

## Becoming to Remain: Community College Students and Post-Secondary Pursuits in Central Appalachia

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*Using data gathered from students attending Southeast Community and Technical College in Harlan County, Kentucky, this article discusses how a commitment to place informs and shapes rural students' decisions around post-secondary education, career, and residence. Though some students connected advanced education with rural outmigration, other students discussed their post-secondary training in relation to local contexts, connecting their education to improved quality of life, both for their families and their rural communities. Their narratives regarding the purpose and application of higher education in Central Appalachia add to the continuing discussion of rural students' rationales to stay or leave their home communities, and by what means they achieve these ends. While some students applied their advanced degrees towards transfer out of the area, others used their degrees towards local transformative ends. By highlighting Labaree's (1997) conception of the citizenry ends of education, this study complicates Corbett (2007) and other studies that attach advanced degree attainment with rural outmigration.*

Chris: And the people who stay—why do they stay?

Sara: Because there is a mountain witch and she won't let you leave. And when you do leave, she'll make you come back.

Chris: Does she have a name?

Sara: I don't know...I guess it's where your heart is. It's anybody—wherever they're born, you know...it's where their heart is—you'll leave and you'll come back.<sup>1</sup>

The above excerpt is taken from an interview with an Appalachian college student discussing her pursuit of higher education and her attachment to home. Sara was not alone in discussing this commitment to the local as it related to her higher education goals. Though she attributed the need to stay in the area to other-worldly influences, many students attending Harlan County's Southeast Community and Technical College emphasized more worldly factors—the push and pull of higher education as it related to their own, and their communities' futures. This paper focuses on a rural community college in Appalachia, Kentucky, a

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<sup>1</sup>Student names referenced throughout the paper are pseudonyms.

region often described as valuing place and people (Billings & Blee, 2004; Caudill, 1963; Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004). Many students understood and articulated the need for advanced degrees, some as a way to leave, but importantly, some as a way to remain in the region.

Alan Peshkin's ethnography *Places of Memory* (1997) described the tension between the secular agenda of mobility and individualism advanced in the schools and the Pueblo's commitment to tribal identity and spiritual attachment to the land represented by the kiva. He highlighted this dichotomy as a process of "becoming" or "remaining". In contrast to the public school, the kiva promoted community values regarding place and Pueblo group identity. Such values, promoted by the kiva, were often in direct opposition to the values promoted by the school system. Peshkin's interviews with school administrators and teachers reflected their hopes of eventually assimilating the Pueblo students to Anglo culture through the acquisition of advanced degrees requiring outmigration. Such hopes starkly illustrated the conflict between the values of formal schooling and the native community. Pueblo students rejected these values through continued high drop-out rates, failing grades, and a general disinterest in pursuing college after high school. Peshkin portrays this as the tension between becoming and remaining.

The school as an institution of becoming, and the kiva, as an institution of remaining, are antagonistic, as are the cultures from which these parallel institutions arise...the Whiteman's school lies beyond Pueblo prayers and songs...therefore

beyond remaining a Pueblo person (p. 114).

Peshkin highlights how commitment to place can be in tension with commitments to secondary and post-secondary education. The thread running through Peshkin's work continues in other studies. Hektner (1995) and Howley (1996) discussed how people, matching their education and training to local job requirements, hesitate to complete advanced degrees when little, if any, local application requires such additional investment. In her study of post-secondary education in a Nova Scotian coal mining town, Jensen (2002) showed how educational efforts were intimately tied to local opportunities. In his study of a Nova Scotian fishing community, Corbett (2007) crystallizes the either/or choice of advanced formal, national schooling and informal, place-based education where individuals, given the marketability of their skills, weigh how much, if any, formal education is necessary beyond high school. Like Peshkin, Corbett adds to the continuing discussion of how a community colludes to push out its young citizens with the most potential and how schooling contributes to these ends, perspectives also echoed by Woodrum (2009) and Carr & Kefalas (2009).

During my study in Kentucky, students reflected on the application of their own post-secondary pursuits. Some articulated it as a way to advance the local, a way of becoming in order to remain and transform the area. Brett, a Southeast Community College student, conveys this as she contextualizes her and her husband's art and science applications.

We thought, if I make a business and he knows how to do this—eventually, we can maybe set up a greenhouse...In Harlan, we need things like that. It would be something that we would love. So, we would be working with our passion.... Also, with the mining, we thought...with all these strip jobs that don't get used around here on these mountains—they cover it up with all this sludge and throw a little grass over it—he wants to figure out a way to farm on top of them. He's got a few pretty bright ideas. We're just thinking.

Instead of applying her advanced degree elsewhere, Brett saw it having direct impact in her hometown. In this way, she is more in line with Labaree's (1997) discussion of the transformative, citizenry ends of education. Unlike Corbett and others who frame post-secondary pursuits as a means out of a rural area, Labaree discusses how education can bring about more than just social advantage for the individual. By applying their education towards social issues, education can be a public good. Brett and other students at Southeast echoed these transformative ends as citizens of the local, providing a model by which one can become to remain.

### **Purpose of Study**

My intent was to find out why students pursued post-secondary training and degrees in central Appalachia, how students discussed the application of their degrees, and whether or not such applications require they leave their home regions. Through their depictions of home, students discussed commitments to Harlan but also growing attachments to other places, new places "to venture out" and apply their advanced degrees and training. Along with how students discussed their post-secondary pursuits at a rural community college, my research gathered data on how students constructed their educational and residential ends in a place historically depicted as underdeveloped and deficient in quality of life amenities.

Students at Southeast showed how the application of higher education *in* the region, rather than propelling students *out* of the region was understood as, if not easy, at least possible. Rather than seeing staying and applying one's advanced education in a particular place as limiting, some Southeast students discussed staying as a positive choice, even in a place seen as deficient in professional and economic opportunities. This goes against human capital arguments which privilege utility maximization over place (Becker, 1983). From these students' voices, *what* and *where* they wanted to become and *chose* to remain was presented in a rational way. By choosing to remain in a region, students were taking part in a place because of its "becoming" potential. Instead of advanced degrees working only to "drain brains" from a region, this local community college enabled students to *become* while remaining committed to a rural place. These rural Appalachian community college students embodied a rationality privileging the primacy of rural place rather than market-driven directives of mobility and individualism (Bourdieu, 1998). By doing so, their actions further complicate pure market-based rationalities that too often implicitly privilege rural outmigration.

### **Methods and Data**

#### **Research Context**

I interviewed students at Southeast Community College in Harlan County Kentucky. Harlan County is in the southeastern corner of Kentucky and, like many Appalachian communities, has seen a decline in population in the last 20 years from approximately 36,500 in 1990 to 29,000 in 2010 (US Census). Appalachia, and specifically significant to this study, Central Appalachia, has among the lowest college completion rates in the United States. Appalachian counties in Kentucky alone do not reach half the national average (Haaga, 2004). As many studies have shown, people, matching their education and training to local job market requirements, hesitate to complete advanced degrees when little, if any, local application requires such additional

education (DeYoung, 2002; Hektner, 1995; Howley, 1996). Other explanations are tied to cultural and social reasons for low investment in educational attainment (Lewis, 1978; Whisnant, 1983). Discussing Appalachian values, Jones (1994) attributed attachment to kin and place as a dominant characteristic.

Southeast Community and Technical College exemplifies rural college-going in Central Appalachia. First, given its geographic remoteness, Southeast does its part to answer state demands for a trained and educated workforce. Next, it does this while working within the historic context of a region spotlighted for its central role in the American labor struggle, a struggle depicted in documentaries (*Harlan County USA*) and popular folksongs (*Which Side Are You On*) reflecting a commitment to people and place. Finally, Southeast has also been positioned within the contrasting national debate on the mission of the community college. In Kentucky, statewide policy initiatives have attempted to clarify the role of the community college. Its role as a transfer institution began in the early 1960s (O'Hara, 2005), changing course in the 1980s and 1990s as more and more jobs required training beyond high school. Since 2007, emphasis has returned to increasing degree attainments through state initiatives seeking to double the number of residents with bachelor degrees by 2020 (Kentucky Council on Post-Secondary Education, 2007).

The Kentucky Higher Education Reform Act of 1997 (House Bill 1) severed Southeast's ties to the University of Kentucky (UK). Merging the technical and vocational schools with the community colleges, HB 1 combined them into a new higher education entity, the Kentucky Community Technical College System (KCTCS). This action effectively ended the relationship between the community colleges and UK. This was then Governor Paul Patton's aim: by separating the two, both could reach their unique missions and potential. UK could concentrate on becoming a top 20 research university, and the community colleges could concentrate on those programs necessary to prepare a workforce in a changing economic climate. According to Patton, if these ties were not severed, both would fail in their missions (2003).

Given the changes enacted in the 1990s, Southeast reassessed its emphasis and strategies. In 1994, the Ford Foundation established the Rural Community College Initiative (RCCI) conceptualizing the rural community college as a catalyst for economic and educational development. Southeast was one of the first colleges to participate in the pilot phase of the project, selected because it had already begun to establish itself as an economic liaison in the region (Kenamer & Katsinas, 2011). The project sought to further link the economic impact of the community college to the region, highlighting "one of the assumptions about rural development...that economic development and access to higher education are related"

(Eller, 2003, p.7). The approach emphasized the role of the community college president in promoting a vision of the college tied to the success of the community. RCCI's strategy of local development through the impetus of community college leadership reflected an expanded definition of the community college, that of civic capacity builder. Dr. Bruce Ayers, the 25 year President of Southeast, describes the relationship between the college's civic promotion and regional development.

Community colleges keep people at home. That is very, very important...They (students) are going to be the future...because they don't want to go anywhere else, it is just home to them... they are going to be the public officials, they are going to be the civic leaders, they are going to be the people who are the future of the region...It is critically important that we do a good job with them (2009).

A relationship between place and post-secondary plans is central to any discussion regarding Appalachian college-going patterns. Southeast showed relationships between where students placed themselves and how this placement informed and shaped their decisions around college and degree selection. Along with the stay or leave positions discussed by Corbett (2007), my research complicated the either/or dichotomy by finding some students who pursued advanced degrees in hopes of advancing local economies. They were staying in order to contribute to the becoming potential of the area.

### Data Collection

The 30 students interviewed included both those who intended to stay local, post degree, and those who intended to leave the area. Study participants included first and second year students, those enrolled in diploma and certification programs, as well students who had transferred from Southeast to complete four-year degrees. Student names were provided by faculty and then by other students. Seventeen of the students interviewed were between the ages of 18 and 22, 10 were between the ages of 23 and 36, with three in their early 40s and 50s. Twenty-two out of the 30 participants interviewed were men, reflecting the overall disproportionate number of men enrolled in certificate and diploma programs. All interviews were transcribed and coded thematically (Spradley, 1979). Using an emergent coding structure, student responses were organized thematically related to place, work/economy, post-secondary applications and aspirations, and identity.

In these initial interviews, I asked students to describe their post-secondary plans and how they would apply these degrees. Students were prompted to describe the region and think about how their conceptions of place influenced the application of their degrees. Throughout the interviews, students did not hesitate to speak frankly about

the dichotomies, tensions, and commitments illustrating and informing their compositions of home and higher education.

Based on these initial interviews, students were grouped according to the post-secondary plans they described: 1) those who were pursuing an associate's degree in order to apply it to a four-year degree; 2) those who were pursuing the associate as the terminal degree; 3) those who were *not* pursuing an associate, but rather a certificate or diploma option, and; 4) those who had transferred from Southeast and were soon to complete or had completed a bachelor's degree.

In order to provide deeper contextual perspectives on post-secondary educational, career and residential aspirations, 10 students were purposely selected for life histories, with two or three of each representing the aforementioned trajectories. In general and specific ways, these 10 students' stories reflected conflicted stances on whether to stay or leave the region and how they believed their degree plans would allow, propel and/or interrogate such choices. Student conceptions of quality of life and community issues influenced not only what they had selected to study but how they planned on applying their degrees. Some explained how their degrees would allow them to stay and transition into local jobs; others described their intentions to transfer to four-year programs outside the region. For a few others, their pursuit of post-secondary education could, as they imagined, eventually be applied to transforming their home communities. Gender representation was balanced among the oral history interviews with five males and five females participating.

### Findings

Southeast students described post-secondary pursuits in ways congruent with well established research on rural college-going. Importantly though, some students described post-secondary pursuits in ways that complicated prior discussions—namely, students with advanced degrees remaining in place, committed to place while working to transform place. In this section, I will present a thematic analysis of the initial 30 students interviewed, the findings of which tend to align with past research (Corbett, 2007; Hekner, 1995; Howley, 1996; Howley, 2006). I conclude the section by then turning to three students whose life narratives complicate these themes.

#### Recurring Themes: Place and Post-Secondary Pursuits

How did the initial 30 Southeast students interviewed describe commitment to place as they pursued degree plans and applications? When asked questions inquiring into place, identity, college and work/career options and applications, students' perceptions of Harlan County and the region shaped their education trajectories. Some shaped their educational trajectories to take advantage of

local opportunities; some anticipated leaving the region to use their degrees elsewhere. A less frequent but nonetheless striking position was voiced by students who discussed their advanced degrees (associate's, bachelor's and master's) for direct application in the region. Hoping their education would connect to the social issues of the region in order that change and economic transformation could come to Harlan County, these students pursued degrees whose applications directly addressed area deficiencies. By getting their degrees, they could be potential agents of change *in* the region.

#### Small Town Life: "Everybody knows everybody"

Of the 30 students interviewed, 10 used the exact quote "everybody knows everybody" to describe the social arrangements of their home region. They spoke of the benefits of small community living. Along with people knowing their neighbors, Harlan County was presented as a place where people also looked out for their neighbors. One student related "I think that one of the strongest assets of this community is the way people care about each other and will help each other. You say hello to people you don't even know, and you'll ask somebody that you don't know if they need some help". Other students added that the intimacy of the community established a sense of safety and security. In contrast to how they saw life lived anonymously in the big city, the Harlan community provided security and familiarity, especially when it came to the care of children.

There were, however, students who articulated what they saw as the negatives of small town life. Nine students directly stated "there is nothing to do here." Others gave more nuanced reasoning regarding the lack of opportunities in Harlan. One student saw little future in Harlan because of its fixation on the past. His belief was that it was stuck in the past and, thus, the area did little to prepare future opportunities for its youth.

I've heard a lot of people who've lived here for any particular amount of time, and say that it's a place that's frozen 20 years behind in time, and it really is the truth. The people, the places, just everything is so—it's not that it's behind the times that is what bothers me so much. It's just because of that, it's so lacking in what my options are to even make it out, to get out, and that's my main goal is to get out of this area where there's so little for me personally.

For those students who had lived for a time away from Harlan County, such distance and time away from the region provided new ways of accessing it. Some discussed how this "outsiders' perspective" provided insights into Harlan's problems that those who had always lived in Harlan lacked. One student, who spent her childhood in Chicago, specifically highlighted the differences in the educational systems. "Education is better there....I got my

first education up there. So when we did move back here, I was ahead.” Another student concluded that the time away helped him see the region in a new way. “Getting out of here and then being out of here for a good amount of time and then coming back here, it really opened my eyes as to what is here, which really isn’t much.”

#### **Harlan’s Economy: “There’s no jobs”**

Southeast students discussed the lack of opportunities available in the region as some began, and others restarted, their economic lives. Students attributed lack of opportunities with the economic problems of the region. Jobs available in the region relied heavily on manual, rather than mental, labor. Other possibilities for jobs providing a livable wage included the medical and educational fields, all requiring additional training and degrees.

All of the students interviewed had direct knowledge of the coal industry. Of the 30 interviewed, 14 students directly stated they had worked, were preparing to work, or had family working in the mines. Though Harlan has historically been known for its coal economy, students seemed aware that the industry was in decline. One student gave the following assessment of the economic impact of coal’s future in the region.

There’s no jobs—none whatsoever. People have given up. It started with no jobs, only coal mines and all the coal mines have shut down. I know of one coal mine in our area. You know, that’s all we have...you can only get so many workers out of that.

Some students were more optimistic about the availability of coal jobs, but nonetheless, hoped to avoid working in the mines. Even so, mining and working in the medical fields were seen as the most high-paying opportunities the county offered. If they were interested in working in other industries, students knew that such work required they be open to leaving the area to take the job. One student’s response to the region’s economic challenges reflects the hopeless feeling of staying and finding work in the area.

The lack of economic development, it’s hurt this county a whole lot. Like every young person in this county, if you were to just ask them what their options were here, you know you’re not gonna get much, it’s just that kind of area.

The lack of new jobs in the area would mean some students would leave Harlan and not return with their finished degrees. One student, who attended Southeast and then transferred to Eastern Kentucky University to finish a four-year degree, identified the area as a place best suited for people retiring. This economic profile pushes out those who are at the beginning rather than the end of their careers.

The problem I had with Harlan is that it’s too small. It is becoming a retirement community. All the young people have to leave because there’s nothing there. It sort of pushes you out. You sort of have to leave. So that’s basically why I left.

#### **Southeast’s Reputation: “It’s close,” “It’s cheap,” “It’s the home town college”**

Southeast students spoke frankly about what post-secondary education meant to their social and economic lives and the role Southeast played in these pursuits. Many of the students interviewed discussed their start at Southeast as an easy, gradual initiation to college work and life. The lower tuition, ability to stay at home and pay reduced rent, being able to continue working at an established place of employment—these reasons were cited often by Southeast students and have historically been attributed as the benefits of attending community colleges in the United States. The descriptors which were most frequently used by students regarding their selection of Southeast were “it’s close” (16) and “it’s affordable/cheap” (11). One student succinctly listed his reasons for selecting Southeast, “Well, three main reasons: 1) it’s at home; 2) I can work here; and, 3) it is very affordable.” Students described Southeast as a good jumping off point, a place to get the basics.

Students also described Southeast in less positive ways. One student’s direct response described Southeast as “cheaper, faster, easier, closer.” The notion of Southeast being an easy place to start was also indicated by two students who referenced the nickname given to Southeast, “South easy”. One student explicitly related the reasoning of his choice, “It was a safe choice. I wasn’t taking no risks. I was pretty much ...pretty much it was like an extended high school. You know, except at a college level.”

Other students justified their selection of Southeast as a safe choice. Some students saw the work at Southeast as scaled down academic versions of the curriculum required at larger universities. By providing students a reprieve, Southeast allowed students, unsure of their academic pursuits, a breathing space to figure out their futures. Many students agreed Southeast was a good place to start their academic plans and agreed further that it was the best thing going, providing opportunities in an area where the future was, at best, sketchy.

#### **“It’s education or it’s underground”**

All the Southeast students interviewed had familial or personal experience with the mining industry. Students mentioned jobs tied to the coal economy, relating grandfathers’, fathers’ and husbands’ work histories as coal miners, construction workers, mechanics, welders and electricians. One student related that his brother, father, and grandfather had all worked in the coal mines. He was “basically following in their footsteps.” Students had

internalized these roles and were following predictable paths. Female students discussed pursuing degrees and training in medical and education fields, working as dental hygienists, nurses, teachers and social workers. Males were pursuing training and degrees to be welders, mechanics, heavy machine operators, law enforcement officers and civil engineers. By attending college, students were, however, breaking with their families' educational traditions. A majority (22) related that neither parent had finished or gone past a high school education. Of those whose parents had college experience (8), half had begun their post-secondary training at Southeast.

Just as Sohn's (2006) study indicated, a majority of Southeast females indicated pursuing their degrees towards community purposes. Of the eight females interviewed for this project, five connected their post-secondary education to improved community application. All were current students at Southeast. These female students further discussed pursuing bachelor's and master's degree options available in the region primarily because it allowed them to stay and directly apply their degrees locally. In contrast, none of the females who had transferred to Eastern Kentucky University discussed their degrees in relation to returning and improving their home region. In fact, each related her degree's application to, as one put it, "getting out."

Overwhelmingly, the males interviewed seeking certificates or associate degrees hoped their additional training and education would translate into additional pay and stable jobs. A limited few (3) were considering work in or related to mining. Many more discussed how education would allow them to circumvent stable, albeit diminishing, coal jobs while also avoiding the physically degenerative effects evident in fathers, brother, uncles and grandfathers who worked in the mines. One male, pursuing radiology certification, relayed, "if you don't go to school, you get into the mines, that's pretty much it." For one student pursuing his associate's degree, being witness to his father's decline, influenced his college attendance.

Seeing him working underground for 20, 21 years....And he's not even, I think he's 40 years old. And he's already had two knee replacement surgeries, and he's down in his back, been crushed a couple of times, and his body's in the shape of—you know, somebody that would be around upper 50s to 60s. And I just didn't wanna end up like that. Having to work underground...in this area, if you wanna have a decent living, then it's either education or underground.

### **Life Histories: Post-Secondary Applications**

As many of the initial interviews and life histories evidenced, advanced education is often discussed as a means out of economically struggling regions. Rarely discussed,

however, are those who use education to transform the economic profile of these regions. Importantly, some Southeast students, through their life history interviews, discussed applying their post-secondary education and degrees towards transformative ends—ends rarely evoked in prior research.

Labaree's discussion of educational aspirations (1997) is consistent with the positions voiced by Southeast students; those transferring out of, transitioning into, or transforming the local. Their positions connected to Labaree's discussion of educational goals, preparing students to be citizens, taxpayers and/or consumers. Southeast students who aligned their degrees with civic goals incorporated the available opportunities that two-, four-year and, in some cases, graduate degrees offered by various private and public institutions at Southeast's Cumberland campus. Their application would be translated in the local context. Continuing to advance in their educational programs, they were able to stay home—their hope to bring about transformation in their home communities.

### **Transforming Place and Community: Brett, David & Eve**

The community college is an institution long described as one negotiating its resources between terminal or transfer plans (Brint & Karabal, 1989, Cohen & Braver, 1982, Lewis, 1978). My assumptions aligned with the either/or preparatory options of the community college, an assumption that regarded the community college as an institution where students complete degrees and certificates for local application. If not for local application, then the community college provides a transferring out possibility for those wanting to pursue degrees beyond the associate. What I heard from some Southeast students was a different application of their community college education. Their commitment to advanced education plans—some of which included graduate degrees—allowed them to stay in place while acquiring and applying their degrees. These students articulated a vision for their communities, a vision negotiated and navigated through Southeast Community and Technical College.

### **Brett: Attaining the AA**

Brett is a Southeast student pursuing an associate of arts degree. In her early 20s and a new mother, Brett has lived her childhood and early adult life in Harlan County. Her father's family has long ties to the area, moving to Harlan in the 1920s and purchasing land. When interviewed, Brett had inherited a portion of this land and was readying it to live on. Her fiancée at the time of our first interview (and husband at the time of the second) lived in Lexington, pursuing a bachelor's degree at the University of Kentucky (UK). He had wanted Brett to move and complete her bachelor's degree at UK and she did contemplate it. Instead,

she graduated with her associate's degree from Southeast in December 2009 and it was in Harlan that she discussed building her future.

During the oral history, Brett shared her future plans—plans that while still in flux, were starting to form around living and working in Harlan. Brett is “crafty,” a term she uses to describe her interest in the arts. Her future hopes are directly tied to the community's.

You have all these people around here that do all this art and they'd sell it dirt cheap compared to in Berea. I've seen people that sell their stuff around here—people will sell a quilt around here for \$100 to \$150. You can go look at the same one in Berea for about \$500. I think the reason is because Berea has all these shops. They have business....It's gonna take a lot of work to get that in Harlan. I think that's a wonderful way to get things started around here.

Brett was convinced that with infrastructural investment, i.e. more accessible roads, Harlan could be to Eastern Kentucky what Berea was to Central Kentucky, a place that highlighted local culture and wares. She believed that if she were able to get an artistic business started, then others would be encouraged and this interest would multiply, facilitating the start-up of other viable businesses. Her husband was studying plant and soil science, and once he finished his degree, planned to move back to Harlan to replant and farm lands recovered from abandoned strip mines. Brett's future plans placed her in Harlan, building up an artisan business, working as a backdrop maker and seamstress, having a garden and enjoying life on the land.

Brett did not see herself leaving Harlan. Her love of the mountains, the necessity of going for walks to relieve the stresses of life, the enjoyment she took in hiking, camping and gardening would not translate in Lexington, the only other place she had considered living. In her decision to stay, her justification revealed a tension she resolved by coming to terms with who she is and what she values. This resolution was reinforced through rural writers.

If I had to leave due to a job? I probably wouldn't. I'd probably just say, “Hey, I'm happier where I'm at.” If it sounded like a good idea, if I was offered a good job as an art teacher in Lexington, I'd be much happier staying here and finding something to do....I was reading that book *When I Was Young in the Mountains*, and in part of the book (the author) talks about going to the city and seeing this and that, but she said, “I don't care because I like it in the mountains and I don't have to go anywhere else.” That's how I feel. I guess that's because I was raised here. I love the land.

Brett's educational ends were transformative. Through

coursework and involvement with plays and other artistic programs, she invested what her degree provided to bring about ways of being and living in Harlan County which were new for her and for her community. Going beyond the associate degree at the time of the interview was not of prime importance, though she did concede a bachelor's degree in business might have better informed her entrepreneurial endeavors. In contrast to those transferring out for “a better life”, Brett continued to live the good life in a small community. She understood leaving as representing a loss to her beloved community.

You would probably find a better job and make more money with more benefits in a place like that. But what happens to the town that you leave behind is what I ask myself. If you are happy and content with not having big things—there are a lot of things you can do to take care of yourself and be content. There are so many people who raise their own food around here. They don't need to go buy a blanket because they know how to sew one together. That's what's good to me....That's a fine quality in life. If you like that kind of stuff, who cares if you make that much more money in the city?

#### David: Pursuing the BA

David was 21 and in his first year at Eastern Kentucky University when we completed our interviews. I had initially interviewed him in the spring prior to his graduation from Southeast when he discussed transferring to complete a bachelor's degree. Having grown up in Harlan County in a coal mining town set up in the mountains, David was experiencing some anxiety about leaving. He was very excited, but was questioning his ability to compete with others at the university level. David was a first generation college student. His father was a coal miner who died when David was 11. Soon after this, David took an active interest in history. During the interviews, he spoke at length about his uncle who had been to college and completed a master's degree. David is the youngest in the family and currently the one furthest from home.

David enjoyed the challenges of attending Eastern Kentucky University. Though finding the classes daunting, he spoke about the pace of the city and campus life. Describing his life as “being in the lion's den,” David saw it as his task to prove to himself, his professors, and peers that he belonged.

University life's much more rapid, much more rapid. It's not laid-back in any way whatsoever. It's very demanding. Like take your professors, for instance, or your fellow students—if you don't do what's expected of you, there's not gonna be any helping hand in the long run to be able

to let you know, “hey, did you know there was an assignment due two weeks ago?”...Because you just see all these people having the same idea, wanting to chase the same dream, wanting to do the same thing. And you see the competition face to face when you go to school with all these students.

About twice a month, he returned to Harlan to see family and friends. He enjoyed returning and hoped to move back to the region to teach history once his degree was finished. Like his uncle, David hoped to teach at the community college level. He found the atmosphere at the community college much less stressful than that at the university level. When asked where he would most like to apply his degree, David returned to the familiar.

Chris: So where do you—again, this quality of life scenario—if you could take that degree and be a college teacher anywhere, where would that be? The world’s your oyster, David....

David: If I had a coin to flip, I would. But off the top of my head where would I like to teach? I’d see if there are a couple places I could teach with Union.

Chris: Union?

David: Yes.

Chris: And that’s in—

David: That’s in Barbourville.

Union College is less than 50 miles from Harlan. Given the world, David preferred the local. David’s position did, however, reflect an interesting combination. Unlike Brett and Eve who, as entrepreneurs, were filling gaps or creating new economies, David’s teaching degree would allow him to fit into a job needed in rural communities. Unlike other professionals, who often prefer to apply their expertise in urban or suburban communities with multiple amenities, David’s dreams of teaching resided where his people have for many centuries. Like them, he too hoped to add his talent to the region’s potential.

It’s home. You realize there’s the bad that comes with the good, and the good that comes with the bad. Home is where the heart is. Home in terms to me is being able to come home to a place and find relief...Some people like to live a very comfortable and easy lifestyle, which would come in a rural area like Harlan.

### **Eve: Pursuing the MA**

When interviewed, Eve was 29 and in an associate of sciences track at Southeast. Her plans were to complete the associate’s degree, then complete a bachelor’s and master’s

degree program in psychology through a weekend program offered at Southeast’s Cumberland campus. Her family is from Harlan County—her father and grandfathers were coal miners in the region.

After finishing high school, Eve enrolled at Appalachian State University (ASU), but dropped out pregnant during her first semester. While raising her son, she met her current husband, then a student at ASU. Eight years later, Eve and her husband moved back to Harlan where they opened the area’s only pet store. Her husband, after having visited with Eve one summer, wanted to move to Harlan to start his business. Her thoughts at the time were “No please, let’s not go back there.” Having moved back, she has ever since, reconciled herself to it. She discussed how the community had changed since she left as a young adult.

When I left here, it was just the most innocent little town you could imagine. And when I came back, my friends that I graduated high school with were prostitutes and they were selling their bodies for Oxycontin. That’s what changed. I had no idea that this was even happening here.

During the life history interview, Eve was visibly upset as she related the conditions of her home community. As the interview continued, she grew more and more agitated. Though committed to the region and its welfare, she was not opposed to her three children leaving to pursue other opportunities. She described Harlan as a good place to raise children, but then “if you can raise your children here, then you can send them off into the world.”

In contrast to her children and their futures, Eve did not see herself leaving Harlan. Instead, she pursued her degree locally so that she could do her part to address the rampant drug problem in Harlan. She had seen many of her high school friends who stayed in the region become addicts and was amazed that, even as it continued to see increased drug addiction, Harlan did not operate a halfway house for individuals trying to overcome drug habits. Unlike those pursuing degrees in order to directly transition into already established local economies, Eve hoped to start a female halfway house once she had the credentials to do so. Her degree plans provided the means towards these transformative ends.

You can go out all you want and hand out flyers and talk to people, but if people don’t feel like you’re educated, they’re not gonna really pay too much attention to you. And plus I wanna know what I’m talking about, too...So I’m just trying to educate myself in order to fix, or try and help.

For Eve, a quality life was defined by options—options allowing for healthy lifestyles. This included not only adequate food and shelter but, of particular importance to her, mental health. She was aware that without the basics

of life, many people could not attain or maintain mental health. Mental health issues were all too prevalent in her home community but even so, Eve believed a good life was possible in Harlan, though much hard work was necessary to see it happen. This would not happen if people abandoned the area.

Well, I think it's probably easier for me to say it's possible because I'm not in the situation that a lot of people around here are in. But I have been. I've been there. And I just think you just have to work hard. I think—even if it takes leaving—but I think you should come back. Because that's what's happening. Everybody's abandoning this place. And this is home. This is a beautiful place. It's absolutely possible to have a good life here.

Having returned three years prior, Eve was still adjusting to the fact that Harlan, in her words, “is a ghost town, dying.” How she personally could work to bring about a reversal of this was still being worked out; she was, however, altogether committed to seeing it happen.

I wanna try to do something. I think this drug problem is the thing that's driving me crazy about this place. I don't think people intentionally wanna become drug addicts. I don't think anybody goes out to say, 'Let's shoot needles.' It just progresses. And I think that if there was other outlets, I wanna do (pause), I have to figure it out. I haven't quite got my master plan together to take over Harlan County, but I'm working on it.

### **Discussion and Implications**

Reflecting Labaree's (1997) description of civic capacity building—characteristic of transformative education, these students were committing themselves and their educational ends to community problems and potentials. They were becoming in order to remain in the region. They were, as Southeast's President Ayers hoped, evidence of the ability to keep community resources intact. In one of our interviews, Ayers referenced the central position of the community college in shaping such commitments.

You know, we're fond of saying that if you're doing your job right, you don't know where the college ends and the community begins, and I think there's some truth to that. Community colleges, of course, were founded, and I'm sure you know all this, to be community centered institutions... helping communities to accentuate some of the positive things that they had going on, the culture and place....So, those that are engaged with their community are doing their job properly.

Even as Southeast students defined quality of life issues and attached them to people and place, they also aligned with arguments promoted by human capital and development theories. All agreed on the need for advanced degrees or training beyond high school, though they would differ regarding whether that would be at the certificate, associate's, bachelor's level or beyond.

Informed by Peshkin (1997) and Corbett's (2007) studies, when beginning my research at Southeast, I, too, assumed that as students pursued more advanced degrees, their application would require they leave the region. I did not expect to find students investing in education in ways allowing them to both “become and remain.” Yet, while interviewing students, some clearly discussed educational goals pursued, attained, and applied in the region. Southeast and its commitment to building the region's civic capacity has translated into making undergraduate, four-year and graduate programs available locally. During my research year, Southeast offered over 50 programs to complete degrees in the area, both four-year and graduate. Students interviewed specifically mentioned these programs as avenues for continued degree attainment. This is the result of a concerted effort by administration and faculty to increase the civic capacity of the region.

In some ways, Southeast Community and Technical College students reflected on the economic definitions of a quality life by tying it to increased incomes. They believed their educational degrees and training would help bring about better paying and more stable jobs. Yet, others, like Brett, David and Eve, attached notions of the good life in ways unrelated to market accessibility and application. Instead, they tied quality of life issues to family and community connections which their advanced degrees were allowing them to maintain by remaining in the region.

Whether instrumental, (e.g., leading to a better job or increased pay), or intrinsic (e.g., increasing knowledge and social betterment), many Southeast students related educational advancement to increased community and family enhancements. Though they knew their degrees might have better economic traction in urban places, their commitment to the local was a dominating influence in their pursuit and application of post-secondary degrees. Southeast students argued in predictable ways that education provided credentials—credentials allowing them more diverse market applications than the high school degree. Yet, some Southeast students also argued in less predictable ways that their post-secondary degrees plans allowed them the security to stay and “fix” issues persistent in their home communities. By applying their education toward these ends, Southeast students were able to stay local and direct their degree plans in ways that strengthened their ties and commitments to home and community networks.

Is Southeast unique in its approach emphasizing the

civic capacity of its students? As Labaree (1997) illustrated, colleges have historically, and with varied commitments, pursued the citizenry component. What is unique to Southeast, however, is its president Dr. Bruce Ayers whose continued service to the college has for the last 25 years prioritized regional capacity building through increased educational access. Such a consistent institutional ethos promoting the community through the college has arguably led to success for both. A Southeast student articulates Ayers connection to the community.

I'd have to say all in all the person that's helped me the most would be Bruce...because he's the president of the college, and he don't—he don't have the attitude like he's sittin' up on a pedestal. He's down and real just like everybody else, and you know—he understands when stuff goes wrong. And he's just a real understanding, helpful person 'cause he's not—you know, just a dude that sits in the office. He's actually doing his job and doing it very well.

What are the policy implications of such an approach? At the state level, given its rural population, Kentucky would do well to look at how those students at Southeast, seeking to transform their communities, are exemplars of successful place-based education. Other rural areas could also take note of Southeast's efforts. Despite the population declines occurring in many rural areas, the options for those remaining must include the pursuit of higher education. By committing their futures to a region considered deficient, an emergent minority of Southeast students were finding ways to articulate regional possibilities. These possibilities included sustaining the local, not by providing “a ticket out”, but instead by ensuring the educational ends which allowed them to become and remain.

Unlike Peshkin (1997), who found the kiva and school antagonistic and ultimately working at cross-purposes for the Pueblo, many Southeast students found in their community college a conduit for place-based attachments and post-secondary applications. The assumptions of education policy efforts, as Kentucky's “Double the Numbers” entails, assume the acquisition of forms of educational capital exchangeable in larger markets, more easily attained and traded in metropolitan settings. Southeast students continue to negotiate modernizing norms demanding increased educational attainment and urbanization alongside their own commitments to local community advancement. How they fare in this endeavor, and the new definitions and old commitments they bring to the discussion, should inform community and state development policy in the coming years. It could also enrich and promote a more nuanced, national conception on how rural life is lived today in the flyover regions of America. As a close colleague noted, “Re/vitalizing the rural local, as a matter of equitable

democratic practice, means taking the logic of rural social practice seriously and shaping educational policies which do not assume or pander to the primacy of metropolitan life.” Nor, as Carr and Kefalas (2009) have concluded, does it hurt a community to invest in those who choose to stay rather than concentrate their resources on those who achieve and leave.

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