

The "Real World" Aspirations of Work-Bound Rural Students

Beverly A. Burnell
Plattsburgh State University of New York

Twenty-six work-bound, college-able, rural high school seniors were interviewed regarding their post-high school aspirations, their views of the transitions associated with leaving high school, and the processes by which they came to think of themselves as work-bound. One of several emergent themes is presented: students' perspectives of the real world and how these perspectives have influenced their post-high school aspirations. Recommendations are made for school personnel, particularly counselors, to address high school students' career and lifestyle development needs from a contextual perspective.

See, [educators] think that because [work-bound students] aren't going on to college, that they're just blowing it off, they're taking the easy route. They need to realize that they're actually working to go on to work.

(17-year-old work-bound, rural student)

Rural communities need and readily support skilled workers such as heavy equipment operators, carpenters, nurse assistants, cosmetologists, childcare providers, auto body repair workers, and landscapers. Workers in these areas of expertise who bring talent, passion, and commitment to their work are highly appreciated within their communities. Rural educators are concerned with the post-high school aspirations of their students, and they likely are aware that fewer rural youth than urban or suburban youth aspire to continue education after high school and that those who do go on to college are more likely than urban students to drop out (Breen & Quaglia, 1991; McCracken & Barcinas, 1991). However, academically able rural high school students who have chosen post-high school goals that do not require college have often been viewed by education professionals as exhibiting "low levels of aspiration" (Apostal & Bilden, 1991; Bloodsworth, 1993; Breen & Quaglia, 1991; Haas, 1992; Pearson, 1993-1994) and are not as well supported by educators as college-bound students.

Aspirations are the pool of individually constructed alternative dreams, hopes, and desires for one's future and are continually modified by both internal and external influences. When adjusted to reflect and conform to individual and social realities, aspirations become goals and serve as motivation for behaviors designed to reach those goals (Lent

& Hackett, 1994; Neimeyer & Leso, 1992). Aspirations are developed for a variety of life domains, such as education/learning, occupation/work, family, self-concept, personal growth, health and physical well-being, relationships, social-community involvement, leisure, material/environmental accomplishments, and ability (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Each is laden with personal and social meaning, and each is a contributor to one's overall development of identity (Blustein, 1994; Haas, 1992; Marcia, Waterman, Matteson, Archer, & Orlofsky, 1993). "Aspirations reflect individuals' ideas of their 'possible selves,' what they would like to become, what they might become, and what they do not wish to become" (Haas, 1992, p. 1).

As a component of career development, aspirations have been interpreted variously. They have been defined as idealistic educational and occupational dreams, hopes, and fantasies of children, and the more specific, realistic, and singular educational and occupational choice or goal of adolescents. Aspirations of adolescents are also viewed as important antecedents for the transition into adult roles, both the timing of this transition and the fulfillment of expected adult responsibilities (Blustein, 1994; Super, 1994). The value of aspirations (e.g., "low" or "high") assigned by the individual from whom they arise may or may not correspond with the value assigned by external observers of that individual (Gottfredson, 1981; Haas, 1992). External assignment of value to aspirations has been used as a means of identifying a young person's prospects for the future and ascribing a person's social value and perception of reality (Empson-Warner & Krahn, 1992; McClelland, 1990).

Sociologists have employed status attainment models (e.g., Haller & Woelfel, 1972; Sewell & Shah, 1968) and structural models (e.g., Ayalon & Yuchtman-Yaar, 1989) to focus on aspirations as indicators of potential for status, particularly status higher than one's parents (upward mobility). In these models, an occupational hierarchy based on prestige, determined by a combination of educational level and income, is the standard by which judgments about an individual's aspirations are made. Because status structure

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Beverly A. Burnell, Plattsburgh State University of New York, Counselor Education, Ward Hall 0107A, Plattsburgh, NY 12901 (beverly.burnell@plattsburgh.edu)

in these models is based on educational and economic attainment, occupations that are highly rewarding socially and economically but do not require high levels of education are not accorded high status and subsequently are not perceived by many as worthy goals (Ayalon and Yuchtman-Yaar, 1989).

Developing Aspirations in the Rural Context

Rural life presents a complex context for understanding the development of adult aspirations as well as the relationships among aspirations in a variety of life domains, including education and occupation (Apostal & Bilden, 1991; Bloodsworth, 1993; Haas, 1992; Hektner, 1995). Some general, though not universal, features of rural life may be important in understanding the development of rural students' post-high school aspirations. Rural families, schools, and communities are characterized by geographic isolation, the importance of connectedness and personal relationships, the tendency to approach problem-solving cooperatively and view learning as a social activity, an aversion to individual recognition and competition, a preference for making decisions from a subjective frame of reference, and the importance of belonging to the rural setting (Bloodsworth, 1993; Fitchen, 1991; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Pearson & Burnell, 1996). Occupations available in rural communities are generally of lower status with lower wages and benefits, and are less likely to require college degrees or advanced skills than occupations represented in urban and suburban communities (Fitchen, 1991; Furdell, 1995; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Haller & Virkler, 1993). Achieving high levels of education and subsequent employment often requires migration out of the rural community (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). Thus, findings in studies of post-high school achievements of rural students may be confounded by traditional measures of status and the particular context of the rural setting. For example, Wilson and Peterson (1988) found that educational and occupational achievements were not related to life satisfaction among young adults in rural Appalachia. For the young adults in this community, proximity to childhood home, self-esteem, and financial resources were significant positive predictors of life satisfaction. How might education professionals respond and take into account findings like these in their work with rural high school students who are academically capable of going on to college and instead choose to go on to work?

Education professionals have clear interests in the development and support of rural students' post-high school aspirations (e.g., Apostal & Bilden, 1991; Bloodsworth, 1993; Furdell, 1995; Haas, 1992; Pearson, 1993-1994). However, rural educators do not seem to fully understand or appreciate the lives of their students and the contexts in which these students are developing their aspirations for their futures (Pearson, 1993-1994).

The perspectives of rural students who are academically able to go on to college but for whom high levels of education are not a preference are not well understood. This study was designed to understand the aspirations of noncollege-bound rural high school students. My objective was to learn more *from* rural students who are not going on to college as a means of learning more *about* these students.

Method

I had conducted a pilot study with six participants, which yielded several tentative aspects of the aspirations and perspectives of noncollege-bound, academically capable rural high school students (Burnell, 1997). One of these was identification by the students of themselves as "work-bound" rather than "noncollege bound"—a focus on who they were rather than who they were not. A second finding from the pilot study arose from the students' perspectives of what they called the "real world." Living in the real world meant working, living on one's own, and being an adult responsible for one's daily life. These students were eager to transition to the real world as soon as possible and identified school as isolated from the real world. They anticipated that college would extend this isolation, which they also felt was the reason many of their college-bound peers chose college. The students also identified success as possible without college, a view supported by their "real-world" experiences and their families. The work-bound students' descriptions of the real world included an appreciation for the relationships among their aspirations for family, lifestyle, work, and learning.

Topics of inquiry most salient to exploration of work-bound rural high school students' perspectives were developed from a review of the professional literature and from the data collected in the pilot study. These topics of inquiry, listed in Appendix A, were not considered exhaustive nor were they expected necessarily to persist throughout the study. New themes that arose as well as previously identified themes, were pursued to the extent that they continued to be salient. For example, discussion of the students' learning experiences in vocational classes and academic classes became part of every interview as the students in the earlier interviews consistently indicated that vocational teachers better applied an understanding of the students as cooperative learners who expected to be treated like adults (Burnell, 1997).

In the pilot study and the research reported here, I used in-depth interviewing and the critical incident procedure (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Young & Friesen, 1990) to explore work-bound rural high school seniors' aspirations for the varied domains of their lives, the relationships among these aspirations, the processes by which the students made choices from among these aspirations, and the context within which they assigned meaning to their aspirations. I conducted interviews to "gather data in the subjects' own

words [in order to] develop insights on how the subjects interpret some piece of the world" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 96). This study focused on understanding the aspirations and perspectives of rural high school seniors who were going on to work after high school.

Data Collection and Analysis

Over 2 months in the spring of 1997, I interviewed 26 work-bound, college-able, rural high school seniors in 11 schools located in seven rural counties in central and northern New York. In New York, "forty-four of the state's sixty-two counties are officially classified as 'rural.' These officially rural counties contain 3 million people, representing 17 percent of the state's population" (Fitchen, 1991, p. 5). Compared to people in rural areas of other states, however, rural New Yorkers are more densely packed and in closer proximity to metropolitan areas—features of ruralness that have consequences for education, employment, and families (Fitchen, 1991). These characteristics may also affect the applicability of the findings presented here to other rural locations.

Seven schools that became part of the study were invited to participate; four schools became part of the study as the result of fliers made available at a regional school counselor's conference. School districts were invited to participate based on one of two criteria—a pre-existing relationship with a school-university partnership project on enhancing the aspirations of students in rural schools, and/or their identity as a rural school defined by their location in a county that was not in a standard metropolitan area.¹ The size of the 1997 graduating classes of the seven invited schools ranged from 20 to 100, $M = 57$. The size of the graduating classes of the self-referred schools ranged from 64 to 175, $M = 128$. Information about students' high school grades, academic status, or post-high school goals could not be released to the researcher except by the student, so potential participants were identified and contacted by their school counselors, who were asked to identify students who were "academically able to go to college, but were not going on to college." Student interviews lasted from 40 minutes to over 2 hours. Nine students were male, 17 were female, and all interviewees were white. Interviews were audiotaped and then transcribed for analysis.

A recursive process of data collection and analytic induction was used (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992): (a) early development of a rough descriptive impression of the phenomenon; (b) continual assessment of the consistency of this impression as data continue to be collected; (c) modification

of the description; (d) active pursuit of cases that do not fit the tentatively developed conception; and (e) continual redefinition of the phenomenon until a universal relationship is established. My objective was to identify salient themes as they arose from the participants' points of view.

Researcher biases, assumptions, experiences, and hypotheses were certainly significant in identifying the initial and subsequent areas of inquiry, in analysis of the interviews in progress and after transcription, and in identification of themes upon which to focus in this analysis. For example, I had to reassess my use of the term "goal-directed," a descriptor identified in the pilot study as appropriate for those students who were going on to work they had identified as a primary goal toward which they were already directed. In the study reported here, however, analysis revealed varied reasons students were going on to work other than being goal-directed toward a specific type of work. In addition to the transcriptions of the student interviews, the recursive process of analysis included data from (a) field notes, written immediately after phone calls, interviews, and site visits, which described the author's reactions and hunches about what was being learned and ideas to pursue in subsequent interviews and site visits; (b) observer comments written into the transcripts of interview tapes to describe context, nonverbal communications, hunches, and directions to pursue as analysis continued; and (c) analytic/reflective memos, written throughout the research process that summarized the codes, categories, and themes being identified, hypotheses being developed, and the author's thoughts about assumptions, problems, and decisions that might have been occurring (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).

The student participants revealed a great deal about themselves, including much that is beyond my scope here. Twenty-four key categories of data arose from the analysis, organized along four dimensions: (a) general descriptions of the students' aspirations as expressed at the time of their interviews and the students' reasons for these choices; (b) the influence of family, including generational influences; (c) perceptions of "the real world"—identified as work, family, adulthood and stability; and (d) perceptions of the transition to the real world. A review of the students' post-high school plans will be presented, followed by a presentation of data and discussion of one of the three primary themes—the students' perspectives of the real world. Due to space limitations, the other two themes—*influence of family and perceptions of the transition*—are not presented.

Findings

All of the students interviewed were very open and forthcoming in their interviews. Several talked about events in their lives that went far beyond the intended scope of the interviews. Although the students were reminded that they were not expected to violate their privacy, many continued

¹ "According to the U.S. Census, metropolitan areas comprise counties with a central city of at least 50,000, together with their surrounding suburbs, everything else constitutes 'non-metro'" (DeYoung, 1994, p. 229).

to share an amazing array of related and intensely personal thoughts, feelings, and descriptions of events. Many personal facets of the students' lives that they revealed as part of their realities as adolescents in their families, schools, and communities are not reported here. The anonymity of the students has been preserved via alterations of identifying features that do not affect the meaning of the findings.

After Graduation

None of the 26 students who participated in this study was going to college immediately after high school, though each had post-high school aspirations for a variety of life domains including work and education. Of the 26 students interviewed, two were entering the military, one was completing a "13th-year" program in nursing at a vocational school, and 23 were going on to work immediately after high school graduation. These students' reasons for going on to work varied considerably. Several students described themselves as going on to work *and* on to college. Of those going on to work, six identified the specific kind of work they were entering as something they had chosen and prepared for through vocational/technical sequences, either at their home schools or at a vocational school. These students' chosen fields of work and training were cosmetology, heavy equipment repair/operation, automotive technology, precision metal machining, horticulture/floral design, and agricultural technology. Of all the interviewees, these students were most clearly goal-directed toward work for which they felt enthusiasm and eagerness. This goal-directedness was characterized by Tallie's response when asked to describe her understanding of the purpose of the interview: "That you are interviewing students who have decided not to go to college, but have their careers basically planned. They know what they want to do." Alan, who was completing a 2-year vocational sequence in precision metal machining, exemplified the enthusiasm these students' felt for their work:

Once I started working with steel, I don't know, it's just . . . I mean sure it's hard labor . . . but it's a different kind of labor . . . I mean, there's more to it . . . Here you can weld, you can torch, you can plastic cut, you can use band saws, you use punches, you use brakes, you use shears, . . . fork trucks, anything you can think of to do with steel, I've run. So I mean, it's fun. . . . I just enjoy it. I think . . . I don't know how to explain it. Steel work is . . . you stand back after it's done and you look at it and it's like "Wow!"

Four students identified work as an intermediate step to make money or otherwise prepare themselves for college. All but one of these students were completing vocational sequences either at their home schools or a vocational school.

The nonvocational student was a National Honor Society student who had taken academic sequences, including college calculus and physics. This student planned to move to another state to work in a hospital and do volunteer work as steps toward an eventual college degree in physical therapy. Of the three students in this group who took vocational sequences, two had studied criminal justice and the third had become a certified nurse assistant. These three had long-term college plans for law, computer information systems, and nursing, but each had suffered some form of family/emotional instability that was contributing to their expressed needs to work, earn money, and establish themselves financially before going on to college. For example, Ellie had been highly motivated by her mother's financial struggles after her parents' separation and wanted to get herself "set," meaning being "able to support myself," and then "take it step by step . . . see how it goes after."

Six students, all female, were going on to work in support of marriage and/or family aspirations. The occupational fields for which five of these students had taken vocational sequences and within which they planned to seek employment were foods/cooking, secretarial/business, nursing, childcare, and early childhood education. The sixth student in this group planned to continue working with her boyfriend on a farm to support themselves and their child. One of these students was married, two had babies and lived with their babies' fathers, two others were engaged, and another was living with her boyfriend. Hannah, for example, was engaged to a diesel mechanic who had been out of school for 6 years. Hannah's primary goals were to get married and start her family, buy a house and get her bills paid off, and move from part-time to full-time at her current job as a certified nursing assistant (CNA). At one time, she had wanted to go on to become a licensed practical nurse, but had changed her mind because she wanted more patient contact like she was getting as a CNA. She felt she had everything she needed from school:

I already got my job. So, I think that was the most important thing 'cause I didn't want to go to college. I did, then I didn't. And now I don't want to go 'cause I want to get my own place and start my own life. I went through that program so I could do that.

Four students described themselves as going on to work primarily as a means of exploring available options. One student wanted to travel and work odd jobs to support herself, one wanted to try "little areas of art" for which she had a passion but not a clear goal, and a third who described himself as graduating young (17) had been given "permission" by his parents to use a year to explore. The fourth student in this group was negotiating between the military and a factory job as options that would help him eventually pay for college. Each of these students said they

were delaying decisions because they had not yet explored the options available to them and hadn't felt their time at school had provided this essential process for them. Two of these students were completing vocational sequences in business/home economics and art. The other two students were completing academic sequences; one of these students was in the National Honor Society. Charlie's parents wanted him to "basically pick one thing," but he said he didn't want one job forever but wanted to do several for variety and to keep from getting bored. He compared his hobby of fishing with his desire for variety and fear of boredom. Variety was like when he is "walking down the stream, fishing. And I just keep going . . . 'cause I don't care about time when I'm doing stuff like that. [Or] if we're moving, like going up and down the shoreline or something [in a boat] . . . you see different things, like different houses or something, it's fine." But having to choose one option was like fishing in a boat on a big lake and being ". . . trapped. You're moving, but it doesn't feel like you're moving because you don't see anything different. It's all water. I don't like the same scene all the time. I like change."

Of the final three students, two had plans for jobs in construction, but for different reasons. One student, who had completed academic sequences in math and French, was going on to work because he saw it as the only choice (see Patrick, below). The second student, who was completing academic sequences in science and math as well as a vocational sequence in technology and art, was going on to work because he wanted to break from school. A third student was choosing to go on to work because she "wanted school over with and [to] get on with" her life. She had completed a vocational sequence in business and half a sequence in childcare. However, she was planning to work in a factory so she could move out of her foster family's home. For her, work meant independence.

The "Real World"

These 26 students referred often to "the real world," which they often contrasted to the world of college. The real world was the world of work and family characterized by stability, and an adult identity characterized by freedom and responsibility, independence, uniqueness, continuity, and commitment. None of these students was negative about college per se, but all said they didn't want to choose college if they didn't know what they would get out of it. These students did not value going on to college if they did not know what they were going to study, what they were going to do or have upon completion of college, or how college would connect to real life. Under these circumstances, college represented a delay of entry into the real world, a "waste" of time, effort, and money and risk. Work represented "the real world" and guaranteed outcomes. They knew of previous graduates of their schools who had gone to college and

had come back home because "they couldn't get jobs," who "live[d] off their parents," and who had stopped mid-way through college because they did not know what they were going to college for and hadn't found any answers in the first year or two. These study participants saw their own decisions to not go to college "just to go" as prudent and practical. Several participants described their college-bound peers as also believing in college as delay of the real world. College would delay the responsibilities of adulthood and allow them to postpone having to make decisions about what to do and how to survive.

Work was an essential aspect of the real world, particularly work that would allow for stability and enough money to pay the bills, as well as work that provided opportunity for variety, creativity, and advancement. These students expected to work. The only reason for not going to work was parenting. Many hoped to advance in their work, primarily to achieve greater stability and to earn enough to provide for children to grow up without wanting. None talked about advancing to positions where they would be managing people or operations, though this might be implied by the few who hoped to eventually own their own businesses. Other goals of advancement were to learn new skills, to develop more expertise within an occupation, to build confidence and security within an occupation, and to have more responsibility within the employment setting and/or the occupation. Work was an expected part of the real world. As Chuck said:

You have to work. . . . I want to see progress like all the time. Not everybody is going to get what they want, but I want to be able to say when I get older, "Well, I succeeded to a point where I was really happy. I didn't stay at the same point I started out as. I started here and I ended up here, which is better than me starting here and staying here." . . . I want to be able to say "I progressed just as my family did, my parents did."

For most of these students (e.g., Alan, above), the work they were going into was something for which high school had prepared them, a self-chosen goal about which they spoke with passion and enthusiasm. A few students were more discouraged. For example, Patrick could not afford to go to college, but would like to study law, law enforcement, or forestry. He had talked with his counselor:

One time last year when we made up my schedule [the school counselor] asked me what I might do. And that's when I mainly thought about the forestry thing. . . . I told him, forestry was what I really thought I'd like. And I think he made the comment, something about how most foresters are all like older guys so I assume that he thought it'd be a tough thing to get into.

Patrick was left with the perception that he, and many of his peers with limited resources, had no choice but to go to work:

I just feel that kids don't think there's that many choices out there. . . . Recently [I've been thinking about] just being a working stiff for the rest of my life. Just working until I drop dead probably . . . Work, work, work. While the jobs are actually still out there to get 'em.

A second aspect of the real world was that all of these students expected, most of them sooner than later, to get married and have families (though not necessarily in that order). In terms of lifestyle, parenting and marital values, and economic achievements, most of the student participants described wanting what their parents had. For example, Phil and his girlfriend were planning to live together after graduation and hoped to eventually move to North Carolina "where the jobs are" and ". . . I hope, to be comfortable, not worrying about money too bad. You know, maybe two kids or so. Nothing outrageous." When asked what he meant by "comfortable," Phil said "Well, if I'm making about \$35,000 a year, I think it'd be comfortable for me. My dad's only making \$20,000 and he's making it. So, I figure about \$35,000 or so a year will get me good."

There were also those students who wanted lifestyles that were different, to varying degrees, from what their parents had, and who felt they had learned more from their parents about how *not* to parent or relate in a marriage. Alan lived with his fiancée and said they planned to be married in a year or two. He said that by the time he was 25 years old he would "like to see a little kid." However,

I want to give myself time enough for us to get to know each other, get married, live with each other, make sure this is right and then have the kid, you know? 'Cause I don't want to bring them into the world—I mean 90% of marriages, they have a kid, then they split up. I don't want that, man. The kid needs his father and his mother. 'Cause my mom raised us since the time I was six, by herself.

Typical of the students' descriptions were aspirations for a lifestyle that was "average," "just right," "comfortable," or "basic." No one explicitly expressed aspirations for high income, an expensive lifestyle, or high social status, though one student mentioned wanting to eventually get a master's degree, one thought she might eventually want to become a doctor, and a few talked about wanting to make "good money." Most frequently the students described their aspirations using such descriptors as "nothing outrageous" or "I don't want too much, I don't want too little either—just right," and expectations such as "I'm not expecting to have

a mansion or anything." A house with a big porch, a stable marriage and lifestyle for the children, a wedding that was "in-between," financial stability, the chance to enjoy life and "to not rush myself, to do everything slow and the way I want to [so as to] notice more . . . enjoy more . . . see things . . . and [be] curious about things," "doing it at my own pace and when I want to," and "to live comfortably and not have to worry about anything," were the kinds of lifestyle aspirations expressed by these students. For some, like Hannah, who was engaged to be married, aspirations for her 20s looked the same as those she held for her 30s, with stable work and family life as keys. Her hopes for her life at age 25:

I want us to both have good jobs. Our own place, own our home, and have our bills paid off. And then I'd like to at least have one kid, . . . but we want to wait till we both have jobs where we can support the kid. 'Cause we could now, but, we just want to wait to make sure that we give the kid a proper home life.

Her hopes for her life at age 35:

Hopefully we'll have a good life up till then. We'll have our kids and have everything we want, have everything paid for. Probably not. . . . So we can live, not wealthy, but live and still be able to do the things we want to do. Like if we want to pay off our bills and go on a trip somewhere, we can do it. Not have to worry about coming back with no money . . . we both want enough money to be able to tide us over and pay our bills and have the stuff we want. 'Cause we both have our jobs.

The third common aspect of the real world centered on the students' views of adulthood ("growing up"): freedom and responsibility, independence, uniqueness, continuity, and commitment. Interestingly, many of these students saw their college-bound peers as failing to grow up because they relied on parents to financially support them, a view that coincided with these students' assertions that they themselves had to "grow up fast." In the real world of these students, parental expectations to quickly become self-sufficient were evaluated as requiring them to go to work rather than college, particularly since college did not hold a guaranteed outcome that would support self-sufficiency. The time frame for their families' expectations of their adult participation in life after high school and the expectations of educators for how the families would frame this period of young adulthood appeared to be out of sync. Family expectations appeared more powerful since many of the students would be living on their own and would have to become self-sufficient quickly. Consequently, commitments were made to work, though not always to a particular kind of work. These

commitments may have been a way of acquiring some sense of stability and settling the question of occupational identity to some degree.

Many of the students were already on their own financially, or were at least somewhat financially self-responsible (e.g., they paid their own car insurance or bought their own clothes). Several were already living on their own. Jill lived with her boyfriend and their 4-month-old baby:

[having my son has] definitely made me grow up and realize that I have responsibilities . . . you have to go to work and stuff . . . you have to really look at what you're gonna do because you have someone to take care of and you have to make a life for them and to be a role model . . . so that's definitely made my life all that much harder to plan and to make sure I'm doing the right thing.

The students were in accord with the perceived parental requirement that they quickly become self-sufficient, though some assigned their own meaning to their parents' expectation, as Hannah did, contrasting her life with the lives of other seniors she knew whom she described as "lazy" and who weren't "gonna make it in the real world at all" because:

Their parents pay for everything, so when they get on their own, they're not gonna know where their money's supposed to be going. And they spend it on stupid stuff. . . . I pay for everything. I pay for my own gas. I pay for my own insurance. If there's clothes I want, I buy 'em. Anything like that, I have to pay for it. My parents don't pay for anything.

The several students who hoped to go to college at some point agreed that they didn't want to choose college if they didn't know what they would get out of it. Going to college immediately after high school was not viewed as necessary, consistent with the students' perspectives of the pace of life and the valuing of outcomes. College was an option they felt was always available to them. As Jill, the single mother above, put it:

Actually, if I really wanted to go to college right now, I could probably get a lot of aid and everything. But I want to be ready to go and not just . . . go because everybody else wants me to go.

Though these students expressed some trepidation about facets of life in the real world, most were more eager than anxious to get on with life. All talked about the challenges of balancing work with marriage, family, and other lifestyle goals. They were willing to work to support themselves, willing to work at their relationships, and thoughtful about

putting it all together in ways that honored their values about work, family, making a home, and providing stability for raising children.

Adulthood

These rural, work-bound students described adult identity and the real world as a *process* of identity development that occurs within the *context* or *community* from which they sought achievement and recognition (Erikson, 1963; Marcia et al., 1993; Vermeulen & Minor, 1998). The adult identities that these students were developing in the real world consisted of several "content domains" (Marcia et al., 1993, p. 21). There were those specific to the real world—work, family, and stability—and those specific to becoming an adult—freedom, responsibility, independence, uniqueness, continuity, and commitment. The interviewees expressed acceptance of responsibility for their own career decision making and career development process, which is an attitudinal component of career maturity. For these students, work appeared to have been a more realistic, and perhaps more meaningful, goal to aspire to than college.

These work-bound students valued continued learning as a means to job advancement and to enhance skills and knowledge. However, learning in a traditional academic setting that does not explicitly connect what is learned to what is needed in a job was not an investment many of these students were willing to make. For these students, the real world of adulthood was imminent and, from their perspectives, delaying entry into this world by going to college was both unrealistic and impractical.

Conclusions

The emerging social constructivist view of career development provides a paradigm within which educators can work with rural, work-bound high school students (Savickas, 1997). The process of talking with a school counselor is typically perceived as carrying little expected psychological risk. As this (and other) research indicates, however, for many people career issues are not made in isolation from other life issues. This has become vividly apparent to women (e.g., Vermeulen & Minor, 1998), as they become expected more and more to balance work and relational domains in order to feed their families, literally and figuratively. It is also apparent in the career choice processes of persons from cultural backgrounds in which competition, individual achievement, and individuation from family expectations are not prized values (Borodovsky & Ponterotto, 1994; Fouad & Bingham, 1995; Herr & Niles, 1994). These features characterize many rural students as well, particularly those who participated in this study. Many educators are likely already aware that such factors as family, social class, and student employment have an impact on students' aspirations and decision processes.

Educators may not be aware, however, of the relative importance of each of these to individual students with whom they work, or how each student evaluates and values each of these contexts as he or she makes decisions about his or her developing identity. Educators must ask, listen, evaluate without judging, and provide accurate information as well as a forum within which students can explore, examine, and assess all facets of their transition and decision-making processes.

This discussion and the data presented here also raise a question about the overall purpose and expected outcomes of a high school education. There appears to be a contradiction between social expectations of the outcomes of high school and adult identity development. On one hand, individual achievement and responsibility, including responsibility for one's choices and actions, are social expectations for achievement of adult status. Yet, as these students sense, when students like them make independent decisions regarding occupational choices, achieve these and take responsibility for them, their choices are less valued by educators if they have not chosen to attend college when they have the academic capability to do so. These work-bound students expressed the perception that the singular valued purpose of a high school education was academic preparation for college. Is college the only acceptable outcome of a high school education?

This study focused solely on the aspirations and perspectives of work-bound rural high school seniors. The data represent what the students were willing to reveal within a limited and specific context and did not include observations of the processes they described. The students were likely not fully aware of all the factors influencing their decision (Krieshok, 1998) and, as several of them said, were surprised by many of the topics raised for discussion and, in some cases, surprised that someone valued hearing about facets of their lives and decisions that they themselves valued. Why should this kind of conversation be unfamiliar and even a surprise to them? Is no one talking with them?

All of these students were white and were from working-class families. It is likely that their race would not have been a factor that most were conscious of having an impact on their choices (Helms, 1994), but that socioeconomic status, and particularly the regional availability of employment options, were factors about which they would likely have had an awareness (Blustein, 1997; Haller & Virkler, 1993). Though the relevance of gender roles was not explored explicitly, this contextual feature was apparent in many of the women's descriptions of their identity development in relation to a specific husband or boyfriend. Josselson (1987) would place these women in an identity foreclosure status, a status she characterized as "purveyor of the heritage" (p. 42). Women in foreclosure status have made identity commitments that reflect childhood values and continue parentally supported choices without having challenged those values and choices. The foreclosure status is generally viewed as

an undesirable and less healthy status, particularly for men (Marcia et al., 1993). However, women foreclosures have been found to be generally as psychologically healthy as identity achievement women. Foreclosures "have a goal or goals and are marching down their chosen roads without looking around or considering other possibilities. Their certitude and self-assurance are enviable" (Josselson, 1987, p. 69). Each of these sociocultural variables—race, socioeconomic status, and gender—is a relevant factor to be explored in future studies and in the practice of career counseling with all students. Future research should also explore rural educators' perspectives of their roles in assisting students in the post-high school transition and decision-making processes, including their perspectives of the salience of race, gender, and socioeconomic class.

Educators, and particularly school counselors, play critical roles in assisting students' development and attainment of aspirations, yet seem more focused on playing this role in the lives of college-bound students than those of work-bound students. The process can appear to be much clearer in working with college-bound students yet, as these interviewees attest, all rural students who go on to work or college need more help with the processes of transition, exploration, and goal-setting.

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Appendix A
Topics of Inquiry

1. Career, family, and lifestyle plans, aspirations, and expectations for the immediate future after high school and the process undergone to arrive at these decisions.
2. Work history—experiences and influences.
3. Current high school program and how this decision was made.
4. Family/parental influences; roles and responsibilities within the family.
5. School history—experiences and influences.
6. Career, family, and lifestyle plans, aspirations, and expectations for the future 10-15 years after high school.
7. Personal attributes—skills, qualities, strengths, interests, talents, accomplishments.
8. Extracurricular and leisure activities—alone, with family, with friends.
9. Becoming an adult.
10. Activities that make up a typical day, week.
11. Assessment of the role and influence of school personnel on planning and decisions.
12. Roadblocks and barriers to pursuit or attainment of aspirations.
13. Assets and resources to facilitate pursuit and attainment of aspiration.