words mattered to me and caused me to reconsider what I thought about my voice and where I belonged. This memory returned with clarity after initial review of the transcribed interviews for this project.

I made initial defiant efforts to keep my accent but found myself increasingly thoughtful about my choice of words and how I pronounced them, based largely on who the audience was. My next career move took me back physically closer to Eastern

Kentucky, so my guard was let down a bit, but that incident in the classroom did not leave me. In fact, upon my return to working in higher education in Central Kentucky a few years later, I was very mindful of how I might be heard from my first interview to my last advising appointment with my students. I wanted those folks to have confidence in what I was sharing and to be seen as the consummate professional. I had witnessed the looks when others heard speakers with an accent similar to that I used to have. Sounding the part mattered as much as actually having the skillset or qualifications, it seemed to me at the time.

In the past several years, I have struggled with the decision I made to alter my speech patterns. What was once a gentle reminder to 'mind my I's' once I arrived at that point on the Mountain Parkway is now an intentional effort to annunciate a few words that I had gotten out of practice using. The words and manner in which I used to convey my thoughts has effectively changed over time. What was once native now relies on memory for me to reproduce. Though I struggle with these changes, I was first confronted with this prospect as a professional and not during my time as an undergrad. My undergraduate experience was nothing if not empowering. How would I have responded had this same line of commentary been directed to me as an undergrad? I suspect that shame and feelings that this place was simply not for me would quickly become my internal narrative. After all, many of us from Eastern Kentucky have heard accounts of not belonging outside of the hills time and again. From cultural (mis) representations in the media to points of fact, such as poverty, that many of us were familiar with, there was always that gnawing feeling that if something could go wrong, it likely would. It stands to reason, then, that some students deal with this linguistic

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discrimination in less positive ways than others and that could contribute to their decision to stay, or not, at the institution they are studying. Despite the generational differences between the students I interviewed and myself, their circumstances were familiar to me and I think that our points of commonality allowed for the interview process to be more authentic and engaging.

Data Sources

The data used in this study are generated from the semi-structured interviews. Codes generated from the transcribed interviews were a primary means of making meaning from the generated data. Codes were also generated from review of field journal entries, as I made notes of observations and questions I had along the way. The interview protocol consisted of five overarching questions with several possible probing questions to follow up (see Appendix A). This particular format suited this research project as it allowed for my judgment to pursue, or not, a particular line of questioning for the benefit of either enriching the discussion or exploring new topics (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The primary interview questions were as follows. I began each session by asking, could we begin by you sharing a bit about yourself, including where you are from and your life prior to college? I then transitioned to the question of, can we talk a bit about your experiences of being a scholar at differing points in your academic career? After this question, I asked, in your time here at UK, were there any decisions or processes you did not feel comfortable engaging even if you were aware of their potential benefit to you as a student? I then asked, as a current college student, could you share a time when you relied on your own internal strategy to overcome an obstacle you found especially challenging? Each interview concluded with me providing thanks for their

time commitment for the day and then asking, Is there anything from our talk that you would like to speak more about, or is there something you want to talk about that we did not address in this interview?

The intent of the first question, *could we begin by sharing a bit about yourself, including where you are from and your life prior to college?*, was to establish rapport and lay groundwork for where the interview would proceed. Getting the interviewee comfortable and initiative rapport was important for me as a researcher to ensure a conversational approach that would be most likely to lead to richer feedback (Brown & Danaher, 2019). This question allowed for potential follow up questions to explore the college decision process, to illuminate concerns or apprehensions about coming to UK, and getting an understanding of what the student felt would have been most helpful to know prior to their arrival at the institution.

The second question, '*can we talk a bit about your experiences of being a scholar at differing points in your academic career?*' begins to frame the discussion in terms of drawing a parallel between the students' past and current academic engagement as being an indicator of being engaged as a scholar. This question provided a large umbrella of opportunity to follow up with several probing questions based on the responses and is a question in the interview that had the potential for considerable time to be devoted. Examples include, how this question provides an opportunity to get a sense of how the student felt they compared to different cohorts of students they would have interacted with over the course of their academic career. This question also provided an opportunity to discuss aspects of the student's identity, such as being first-generation and Eastern Kentuckian, and if/how that has impacted their experiences. This question about

evolving identity also provided an opportunity to inquire how the student's perception of learning changed or did not change during their time in college, to illuminate both the times of struggle or uncertainty, as well as the 'aha' moments when everything felt like it clicked and made sense.

The third question, '*in your time here at UK, were there any decisions or processes you did not feel comfortable engaging even when you were aware of their potential benefit to you as a student?*' was designed to get to the heart of the initial inquiry. Now the stage was set to get a sense of how the student had experienced college up to this point, this question allowed the student to reflect on their decision making in college. This question can illuminate the reasons why the students did not do 'as expected' while also highlighting their individual growth in how they overcame a dissonant circumstance successfully. In other words, this question was not designed to 'call the student out' on why they did not do what they were 'supposed' to do and when they were supposed to. Rather, this was an opportunity to identify a different path that worked for the student, eventually, even if that decision made for a challenging situation at the time.

The fourth question, '*as a current college student, could you share a time when you relied on your own internal strategy to overcome an obstacle you found especially challenging?*' allowed for an opportunity to expand on the discussion initiated in Question 3 to look at other examples where students looked inward to address a problem or concern, as opposed to utilizing a resource that might have otherwise been expected of them. The potential probing questions allow for reflection on if and how the student might have chosen to address an issue differently. This question also allows for students

to reflect on how the relationships built with key stakeholders, such as faculty and academic advisors, have influenced their academic career.

Finally, the fifth question, '*is there anything from our talk that you would like to speak more about, or is there something you want to talk about that we did not address in this interview*? is designed to give space to the student to introduce additional topics or to revisit discussions from earlier in the interview. Concluding with this question allowed for students to share had they been reflecting on any part of the questions or process up to that point. For the most part, this question did not lead to additional discussion, with most students indicating they had nothing further to add. One student, however, did share that he did, in fact, have an 'aha' moment and returned to that story. For him, as with most others, this moment was connected in some way or another to his eventual major.

Data Generation

The purposive sampling approach was appropriate for this research as the lived experiences of the first-generation students from the geographic region is best told by the experts; the students, themselves (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). One consideration was to have a manageable number of interviewees while being able to produce useful data related to the problem (Sandelowski, 1995). Based on previous experience with conducting semi-structured interviews that were comparable in terms of duration of the session, I felt that a range of 10-15 interviews would be manageable and this range aligned with the time and resources I had available to conduct the interviews and analyze the transcripts. Another concern was working to ensure representation and quality of data produced over volume (Murray, Nebeker, & Carpendale, 2019). The participant

recruitment process was iterative, in that I tracked key data points immediately after each interview, such as gender, race and ethnicity, and field of study, and was aware of the evolving demographics of the interview panel. The first wave of recruitment emails yielded the majority of eventual participants allowing me to continually review the makeup of the panel early in the process to have adjusted should the need have arisen. Should the panel have proven to be less diverse, in terms of those key characteristics, for example, I would have initiated an updated recruitment process. Though the quantity of interviews was not the primary focus, being mindful of data saturation was certainly a focus, as interviews were being conducted as I was also recruiting with reminder outreaches (Fusch & Ness, 2015). I was comfortable with the level of saturation based on the recurrence of themes. I relied on my field work journal notes regarding potential themes that were consistently being shared and this helped inform the duration of the recruitment process. A significant data point shared by most respondents was the connection between the eventual field of study and their 'aha moment'. As this theme of 'aha moment' was critical in informing my understanding of the circumstances that authorized the students to embrace their scholarly identity, I determined that enough interviews had been collected. Though I have confidence in the ultimate size and generated data from the pool, a factor that impacted recruitment was that of the dramatic drop in responses after the initial email. The enthusiasm, as expressed through email replies, dipped considerably after the first recruitment email. While there were two additional reminder email invitations shared with the group, a judgment call was made to ensure that reminder emails were not bordering on harassment of the students, thus a total of three outreaches were made and no more. Further, based on my experience with

college student email responses and the timing in the semester that the first recruitment email was shared, I did not anticipate being overwhelmed by responses indicating a willingness to participate.

My experience in the field of academic advising was another lens that I reflected on the process throughout out. For example, the insight into major specific curriculum, sequence of courses to be taken, and pre-requisites helped me to further tailor follow up questions to students around these topics. For example, more than one student shared their experiences in particular 100-level courses and how this influenced their opinion of field of study. Should a student share that they faced challenges in a course such as College Algebra, for example, and began their career at UK as an Engineering major and changed focus early on, I would inquire if the mathematics were part of their consideration. At this institution, all Engineering majors require at least three levels of Calculus courses, with four levels being required for most.   I feel this allowed for greater rapport building through understanding and relatability of the student's experiences.

Data Analysis

I used thematic analysis (TA) as the organizational and procedural means of generating and sorting data from the interview transcripts (Braun V., Clarke V., Hayfield, N., Terry G., 2019). Thematic analysis is fitting for a smaller project size, such as this turned out to be (Braun & Clarke, 2013).   I ordered the interview data utilizing the multi-step process that includes 1. Familiarization with the data 2. Generation of initial codes 3. Generation of themes 4. Review of the themes 5. Refining/define the themes 6. Reporting of findings. Though the steps are listed in an order, this process does not necessarily represent a linear process. It is iterative and requires reflection and redefining at many

points along the way. The following will provide additional context into what each step of the process was like for this project.

Familiarization with the data

This process initially consisted of careful reading and re-reading of the transcripts. This process began with reviewing transcripts for accuracy, initially, and once that was verified, I read each for content and meaning. Initial readings of each transcript were intentionally light on comments and notes as the intent was to read for overall familiarity. Subsequent readings produced more notes that would lead to the eventual forming of codes and, ultimately, themes. As part of this familiarization process, I would mark hard the hard copy of the transcript being reviewed with comments, questions, or observations about what stood out as interesting or something to review further.

Generate initial codes

As this is a theoretical thematic analysis, I coded the data as I interpreted it to be relevant to the project. Upon review of transcripts, I was not bound by any set list of codes to use and would assign a code to a section of text that conveyed significant information pertinent to the exploration. I did want to be open to all codes that might best fit the scenario. I utilized Excel spreadsheets to label certain sections of text with the code or codes, as there were often chunks of text that had more than one code (or theme) assigned. After all transcripts were coded, I created a listing of every code I had generated and then further clarified these codes. For example, there were instances of where I had used one code on a certain transcript and a different word, but with similar meaning, on another. In other words, I found that the 'cleaning up' process sometimes required that I combine similar codes. For example, there were instances of the code

'Eastern Kentucky' being used in one case with 'Appalachian' used in another. While these codes could be distinct, depending on the nature of the project, for the purposes of this research, those codes are similar enough to convey nearly the same meaning ultimately were combined.

Generation of themes

While this process was similar to the coding generation process, the intent was to identify overarching themes that connected some of the codes. This generation phase is an iterative process that was very similar to the initial code generation but was more focused on connectivity of identified codes. This process consisted of review of the current codebook that I had created for the established codes and grouping codes into categories that fit with the topics that codes addressed. An example of this includes the theme of 'Pre-Matriculation Factors'. This theme addressed data associated with codes such as, 'Extra Curricular/Clubs/Sports', 'Tempered Expectations/Bounded Rationality', 'Family Influence', 'Class Rankings/GPA', and other codes that were similar.

Review of the themes

I used this verification process to examine if the data support the generated themes. This process required my careful review of the clean transcript compared to the coded/themed set of data to ensure that the intended meaning of the respondent was a) being conveyed accurately and b), that this meant what I initially thought it meant. I was mindful to review the text associated with the themes in the context in which they were shared with me. For example, when there were instances of a student sharing their struggles in a particular class, I made sure to understand what led our conversation to the point and closely examined what came after so that I was confident in the theme

selection. I made efforts to avoid pulling quotes out of context or generating themes in isolation of the coded transcript.

Refining/define themes

This process seeks to 'identify the 'essence' of what each theme is about' (Braun & Clarke, 2006).   As the entirety of the analysis stage of this research project proved to be an iterative process, this specific step of TA embodied that philosophy. I engaged in this process from the beginning of the coding process until the presentation of findings. Part of the process that I engaged was that of identifying sub-themes and examining how themes were connected.   I had three distinct versions of themes and sub-themes that fit my understanding of the data, at the time. In other words, I further honed what the final themes would be throughout, and the final set of themes does not necessarily match the themes from the earlier analysis. This process helped to put a finer point on what I felt was of significance from the data. This process was not unlike the efforts I made in clarifying the generated codes. The list of themes I created grew, in some cases, condensed in others, such that I felt comfortable that I was sharing information that spoke to the heart of what the students had conveyed.

Reporting of findings phase

This step of the process has proven as iterative as all of the others, in that I have reviewed and reworked the findings of my efforts to arrive at a story that groups important aspects of each student's account into a logical narrative. Determining which themes were 'major themes' and how to present these findings was the final challenge in this process. Deciding what constituted a significant or major theme involved my review of what was said and *how* it was said by each student.   This process entailed reviewing

the data on the aggregate as well as on an individual level to make sure information fit within the theme while remaining true to what the student had conveyed. An example of a code (that was at one point a theme in an earlier stage) that helps to illustrate the truly iterative nature of this analysis is that of 'accent'. I knew from the frequency this topic was brought up and the way it was discussed (usually these discussions had more emotion than others), that this was important and must be included in the reported findings. Through refining the themes, I placed this conversation into a discussion about identity and is reported as such.

Validity and Credibility

As this is a qualitative project, to address reliability, I have made efforts to document the steps and procedures of the processes undertaken in this research project (Yin, 2011). In addition to the field work journal, I also carefully reviewed each transcript to ensure they are as free of mistakes as possible that might have occurred from the transcription process, and to ensure the transcripts reflect the sentiment of what was expressed (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In terms of validity, the research relied on rich data to convey findings, in order to allow readers to have a better sense of the context around the reported findings. That the interview pool produced a diverse group of participants aided in claims of validity. Moreover, to illuminate the broadest spectrum of findings, any negative or discrepant information that would otherwise run counter to many of the findings will be shared, as well. I utilized peer debriefing to review and clarify questions about the study. In terms of verifying the transcripts with the respondents for accuracy, I chose not to employ member checking. Quite frequently, respondents cited attention being called to their accent as a point of pride for some, but

for others as a recurring point of pain, during their time at the institution (Candela, 2019). In an effort to minimize potential harm to the students, I chose not to share the transcripts, as conversational transcripts often do not reflect the level of sophistication that respondents are accustomed to with other text documents, for example, and I did not wish to invoke feelings of embarrassment or shame upon review of the transcript.

I employed several techniques to assist with triangulation of the findings. The primary means of corroborating the data were through the document analysis of the transcripts of each respondent (details of the process described above), analysis of a field work journal, along with interviews with colleagues to determine if these findings aligned with their experiences. In addition, I also used data from the Kentucky Department of Education's School Report Card portal to review data for independent and county districts, as this topic was surfaced by some of the respondents when discussing their high school experience.

Regarding the field work journal to capture real time thoughts from my interactions with the research process, and opportunities to reflect and question; these become data to be ordered and coded to serve as reference points to remember why something seemed important at the time. In other words, this level of analysis helped me to better understand what I am finding and helped inform subsequent analysis. I utilized Maxwell's recommendation for constructing methodological and analytic "memos" to allow me to capture the evolving nature of the research findings as it unfolded (J.A. Maxwell, 2013).

Colleagues at the institution, specifically those associated with supplemental or program advising, as well as instructors were consulted to get their perspective of the

experience of first-generation students based on their interactions. Both sources provided

insight into the discussion regarding process awareness and execution of first-generation

students, in that the advisors and instructor indicated they witness the behaviors described

by the respondents in this project. In particular, an instructor explained how her process

at the opening of a term has been adjusted to make efforts at normalizing the processes

associated with positive student behaviors, such as utilizing office hours and academic

resources, as regular practice and not just as behaviors that an academically struggling

student would utilize. Program advisors were able to provide insight into how their

interactions with first-generation students evolved over time, noting points of growth

along the way that aligned with sentiment expressed by the students. I intentionally

sought out the voices of additional advisors for their perspectives. Though my own

professional experience of nearly 10 years as an academic advisor at this institution

provided me with an informed perspective, I was mindful of the bias I could introduce

into the process, and I made efforts to listen deeply to what was shared and not make

assumptions without context.

     During the interview process, multiple students referenced their perception of

how their high school experience placed them in an advantageous position or not, in

comparison to peers from their county. This discussion was introduced by students who

had both an independent public-school district in their county as well as the more typical

public 'county' school in their home county. The Kentucky School Report Card data

corroborates that the independent school districts tend to score higher on standard success

measures such as ACT, college sending rate, and graduation rates ("Kentucky School

Report Card," 2022).

Conclusion/Implications of Research

A significant implication of this research is to enrich and complicate the narrative of first-generation students, in general, and specifically the narrative around students from mostly rural areas in Eastern Kentucky. I began with an assertion that it is with an unfortunate frequency that standardized measures are used to effectively sum the worth of a student or school, or in the case of Eastern Kentucky, statistics are often cited in negative depictions of the region. This research set out to find out the rest of the story that needs to be told so that both institutions of higher education, as well as secondary schools, might have a better appreciation of the holistic appreciation of the student experience. This could, of course, lead to policy designed to mitigate identified obstacles for students, but also could help to inform new ways of thinking about the overall structure of schools that encourages student growth through their alternative paths to success. In other words, it is the hope that more research will focus on larger system change that makes room for all students, and not simply identifying corrective actions to policy that has historically excluded and poorly served certain populations.

The following chapter will provide additional information regarding the key themes I generated from this research project. The themes of Dialect/Hillbilly Perception, Strong Appalachian Woman, Grit and Eastern Kentucky Mindset, Immigrant Identity/Appalachian Diversity. I explore these themes further through sharing select student's stories and recounting elements of their experiences.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study is to add additional perspectives to the conversation about how first-generation college students navigate their higher education experience. An underlying assumption that was the leaping off point for this project's inquiry is that first-generation students eventually gain access to the playbook that their continuing generation peers use to navigate higher education. There are differences, however, in the timing, the rationale, and how these first-generation college students act on this information when compared to their continuing generation peers. The voices and perspectives shared by the students are especially important in enriching this discussion. Specifically, this project focused on first-generation students who are from Eastern Kentucky that were enrolled at the University of Kentucky at the time this project began in the Spring semester 2021.   As previously mentioned, there are well established reports of achievement gaps between first-generation college students and their continuing generation peers. Many researchers have focused their inquiry on this achievement gap by focusing on measures like academic preparation, persistence to degree, and retention rates.

While these efforts have added to the conversation around first-generation student college success, the approach of focusing solely on the achievement gap limits additional exploration of potential systemic issues and has the potential to reinforce existing negative portrayals of groups that tend to be viewed through this deficit-minded lens (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Quinn, 2020). Moreover, as no demographic is a monolith, it is highly unlikely that a singular 'why' exists to explain these persistent achievement gaps.

Even within such a focused population as this study targets, there were many factors that have impacted each student in a different way that has contributed to defining their experience with higher education.

Participants

This study focused on twelve first-generation students, who attended high school in Eastern Kentucky, who were enrolled in their third or fourth year at the University of Kentucky. Not all of these students were native to the region but had attended and graduated from a high school in the area. At least two of the respondents were born outside of the United States. Seven of the interviewees identified as woman and five identified their gender as being a man. Most of the respondents were White with three students identifying as other than White. These students represented individual perspectives derived from their unique lived experiences. There were points of commonality in the topics discussed, certainly, but each respondent's individuality was clear, and efforts were made to appreciate the disaggregated data generated along with more broad findings.

Overview of Key Themes

I applied thematic analysis to identify and then analyze themes from the data. This chapter will address emergent themes, in general, with 'authorization' being looked at more closely in the next chapter. Several themes were identified from student responses that further contextualized the question of what authorizes the first-generation student from Eastern Kentucky to embrace their emerging scholar identity. While the overarching themes tend to span the entirety of the interview panel, the individual perspective of each

respondent aided in adding complexity to the larger theme. There were also instances of overlapping or connected themes on the individual respondent level, as well.

The themes to be discussed are Dialect/Hillbilly Perception, Appalachian Strong Woman, Grit and Eastern Kentucky Mindset, and Immigrant Identity and Appalachian Diversity. Briefly, 'Dialect/Hillbilly' allows for discussions around how students dealt with elements of their identity such as accent and being an Eastern Kentuckian. The theme of 'Appalachian Strong Woman' focuses on perceptions of gender roles within rural spaces and beyond, as well as discussions on field of study as it relates to gender. 'Grit and Eastern Kentucky Mindset' is an opportunity to explore how students have come to internalize privilege relative to their upbringing. The theme of 'Immigrant Identity and Appalachian Diversity' provides space to complicate the narrative of who represents Appalachia. In the following, I discuss each of these themes in greater detail and weave in stories from several of the respondents in the process. Their respective stories' help to further complicate the themes and enrich the discussion. Of the twelve students who participated in the project, 5 have been chosen as representative of major themes that were identified through this research project. I explore these key themes through the stories of Rhonda, Lacy, Marcus, Julie, and Jeremiah.

This representation of the student panel includes students from widely different circumstances, in terms of access to resources as well as how long (or short) of a time period their family has been in the Appalachian region. There were some students native to the region who strongly identified with being Appalachian, while there were also students who are children of immigrants who have a more complicated relationship with

the Eastern Kentucky region. Pseudonyms and limited identifying details are shared to preserve the anonymity of the respondents.

Dialect/Hillbilly Perception

Rhonda's dad always pushed college to her as she was growing up. The prospect of going to college was not presented as an option for consideration. She was going to go to college; that was certain. And Rhonda was certain of this, as well, but she reflected that "everyone would tell her to go to college, but no one shared what to do once there or how it worked", let alone how to figure out what she wanted to study. Rhonda is a White woman from Pikeville, Kentucky who has been involved with athletics throughout her academic career. Rhonda highlights how the superficial knowledge of 'going to college' can fall short for many students, in terms of navigating the space upon arrival.

Being from Eastern Kentucky was a significant factor for Rhonda as she became acutely aware of how she talked and how she felt others perceived her accent. She recalls from her very first day on campus, someone enthusiastically inquired where she was from because of how she sounded.

> …it's something I definitely think about often because from the very moment I stepped on campus, you know, people were always like 'oh my gosh, like, where are you from?', like your accent, you know what I mean? Um, but I think the older I get the more I just, I'm very proud to be from Eastern Kentucky; from the mountains, and I just embrace it. But, it's definitely something that I face daily, having, like, a thick accent. And, so….honestly, like, once people find out you're from Eastern Kentucky, they may start with the jokes and they start with, well you're not smart and they come at you with all kinds of things like that.

Rhonda shared that her accent gets mentioned regularly, almost daily, but now it is something that she just deals with; often trying to overlook those folks that make fun or draw an inordinate amount of attention to her way of speaking. In her statement just above, in addition to the accent discussion, Rhonda stated that just being from Eastern

Kentucky would invite ridicule. As previously discussed, accent discrimination can be more common and could be interpreted as more acceptable based on assumptions made regarding folks' deftness with Standard English, and simply being from a rural Appalachian space provides the green light for some to discriminate, as well (Dunstan, Wolfram, Jaeger, & Crandall, 2015; Ingram, 2009).

In Rhonda's case, she has shared that dealing with this sort of discrimination has made her more resilient in how she deals with it now, in that she has embraced her 'thick' accent and does not hesitate to 'put people in their place' when it gets to be too much. She shared an example from class that stood out to her:

> I did actually have a class where the professor, like, would talk about Eastern Kentucky nonstop and she was just advancing the stereotypes and I did have to call her out on it; not in class, because I just think that's, like, disrespectful, but after class, I was like, I need to talk to you. And so, we had a conversation about it.

It is interesting to note how Rhonda wanted to be mindful of the feelings of the professor in how she chose to confront her over this situation that Rhonda found offensive. Would other students with a different understanding of their privilege respond in this manner? Whereas Rhonda has been able to grow and mature through these experiences, other students have taken a different path in response to such challenges, either through a transfer to another institution or stopping out. For this student, as evidenced through how she came to respond to accent discrimination, she had developed a greater awareness of her agency within the existing structures of the college. Rhonda's evolution is not entirely unlike how students might change their approach at defining themselves to be better positioned for the labor market, for example (Tran, Phan, Tan, & Rahimi, 2022).

Rhonda was not alone in expressing concerns over how her accent was received and responded to by others upon arrival at college. Discussions of Eastern Kentucky stereotypes were common among the participants, with respondents addressing how negativity was often targeting their accent. Another student cited several encounters she has had with others, ranging from fellow students to professors, propagating Eastern Kentucky stereotypes to ridiculing accents.

> Yeah, definitely, um, I think there was, you know, sort of a point probably, um late high school, where I realized people actually believe, like hick and hillbilly stereotypes, so that was kind of funny…and then I think that was something I encountered more and more in college…like a lot of the identity is tied to specifically the accent, for me…I remember, maybe like I mentioned before, um, I did, I participated in a linguistics project, I think sophomore year, where they wanted to know if I like, recognize Appalachian, um, words, and wanted to record me saying things.

When, in conversation about the topic, the student stated that she 'didn't have a *bad* accent'…paused and rephrased to 'thick or noticeable' accent, as a way of correcting how she talked about this issue. This student was actively reassessing their relationship and understanding of this facet of their identity. Another student, who has consistently been a high achieving student, who was engaged in school clubs, from Harlan spoke to the self-doubt and shame that discussions around his   accent invoked. This student felt that those that called attention to his accent were also expressing their expectation how he will perform, or more accurately, under perform, in his classes. When he heard his accent being 'called out', he assumed that there were judgments being made about his intellectual capability, as well. Despite the feelings of shame around his accent, the student shared that he grew to feel a stronger connection with this facet of his identity and has embraced his accent more than before. Per the student, "But, there's also with that,

there is a sense of like, identity, why there's a you know, like, I can't change the fact I'm from there, so I might as well embrace it."

While the student indicated he somewhat pragmatically embraced his Eastern Kentucky identity, his self-doubt persisted as it related to his academic accomplishments. He suffered considerable self-doubt that was reinforced by others commenting on how he talked. He questioned if they were right and regularly wondered if he belonged here in this space. As he began to achieve more things, he had doubts about how to celebrate and embrace these milestones that might or might not have been intended for him. Though there is a connection between academic achievement and facets of a student's sense of belonging in college, this student still faced challenges related to his belonging, despite his accomplishments (Ahn & Davis, 2020).

The linguistic element of identity can be quite personal and impactful in one feeling like they belong or are an outsider, depending on their circumstances (Freynet & Clément, 2019; Lippi-Green, 2012). One interviewee shared the following:

> …but, like, I know I had a friend from Pikeville who was here, and she said, you know she always had trouble with people kind of laughing at her accent or calling it cute when she was trying to talk in class. Um, I think that definitely can affect people and definitely does.

Each student was at a different leg of their journey as it relates to how they felt and acted in relation to their accent. Some were still dealing with the fresh, almost daily, trauma they reported navigating while others had progressed to the point of boldly preserving their accent while taking opportunities to educate those that call negative attention to their way of speaking, such as Rhonda. Another student, who was a social sciences major, and consistently high achieving pre-matriculation and during college, shared a

similar account about how they have evolved as it relates to their Eastern Kentucky identity and accent.

> At first, it was very embarrassing, like there's a, there's a sort of shame, I guess, when you first come into college and people hear the accent or something along those lines, then you know immediately you're different because you talk funny or whatever. But, during my time at UK, one thing I am very happy about is that I sort of, like, grown to accept the identity because I've met other people from Eastern Kentucky and for some people, like it's such a sense of pride, and I guess I saw that and was able to embrace that.

Rhonda's story is complicated in that, despite having access to more resources than many of her classmates, as she became affiliated with a prominent athletic team and its associated resources, Rhonda struggled with feeling that she fit in. As discussed, her accent was a regular topic of conversation and compounding this frustration was that she did not have a good sense of the field of study she would pursue. Rhonda shared that she did not have positive feelings about tutoring. Compounding how Rhonda felt there was a stigma connected to tutoring resources, she also shared that she did not want to 'bother' those that were providing these resources. Despite Rhonda working with a team that is persistent in instilling help seeking behaviors in its members and having exclusive access to many of these resources, Rhonda still did not feel these things were for her.

The question of 'why did this student not take advantage of the resources available to her' spoke more to how Rhonda internalized her identity than it did her awareness of the resource. While some students might have more negative associations with their identity than what is perceived by others, many of these students had examples of how the negative image was reflected by others and not just an internal perception (Meister, Jehn, & Thatcher, 2012). Per Rhonda, she felt the act of seeking help would validate how others perceived her, as well as reinforce her own questions, about being

Eastern Kentuckian in this place that already did not seem completely right for her. Ultimately, Rhonda was able to connect with important faculty members and engaged in shadowing opportunities to help her settle on a major. She was finally able to acknowledge the harm that was being caused by others making fun of how she talked after finding her field of study. While she did have good defensive mechanisms around her Eastern Kentucky identity, those behaviors put her on edge and reinforced many of her concerns about belonging and fitting in.

Discussions regarding perceived stigma for common practices such as utilizing a resource like tutoring or visiting instructor office hours resonate on an individual level when examined through the lens of the Eastern Kentucky identity. Help seeking stigma is commonly discussed through the lenses of mental health, masculinity, or military connected individuals, but for this group, the stigma is rooted in elements of their identity (Heath, Seidman, Vogel, Cornish, & Wade, 2017; Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2012; Vogel & Wade, 2009). For this group of students, the concerns over stigma and how others perceived them, were exacerbated by their negative experiences with how their Eastern Kentucky identity was responded to by fellow students, faculty, and staff. The Eastern Kentucky stigma is a tired, but resilient trope that would seem to have diminished over time but has current impact on students. For example, one student shared their heightened awareness of the negative perception, through how others scrutinized the language and the region she was from when participating in the Governor's Scholars Program. For greater context, the Governor's Scholar Program (GSP) serves an elite group of high school scholars in Kentucky (Ky.gov, 2022). The student shared that some of her fellow participants from other parts of the state were equally surprised that shoes

were commonplace in Eastern Kentucky and that there was internet connection in the region. Per the student, "Like, I went to GSP when I was in high school and a girl asked my friend if she bought shoes to come to GSP…like genuinely thought we didn't have shoes!" Eastern Kentucky culture and accent has routinely been represented as a proxy for lack of sophistication, if not stupidity, and representative of a provincial existence. When taken into account along with the concern over 'not wanting to bother' the professor, this anger and embarrassment associated with one's way of speaking negatively impacts sense of belonging. Moreover, not feeling welcome or the student feeling a sense of belonging in this space could also lead to a student questioning their participation in a process that can, at times, feel that it was not intended for them to engage. After all, the students that had negative interactions with various stakeholders in college were witnessing those horror stories shared in high school coming to pass. Historically marginalized students are often subject to identity-based discrimination that presents significant challenges along their educational journey, of course. The pervasive Eastern Kentucky stereotype and associated acts of discrimination can be more tolerated than other types of discrimination such as those based on sex, religion, or other identity factors that justifiably invoke anger when these tropes are presented in a setting such as that of higher education.

Strong Appalachian Woman

Other elements of identity, such as gender, were common discussion points among those respondents identifying as a woman. Lacy has lived in a couple counties in Eastern Kentucky and is an Honors student finishing up a double major within fields of natural and social sciences. Somewhat out of necessity, Lacy was an involved student in

high school. Her parents, divorced, were coming from different places to assist Lacy in getting home from her extracurricular activities. This allowed more time, however, for her to focus on her academic team commitments. Lacy viewed her involvement with the academic team as more than an activity to pass the time. She was aware that her participation gave her more experiences to get beyond her community compared to her less involved peers. This is all to say that Lacy was a strong student prior to enrolling at the university and continued the positive trajectory once enrolled.

Being strong academically was a necessity for Lacy. She was aware her family could not afford to send her to college. Her plan was to attend college and she set her sights on securing academic scholarships.   An additional factor for Lacy to consider beyond funding was proximity to home. Lacy's preference was to not select a college too far from home. Going to college that is just far enough away to foster independence, but not so far from family is not uncommon among many students, first-generation or otherwise, but this is a common refrain from many of the students in the interview pool (Ramirez, 2016).

Though Lacy is a very strong student, she did have to learn to deal with issues ranging not earning all A's in her classes (she quickly overcame that, however, and largely earns all A's and is an Honor student) as she was accustomed to doing so prior to college, to her comfort with her areas of study. With Lacy's majors being within fields of study in the natural and social sciences, she has had to deal with challenges of being a woman in a space that has had a larger number of male students. While Lacy has excelled in both fields, she indicated that the networks she has joined in Anthropology have been more fulfilling for her, as there is a greater gender diversity. Identifying as a

woman, along with being a woman navigating both the hard and soft sciences, were quite relevant to Lacy. While the field of study was a common topic of discussion among the respondents, this discussion of gender roles and expectations around their field   of study surfaced with the women respondents and not the men. Lacy underscored her earlier point through sharing her initial reaction to the classroom setting where she noticed the unequal gender distribution, "I'm a woman, I'm going to have a harder time, but like I've noticed in some classes there's a lot more men." It bears repeating that Lacy has successfully worked toward degrees within the natural and social sciences, in addition to being an Honor's student and regularly on the Dean's List.

Another perspective shared by a student indicated that her identity as a woman was empowering for her navigating various relationships. In particular, she shared how her mindset was upon her arrival in college:

> yeah, so being a woman is one of the biggest parts of my identity. And, I guess, I was   sort of nervous coming into college. You know, you're surrounded with this idea of there's male professors, like all around, there's not a ton of women professors and that true in a lot of the programs here. A big thing for me was just coming into college and making sure that, like, like I presented myself as, like, a strong woman, and like, I wasn't going to take any crap from professors and stuff. But, as I got into the program, especially, I realized, like a lot of the staff was women, so that made me feel a lot more comfortable at first, and then it also helped me to navigate, like just being a woman, it helped me to navigate a lot of the professional situations that I'm going to have to face getting outside of college…

Not unlike Lacy, this was an engaged, academically strong student. This student was prepared to confront the expected challenges associated with her gender identity head on. The combination of being Appalachian and being a woman likely factored into this student's resilience and strength (Helton & Keller, 2010). In other words, the strength of

this student reflects her understanding of her gender role that was informed by being from Appalachia.

Grit and Eastern Kentucky Mindset

Marcus is from the Cumberland Gap region of Kentucky and planned to be a Pharmacist upon arriving on campus. Marcus felt he had a lot going for him before getting on campus. He was a participant in the Governor Scholars Program in high school. The independent high school he attended had a reputation as the better school option in his county. Marcus had consistently been on the Dean's List, as he finished his degree and anticipated beginning law school. Marcus shared that he is aware of the many privileges he was afforded prior to college, but still had to overcome obstacles upon matriculation that have shaped the path he is taking. Students like Marcus shared that there was something about their Eastern Kentucky identity that informed some of their tendency toward self-reliance and internal strategies, coupled with an expectation of hard work, in addressing new challenges in college. Marcus also helps to frame the discussion of privilege relative to his Eastern Kentucky origins.

Marcus was fine with going to the library, but not seeking out tutoring or study groups. He did not go to professor office hours early on in his career as he shared that he 'did not want to bother them' with his questions. He chalked the anti-help seeking behavior up to an 'Eastern Kentucky cultural thing' and just persisted. It was not through serendipitous inaction that Marcus continued to progress toward degree. He was able to connect with an instructor that proved to be transformational for him, in terms of how he felt he fit in this place. Marcus's reluctance to 'bother' professors is not unlike the reported hesitancy of other marginalized populations in more fully engaging the

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classroom experience (Wood, 2014). While it could be that embarrassment or shyness were factors for some students, on an individual level, there can be cultural factors that influence this line of thinking (González & Ting, 2008). To be clear, this is not to say that resource utilization or help seeking in the classroom is necessarily a negative thing, but rather, there are learned methods of moving through the world that carry over for students as they transition to higher education.

There were other examples of students who seemingly had more than adequate preparation for college, but still had challenges transitioning to this new space. Another student, who was raised by a single father, determined he wanted to give his daughter the greatest opportunity for success within his means and moved her into the local independent district. For this student, being a first-generation college student was not necessarily an impediment, she felt, but she was very embarrassed to seek out help. Despite her having the connections that would have made this process smoother, the student did not feel comfortable asking others for help. This notion of the help seeking stigma was prevalent among most of the respondents. Even as this student contemplates graduate school, she is dealing with some of those same worries that she had early on in her undergraduate career. Per the student, "Just, um, figuring out that transition. Like I said, like I had people that I could ask questions to and like rely on to help me through things, but it's like, almost, it's almost embarrassing to, like, ask for help, because you don't know anybody who was like going through these processes. And like, even now, getting ready to go to grad school, like it's the same thing all over again."

For as many students that shared their reluctance to engage with faculty and supplemental resources, as many shared how they overcame this challenge, even if their

approach was initially more challenging. A common approach shared by students was how they employed their own internal strategy to address issues that had arisen. This self-reliance was not exclusively a response to the reluctance to engage key stakeholders because of shame or fear of embarrassment for all students. For example, a few students shared how their Eastern Kentucky identity informed their internal strategies and self-reliance was a mindset formed pre-matriculation. Marcus framed his decision-making strategy in terms of his natural tendency to introversion and as an Eastern Kentucky cultural norm in the following:

> I sound very much like an introvert, like there's, I've always had like a bit sense of individualism. Like, just do it yourself. I guess that's why I never really use the resources, like, I'm you know, I think a big part of the culture of Eastern Kentucky is individualistic, like you know, your business; what's expected. You do it, you know, by yourself, like maybe not ask for help.

This student's lived experience to that point had required an approach to taking care of problems that emerged on their own without consulting outside resources. For some, this manifested as a help seeking stigma, in general. Tutoring was a common example cited. Several students shared how they came to understand tutoring services based on their high school experience which impacted how they interacted or not with this resource. Concerns over a perceived stigma were voiced by some of the respondents as they associated tutoring with struggling students. Some students expressed their concern over being seen by their friends and peer group in the tutoring space, thus preventing them from accessing the resource. Whether it was consulting professors during office hours or going to tutoring centers, the respondents expressed a potentially superficial awareness of these activities as being those encouraging their success but had reluctance to engage in the activity for one reason or another.

While internal strategy and self-reliance can be empowering, the weight of this reality was expressed as a stressor from many of the students. There were general sentiments of not wanting 'to bother' key stakeholders, as stated, but there was a sense of bearing the burden alone and self-blame for needing to access resources. One student shared, "…avoid putting more stress on my family or friends. Um, kind of like to try to deal with things myself to not inconvenience, or I don't know, make things worse for other people." Concerns over not bothering others with their problems and feelings of shame for needing access to resources compounded some of the challenges the students faced upon entry into college. Some students did share, for example, that they looked inward because they just did not know what to do. For context, during orientation and early in the academic term, efforts are typically made to inform students of common processes and actions they will engage throughout their academic careers, such as using academic resources and engaging with key stakeholders. An underlying assumption to this approach is that if students are made aware of these processes that barriers to student success will be minimized with this knowledge. There is a range of awareness that first-generation and continuing generation students begin their academic careers with. For some students, this initial level of uncertainty was expressed as a concern. One student, who was the sole child of a single parent, that had moved to Eastern Kentucky to pursue a personal relationship, shared her experience with learning how to navigate higher education pre-matriculation through her first few semesters:

> …because of the many difficulties, like there was no guidance at all for me so that was very difficult. Um, my mom kept telling me to do things but I didn't know where to start or where to get help at all, because neither she could help me with that, and, like, I didn't where to ask and I was too afraid…I wish that people told me about more scholarships, um, going into UK. That would have helped me tremendously and of how I can apply, and um, how to apply for FAFSA, as well.

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Because, it's me and my mom and every time it's always so frustrating or how are we going to get this done? How are we going to do this? Like what information do we need? This, and that, um, I would also, I also wish that someone would have told me that it wasn't a good idea working, well working for the first time while studying in college with 16 credit hours.

Other students, however, regularly shared a level of familiarity with the process of engaging activities typically associated with providing for greater opportunities for student success (tutoring services, instructor office hours, etc.), but there were reservations shared about following through with the processes. There were instances of when students expressed not feeling comfortable with the individuals associated with the process. This discomfort was expressed both in terms of groups (professors/instructional staff writ large), as well as on individual level, where the student had a negative experience with a key stakeholder. This was most commonly shared through stories of interactions the students had with advisors or professors. Earlier in our discussion, Marcus had shared his reluctance to engage professor's outside of the classroom setting. Upon reflection, later in our discussion, Marcus shared, "I honestly don't think I ever went to a single professor's office hours…ever. I don't know why that was, um, I don't know if it was like trying not to bother (the professor)." Several students alluded to either not wanting to 'bother' professors or advisors with their questions. Another respondent, who was a participant in a geographically specific scholarship program pre-matriculation that continued services through college, provided insight into this perspective through sharing the manner in which their high school teachers discussed professors. This student recalled how teachers suggested professors were less likely to tolerate the same behaviors of their students as their high school teachers did. In other words, professors were discussed through the lens of classroom discipline. This perspective prompted the

student to interpret faculty and other instructors as a group not to be bothered out of fear of consequences. In some instances, students reported feelings of distrust or lack of connection with the professor as a contributing factor for avoiding engagement outside of the classroom based on interactions they had with that or other professors. These perspectives have the potential to influence how faculty are perceived as gatekeepers discouraging some students from continuing on their path and not as a resource to consult (McCoy, Luedke, & Winkle-Wagner, 2017). Though the students were likely encouraged to take advantage of instructor office hours by a member of the community such as by their academic advisor or RA, their discomfort in doing so would often prevent them from taking advantage of this resource until later in their higher education journey (Yee, 2016). To be clear, while several students shared their initial struggles with these key stakeholders, they would go on to share how making a positive connection with a professor or advisor was instrumental in their persistence to degree through clarifying the student's choice in field of study or discussing potential viable career options. The initial challenge in this area of engagement was significant for most of the respondents, however.

There is a connection between the students' reliance on internal strategies and how students perceived and talked about the expectation of hard work. While there were factors, such as poverty, that informed some of the discussions, hard work was referenced as an expected way of life. Jeremiah, who we meet later, shared he has had regular employment since his pre-teen years and cited poverty as a driving force for his need to work. However, this was also a point of pride that influenced him individually and on a cultural level. Jeremiah is the child of immigrants who had instilled in him the value of

hard work. While no claim is being made that this particular group of students were harder workers than their peers, the way that hard work was often discussed suggested this was a frequent refrain the students were familiar with that was presented as they would need to work hard (harder than others) to get to and succeed in college. While in some ways, this expectation of hard work seems to offer parallels to the Protestant work ethic through the American political lens, in that there is a hope of improving one's lot through individual commitment and hard work (Ali, Falcone, & Azim, 1995). The expectation of hard work does not always convey the same sense of hope if the struggles one encounters appear to have no end in sight. Many of the students either shared stories of their family's commitment to hard work or that of members of their community's commitment to hard work as a necessity just to survive and subsist. On the surface, this commitment to hard work could be interpreted as a meritorious internal drive to succeed and excel in the first-generation student's pursuit of a college degree. On the one hand, this commitment to and expectation of hard work could pay dividends for getting assignments completed that might require long hours of study and preparation, for example. On the other hand, however, this expectation of hard work could also add to the feelings of doubt that accompanied not feeling part of the overall process in that it could foster a sense of hopelessness that the process will not get better or easier, especially if the student encounters a stretch of assignments or courses that require much of their time or if the material is unfamiliar. When taken into consideration with the stressors of not belonging, the expectation of hard work could manifest as the student feeling the enormity of pursuing a degree as an even more monumental task than initially perceived. In other words, the value of and commitment to hard work is made more

tolerable, if not satisfying, by the assumption of relief or a reward as a result of the efforts.

The expectation of hard work and self-reliance could be a reflection of a response born out of economic necessity, on the one hand. On the other hand, these characteristics could also speak to how the student's identity has been shaped by the place they are from and serve to represent a cultural value as much as a means of 'getting ahead'. Doubling down on the strategy to look inward could feel like the most rationale approach for students to take when moving into a less familiar environment as this has been a means of progressing through life up to this point. This strategy, whether intentional or not, can present more challenges early on in the student's educational journey, but if they are able to transition beyond the most challenging times, they stand to benefit from those experiences due to the growth that occurred through internal reflection and adding additional strategies (engaging professors in office hours, using tutoring resources, etc.) to their portfolio.

The value of hard work cannot be separated from how students reported seeing their varying levels of privilege relative to where they were from. The scholarship recipient, whom we recently were introduced   shared how they were not as economically advantaged as others outside the region, but were not in the worst circumstances within Eastern Kentucky:

> Um, my parents were not super well off, but we're also not as or as a lot of people
> are in really high poverty levels. Um, so, they have been able to help me with
> things, even if they weren't able to pay for my college…yeah, so I think, um,
> yeah, we do, I think, have disadvantage generally. Um, I don't know of any
> statistics, but the amount of people that went to college from the people I
> graduated with, it's a pretty low number. Um, and I know a lot of my friends and
> people from high school I know haven't finished college, haven't started and

didn't keep going. Um, so I think you know, sort of generally, there is a disadvantage.

Going beyond financial circumstances, but speaking to privilege relative to the region, is the discussion regarding students who had access to additional resources, not just in high school, but through which high school they attended.   This topic was often presented through sharing how the student came to attend the independent high school district and engage a variety of extracurricular opportunities. For context, Kentucky has 120 'county' school districts and 54 independent districts. These independent school districts tend to be located in towns and county seats. The urban area in Northern Kentucky has a dense clustering of 12 independent school districts.   Eastern Kentucky (Eastern Kentucky being defined as counties in Kentucky as 'Appalachian' by the ARC) has around 20 independent districts situated in county seats, while the remaining 20 or so are much more scattered throughout Central and Western Kentucky. The Appalachian independent schools are in county seats like Hazard, Jackson, Pikeville, Somerset, and Harlan. Pertinent to this discussion is that the independent school district tends to perform better than the county district in various success measures such as college sending rates, ACT scores, and GPA (kyschoolreportcard.com/). Awareness of these tendencies prompted the families of some students to move their student to one of these schools. Rhonda, who we met earlier, shared how she came to attend the independent school:

> I just grew up in the county school system; actually transitioned to Pikeville Independent. Life was pretty good, even though, like I said, I was raised by a single parent, didn't have any issues there. I have been very blessed, so that great…Um, the transition was just honestly academic reasons. The high school that was in my district wasn't very promising and my dad wanted to put me in the best position possible for college.

Marcus had shared a similar account of how his high school experience better positioned him for the transition to college:

> There's two high schools in my county. There's the, the city school and then there's the county school. The city school is sort of known to be the better, you know, not saying anything like that, but it's sort of the more…it's the smaller scale, the more elite school, um, compared to the county school. So, I definitely had a better jumping off point going, you know, to that particular school in my county compared to a lot of other people. Um, but yeah, I graduated Valedictorian from my high school and came to UK.

These accounts reflect an awareness that the students were positioned about as well as they could have been pre-matriculation. Remember, however, going back to earlier discussions about perception being from Eastern Kentucky, being advantageously placed in circumstances such as the independent school or participating in high level engagement activities for high achieving students (Governor's Scholars, academic team, etc.), there was still something that remained in the back of many of the student's minds that did not make their transition quite right. Marcus shared the following. I will reiterate that Marcus was well on his way to studying law and was an excellent student in college:

> I think people have an expectation…there's a stigma about being from Eastern Kentucky that, 'oh they're, you know, redneck, hillbilly…they're not smart'…like when I go to Law School and people hear me speak for the first time, they're going to think 'he's dumb'.

The interviewed students represented a range of students whose pre-matriculation networks reflected varying levels of social capital and privilege. On the one hand, there were multiple students that shared their family intentionally selected a certain school with hopes of increasing their likelihood to get to college. On the other hand, there were students who had an aspiration of college, but the virtue of hard work was seen as a

primary vehicle to get there and this perspective, combined with internal strategies for navigating their experience provided opportunities for growth for those that persisted. Regardless of where students were on the spectrum of relative privilege, the expectation of hard work and reliance on self (not wanting to bother key stakeholders) was common among all respondents. These concepts are not mutually exclusive as those students who had relatively better preparation for college still voiced doubts and concerns, but different students had access to different perspectives at home and at school that informed their thinking about college navigation. Many students, in fact, shared that their mindset and their approach to college was informed by their home and school experience, of course, but simply being from Eastern Kentucky was also a point of strong influence for how these students perceived the opportunities before them.

Immigrant Identity and Appalachian Diversity

Julie and Jeremiah offer opportunities to consider the Eastern Kentucky first-generation college student through the lens of the migrant experience. Julie and Jeremiah are neither related nor from the same county, but a common point between the two is that each is the child of migrant parents. Julie is the daughter of a single parent who came to the United States from an Asian county, and Julie has issues with mobility. Jeremiah, who lived with a larger family, is from a Latin American country. Each student shared accounts of unique cultural challenges that added complexity to their path that lead to college as well as challenges once in college. These two students shared insights that were at the same time very similar, yet distinct, from many of the other students in the pool. For these two students, their Appalachian identity was complicated further by

factors associated with elements of their identity that were informed by being children of immigrants.

While both Julie and Jeremiah conveyed similar feedback, as it related to their experiences navigating college, it is important to view their words in context of their lived experience. Eastern Kentucky counties range from approximately 92%-98% White, less than 1% Asian, and approximately .5%-nearly 4% Hispanic or Latino ("Census Quick Facts," 2022). These figures have remained consistent and stable over the past decade or so. The Appalachian region of Kentucky has been in a relatively stagnant pattern of migration. Economic factors that tend to drive positive net migration growth looks a bit differently in Appalachian Kentucky. Much of the migrant population coming into the region tends to represent a higher volume of lower skilled workers that are mostly migrating from Asian and European countries (Ludke & Obermiller, 2014). Earning potential, which is a factor for most of the US, is less of a factor in the Appalachian region and does not appear to be as enticing to bring in new folks to this region (Betz & Partridge, 2013). There are exceptions, such as medical graduates seeking to take advantage of the J-1 Visa Waiver program, that commits those taking advantage of this program to service in the region for a period of time that also bolsters services to the region during their stay (Ester & Group, 2007). This context is helpful to better understand the next two student's stories, as they represent students navigating dual spaces of being from the region with roots in other places. While Julie, as an Asian immigrant did not identify with the region outside of it happening to be the last place she lived before entering college, Jeremiah , a bilingual Latino, shared he had a complicated

relationship with the region in that he identified on some levels with his Appalachian identity and not with others.

Before her teen years, Julie and her mother immigrated to the United States from an Asian country to a small midwestern city. A couple years later, Julie, along with her Mother and now husband, moved to Eastern Kentucky. Julie feels disconnected, in many ways, from the place her mother now resides, in Eastern Kentucky. From the onset, it was a challenge for Julie to navigate the space. The mostly rural area presented multiple issues in creating physical obstacles to and within the region.

Julie does not feel connected to the culture and often feels she is the target of discrimination. Julie faced challenges in high school with the cultural differences she encountered in the US through her food choices, accent, and popular culture preferences. During our discussion, Julie acknowledged the irony of the rise in popularity of many facets of Asian culture (K Pop and anime to name a couple) among her peers while being ridiculed for the lunches from home she would bring to school.

> Yes, people would make fun of my accent, and um, make fun of the way I talk or the food I would bring to school because I didn't like the fast food, um, the cafeteria food as much because I didn't think it was healthy. And it was even at things like, that I like, um, they would be kind of weird about it and it's funny because nowadays it's popular. Like, the Asian culture, like K Pop, anime, all this stuff that they made fun of me, now they, everyone's accepting it and more open about it, so that, like it's only a couple year ago.

Ultimately, Julie feels that all these things made her an outsider to this region and she does not connect with this place. Not unlike most of the other respondents, Julie surfaced 'accent' as a strong point of contention for her, but hers was not that her Appalachian accent was ridiculed. Rather, as English was not her first language, her non-Appalachian accent was a point of discrimination for her in Eastern Kentucky. This is significant as

there is an added layer of the potential to feel isolated due to the accent discrimination impacting Julie. 'Foreign' accents, in general, have shown to present challenges in employability and can introduce additional discrimination into the lives of the speakers (Moyer, 2013; Timming, 2017). Julie had lived for a period in a small midwestern city before the move to Eastern Kentucky, and her frame of reference was that the folks in Eastern Kentucky were the ones with the accent, adding a layer of complication to how Julie internalized how her voice was responded to.

The capital that Julie brought with her to college as a first-generation student and immigrant to the United States could present that she was not as prepared as many of her continuing generation peers in her cohort. However, because of those challenges that Julie faced early on, she was, in fact, better equipped to handle challenges that might have proven an obstacle too great for others. All was not smooth, but Julie's commitment to earning her degree was significant and she willingly put in the work to accomplish what she set out to do. One example of this commitment, and the challenging way it unfolded, was through the expectation of hard work. As discussed earlier, the expectation of hard work was a regularly occurring discussion point with all the respondents, but for Julie, it was a bit different and was rooted even more in the need to secure additional financial capital. This is not to say that there was not a similar intrinsic appreciation of hard work as other members of the panel, but for Julie, she shared how her working at an outside job took away time she needed for her studies. Julie's mother would offer advice on what she thought Julie should do, but neither Julie nor her mother knew how to put the advice in action. Julie wanted a major in the sciences to assist others who had the same type of neurological condition as herself. Julie was getting

advised from home to get a job, earn money, and help herself. Many hours working in a job, per advice from home, coupled with the rigors of her hopeful major path, and even further complicated by Julie's expressed discomfort with seeking tutoring, left Julie in a very difficult position. She was unable to find a balance between the hours needed to study with her job and her grades forced a change in her major. However, this work ethic was a positive factor to get Julie to college and, combined with her motivation to succeed, helped her navigate higher education. Julie shared how she would try to do clubs and extracurriculars to strengthen her resume for college applications as a high school student. This was particularly challenging due to physical obstructions of the area, and both parents working hours that made transportation challenging. Per Julie, "I was one of the hardest workers in class, which, um, I, which made me, um, graduate with…high honors."

Not unlike many of the participants in this study, Julie had common worries about coming to college; not making friends or being made fun of. Julie had already experienced these things in her few years in this new country and was reasonably concerned about their continuation upon arriving on campus. Quite similar to many of her peers, Julie has a strong sense of self-reliance, a point of pride for her, as she feels that her hard work has paid greater dividends for her than those that did not have as many challenges. While the first-generation identity resonated with some more than others, for Julie, this facet of her identity was salient. In fact, this was, per Julie 'another label' for her as she had a different appreciation for the term, 'first-generation' as an immigrant to the US. While many of her Eastern Kentucky cohort expressed a desire to eventually return or a pull back to the region, Julie does not share that sentiment. To Julie, Eastern

Kentucky just happens to be the place her family lived prior to her coming to college. Her connections are more to a home thousands of miles away. In fact, Julie clarified that she is still trying to figure out what belonging in this place means for her. As a first-generation student who is also an immigrant, Julie's sense of belonging is complicated and this has been reflected in her experiences in high school and college (Stebleton, Soria, Huesman Jr, & Torres, 2014).

This same commitment drove Julie to get connected with the office she became a mentor for, and due to her refusing to give up, is a contributing factor that led to her finding an academic path that was fulfilling that Julie had not considered prior. Largely in part to finding a major path that fit, in addition to working out roommate issues, Julie had her 'aha moment' that allowed college to start to get more manageable for her. Comfort with their field of study corresponded with nearly all of the respondents, in terms of being their defining moment where they had turned the corner in college. It was at this point where the possibility of successfully completing the degree began to feel like much more of a reality for Julie. As with many students interviewed, there was a connection with a key faculty member that introduced them to their eventual field of study and affirmed their path. Julie would go on to make strong faculty connections, but her connection with her program advisor proved to be an equally critical contact for her to connect her with resources that helped her persist, particularly when compared to what she felt was an overall negative academic advising experience.

As Julie shared, she feels that her strong work ethic and the struggles she has had to overcome and those persistent challenges, have provided her with exceptional growth opportunities. When compared to her peers, Julie likely has advanced further along her

journey to self-authorship as she has had to mature in various ways simply to persist. Julie, herself, concedes that while she thinks she has had to work harder than most, this commitment has paid her greater dividends than those that did not have a similar experience. Upon reflection, Julie would advise those coming after her to be more comfortable in seeking out help and interacting with professors and advisors. Julie shared that early on in her academic journey that she was not comfortable asking questions of the instructor in front of her classmates or taking advantage of instructor office hours. Later, she shared, she was much more comfortable asking questions in class and after to ensure she had a better grasp of the material. At the time of the interview, Julie was preparing for her final year of college with plans of finishing up a degree in the field of communication. Julie became a student leader and peer mentor in the same place where her program advisors had offered her guidance and turned her toward resources earlier in her career.

Not unlike Julie, Jeremiah faced additional challenges that some of the other respondents did not have to deal with before coming to college. It is an understatement to claim that Jeremiah works hard. He possibly works excessively hard, but that is what works for him and he has been doing it for quite some time now. During our discussion, he indicated that he has been earning money since he was 11 or 12 years old, in fact. Jeremiah knows the challenges of poverty; his work ethic was born out of that need to survive. Per Jeremiah, regarding his commitment to education and his first-generation identity:

> I am a first-gen student, and uh, on top of like being a first-gen student, I'm also a son of immigrants. I'm also the oldest of the pack, so um, life growing up, definitely difficult. English was not my first language. Spanish was, and uh, just really having to learn everything by trial and error…my parents don't always have

the right answers for everything. Neither did I, obviously; I was just a kid. So, as a kind of learning experience from both ends and then just seeing where life takes us in there, including college, is just like a shot in the dark. Let's see what we can do. Um, ever since day one, I've always tried my best with education, because I know that's like my way out of poverty and like anything bad…

Discussions of poverty, expectation of hard work, and a recognition of education as a vehicle for social mobility were consistent throughout our discussion. It's just a part of who he is and is a key component of his strategy to succeed.

Jeremiah is from Somerset and English was not his first language. For Jeremiah, picking up English was a challenge that was compounded by feedback he would receive as he was speaking a dialect of Standard American English often criticized as being 'less than' or wrong. Jeremiah came to realize that he needed to learn a more mainstream sounding English, in addition to the Eastern Kentucky dialect, for him to transition to multiple spaces more easily. Jeremiah indicated he had to learn through a lot of trial and error, but that has given him the self-confidence to do things on his own. At the time of the interview, Jeremiah was finishing up a degree in the health sciences and will be starting a graduate program at this university after graduating. At the time of the interview, Jeremiah was still deciding if he will finish the minors he was currently pursuing in Psychology and Spanish.

Jeremiah shared that he has a great fear of failure and that drives him to put in all the hours that he does. While Julie shared an appreciation of hard work that was reinforced from home, Jeremiah's situation presents this on a different level. In other words, the value of hard work tends to be seen as a primary means for children of immigrants to achieve their aspirations, and this notion was wholly embraced by Jeremiah (Fuligni, 2012). Not only does Jeremiah regularly have more than one job, a

challenging curriculum, he also participates in several clubs, sports, and does volunteer activities related to his future career path. Jeremiah feels that he, unlike many of his peers, does not have the same cushion to fall back on should he not succeed in his efforts in college, thus he works very hard to succeed in his endeavors, often at the expense of sleep. Jeremiah shared that he has followed many of the cues of his continuing-generation peers as they seemed to have known what to expect out of college more than he did. This has helped him in managing his time. He cited learning the importance of engaging with professors and study strategies as significant findings from his interactions with his friends.   Specifically, he shared that he wished he had known pre-matriculation how important it was to establish relationships with his professors and instructors.

Before his arrival at college, Jeremiah sought out the advice from a local family that shared many similar circumstances as his own family:

> Um, there is another family from my hometown who was also Hispanic, and they also were like in the same, like, situation I was. Like, you know, immigrants, what not, and their older son came to UK, too, and also got the William C. Parker scholarship. And, we didn't talk much, but I was like, how'd you do it, how to do it, like, I know you're smart, like how'd you do it? He was like, well, I did this and this, so anything he did, I did twice as much to make sure that I get in the spot.

Though Jeremiah's family did not have experience with higher education, he consulted his social networks for additional insight to help him along his journey. Jeremiah employed a strategy of engaging with those that he suspected knew the processes in greater depth than he, which is not uncommon among first-generation students, both as a response to 'doing college right', but also fitting in (Cisneros, 2021). His internal drive to succeed allowed him to capitalize on the challenges he was presented with as opportunities to progress further. Seeking out a family friend was Jeremiah's way of

paying homage to his roots. Per Jeremiah, "…being aware of it is to not forget where I come from, and like, my roots, but also not to let that, like, define me."

Being a first-generation college student, and first-generation US citizen from Eastern Kentucky is complicated for Jeremiah. It is part of his identity, of course, but not what Jeremiah would describe as a key identifier; at least not the first-generation college student part. Jeremiah is a first-generation citizen of the US, picked up English as a second language, and is a person of color (POC) from a region that tends to have a high-density White population. Being a POC from Eastern Kentucky, is salient, however for Jeremiah. Jeremiah understood the nuances of preserving culture and balancing aspects of assimilation growing up in Eastern Kentucky (Von Robertson, Bravo, & Chaney, 2016). He understands the complications that arise being a POC in this mostly White space, but also has strong positive feelings toward some of the aspects of his Appalachian culture that are meaningful to him. Jeremiah shared that he feels there is a duality with his Eastern Kentucky identity, sometimes in conflict and other times not. Per Jeremiah,

> It definitely is conflicting…I am brown, so like in Eastern Kentucky, these two cultures don't always mix. (When) I'm talking to someone from Eastern Kentucky, and even though we don't look the same, we're from the same culture roots, and…sometimes I have to pick which Jeremiah am I today, and then the other day, I'm both, so

He also identifies strongly with his family's culture and roots outside of Eastern Kentucky. For Jeremiah, this is all part of 'not forgetting where you're from'. His nuanced identity has given him perspectives on how to navigate higher education that some of his peers might not have, and Jeremiah has been able to capitalize on these insights through tireless efforts to get ahead.

Jeremiah did not simply have great insight, but that was a significant factor for his success. His current path was influenced by a point in his academic career when he finally had to concede that he did not know what he was doing and needed to speak with a professor for guidance. He did not feel a connection, so much, with his academic advisors, but in this class, he wanted to be engaged better with the material and had a conversation with is professor which proved enlightening. It reinforced this notion that he needed to broaden his social networks to succeed, despite the countless hours he was putting into his academic journey. A fear that was only slightly less than his fear of failure was his fear of 'looking dumb', but once he began to address that concern, his path became clearer. Jeremiah's 'aha moment' was realized when he started to believe he could finish his degree through the confidence he gained in acquiring comfort with his major choice.

Though Jeremiah knows he works a lot of hours, at the time of the interview, he shared he was working three jobs. He is saving as much money as he can so that he does not have to do this same thing in graduate school. He is now more attuned with his mental well-being and understands the necessity to give time for this, as well. Jeremiah's advice to future students was to value where you're from, and to not be bound by cultural or financial circumstances. Compared to his peers, Jeremiah has had to address many challenges by seeing them and acting on them as opportunities for growth.

Conclusion

Twelve students who attended high school in Eastern Kentucky and were first-generation students at the state's largest institution shared stories that helped to complicate the narrative of first-generation students from the region. This narrative was

complicated through a deeper discussion through the themes of Dialect/Hillbilly Perception, Appalachian Strong Woman, Grit and Eastern Kentucky Mindset, and Immigrant Identity and Appalachian Diversity. These themes allowed for discussions on language, gender, work ethic, as well as racial and ethnic diversity, among other topics surfaced by the students.   The following chapter will dig deeper into the relationship between feeling authorized to embrace scholarly identity and authorship. Students shared several examples of circumstances that advanced them further to a greater sense of comfort in working toward their degree, including finding the 'right' major for them. The discussions following will build on examples such as that and look further into the relationship between agency, power, and the disruptions that did or did not help the students advance further along in their intellectual development. Specifically, positive connections with a key stakeholder, usually a professor or program advisor, and connections to field of study were key events that students discussed, as well as how the student's sense of belonging impacted their journey.

BECOMING AUTHORIZED

At the beginning of this document, the reader was asked to imagine what it is like to order from a menu at a restaurant that was both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. It is likely that, after going to this place a time or two, that our order will change over time. There is increased growth and comfort in the setting and that place can become and feel more natural. Another way of thinking about becoming authorized to embrace emergent scholarly identity is comparable to how we come to appreciate art. In terms of recognizing art, we might not be able to quite put our fingers on it, but we tend to be able to identify art; not always, but given the proper context, we tend to have a level of familiarity with art, in general that allows this. More often than not, however, it takes some time to study to move beyond simply identifying art to being able to appreciate it at a different level. First-generation students have a level of familiarity with college and its processes, but after time, they develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the experience. Students experience a myriad of situations in college that can serve to highlight growth within a system. Imagine again, if you will, that you are at your commencement ceremony. The president of the institution wants to formally acknowledge the first-generation students graduating on this day, as well as those families that supported the journey. The president asks the families of these students to stand. It is at this point that a student whom we have met earlier, Marcus, noticed that his parents did not know what to do. He had transitioned to a different place in terms of his understanding of his situation and circumstances in college, but this was all still relatively foreign to his parents. At that moment, Marcus was able to see the progress he had made

up to that point in his academic career. Marcus was able to see and appreciate what he could not at the beginning of his academic journey at this institution.

This project is based on the assumption that first-generation college students get access to the same menu of processes and resources that continuing generation students do, but many first-generation students tend to act on this information in different ways and on a different timeline than a good number of their continuing generation peers. Further, this project sought to explore what the circumstances were that helps a first-generation college student become authorized to embrace their emergent scholarly identity. The previous chapter shares several clues regarding the driving assumption about how and when first-generation students act based on information available to them. Students shared accounts of circumstances that got them closer to this feeling of being authorized, including connecting with an important professor and finding their major, to embrace their scholarly identity. The following section looks more closely at the relationship between self-authorship and agency and how these concepts can help to inform our understanding of this notion of first-generation students becoming authorized to engage their educational experience. The following is an examination of identity more deeply, as well as actions taken, specifically related to major selection, that speaks to the underlying questions driving this inquiry.

It is important to draw distinction between self-authorship and agency, as the former is a helpful framework for analyzing processes and internal reflections that are used to make meaning of experiences, and the latter is a descriptor for self-directed behaviors or social engagement (Creamer & Laughlin, 2005; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Or another way of considering this is self-authorship is a multi-level, iterative

process of reflection that helps inform one's ideals and beliefs relative to understanding fit within a system. Agency is more akin to the actions that are taken, that are informed by past experiences that also look to the future, that are illustrative of how one acts on their evolving understanding of their place. While these concepts do not fit neatly within the same box, when taken into consideration together, these ideas help provide a framework and perspective for deeper understanding of those circumstances that encourage situations where students become authorized to embrace their scholarly identity.

This research highlighted many elements of identity, as surfaced by the students, that speak to different aspects of self-authorship and agency. The connection between identity and agency is especially helpful in terms of the perspective it can provide in thinking through this inquiry. In research that explores learning in formal school settings and informal spaces outside of the classroom, the notion of agency and identity are linked and seen as 'entering a discourse' (Hull & Greeno, 2006). In other words, one informs the other and is connected in how people think through and behave per their circumstances. Going further, the idea of positional identity speaks to how people are 'entitled', expected and obligated to participate in defined settings (Holland, Lachicotte Jr, Skinner, & Cain, 2008).   For the students in this study, most had assumptions or internalized predictions of the response their Eastern Kentucky identity would evoke. These beliefs, which were validated for most of the students early on in their college careers through negative interactions with various stakeholders, informed how they navigated this space. The concept of voice, then, speaks more specifically to how these students chose to 'present and represent' themselves through an iterative process that

helped to author their identity within the social world they occupied (Holland et al., 2008; Hull & Greeno, 2006).   For the students in this project, elements of their identity that proved to be more or less salient give greater insight into the complex world of meaning making in which they are engaged.

Being First-Generation

For many of these students, aspects of their identity that resonated more with them included gender, being Appalachian, or their racial and ethnic identities. What it meant being a first-generation student varied across the participants. By way of background and context, as the discussion continues further about how the student becomes authorized to embrace their scholar identity, the salience of being first-generation gives insight into certain levels of awareness and reflection among the students. Further, as the student participants in this research were in the emerging adulthood group, personal agency and identity formation are critically important processes they are engaged at this stage of their development (Schwartz, Côté, & Arnett, 2005).

For some students, identifying as being first-generation was hardly relevant to their daily lived experience. For others, this element of their identity was a point of pride for them as they linked where they are now to where they started. One student shared how she did not realize she was a first-generation student as her mother had gone to community college and earned an associate degree. Another student shared how she did not put much thought into being a first-generation student as discussions of her going to college were ubiquitous in her home as she was growing up. The prospect of going to college was a normalized expectation in her family. Another student shared that being a

first-generation college student was 'just another label'. Being a first-generation student is not something that all students have had the opportunity to reflect on or had exposure to in the early phases of their college careers, but might reflect on further later (Orbe, 2004). Being first-generation did carry more weight with some students, however. Earlier we were introduced to Jeremiah, who shared how he relates to being a first-generation college student as something that grounds him, stating, "I think the biggest thing for me, of being aware of it, is to not forget where I come from, and like my roots." For Jeremiah, the significance of his first-generation identity is presented as somewhat of a conflict as he is reluctant to be 'defined' by this status as if that would be him not paying homage to his roots. While his statement is very rich with additional opportunities to explore in greater depth, for the purpose of this discussion, I returned to this comment to illustrate that Jeremiah had reflected on this element of his identity and had found that parts of it might be in conflict with aspects or values of his home life.

Marcus, who was the student that introduced this chapter, and who had access to a robust portfolio of resources pre-matriculation indicated how his first-generation status was not something he contemplated until very late in his college career. In college, first-generation awareness arose at an interesting point, late in his academic career, as Marcus shared through how he watched his family respond to a particular situation. I had previously shared that at his recent commencement ceremony, the president of the institution asked all the parents of the first-generation students to stand and be acknowledged. Marcus shared he was able to spot his parents in the crowd struggling with whether to stand or not as this notion of being the parent of a first-generation college student is not something on their mind, necessarily. While these details might appear

trivial, they help better understand the foundational elements of what prepared Marcus

for college and speak to the strides he made along the way. When asked to expand

further on his first-generation identity, Marcus shared more about his parents:

> I think that's the biggest thing, like in a practical sense, is there's a disconnect
> between the students and their parents, at least for me, because, you know, they
> didn't have the experiences, are not really, you know, if I'm having an issue or
> problem, like, they can't really understand what it is just because they've never
> fully completed college. In terms of, like, the identity, like it is, I guess, it is a
> sense of pride that I'm the first in the family to complete a degree…And I don't
> think they understood, the, you know, what that title or what that means, that they
> were still sitting down, then they stood up once they saw me standing.

For Marcus and Jeremiah, contemplating their first-generation status was both a point of

dissonance with them in terms of how they connected to home and family, on some level,

but also a point of pride.

Field of Study

One of processes that speaks most directly to 'what authorizes the first-generation

college student to embrace their emergent scholar identity' is that of selecting field of

study. Once students had made this important decision, usually after a positive series of

encounters with key instructional staff or professors. This process was described by the

students in a manner that suggested this was a liberating experience for them that

changed how they interacted with the college experience. This was the point in time or

realization over a period of time where the student transitioned to the stage of engaging

more fully in the process of higher education with fewer of the doubts and worries that

consumed more of their time previously. The day-to-day challenges were potentially still

present but did not present as the same type of challenge as earlier in the academic career.

These moments were not always profound as in a sudden epiphany, to be clear, and could

seem rather mundane in the realm of higher education student life cycles. Identifying

with a major was a positive factor for belonging and the students were a legitimate part of

the process they were engaged, but this was also an indicator that the student had greater

potential of engaging in scholarship at a deeper level with this anxiety alleviated.

In many ways, either not knowing what one will major in or knowingly being in a

major that is not the right fit, reinforced the notion of not belonging in this space.

Finding the right major was symbolic of fitting in and 'doing college right' for many of

these students. Supplemental resources were used, as reported by the students, such as

career counseling services, program and academic advising, but for most of the students

that shared their 'aha moment' being connected to the comfort found with their field of

study, they identified a key stakeholder, the professor, as being a primary reason. In

general, the students did not report enthusiastic positive associations with their instructors

until the point they were more comfortable in their major or had made a decision on their

field of study. The sum of field of study uncertainty, view of instructional staff as

gatekeepers or obstacle, and general anxiety around how they were perceived by peers,

likely contributed to feeling unsettled and out of place. The positive linking of the

positive interaction with the professor and finding the right field of study, however,

further empowered the students to respond to other stressors they were navigating. But,

the obstacle of major/field of study uncertainty was alleviated and the view of professors

was evolving. In some ways, first-generation college students might not have the

nuanced understanding of the role of the instructor as some of their continuing generation

peers, based in part, on how that particular stakeholder was discussed pre-matriculation

or due to general process awareness related to college (Ardoin, 2017; Drotos, 2011). In

other words, the initial reluctance to engage with faculty and other instructors was compounded by uncertainty over fit regarding field of study. Once this issue began to be resolved, the student likely felt freer to engage the process more intentionally.

Finding the right major likely aided in providing the students with more of a sense of academic belonging, in terms of the process and knowing what to do in order to advance to degree attainment, but this was also an initial step for the student to engage in scholarship on a different level than before. There were elements of the student experience shared that suggested they had transitioned beyond the point of procedure mastery, in terms of knowing what to do and then executing for their field of study, to a connection to the greater scholarly process. This sense of intellectual belonging became more apparent to the student after their initial 'aha moment' that was connected to knowing what to do and that they were justifiably part of the educational process. The intellectual belonging element was expressed when students felt they were thinking more critically about their studies and how their academic pursuits were influencing how they perceived their role in society beyond college and contemplation of their own identity. This is a state where the students were not only engaging in scholarly pursuits but were more comfortable identifying as a legitimate participant in scholarship, even if not yet recognizing or acknowledging themselves as scholars. The major selection process is an interesting lens to consider how the students were 're-authoring' elements of their identity and discovering and acting on their evolving agency. The participants varied in expressing where they were along the spectrum of being scholars with some appearing more content with getting through college to move on to the next phase of their live and others.

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It is through 'doing the little things' where the growth and evolution of a first-generation student is most apparent. The 'aha' moments that allowed the student to transition from those concerns, making friends or finding a major, however, were not always profound as in a sudden epiphany, and in fact could be seen as pedestrian or mundane in the realm of higher education student life cycles. First-generation students progressing through processes, regardless of how routine these processes might be, however, is noteworthy based on what we know about the different degree completion rates between first-generation and continuing generation students. As previously stated, students shared that their 'aha moment' was most closely associated with the selected field of study they settled on, both in terms of the content area, but also regarding the positive connection made with a key stakeholder that made this possibility more of a reality. While major selection is a routine process in higher education, the anxieties and stresses over not knowing one's major was a significant issue for some students interviewed. One student shared that their anxiety over not having the 'right major' (they had undergone several changes of major) was compounded as she assumed others were associating her Appalachian identity with her inability to find the right major. She was very relieved when this happened for her. Another student shared the weight of the major decision process:

> Probably after like my second semester, where I was like, alright, I'm about to drop out. This isn't for me. I don't know what I'm doing. And then I spent hours and hours looking over courses looking at what my year plan was where I'm trying to get to be like 'okay, if I do this and this, I have this GPA, if I do this, this, and this, I have this and if I do that, I can keep the scholarship and I can get here. I'm like, 'you know what? This looks difficult, but it's been done before so I'm going to do it and I did. And I was like, alright, let's just keep doing that, over and over again, and eventually I just didn't have to think about just getting stuff done as it should be and it's just part of being in college.

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This student's anxiety over not having their major determined was a significant negative influence on the likelihood they would persist to their goal. This student was contemplating their next move (leaving the institution) while going through this exercise of trying to identity their best fit major. Another student, who was not contemplating departing higher education, was still struggling with finding their right place. The following is their account of their pleasure with finding the right field of study:

> I actually did have that moment, because it was in Sociology 235 Inequalities in Society in sociology…loved that class and every single bit of material I found fascinating…I was at that point trying to decide what major and…I should have been doing this the whole time, so I went ahead and added that, and yeah that was definitely the that I have, the aha moment, like because Sociology is the perfect fit.

Finding the right major was a positive influence for belonging that allowed the students to feel they were a legitimate part of the process they were engaged. This was also an indicator that the student was more readily engaging in scholarship at a deeper level once larger questions of general fit and belonging were addressed through the field of study. In many ways, either not knowing what one will major in or knowingly being in a major that is not the right fit, reinforced the notion of not belonging in this space. Coupled with the perceived social lack of fit, not having a sense of comfort with what to study would potentially lead a student to question why they were going through this process. Finding the right major was symbolic of fitting in and 'doing college right'.

For the student contemplating leaving the institution based on her struggles with identifying a major speaks to her pre-matriculation mindset about how she viewed college and its purpose. Existing research focusing on rural and urban first-generation college students and their major selection processes provides insight into why these students felt a greater sense of relief upon finding their major fit. For many of the rural

first-generation students in that research project, the college experience was viewed as a credentialing process more so than an exploratory process that urban first-generation students tended to view this pursuit (Sims & Ferrare, 2021). This mindset would put a premium on finding the 'right' major early in the process to stay on track to a timely credential. This uncertainty about field of study was perceived by students as they were not doing something right, and further, that everyone else was. The 'something' in this case was selecting the right major. So, while we cannot draw on empirical evidence from this study that speaks to the assertion that first-generation students engage higher education differently and on a different timeline, we can see that students *felt* they were going about this differently from others. This perception was the reality for those expressing this concern.

Conclusion

The points of dissonance and conflict that these students navigated helped to inform their internal sense of self and evolving identity. In turn, these moments of reflection resulted in, at least for many of the students in this study, an evolving understanding of their agency and comfort in acting on their beliefs and identity. The concerns over having the 'right major' from the onset suggested a relative discomfort with the process. Moving into the eventual field of study that felt 'right' was an action taken that helped alleviate prior anxieties and freed up additional opportunities to engage other elements of their college experience.

SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

This chapter presents a summary of the findings from the research project including important conclusions that were drawn from the presented data in the previous chapters. This chapter provides considerations to the discussion and implications for the field of study of first-generation students. In addition, this chapter engages in discussions regarding potential considerations for various practitioners connected to higher education are explored. The conclusion of this chapter will address recommendations and considerations for further research.

Overview of the Problem

An abundance of literature exists to support the notion that first-generation students and their continuing-generation peers do not progress toward earning a degree at the same rate, do not persist to completion at the same rate as their continuing-generation peers, nor achieve the same benchmarks of success associated with continuing-generation peers. Persistence to degree, in particular, remains a steady focus of research (Cahalan & Perna, 2015; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Means & Pyne, 2017). This research project layered on being from Eastern Kentucky in addition to being a first-generation student. Per existing literature, first-generation student tendencies and performance indicators are well established and understood on certain levels, but the analytical lens of student success outcomes can prove limiting and avoid larger systemic discussions. The approach taken with this project focused less on success outcomes and more on how the student experience, as expressed through their words, could contribute to the larger discussions of first-generation student success.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study is to enrich the conversation about how some first-generation college students navigate their higher education experience and to share their accounts of their unique experiences. This project focused on a specific group of students from the Eastern Kentucky region and there was no intention of presenting the findings as representative of the collective first-generation student experience at this institution, nor the first-generation population writ large. A fundamental assumption behind this research is that first-generation students eventually gain access to the playbook that their continuing generation peers use to navigate higher education, but the timing and the way that this information is acted upon does not necessarily align with how continuing generation students would respond to this information. To be clear, this project was not an exploration of how students navigate the hidden curriculum of higher education (Margolis, 2001). The 'hidden curriculum' of higher education is increasingly exposed early on to students through conversations with academic and supplemental advisors, professors, residence life staff and others. In fact, oftentimes, effective strategies and direct communications are shared with all first-year college students, including first-generation, by various faculty and staff, but those directions and advice do not always lead to immediate action by students, regardless of first-generation or continuing generation status. The questions that drove this research project follow. In what ways do first-generation students act, or not, on higher education navigational information shared with them? Alternatively, another perspective to get at this issue is considering what the contributing circumstances that 'authorize' first-generation students to embrace their emergent scholar identity are. Authorize in this sense is akin to a sense

of empowerment and comfort for the student to more fully engage their educational experience. What does the process look like for students navigating these new identities and what are the contributing factors in aiding their sense of belonging, if belonging was, in fact, part of what enabled the student to cross over into this new community?

Review of the Methodology

A qualitative methodology was the most appropriate tactic to approach this research as the words of the interviewees provide meaning and context to the issue being examined that have the potential to give a deeper understanding of the issue (Joseph A Maxwell, 2012). The qualitative data collected offers an in-depth look at the social world of the participants based on their meaning making within it (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013). The individual voices and perspectives were important to highlight in this project and the selected methodology reflects that value. The rich data generated from qualitative research provides a foundation for understanding the day-to-day nuanced experience. Per Yin, "the social, institutional, and environmental conditions within which people's lives take place…these contextual conditions may strongly influence all human events" (Yin, 2011). The semi-structured interview method implemented in this project was selected to allow for a conversational style to encourage comfort of conversation with the interviewee. In addition, this method has enough structure to ensure the topic is covered, but is flexible to allow for probing questions and follow ups, as necessary (Adams, 2015).

Overview of the Sample, Data Collection, and Analysis

The transcripts from the semi-structured interviews acted as a primary means of data generation. Codes and larger themes from transcripts, along with field work journal

analysis, consultation with colleagues, as well as reliance on personal professional insights were also used in the process. Codes from field journal entries as I made note of the process during conducting the research also informed the inquiry into the research questions.   The interview protocol consisted of five overarching questions with several possible probing questions to follow up (see Appendix A). This particular format suits this research project as it allows for the judgment of the interviewer to pursue, or not, a particular line of questioning for the benefit of either enriching the discussion or exploring new topics (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Data Generation

Participants were recruited via email from addresses provided by the institution through Institutional Research and Advanced Analytics. The recruitment email (see Appendix B) identified the researcher, the nature of the research and the commitment of time, as well as the $25 incentive provided to respondents. The initial email was sent to all eligible students (178 total) on April 30, 2021. Ten students indicated willingness to participate and received a link to schedule the meeting along with the consent to participate (see Appendix C) for review on May 2, 2021. One of these students failed to show to their scheduled interview and did not respond to follow ups. A reminder email was sent to the remainder of the group on May 5. This yielded two respondents that I followed up with a scheduling link and consent document. A second reminder email was sent on May 17. This yielded two students with one of those being a 'no show'.

The purposive sampling approach was appropriate for this research as the lived experiences of the first-generation students from the geographic region is best told by the experts; the students, themselves (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). A consideration

was to have a manageable number of interviewees while being able to produce useful data related to the problem (Sandelowski, 1995). Another concern was working to ensure representation and quality of data produced over volume (Murray, Nebeker, & Carpendale, 2019). Though the quantity of interviews was not the primary focus, being mindful of data saturation was certainly a focus, as interviews were being conducted as I was also recruiting with reminder outreaches (Fusch & Ness, 2015). I relied on my fieldwork journal notes regarding potential themes that were consistently being shared that helped inform the duration of the recruitment process.

Another real-world factor that impacted recruitment was that of the considerable reduction in responses after the initial email. A judgment call had to be made to ensure that reminder emails were not at a frequency or volume that might be interpreted as harassment of the students. Regarding the recruitment efforts, of the pool of 178 students, 12 students elected to participate in the interview process. Five respondents identified as male and seven identified as female. This represents a 41%-59% gender split. There were 2 interviewees who were classified as URM or about 16%. However, a third student's ethnicity is 'unknown'. Demographic data and student contact information was provided by request to Institutional Research and Advanced Analytics (IRADS) upon showing evidence of IRB approval to conduct this project.

Data Analysis

The case study research design (Yin, 2008) will utilize thematic analysis (TA) as the primary means of making meaning from the interview transcripts (Braun V., Clarke V., Hayfield, N., Terry G., 2019). Based on my experience with college student email responses and the timing in the semester that the first recruitment email was shared, I did

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not anticipate a large volume of respondents. Thematic analysis is fitting for a smaller

project size (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The interview data was ordered utilizing the multi-

step thematic analysis process described in detail in Chapter 3. The steps of the process

were:

> 1. Familiarization with the data, which consists of careful reading and re-reading
>
> of the transcripts.
>
> 2. Generate initial codes. As this is a theoretical thematic analysis, the data was
>
> coded as it was interpreted to be relevant to the project.
>
> 3. Generation of themes. While this process will be similar to coding, the intent
>
> will be to look for overarching themes that connect some of the codes.
>
> 4. Review of the themes. This verification process examines if the data support
>
> the generated themes.
>
> 5. Refining/define themes. This process seeks to 'identify the 'essence' of what
>
> each theme is about' (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Identifying sub-themes and the
>
> relationship between themes is part of this process, as well.
>
> 6. Reporting of findings phase.

Regarding the fieldwork journal to capture real time thoughts from my

interactions with the research process, and opportunities to reflect and question, these

became data to be ordered and coded that served as reference points to remember why

something seemed important at the time. In other words, this level of analysis provided a

better understanding what I was finding and helped me to shape the research accordingly.

I employed Maxwell's recommendation for constructing methodological and analytic

"memos" that allowed me to capture the evolving nature of the research findings as it unfolds (J.A. Maxwell, 2013).

Synopsis of Major Findings

Major themes from the research fell within the categories of: Dialect/Hillbilly Perception, Appalachian Strong Woman, Grit and Eastern Kentucky Mindset, and Immigrant Identity and Appalachian Diversity. The theme of 'Dialect/Hillbilly' provided insights into how students dealt with how their accent and being an Eastern Kentuckian were perceived and responded to before and during their college experience. The theme of 'Appalachian Strong Woman' provided a lens of examining gender roles within rural spaces, as well as cross examining the impact of gender on field of study. 'Grit and Eastern Kentucky Mindset' is a lens to examine the complicated processes of how students understood their evolving identity and privilege relative to their lived experiences and shifting engagements in the college experience. The theme of 'Immigrant Identity and Appalachian Diversity' provided an opportunity to consider the perspectives of folks who do not make up the majority White residents of Appalachian Kentucky. These overarching themes share elements of the student experience that help to complicate further the narrative of what it means to be a first-generation student from Eastern Kentucky navigating the higher education experience at Kentucky's largest university. Students shared a range of accounts of successes that bolstered their confidence and obstacles that sometimes proved to be challenging growth opportunities. Returning to the driving questions of what authorizes the first-generation college student to embrace their emergent scholar identity, in addition to the previously discussed themes, I looked more closely at the relationship between self-authorship, agency, and

identity. This discussion from the previous chapter framed the major selection process as a potential act that demonstrated that these students had more fully embraced their emergent scholar identity.

Findings Related to the Literature

Many of the findings from this research were congruent with those represented in the existing literature. Several examples include the following: 1. The significance of the impact of language and how students navigate the higher education space, 2. Rural/Appalachian preconceptions 3. The interplay between gender and fields of study, 4. The first-generation tendency to engage with faculty less than their continuing generation peers 5. Importance of the transition period to college 6. Impact of key stakeholders (supplemental advisors and instructors) on first-generation students 7. Importance of critical peer social networks.

Discussions of language and accent were nearly ubiquitous among the respondents. Every student had much to say about either their experiences with navigating this space with their accent or shared thoughts on how they felt peers, faculty, and staff perceived them. For some, this struggle with language became a point of growth that strengthened their resolve and bolstered their sense of Eastern Kentucky identity. For others, they were still navigating a recurring obstacle, or problems related to their accent was not connected to an Eastern Kentucky accent if they were not originally from there. For all, however, the student's language was a personal element of their identity that was a factor in their overall comfort or discomfort in many of the situations they encountered while in college.

Related to the concerns with language and accent was that of how the Eastern Kentucky or Appalachian identity factored into students' journey in college. Most of the students were able to share an account of at least one encounter they had with peers, faculty, and staff that suggested that those stakeholders held negative preconceptions about their identity. A student shared that she was asked about if she wore shoes with regularity or had access to high-speed internet, for example. Others shared how they were in a classroom setting and felt more targeted by the negative portrayals of Appalachia by the instructor. On the other hand, many of the students also reflected on what they perceived as challenges stemming from living in Eastern Kentucky, citing historical economic conditions or their dissonance as it related to their shifting political views. The students, with their more nuanced understanding and appreciation of their home region, were acutely aware of false or misleading representations of Eastern Kentucky and this likely increased their already heightened level of awareness and sensitivity to potential ridicule or criticism.

Several of the women interviewed for this project shared their perspectives about how their identity as a woman fit within their field of study. This was particularly evident with those women who either were pursuing or had been seeking a credential in one of the 'hard science' fields. Some of the students did explore different fields of study, though it was not evident if their identity as a woman was the primary factor or their shifting interests. For others, they stayed in the major or added another major or minor that had a higher preponderance of women in the field. It is not surprising that women offered this perspective about their identity within their major. While existing

literature explores this issue, it could also be pursued with the added geographic and first-generation status layered on.

Student engagement with faculty, or lack of engagement with faculty was a common thread among the respondents in this project. Many students expressed their preconceived concerns about they thought faculty behaved and thus, how they were to engage (or not) with faculty and other instructors. One student shared an account of how her high school teachers had presented college faculty as rigid disciplinarians that would not tolerate immature behaviors. This perspective bolstered the idea that faculty were at best gatekeepers, or for some, obstacles to their pursuit of a degree. Students shared concerns over not wanting to bother their professors, thus were reluctant to engage outside of the classroom during office hours, for example.

Significant research has been conducted on the importance of the transition period to college for all students. For the first-generation students interviewed for this project, it was within that first semester or first year where they began to encounter questions about the field of study they were pursuing and the other challenges in this new environment, ranging from making new friends to the affordability of college. While the importance of that transition period is significant for most students, for first-generation students, this period is acutely significant as this is a time of questioning fit and the process, in general. In other words, many of these students, though they expressed that they knew there were going to college for quite some time, were confronted with an unfamiliar situation upon getting into the processes of higher education. All the changes and doubts associated with this experience were likely magnified for students who might tend to question their place in higher education. Several of the respondents reported that they were encouraged

from a young age to pursue college, but the goal was simply to go to college. What was lacking for many of these students were additional discussions on what to expect or how to navigate the space. In some ways, many of these students were given the end goal but not the discussions or directions on how to get there.

Many of the students equated their 'aha' moment with finding comfort in their field of study. For most of the students, this comfort also coincided with a positive interaction with a key faculty member or instructor. Existing research highlights the importance of these key stakeholders in increasing the likelihood of success for students. Many of the students interviewed for this project relayed the importance of the faculty member in getting them more connected to scholarship. Students also shared, that in addition to the importance of the faculty member in aiding their comfort with their field of study, that their supplemental or program advisor was an important factor in assisting them on how to engage many of the processes that tend to increase student success outcomes. While process awareness and execution was a major theme of this research, connecting with the right person or people tended to coincide with 'doing' the right things to navigate college.

Finally, students shared that they were intentional in using their peer networks to help in navigating this new experience in college. For some, it was an effort to connect with more first-generation college students who were also going through similar experiences. This was a common theme from students who might have been in a specific scholarship group, were in a first-generation living learning community, or who took advantage of resources specific to first-generation students. This was a place to develop community and share strategies. For other students, whether intentional or not, they were

not associating with many first-generation peers and mirrored some of the activities of their continuing generation peers. Before the preponderance of first-generation student services on many college campuses today, this was likely the most common tactic used by first-generation students to get acclimated with college.

Unexpected Findings?

In some ways, many of the findings were both expected and unexpected, based on prior research and my own lived experience. However, there were instances where what I anticipated discussions to go in different directions. Chief among those were the significance of post-secondary aspirations and the role of academic advisors in influencing the students' higher education trajectory. Regarding the post-secondary aspirations, many of the respondents spoke to this on a surface level. For example, many, if not most, of the students cited an awareness that they were going to college. They typically shared that they knew they were going to college from an early age based on advice or directions received from home or in their school. Parents were significant driving factors in encouraging college attendance, as were some high school teachers and occasionally guidance counselors. Students shared that they were familiar with the expectation to go to college but cited that what to do next or 'how' to engage in the process upon matriculation was not a topic of discussion they regularly engaged in and that they felt unprepared for the actual experience. Guidance counselors, for some students, play a key part in assisting in the college selection process or in educating the students on what their college options are. Many of the students interviewed for this project did not share that their experience interacting with their guidance counselor was particularly significant. Students regularly shared that they were left thinking, what now,

upon their transition to college. While the post-secondary aspirations were there and discussed prior to coming to college, these aspirational experiences were limited in terms of giving the students a realistic expectation of what college would entail.

Leading up to the research project, there was an assumption that a key stakeholder, the academic advisor, in the student's educational career would come up in conversation more than what proved to be the case. This assumption was based on professional experience and existing literature. For greater context, I have nearly 10 years of experience as an academic advisor and several years' experience providing supervision to an office that provides supplemental advising. This is not to say, however, that it was unexpected that the relationship with the faculty member would prove as significant as the students indicated, but there was an expectation that this particular stakeholder would have been discussed in more influential terms from the perspective of the students. Supplemental advisors (such as those connected with identity groups, scholarships, or athletics) on the other hand, did, in fact, get regularly mentioned as a strong support for navigating higher education. It makes sense that a student might feel more connected to a supplemental advisor as they would typically have the opportunity to interact with that advisor more regularly than their assigned academic advisor. At this particular institution, students have opportunities to engage with academic advisors pre-matriculation and throughout the academic term, but many students will meet with their advisor one or two times the first semester and then as needed, but at least once per semester, going forward. This stakeholder is a relatively consistent point of interaction with all first-year students at this institution, but from the respondents, these interactions did not necessarily prove as positively beneficial in navigating this new space.

Generally speaking, the tone from respondents was not one of disdain for the stakeholder or their role, but rather one of indifference in terms of how that particular stakeholder influenced their journey. Was this because of how the student viewed the value and purpose of their pursuit of a degree, personality conflicts, or was the timing a factor when the student first engaged these stakeholders? This understanding of roles and functions of academic advisors is not entirely inconsistent with the perception that many students had about their faculty members. The 'why', in terms of why certain stakeholders did not prove as impactful is worth deeper examination.

Study Limitations

This project was limited in certain ways that offer insight into additional research considerations in the future. Identified limitations include sample size, included voices and perspectives in the process, and researcher bias. Efforts were made in the planning phase, while conducting the research, and the write-up of findings to take these limitations into consideration.

The small sample of 12 that focused in on a specific region of Kentucky limited the generalizability of the findings, both in terms of comparisons to other first-generation students, both within Kentucky and writ large, but also to the many other first-generation students from that part of Kentucky that either did not participate or were enrolled at other institutions. The intent of this project was more aligned with illuminating individual student perspectives, speaking with 12 students out of a possible 178 presents a challenge of generalizability, but does offer points of comparison for additional research.

Another related limitation of this research is highlighted by the voices omitted. In particular, those students that were no longer enrolled at the institution, due to stopping out or transfer, at the time of interview recruitment is a group to consider for inclusion of their voices. The students who began at this institution but were not enrolled and had not earned a degree at the time of the project had the potential to provide unique insight and comparative data. While the number of first-generation students from Eastern Kentucky was limited, there were no voices of continuing generation students that could have added context to the discussion. As respondents frequently shared the concerns voiced about the perceived Eastern Kentucky stereotypes, continuing generation students from the same region would be an important population to add context and opportunities to compare. Faculty, as well, were not included in the project, but were frequently cited as a distinctly important part of most of the respondent's journeys. Taking time and resources into consideration, these voices could have offered additional context to the project.

Another limitation that I have reflected on throughout the research process is the bias that I brought into the project. While efforts were made to systematically code the data to identify themes, it is worth mentioning my familiarity with the region and understanding of higher education processes. I am a first-generation college student from Eastern Kentucky who was employed by the institution where the research was conducted. Further, I was an academic advisor at this institution for nearly 10 years before transitioning roles and have reflected on how this employment history, combined with my personal history, have informed the biases and judgment calls made along in the way in this research project. In addition to those identity elements, I also made decisions in how to order and make sense of the large volume of data. I was mindful of the

perspectives that I brought into this research project that might impact how I interpreted the data. For example, I made efforts to be mindful that I am an able bodied White man, originally from the same general areas as these students, whose interest in this particular group of students was at least partly influenced by sharing some points of commonality with the students. However, I was intentional in viewing each point of data as discreet and independent from other identifying data generated from the students.

Further Inquiry

There are several considerations for future research that could stem from this project, both in terms of additional research opportunities as well as in terms of informing higher education practitioners' strategies for engagement with first-generation students. Prior to engaging in this discussion more specifically, it is important to note that some of the respondents in this project did not necessarily identify with the 'first-generation' label. In fact, at least one student referred to it as just that…a label. I introduce this into the conversation as it is important for institutions of higher education to be mindful of labels that are placed on students, regardless of how salient or not that identity might be for that student. While categories are helpful in informing institutional data reports, in terms of informing policy, there can be challenges without greater context. As it relates to first-generation college students, while many have argued there are 'rules of thumb' as to how this group of students tend to behave, it is equally important to honor the individuality of students, regardless of labels applied. While an aggregate understanding of a group is a helpful first step, potentially, it is a first step that needs to be further unpacked, I would argue, for students to reap the greatest benefits from the experiences.

Areas to target future research include a detailed examination into the field of study of the students, the course load of the students, the type and modality of courses enrolled and class size. Exploration of the curricular obligations of students and subsequent comparisons across disciplines and institution type could offer up additional insight to first-generation student success. Regarding field of study, for example, there is existing research that explores different experiences based on gender, ethnicity, or race. Layering in first-generation has the potential to complicate the inquiry further with additional information being included on the aggregate.

In addition to exploring issues at the student level, closer examination specific to different institutions has the potential to add to the growing collection of first-generation college student specific data. As stated, a limitation of this research project was the narrowed geographic focus, thus there are many opportunities to expand the inquiry across various institutions of higher education. Comparative analysis of multiple projects at institutions that were of diverse Carnegie Classifications from varying geographic regions would further enrich the inquiry.

As discussed as a limitation, another area for additional consideration for future research is the group of students that did not persist. This project engaged only those who had persisted up to the point of the interview. These were students that had faced transition challenges and were able to continue along their way to degree. The voices of those students that had not persisted, either by stopping out or transferring, could potentially add new perspectives that could prompt additional questions or insight to the issue. Those students no longer at the institution have a unique perspective that could be similar or quite different from those students that remained enrolled. Nonetheless, a

comparison of their stories along with those that persisted offers opportunity for additional inquiry.

Specific pre-matriculation factors, such as the type of and location of high school students attended is an area that warrants additional inquiry. From this project, there were students that shared their awareness of their perceived benefit or deficit based on the high school they attended. For these students, this was framed in terms of the independent district as being represented favorably in comparison to the county district. While the independent vs. county discussion is not solely restricted to Eastern Kentucky, as there are other independent districts spread throughout the state, expanding this inquiry further would be an interesting pursuit. While further exploration into this specific phenomenon (independent vs. county school district success outcomes differential) is an area of future consideration, there are multiple opportunities to expand this concept to be inclusive of the myriad of high school and secondary educational options that students have access to.

Examining the pre-tertiary preparation through the lens of the school type could potentially lead to opportunities to explore how students navigated relationships with key stakeholders that influenced their thinking on pursuing post-secondary options. Post-secondary aspirational research exists, but as highlighted by some of the respondents in this project, it can feel to students to be at a surface level that leaves them in need of more information upon matriculation to the university setting. Identified key stakeholders to consider are the guidance counselors, teachers, coaches, or others that had opportunities to affect the student's educational trajectory. Incorporating these voices in future research projects is a consideration that has the potential to offer additional context and

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contribute to a clearer understanding of the issues around first-generation students and the factors that hinder or encourage their progress toward degree completion.

There are many opportunities to engage more stakeholders at the college and university with future research. While this project was intentionally designed to engage with the student, the perspectives of the various key stakeholders, particularly those highlighted in this project (academic advisors, supplemental/program advisors, faculty) could potentially help to further contextualize the student-generated data. A selection of these stakeholders that would tend to intersect with these students at various points across disciplines would be ideal to engage in future research to gain additional perspectives. There is potential to design longitudinal studies that incorporates these voices as well as discrete moment in times inquiries.

For practitioners in the field, student services oriented or instruction, there are practical implications of research findings such as those stemming from this project. For those engaged in academic advising, there is an opportunity to elevate base level knowledge of advisors through training interventions that would have the potential to increase the likelihood of engaging first-generation college students in a more effective manner and on a timeline that is most helpful for the student. For many of the students in this project, the academic advisor was not necessarily the point of contact that stood out as one that positively shifted their path. As the academic advisor is a consistent point of contact for students, however, this is an area to where the implementation of advanced training has the potential to improve this relationship. This could be achieved through better-informed referrals or by sharing best practices, through one-to-one engagement, with students in a manner that is tactful that is most likely to be received by the students.

Regarding language used in the previous line (tactful), this was intentionally phrased as faculty and staff can present information in a manner that further ostracizes the student they are seeking to assist. For example, I have heard examples of advisors speaking to a group of students, both continuing generation and first-generation, that have said things similar to, "X resources is especially important for first-gen students, as we know they lack this coming into college." The intent versus the impact of even the most well intended words could have the result of students building more walls between themselves and the key stakeholders and resources that could prove most helpful.

Regarding instruction, particularly the first- and second-year level instructors, there is an opportunity to demystify some of the processes and behaviors expected of all students who are newer to the experience and not just first-generation college students. A general policy of student engagement strategies among instructors of entry level coursework could benefit many students, including first-generation, in terms of getting these students more acclimated to the norms and expectations of college. While it is not the case that all faculty or other instructional staff have as great of a need for student engagement strategies, there are several instructors who would stand to benefit from more robust trainings on this topic. Some faculty are more intentional in explaining the expectations and processes for students. This can be conveyed through how the faculty discusses the details of and how to use the course syllabus or explaining what and how to use instructor office hours, or how to best use the Teaching Assistant than others. In practice, there is an opportunity to offer professional development to this critical group of key stakeholders. As referenced earlier, there tends to be a rising tide effect in terms of

strategies that work well for first-generation college students tend to work well for all students, though the inverse of that is not always true.

Concluding Remarks

This research project took the approach of investigating the first-generation college student experience through a targeted geographic lens that intentionally avoided a deficit perspective in analyzing the student's remarks. A motivating factor to engage in this project was to gain insight into systemic and local contributing factors regarding the persistent, well documented, achievement gap that exists between the first-generation college student and their continuing-generation peers. Repeatedly, various projects have supported the finding that first-generation students do not progress toward earning a degree at the same rate as their continuing-generation peers, that first-generation students do not persist semester to semester at the same rate as their continuing-generation peers, nor achieve the same benchmarks of success associated with continuing-generation peers. That these findings persist prompted the additional, targeted inquiry of this project.

As it relates to this project and the underlying assumption that those first-generation students who do not stop out, navigate their experience in college both in a different manner and in a different timeframe than their continuing generation peers, the findings are mixed. Regarding the different approaches that students took, the participants in this study shared a level of awareness of their situations that suggested they knew what they 'were supposed to do'. For a variety of reasons (negative perceptions connected to their identity, evolving manner in how they viewed professors, help seeking stigma, etc.), however, they chose to take a different path, at least initially. Students voiced their awareness of expectations of processes to engage that would likely

increase their chances for success in college, for the most part. Most students indicated that they employed internal strategies that they hoped would achieve the same results of the actions or processes shared with them previously. The internal strategy and self-reliance, while a strong positive influence in different scenarios, could have also been a contributing factor in the delay to take advantage of academic resources and engaging with faculty.

If the internal strategies employed by students represents differences in how first-generation college students navigate higher education compared to their continuing generation peers, the timing of this transition is less clear. While this research project supports that first-generation college students navigate higher education differently in the early stages of their career, particularly before settling on a major, it is inconclusive as to whether the overall timing of how they engage the process differs from their continuing generation peers. Students did repeatedly express anxiety with not having their major determined. This anxiety implies that the students felt that others had, in fact, determined their major already. This feeling of anxiety and uncertainty regarding major selection is not exclusive to first-generation college students, as many continuing generation students struggle with this issue, as well. As previously discussed, the view of college as a means to an end (better job) is a more commonly held first-generation student perspective. When compared to the perspective of college as a time for growth and exploration, a view more commonly held by continuing generation students, it is understandable how this stress would have been burdensome as the student likely felt that the timing of their process was 'behind' in comparison.   Moreover, the act of the major selection process, which was frequently intertwined with a positive connection with a faculty member, was

consistently identified as an action that seemed to instill a greater sense of confidence and

comfort in their journey for first-generation students, which speaks to the increased

comfort of being authorized to embrace this emergent scholar identity.

APPENDICES

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Embracing Rural First-Generation College Student Scholar Identity:
Wading Waist Deep in Unfamiliar Waters

Participant Name: _____

Location/Modality:
Interviewer: Robert Hayes
Interview Date(s):   **Interview Time(s):**

Introduction: Thank you for speaking with me today. Prior to beginning this interview, I want to clarify the process. The process consists of a semi-structured interview. The interview will focus on your experiences and perception. We will review the consent document prior to conducting the interview and address any questions that you might have and to confirm your consent to the process. You can choose to not answer or skip any question that you do not feel comfortable answering and you may end your interview or elect to withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty. Please keep in mind that your participation is completely voluntary.

Interviewer will state the place, date and time and ask the participant to state their name and class.

1. Could we begin by you sharing a bit about yourself, including where you are from and your life prior to college?
   Potential probing questions:
   a. What was your process for picking a college and why UK?
   b. What were you excited or worried about coming to college? How did that play out?
   c. What do you wish you would have known prior to coming to UK?
2. Can we talk a bit about your experience of being a scholar at different points in your academic career?
   a. In relation to your high school graduating class, where do you feel you 'ranked' among your class, taking into consideration standardized tests, GPA, participation in clubs/sports?
   b. What about your college cohort that first year? Did you feel you ranked differently among your first-generation peers compared your continuing generation peers? Why or why not? What were the factors that made you feel this way?
   c. At what point did you become more aware of your identity as a first-generation college student? What did that mean to you?
   d. How does being rom Eastern Kentucky impact this? In what ways was this a point of pride, or maybe do you feel it impeded you, or maybe

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wasn't a factor? Did you have any assumptions about how you would perform in college based on being a first-generation student from Eastern Kentucky? Were there other parts of your identity that influenced how you felt you would perform in college?

e. How do you feel first-gen students compared to the rest of the cohort you started college with? What about those specifically from Eastern Kentucky?

f. In your opinion, has college been a transformational experience? Why or why not?

g. Did your view of learning change once you got to college? If so, how?

h. Did you have an 'aha' moment when it felt like everything started to click?

i. Was there a time when you felt like you really belonged, and all was going great? What were the circumstances around that? Who did you celebrate the little victories with?

j. On the other hand, were there times when you felt like you didn't belong? What that like and were there circumstances (work, family, other) that impacted this perception?

3. In your time here at UK, were there any decisions or process you did not feel comfortable engaging even if you were aware of their potential benefit to you as a student? Utilizing instructor office hours, going to tutoring services, etc., for example.   To rephrase, were there things that you KNEW were likely the best option for you, but you chose either not to participate or to do it differently? Do you have some examples? What do you feel influenced your decision?

a. Can you expand on that a bit? Has your academic decision-making process changed since first starting college? If so, how? To be clear, we don't have to look at this as negative or positive behaviors, but more about how and if your behaviors changed and why.

4. As a current college student, could you share a time when you relied on your own internal strategy to overcome an obstacle you found especially challenging? Maybe this was with studying, dealing with a financial concern, or a physical or mental health challenge, for example?

a. Reflecting on that, are there other ways you would have dealt with that challenge in retrospect?

b. How would you describe your relationship with advisors and professors and has that evolved in your time at UK? (Potential probe: Who did you turn to for advice or guidance early on and how about now…peers, family, advisors, faculty?)

c. What advice would you give incoming first-generation students from Eastern Kentucky?

5. Thank you for this discussion today. Is there anything from our talk that you would like to speak more about, or is there something you want to talk about that we did not address in this interview?

APPENDIX B. RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear (student's first and last name):

My name is Robert Hayes. You might know me from my role overseeing the office that houses First-Generation Advising, but this project is for my degree requirements as a PhD candidate. My faculty advisor is Dr. Jane Jensen.   I am contacting you to consider participating in a study about first-generation college student experiences at the University of Kentucky, who are from Eastern Kentucky. Participation in this project will consist of one Zoom interview that will last approximately one hour.   Being a first-generation student, for the purposes of this project, means that neither parent nor guardian earned a bachelor's degree.

I am inviting you to consider whether or not to volunteer for a research study about how first-generation college students experience the process of being a college student here at UK. I would like to talk about how your identity as a first-generation student scholar has emerged in your time at UK and how that has informed decisions you have made or actions that you have taken or not taken in navigating this institution as a student. You choosing to participate or not participate in this study will have no impact on any of the services you currently receive from our office. I am asking you to consider this project as you are a first-generation college student from Eastern Kentucky.

If you have questions about your rights as a research study participant, you can call the University of Kentucky's Office of Research Integrity (ORI). The ORI is independent from the researcher. You can contact the ORI if you have concerns or complaints that you do not want to talk to the study team about. The ORI phone number is (859)257-9428.

Please be assured that your participation is voluntary and confidential, and in writing up the results, nothing you say will be attributed to you.   You choosing to participate or not participate in this study will have no impact on any of the services you currently receive from our office nor will it impact potential future services. If you are among the first 20 students selected to participate in this project-which is completely voluntary- you will be compensated $25, via Amazon Gift Card, for your time. If more than 20 students respond expressing their interest in participating, only the first 20 respondents, per the order of email received, will be eligible for participating in the project and receiving the gift card. If you wish to participate, reply to this email indicating your intentions, and I will share a detailed consent document with you to review. You will have time to review the document in advance of the interview. We will talk about the consent process prior to beginning the interview.

Sincerely,

Robert Hayes
PhD Candidate

Educational Policy Students & Evaluation
College of Education, University of Kentucky

APPENDIX C. INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT

This consent includes the following:

- **Key Information Page**
- **Detailed Consent**

Please note you will be asked to provide your verbal consent. If you have any questions about the research, please ask me now.

By providing verbal consent, you are granting permission to:

1.) Participate in this interview
2.) Digitally record the audio of the interview

If you wish to consent to the interview, but not the recording, please share that information.

Consent and Authorization to Participate in a Research Study

KEY INFORMATION FOR "Embracing Rural First-Generation College Student Scholar Identity: Wading Waist Deep in Unfamiliar Waters"

I am inviting you to consider whether or not to volunteer for a research study about how first-generation college students experience the process of being a college student and how their identity as a first-generation student scholar emerges. I am asking you to consider this project as you are a first-generation college student. Being a first-generation student, for the purposes of this project, means that neither parent nor guardian earned a bachelor's degree. This page is to give you key information to help you decide whether to participate. You choosing to participate or not participate in this study will have no impact on any of the services you currently receive from our office. I have included detailed information after this page if you would like to ask me questions. If you have questions later, the contact information for the research investigator in charge of the study is below.

WHAT IS THE STUDY ABOUT AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?

The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences and perceptions of first-generation college students from Eastern Kentucky that provides a sense of authorization to embrace, or not, their first-generation college student scholar identity.

By participating in this study, the hope is to learn about factors that influence how and when first-generation college students feel connected to their emergent scholar identity. Your participation in this research will last approximately one hour and will take place during a single meeting.

What are reasons you might choose to volunteer for this study?

There is no guarantee that you will get any benefit from taking part in this study. Your willingness to take part, however, may, in the future, help society as a whole, better understand this research topic. For a complete description of benefits and/or rewards, refer to the Detailed Consent.

What are reasons you might choose NOT to volunteer for this study?

The only reason you should not participate in this study is if you are not a first-generation college student from Eastern Kentucky. For a complete description of risks, refer to the Detailed Consent.

DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?

If you decide to take part, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You will not lose any services, benefits or rights you would normally have if you choose not to volunteer. As a student, should you decide not to take part in this study, your choice will have no effect on your academic status or class grade(s).

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS, SUGGESTIONS OR CONCERNS?

The person in charge of this study is Robert Hayes of the University of Kentucky, Student Transitions and Family Programs. If you have questions, suggestions, or concerns regarding this study or you want to withdraw from the study, his contact information is
.

If you have any concerns or questions about your rights as a research volunteer, contact staff in the University of Kentucky (UK) Office of Research Integrity (ORI) between 8am and 5pm EST, Monday-Friday at 859-257-9428 or toll free at 1-866-400-9428.

<div align="center">

Detailed Consent

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Are there reasons why you would not qualify for this study?

The only reason why you should not participate in this study is if you are not 1. a first-generation college student: i.e. that neither parent earned a bachelor's degree, regardless of siblings and other relatives or 2. From Eastern Kentucky.   Subjects must be at least 18 years old, first-generation college student and from Eastern Kentucky.

Where will the Study Take Place and What is the Total Amount of Time Involved?

The research procedures will be conducted remotely via Zoom. You will need to meet virtually with the interviewer one time during the study. As you will interview via Zoom, please be aware, while I will make every effort to safeguard your data, the interview is being conducted

via an online medium. As with anything involving the Internet, we can never guarantee the confidentiality of the data while still on the company's servers, or while en route to either them or myself.

An estimate is that most participants will conclude their interview in one hour or less. The total amount of time you are being asked to volunteer will be for one hour.

What Will You be Asked to Do?

Your participation in this study will involve one activity: Participating in one interview via Zoom. During the interview, you will be asked questions about your experiences leading up to and including your current college enrollment. With your permission, we will digitally record the audio of the interview to ensure accuracy in analysis. You can still participate in the interview should you not agree to being recorded and receive the $25 gift card. You can skip an interview question you wish for any reason and still receive the $25 gift card.

What Are the Possible Risks and Discomforts?

To the best of my knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would experience in everyday life.

Will You Benefit from Taking Part in The Study?

There is no guarantee that you will get any benefit from taking part in this study. Your willingness to take part, however, may, in the future, help society as a whole, better understand this research topic.

If You Don't Want to Take Part in The Study, Are There Other Choices?

If you do not want to be in the study, there are no other choices except not to take part in the study.

What Will It Cost You to Participate?

There are no costs associated with taking part in this study.

Who Will See the Information That You Give?

When I write about or share the results from the study, I will write about the combined information. I will keep your name and other identifying information private. I will make every effort to prevent anyone from knowing that you provided information, or what that information is. Audio recordings of interviews will be transcribed verbatim for analysis purposes only. Transcription will be provided by third party service. Upon completion of this project, all interview recordings are erased or otherwise destroyed. All interview data is kept in a secure location at the University of Kentucky. Numerical codes are given to digital recordings and other information connected to you and your participation to aide in maintaining confidentiality. All results from this project will be reported in aggregate form, and any quotations cited will be used only so long as the participants remain anonymous.

You should know that there are some circumstances in which I may have to show your information to other people because legal or safety concerns. For example, the law may require

sharing your information with authorities if you report information about a child being abused, and/or if you pose a danger to yourself or someone else.

I will make every effort to safeguard your data, but as with anything online, I cannot guarantee the security of data obtained via the Internet. Third-party applications used in this study may have Terms of Service and Privacy policies outside of the control of the University of Kentucky.

Can You Choose to Withdraw from The Study Early?

You can choose to leave the study at any time. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study.

If you choose to leave the study early, data collected until that point will remain in the study database and may not be removed.

The investigator conducting the study may need to remove you from the study. This may occur for a number of reasons. You may be removed from the study if:

- You are not able to follow directions,
- It is determined that your participation in the study is more risk than benefit to you

Will You Receive Any Rewards for Taking Part in This Study?

You will receive a $25 Amazon gift card for taking part in this study.

What Else Do You Need to Know?

If you volunteer to take part in this study, you will be one of about 20 people to do so.

Will Your Information Be Used for Future Research?

All identifiable information (e.g., your name or date of birth) will be removed from the information collected in this study. After I remove all identifiers, the information may be used for future research or shared with other researchers without your additional informed consent.

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VITA

EDUCATION
Master of Arts, University of Louisville   December 2006
Higher Education

Bachelor of Arts, Berea College   May 2002
Education Studies

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENECE
Executive Director of Student Community Resources and Services, University of Kentucky, October 2017-Present

Acting Associate Director of First-Generation Initiatives and Robinson Scholars, University of Kentucky, August 2016-October 2017

Academic Advisor, University of Kentucky, May 2007-August 2016

Assistant Director of Upward Bound, Lees College Campus of HCTC, 2005-2007

Counselor and Teacher, Cedar Creek Treatment Center, 2003-2004

Special Needs Reading Teacher, Leestown Middle School, 2002-2003

HONORS & AWARDS
EPE Dissertation Enhancement Award, 2021
Arville and Ellen Thacker Award, 2018
Undergraduate Education Outstanding Staff Award, University of Kentucky 2014

ROBERT HAYES, MA