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## Small Town, Big Future: Preparing Rural Maine Students For College

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Small Town, Big Future:  
Preparing Rural Maine Students For College

**Elizabeth C. Huber has completed the requirements  
for Honors in Education  
May 2017**

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**Small Town, Big Future: Preparing Rural Maine Students  
for College**

**Elizabeth C. Huber**

## Abstract

While the need for a college degree has increased in the knowledge economy era, acquisition of this degree has remained difficult for low-income and first-generation students. At the same time, college preparatory programs designed for this demographic of student tend to be clustered in urban centers while very little focus is given to disadvantaged students in rural communities. The academic prospects of rural students in regards to higher education are the focus of this project. More specifically, this project explores the ways in which college-cultured programs may address the educational needs of students living in rural communities. By doing in-depth case studies of four college bound seniors attending two rural Maine high schools, the pivotal influences that guided these students toward a higher degree were revealed. Ultimately, this study validates the need for pre-existing programs in a rural Maine town, exposes the ways that they can be improved, and argues that the presence of college-cultured programs such as Breakthrough Collaborative could make a difference in the lives of these under-performing rural students.

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## Introduction

As slowly as possible, I read question number seven aloud to two students in the library. When I finished, they looked at me blankly as if waiting for another direction.

“Now you may separately solve the problem on your sheets of paper,” I said to them. One of the students, the girl, asked me to read the question again, this time even slower. The other student, the boy, hesitantly began to solve the equation. The two students were in sixth grade and were not proficient in reading. As requested by their teacher, I was to read each question to them aloud so that they could finish their quiz before the end of class. These students, who I later found out were cousins, were students at Woodstock Junior High School in Woodstock, Maine- a rural town with less than 16,000 residents.

Sixth months later, I observed another student. Eyes squinting at her paper and forehead resting heavily in her left palm, Destiny read the word problem aloud. After she finished I asked, “If the problem is asking for a *sum*, what operation should we use?” Her eyes looked up at me as if looking for a hint.

“Subtraction?”

“Did you guess?”

A sneaky smile pulled at the corner of her mouth and she nodded her head. Though she should have learned this concept two years ago in fifth grade, I quietly reminded her that *sum* suggests addition. Her eyes widened and she flicked her pencil in the air as she pretended to have known the answer all along. Within seconds, she began attempting to solve the problem on a scratch piece of paper. Destiny, a seventh grader who was extremely behind academically, was a student at Bedford Stuyvesant Collegiate Charter School in Brooklyn- a community of over 2.5 million people.

These two sets of students were at similar levels in terms of their proficiency in mathematics and reading; both were two to three grade levels behind and both found it difficult to succeed in a large group setting. However, their experience in the classroom and their expectations for their future varied drastically.

Destiny's school in Brooklyn was among fifteen other Brooklyn charter schools within the Uncommon Schools network. As a part of the network's mission, each student was rigorously pushed in the classroom and routinely reminded of the importance of a college education. From kindergarten classrooms to twelfth grade homerooms, each grade was assigned a particular college or university that set them apart. During my work with Bedford Stuyvesant Collegiate in the summer of 2016, I was a member of the "Howard University" homeroom. Despite being eleven years old, many of my students were already planning to attend the historically black university in Washington, D.C. Howard University flags lined the walls of our classroom and students were referred to as "bison", in recognition of the school's mascot. Destiny, a student in Howard University homeroom, was surrounded by supportive sources of influence and was expected to meet high standards. Despite being behind her grade level, Destiny was expected to be an "achiever" (Carr, 2009). That is, she was expected to challenge herself beyond high school and, ultimately, be placed on the trajectory to attend a four-year university.

The two struggling students in Woodstock, Maine, however, followed a different set of expectations. Rather than improving their own skills in mathematics or reading, they were responsible for keeping themselves out of the way of their peers' learning. As demonstrated by their teacher's unwillingness to provide extra time to accommodate for their reading difficulties, the two students were dismissed by their teachers as being too behind to catch up. The cousins' promotion to the sixth grade suggested that their status as "unfixable" had been felt in multiple

grade levels by each teacher who had promoted them to the next grade level in the past, despite the fact that they were clearly unprepared. Too frequently, the two students, and many others like them, are not given equal consideration in the deployment of academic resources. These students are often placed on low academic tracks at the beginning of their academic journey and are not predicted to attend college. Frequently, these students do not out-migrate (Carr, 2009) and often find jobs in blue-collar occupations directly after high school.

As demonstrated by these two different narratives, the future of students, particularly those who struggle academically or financially, is in the hands of those who are in positions of influence, namely teachers, parents, and school administrators. The determination of college-bound students and non-college bound students is not always a result of a student's behavior or aptitude, but also, the way in which his community and academic environment supports, challenges, and holds him accountable. While the Woodstock students were prey to a self-fulfilling prophecy of academic failure, Destiny was the recipient of a long-term strategic plan to get her to college.

The academic futures of students living in low-income communities, such as Woodstock or Bedford Stuyvesant, are a hotly discussed topic in today's political and social agenda. During the early history of education in the United States, college was a place reserved solely for white, upper-middle class, socially elite students (Farmer-Hinton, 2010). Until recently, the prevalence of college-cultured curriculum in elementary and junior high school was provided to students of elite status, while those who lived in low-income or minority communities were not given the same consideration (Sherman, 2006). Rather than being placed on a "college track" these students, as young as middle school, were placed on a "vocational track" guised as a way to maintain social stability that had been reclaimed since the Great Depression (NACAC 2008).

While low-income students can be found in all corners of the United States, those clustered in urban centers are often given the most focus (Sherman 2006). Charter schools such as Uncommon Schools (where students like Destiny enrolled) or the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP schools), have gained spotlight in recent decades as they lead the movement in “college cultured” junior-high schools for low-income and minority students. In addition, summer programs such as Breakthrough Collaborative have become a leading program for public school children to become introduced to a college-centered future. While the goals of Uncommon Schools and Breakthrough are noble, their sites are often only clustered in large city centers such as Philadelphia, Atlanta, New York, or Boston.

In 2015, one hundred percent of Uncommon Charter High School’s senior class had been admitted into a four-year university and the enrollment levels were nearly that high. Despite their racially and financially disadvantaged backgrounds, students from Uncommon Schools were proving that low-income students were capable of accomplishing the same goals as their more advantaged peers across the country. Charter schools such as those in the Uncommon network found that exposing students to college culture at an early age, utilizing the rhetoric of one hundred percent, and setting high expectations proved to be an effective method for placing underprivileged students on a path to higher education.

Why, then, is this model, having proven to be successful in urban centers, not being used in low-income areas such as Woodstock, Maine as a means to broaden the horizons of low-income and low-performing students there? Being from a rural town, I frequently brooded over this question during my work with Breakthrough Atlanta and Uncommon Schools in Brooklyn. Issues that I spent the last two summers combating, such as transforming underserved, low-income students into college-bound young adults, were the same issues that were occurring in my own backyard.

In my experience with rural schooling, I was expected to go to college from an early age. I was enrolled in Advanced Placement courses at my high school and encouraged to apply to elite universities by my teachers and guidance counselor. Many members of the faculty, including my principal, had a vested interest in my success and I was expected to excel post high school. At the same time, however, many of my peers found themselves attending classes at United Technologies Center, or UTC, which offered high-school students more hands-on, career-oriented education. These students were not expected to attend college, but to begin working soon after graduation. Rather than encouraged to attend university, these students were expected to fall directly into the labor force post high school graduation, and ultimately, live and work in their home communities for the rest of their lives.

The academic prospects of rural students in regards to higher education are the focus of this project. More specifically, in what ways would college-cultured programs address the educational needs of students living in rural communities? By doing an in-depth case study of four college-bound seniors attending two rural Maine high schools, I searched for the pivotal influences that guided these students toward a higher degree and sought to replicate these influences for other Maine students.

Ultimately, this study validates the need for pre-existing programs in Woodstock, Maine, exposes the ways that they can be improved, and argues that the presence of college-cultured programs such as Breakthrough Collaborative could make a difference in the lives of these under-performing rural students. Key elements of the college preparatory model, particularly early exposure, parental involvement, and college-level curricula can work to assist students of all races, classes, genders, and locales. However, there are specific obstacles to rural students on the path to higher education. This project seeks to pinpoint these challenges, as well as explore

strategies that are currently working, in order to maximize the effectiveness of these programs in rural Maine.

An additional, yet unintended rationale for this project became apparent during the election of Donald Trump as the 45th U.S. president and the geographical analysis of his supporters. Studies conducted by the Pew Research Center (2016) revealed that Trump sealed the support of rural constituents, claiming 62% of their votes and disrupting the overwhelming prediction that Hillary Clinton would gain the presidency for the Democratic party. The political rationale for this project is not to claim that rural spaces are in need of additional education, but to claim that rural spaces are still powerful pockets of the United States that are often neglected attention in political and social spheres. Political analysts often pinpoint ignorance, sexism, racism, or Islamophobia of rural spaces as the source of the landslide rural support for Trump. However, this evaluation fails to acknowledge a tension among rural spaces rooted from the belief that they are not considered in the deployment of our nation's resources; Donald Trump provided for them a politician who acknowledged their struggle, shared their belief system, and proposed systems for reform. Many rural residents were finally given a candidate that vowed to consider their plight and legitimize their ideologies.

Robert Leonard explored this further in his New York Time's article, "Why Rural America Voted for Trump" (January, 2017). According to him, resources and power are often concentrated in urban spaces; cities tend to have better roads, more educational and occupational opportunity, and higher quality law enforcement. In the dominant rhetoric of many rural communities, much of the nation's taxes, energy, and resources go into making residents of urban spaces live better. This pattern seems to be evident in the deployment of academic resources as well, particularly access to highly publicized college preparatory programs which are clustered in major cities and neglect needy students of rural spaces. The overwhelming

support that Trump received from rural spaces and the narratives of rural students in this project demonstrate that small-towns are active, powerful, and have constituents that deserve attention.

Finally, I contend that finding a way to assist the non-college bound students of rural populations is not only a moral obligation, but a practical strategy as well. For example, in 2015, the median income of Woodstock, Maine was \$46,600 (Statistical Atlas, 2015) while the median income for those with a high school diploma alone was a mere \$14,500. In addition, this category contained the largest percentage of Woodstock residents at 62.9%. This data alone suggests that a large number of residents who inhabit Woodstock are making ends meet with a high school diploma or less. While rural schools, such as those found in Woodstock, place such incredible focus and resources on their college-bound population, they neglect the ones who will stay and ultimately shape the future of these rural communities. The prospect of the students who choose to stay will act as a barometer for the financial and social future of these communities to come. Teachers, parents, and other influential adults will play a pivotal role in determining the caliber of the students who are encouraged to leave, and more importantly, in the quality of those who choose to stay.

## Methods

This project drew on student case studies and academic theories in order to validate the need for college preparatory programs in rural Maine. The appropriate methods were chosen to drive the project toward its ultimate goal: to understand the academic journey of four rural Maine, high school students and to place their experiences into the conceptual frameworks found through my academic research.

While data often connotes quantitative figures, this project aimed to collect data that was based on the stories and experiences of local students. For many years, researchers who sought to make education a more academic discipline argued that it should be based more heavily in quantitative reasonings (Seidman, 2013); they argued that it should involve research patterns more similar to that of the natural sciences. However, to neglect the lived experience of those affected by this research would be to neglect the significance of language and the subtle human nuances that are excluded from quantitative data. The best research is that “which stir people’s minds, hearts, and souls and by so doing give them new insights into themselves, their problems, and their human condition” (Reason, 1981, p. 93). The purpose of the four student case studies was to tap into the individual consciousness of rural students and to gain access to complex social and educational intersections, “because social and educational issues are abstractions based on the concrete experience of people” (Seidman, 2013 p. 7). Furthermore, the purpose of the four interviews was not to simply get answers or to test a likely hypothesis. Rather, this project was to explore the ways in which the students place meaning to their experiences as rural high school students in Maine. To undergo research without the considering the stories of individuals involved is not only anti-intellectual; it allows room for misinterpretation, misrepresentation, and at one extreme, is “susceptible to the violence of others” (Todorov, 1984, p. 82).

Lastly, Herbert Blumer (1969) argues that the meaning placed behind an individual's actions often affects the way they carry out that experience. For example, students may be enrolled in an Advanced Placement course, but the meaning of the students' enrollment may differ: are students enrolled because they want college credit? Because their parents are making them? Or because they want to boost their grade point average? In depth interviewing allows researchers to put behavior into context and comprehend the meaning behind the actions of individuals. At first, the research from this project may reveal surface level observations of the four students involved; however, when considering the ways in which their cultural, social, and economic capital play a role in shaping their actions, the way in which these students conduct themselves is essential. It is the meaning and purpose behind the actions of these students that informed the research of this project.

### *Participants*

The primary source of data for this project relied on student case studies gathered from four high school seniors who attend Woodstock High School or Smith High School. All four students applied to four-year universities and planned to enroll in the fall directly after their high school graduation. Due to the timing of the interviews within the college application process, the four students were still awaiting acceptance letters, though a few had received letters of admission from their "safety schools". The first of these participants was Katelyn, a student in the top ten of her class at Smith High School. At the time of the interview, she was waiting for a decision from Bates College where she hoped to enter the pre-medical program. Neither of Katelyn's biological parents attended college, though her step-mother attended Kennebec Valley Community College (KVCC). Katelyn's mother served as an Educational Technician in area middle schools and her father drove a truck for Oakhurst Dairy. At the time, Katelyn was enrolled in three dual-enrollment courses at Thomas College and KVCC where she would earn

college credit in algebra, anatomy and physiology, and psychology. She was also involved in track, dance, and National Honors Society. During the interviews, Katelyn was quiet and reserved though she became slightly more open toward the end of our second conversation. She spoke very highly of her community and planned to live there into her adulthood. Katelyn identified as being a member of the lower-middle class.

The second participant was Brianna, a student at Smith High School who applied to eight colleges and had performed seven job shadows at local hospitals as a way to explore her interests within the medical field. Both of her parents and grandparents were from Maine and she hoped to attend college in New England as a way to stay close to them. Brianna also took advantage of dual-enrollment courses at KVCC and was enrolled in college-level sociology. In the fall, Brianna participated in Let's Get Ready, a SAT-preparatory course offered by Colby College students. At the time of our interview, Brianna had already been admitted to the University of Maine, though she was awaiting a letter from the University of New England, where she hoped to enroll. During the interviews, Brianna spoke very highly of her family, though was somewhat critical of her community; she seemed to feel as though her family was different from the low-income and "redneck types" that she felt inhabited the greater Woodstock area. She was mature, witty, and very open to discussions surrounding social class. Brianna identified as being a member of the middle class.

The third student, Stephen, was born in Charlottesville, Virginia but had become a resident of Woodstock, Maine at a young age. He had already been accepted at University of Kansas, his mother's alma mater, but was waiting to hear back from his top-choice, the University of Virginia, where his father attended. He had no extended family in Maine and was eager to spend college closer to his extended family in Virginia, if given the opportunity. Stephen was involved in swim and theatre at Woodstock High School and had reached the

highest level of French courses offered at the high school. He spoke frequently about his parent's influence, particularly his father's, on his decision to attend a four-year university post high school graduation. Stephen felt as though his academic success was almost entirely a result of his own merit, rather than from outside influences or advantages. Like Brianna, he was witty, critical, and very capable of deep thinking. Additionally, Stephen felt lucky to share the college process with his twin sister, Anna. Stephen identified as being a member of the middle-upper class.

The fourth student, Camille, was a member of Woodstock High School's National Honors Society, the president of Green Team, vice-president of her class, a member of Science Olympiad, a lector at her church, and a member of the school's cross-country and track teams. She applied to fourteen schools, all of which are NESCAC or Ivy League institutions. Camille frequently cited her mother as her inspiration because she had come to the United States from Suriname at a young age. Camille's parents met at Tufts University Medical School, where they hoped Camille would enroll as an undergraduate. During the interview, however, Camille mentioned that Brown University was her top choice. Camille was extremely mature, articulate, and self-assured during our conversation. She seemed eager to become involved in many aspects of academic life and was confident that she would succeed regardless of the college or university she attended. Camille spoke very highly of her educators at Woodstock High School and mentioned that she would miss the "small-town feel" when she moved to a larger city. Camille identified as being a member of the middle-upper class.

Stephen and Camille attended Woodstock High School in Woodstock, Maine, a community with a population of about 16,000 people. The high school is in school district AOS92 which also includes schools from two other Maine towns. Of the Woodstock population, 90% of its residents are white, and the population of Hispanic, black, and Asian residents is each

below 3% (Statistical Atlas, 2015). Only 32% of Woodstock's residents hold a higher degree and the average household income is slightly above \$33,000. The largest occupational industries in Woodstock are administrative, education, and management.

The remaining two students, Katelyn and Brianna, attended Smith High School, a public institution in Maine School Administrative District 49, which serves students from four small Northeastern towns. Each town has a population less than half of the neighboring city of Woodstock (Town A, 2k; Town B, 2.7k; Town C, 3.4k; and Town D, 6.7k). Of the MSAD 49 population, 95.8% are white, 2.7% are Hispanic, and the percentage of black, Asian, and mixed residents is each less than 1%. About 63% of all MSAD 49 residents have no education beyond their high school degree and 55% of its students receive government assistance. The largest occupational industries in MSAD 49 are administrative, sales, production, and construction.

According to the school's handbook, Smith High School focuses heavily on creating an "intellectually and socially energetic environment" in which respect is their core value. The school's mission statement focuses on fostering a safe, nurturing and respectful environment in which students can develop their own goals and interests. The statement reads: "It is our role to guide and motivate students at Smith High School to participate in a conscious process of seeking appropriately rigorous courses and activities that engage students with opportunities to learn about and explore career, college and life readiness." Their emphasis on "appropriately rigorous courses" suggests that all students are not necessarily encouraged down the same path in terms of post-graduate opportunities, but encouraged to define these goals for themselves.

Following a student's initiative, students at Smith High School and Woodstock High School may take college level courses in order to gain credit for both high school and future college requirements. These courses are offered at Thomas College and Kennebec Valley Community College. The courses are free and open to high school students who match GPA

requirements. These dual-enrollment programs are explored in more depth in the Conclusion section of this project.

### *Data Collection*

Gathering data from the student participants was the most critical aspect of this project. For this reason, it was important that it was collected in a way that was efficient, extensive, and ethical. The case studies involved two one-hour interviews with the participants. The participants at Smith High School were identified with the critical help of guidance counselors who knew the students on a personal level. The students at Woodstock High were referred to me through a personal contact who had recently graduated from the school.

The gender of the students was intended to be balanced as to reduce gender-bias from student responses; it resulted in one male interviewee and three female, which was not an ideal ratio. My connections at each high school gave me the contacts of mostly female students and due to the time restrictions of this project, I was unable to secure an interview with another college-bound male student. The only remaining criterion was that each student had applied to a four-year university and planned to enroll in the near future.

Interview scheduling began immediately after the four participants and I were connected through the guidance counselors at Smith or my personal contact at Woodstock. A list of possible time slots was provided and participants were asked to note their availability. Each interview at Smith took place in a private room at the high school. The participants from Woodstock High School noted that it would be more convenient for them to be interviewed at Colby College. All four interviews were conducted in private rooms in which myself and the participant were the only ones present. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and each participant took part in two separate interviews throughout the research process.

At the forefront of the first interview, students were given a briefing on the purpose of the research, their role in the research, and were asked to sign a consent form. In addition, each participant was given notice that they would receive a pseudonym during the analysis and writing process to protect their identity. The link between the participants name and pseudonym would not be made public to anyone other than the researcher and the respective participant. The interviews were formal in which the participant was given a guiding question and then provided the freedom to pursue other subjects as seen fit. I took few notes during the interview process and all interviews were tape recorded for the purpose of later transcription; each participant was aware of this at the forefront of his or her interview. At the end of both interviews, participants were given a debriefing that described the next steps in the process. Participants were also given the chance to ask questions or add any additional information relevant to our conversations during this time.

The final aspect of data collection was based in academic research and scholarly texts relevant to college attainment, particularly for rural students. In order to make this project comprehensive and context-sensitive, it was important that the individual case studies were framed by scholarly theory and past research. Research questions included: what unique challenges do students from rural America face? What are the monetary benefits of a college education? Are there benefits to attending high school and/or college in a rural community? How can schools capitalize on these benefits? At what age should conversations surrounding college begin? Information pertaining to these research questions were found primarily on academic databases and through peer-reviewed articles, studies, and books.

This project was strengthened by the way it was based on multiple methods of research. Fielding and Fielding (1986) refer to this research method as *triangulation*, a term taken from land surveying. It claims that knowing a single landmark (or academic perspective) only situates

research somewhere along a line in a direction from a landmark. However, with two landmarks (and the position of the researcher as the last point of the triangle), research can take bearings in multiple directions and be located at an accurate and educated intersection. The student case studies, academic inquiry, and my own experience as a rural Maine student, served as the vertices of this project's research triangle. The rich variety of methods employed in this project resulted in meaningful proposals to benefit rural students.

### *Data Analysis*

Analysis of the data began once the final interview was transcribed. I began the process by reading through the transcriptions, familiarizing myself with the student responses, and beginning to identify recurring themes. During this phase, I identified frequently mentioned words or phrases that related to my research focus of college preparation, support, and rural challenges. Next, I reviewed my literature for the same purpose of identifying key words or phrases pertaining to my research focus. I created a list of 40 words or "codes" that pertained to my research focus, were present in my student interviews, and were discussed within my literature review. Starting with forty codes, I collapsed them into eight, then combined those into three, which emerged as my findings.

During the earlier stages of this process with forty codes, I performed careful line by line analysis by taking these labels and assigning them to relevant parts of my interviews. For example, one of my labels, or codes, was parental influence. When a student from the interview mentioned his dad's influence on his decision to apply to UVA, I highlighted his response and categorized it under the appropriate label of parental influence. I proceeded to do this with all eight interviews until I had a comprehensive understanding of the students' responses as they related to the literature review and research focus. In doing so, I was able to identify emerging themes and use the student responses to support these findings.

With the interviews coded, I was able to evaluate the findings and collapse the forty terms into eight clusters of related labels. For example, parent occupation, parent educational attainment, parental support, and parental expectation were combined under the code *Familial Influence*. In identifying these eight codes, I was able to exclude labels that were recurrent among my data but did not necessarily reflect my research focus. Next, I evaluated my eight codes and explored ways in which they overlapped and could be collapsed into three more encompassing themes. What resulted from this process was three themes that related to my research focus of college preparation and support within rural communities.

## Literature Review

### *College as Necessary for Success*

Success as an outcome is often used as a comprehensive phrase to capture the accomplishment of an aim or purpose. To many, the term success is understood in financial terms. Specifically, to have an abundance of wealth, property, or material goods is seen as successful. For others, it may be measured in satisfaction and happiness with one's life. Success can also be understood in academic terms. In this case, it is often defined by good grades, difficult course load, high class rank, and eventually, by college enrollment, completion, and the attainment of a high-paying job after graduation.

Clearly, the perspectival nature of the phrase heightens its ambiguity and makes it difficult to define a specific outcome as true success (York, Gibson, & Rankin, 2015). For example, while an honors student may not consider acceptance to a community college as an indicator of success, a first-generation college student certainly might. Both arguments are valid in that they support the application of the term within the context of each individual's interests. However, varying levels of value are placed on these two understandings of success. The dominant narratives about *valuable success* are created by those with substantial levels of social, cultural, and financial capital. Measuring and defining valuable success is a complex task that cannot be performed without exploring these influences of power.

The formation and preservation of ideals such as valuable success is explored in Pierre Bourdieu's *field theory* (Bourdieu, 1984). It concerns the dynamics between people, or agents, and their varying levels of power. According to Bourdieu, reality is a social construct. What is "real" is relational and an agent interprets himself and his position based on marked differences. Agents belong to various semi-autonomous categories, or fields, in which they occupy unique positions and exert their power to effect change. Positions among and within the fields are

largely defined by an agent's level of capital. Capital, according to Bourdieu, is categorized into that of economic, social, and cultural. Economic capital is the security of monetary resources; social capital includes resources based on group membership, connections, or networks of support; cultural capital includes the knowledge, skills, or education that one may have. Symbolic capital was later added to Bourdieu's theory and it includes resources available to an individual on the honor of prestige or recognition.

The evaluation of one's capital, particularly that of cultural, is not usually a quantitative assessment, but one primarily based on quality. For example, the cultural knowledge of how to dress properly for an interview is arguably more valuable than the knowledge of how to change a tire, in regards to social mobility and accumulation of status. The quality of an agent's capital often determines his course of action and marks his position accordingly in the context of his surrounding social reality (James, 2015).

The agents then exploit their capital as a way to influence the *doxa* or the experience in which "the natural and social world appears as self-evident" (Bourdieu, 1977 p. 162). In other words, agents use their power as a way to alter society's unquestioned truths. *Doxa*, in turn, subtly forces less powerful agents to abide by a set of social imaginaries and leaves little space for deliberate participation within their fields (Bourdieu, 1984).

In the struggle to modify the *doxa*, agents exploit their capital in order to transform the rules to benefit themselves. It is not a coincidence that the generally accepted definition of a successful agent (e.g. white, wealthy, educated) is defined by the same agent that it describes. Those with elite or highly valuable forms of capital purposefully seek to retain their rituals of belonging, cultural distinctions, and moral discourses that separate themselves from others (Hopper, 1971).

Cultural capital is a critical element to the ways in which elites form boundaries between themselves and others. Lamont and Lareau (1988) provided an acute definition of cultural capital as “widely shared, high-status cultural signals used for social and cultural exclusion” (p.156). Cultural capital is represented in three states, one of which is *institutionalized* that refers to an agent’s educational credentials (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Bourdieu argues that the education system is “biased toward valorizing cultural capital, ascribing positive qualities to individuals and families that possess it” (Jæger, 2016, p. 1083) The stock value of a higher education is increased due to the exclusivity of the college admissions process. Because of its exclusivity, it is an elite form of cultural capital that provides a heightened position of power in many of Bourdieu’s fields.

The notion that doxa is affected by individuals with enough capital to set the standard complicates the definition of true success. Because the “rules of the game” are altered to benefit those in power, *valuable success* will simultaneously be altered to match the qualities of those in power. The current understanding of valuable institutionalized cultural capital is the possession of a college degree, and as of recent decades, the quality of the institution that the degree comes from; a university education can provide an individual with greater employment opportunities, increased income potential, and higher health and better health and quality of life (Friesen, 2016).

Furthermore, the importance of a college degree is not entirely grounded in theoretical frameworks about success. In many nations, including the United States, government policy and scholarly work have recognized the increasing importance of higher education in fueling the knowledge economy (Marginson, 2010). The knowledge economy is defined as services and productions reliant on knowledge-intensive preparation that create an increased pace towards technical and scientific advance (Powell & Snellman, 2004). A distinguishing element of the

knowledge economy is a greater dependence on intellectual capabilities than on physical power or natural resources. Notions of the knowledge-based economy suggest that greater learning efforts to obtain necessary human capital are required to participate in this type of economy (Livingstone, 2005).

In his book *The Effective Executive* (2006) Peter Drucker exposes the difference between the manual worker and the knowledge worker. The manual worker is one who works with her hands in order to produce goods and services, whereas the knowledge worker works with her head to produce knowledge, ideas, or information. Science, technology, engineering, and mathematic (STEM) careers that require the latter form of skills such as engineers, computer scientists, or scientific inventors will see continuous demand in the knowledge-based economy. These new jobs tend to favor those with higher levels of education rather than those with less education or skills (Powell & Snellman, 2004). Many technological innovations require workers with knowledge of the technology or a complementary set of skills. At the same time, low-leveled positions are being replaced by technology which decreases the need for less-educated workers (Morris & Western, 1999).

A college degree in the knowledge economy is important for financial security, but for many students, the acquisition of this degree is incredibly difficult. Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and *cultural reproduction* state that inequalities in educational and socioeconomic contexts endure over generations (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1900). The theory outlines a complex system in which "parents transmit cultural capital to children, children exploit their acquired cultural capital in the educational system, and, as a consequence, families who possess cultural capital have an advantage that helps them reproduce their privileged socioeconomic position" (Jæger, 2016, p. 1080). In other words, children from parents without access to valuable forms of cultural capital such as a college degree, knowledge of the application process, etc. experience a

significant disadvantage on their quest for higher educational attainment. Because a college degree is essential to becoming an active player in many fields that produce successful agents (or at least, what is broadly understood to be successful), as well as in becoming an active participant in the knowledge economy, early exposure to higher educational opportunities and access to college preparatory programs are increasingly important for students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

### *College Preparatory Programs*

Because academic success and future financial success often require a college degree, access to higher education is an area of high focus in today's political and social climate. Enrollments in postsecondary education have increased in the past twenty years, though it is important to keep in mind that racial and social class stratification continue to persist in the postsecondary arena (Bergerson, 2009). The rate at which students graduate high school, attend college, and graduate varies depending on factors such as race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status (SES), and family background (Dalton, Glennie, & Ingels, 2009; Ingels, Glennie, & Lauff, 2012). In an effort to combat this stratification, a variety of strategies have been employed in order to increase college access for these underrepresented students. Among these strategies have been reforming student loans and increasing federal investments to Pell Grants and college tax credits which are all focused on the financial barriers to college access. However, the gap continues to persist. One potential explanation for the persisting gap could be that current college access programs (e.g. financial aid programs) focus too heavily on financial barriers, while neglecting to pay attention to the academic, social, and psychological aspects of preparing young students (Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002).

Extending college access to underrepresented students continues to be a complex task. The task grows even more difficult when strategies must be tailored to reach the needs of

students in different locales. One of the more recent and decentralized attempts to bolster access has been through a wide variety of college preparatory programs. State and national governments, educational institutions, and local communities have allocated a great deal of resources toward identifying and assisting marginalized students on their pathway to higher education. In recent decades, programs such as Upward Bound, College Summit, Puente, Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), and innumerable other localized programs have worked to prepare a diverse population of students for college.

Not surprisingly, academic achievement is the target focus for most college preparatory programs; they operate under the assumption that developing a student's academic skills will increase their probability of attending and succeeding in college (Villalpando & Solorzano, 2005). However, many programs are unique in their approach, focus, and culture. For example, Mathematics, Engineering, Science Achievement (MESA) established by the University of California seeks to develop the academic and leadership skills of students from historically underrepresented students in STEM fields. At the same time, programs such as "I Have a Dream" (IHAD) emphasize financial assistance and mentorship. Programs like Puente are different in the way that they target certain populations of students, in this case, those of Latina and Latino heritage. All of these examples highlight the numerous factors involved in preparing students for college.

While each program is encouraged to create their own individual elements, Corwin, Colyar, and Tierney (2005) created a universal framework for analyzing the curricular and cocurricular elements of each model. The authors argued that nine characteristics are universally important in developing a successful college preparatory program: an emphasis on the culture of the student; family engagement; incorporation of peer groups; access to college preparatory curricula; knowledgeable counselors who are available to students; early intervention with

consistent structure; little to no emphasis on co-curricular activities; mentoring; and results that can be achieved at a reasonable cost. Certain components are critical to successful programs such as family engagement, college preparatory curricula, and early engagement. Other components such as mentoring or peer groups are advantageous but not essential. The following sections seek to review the literature pertaining to the three most critical elements of a college preparatory model.

*Family Engagement.* The notion that parents and families hold a valuable position in increasing a student's access to higher education began to gain traction in the 1980s and 1990s. During this period, there was a growth in the development of school and parent partnership policies, programs, and research, including the formation of family literacy centers and major research institutions (Tierney, Corwin, & Colyar, 2005).

Despite its gaining popularity, the involvement of parents in college preparation has been largely undertheorized (Jordan et al., 2002). However, Bourdieu's (1977) framework of cultural and social capital equips researchers with the tools to consider how parents may be more or less prepared to assist their children in the college process. Parents of higher socioeconomic status invest time, money, and effort into their child's academic success in order to maximize their advantage in higher education. Those without access to this valuable form of cultural capital are unaware that these investments need to be made or unaware of how to make them properly (Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). As a result, one of the most common inequalities in college access is the unequal distribution of information among students of different socioeconomic classes (Perna & Kurban, 2013).

For this reason, the family engagement aspect of college preparatory programs is largely focused on the transfer of knowledge and information regarding the college process. Parents without first-hand knowledge of the college experience often need assistance making sense of

the complex information and realizing its relevance to their lives (McClafferty, McDonough, & Fann, 2001). Regardless of the structure or approach of each model, parents of low socioeconomic status appear to receive the majority of their information about higher education from college preparatory programs (Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). College preparatory programs provide parents with a safe, non-judgmental space to ask questions about financial aid, work to understand the application process, and foster meaningful conversations about college choice with their child. The most important elements for successfully including parents in the process are trusting and personal relationships with program staff, measures to bridge the information gap, and activities to empower parents as advocates for their children (Perez, 1999).

If the research clearly supports parental and familial engagement in the college preparation process, why do some programs continue to neglect this element in their model? Tierney (2002) states that college preparatory programs suffer from lack of funding, short staffing, and a lack of evaluative processes that enable them to prioritize activities. Because parents and families are secondary constituencies, activities on their behalf are almost never given great consideration. If they are employed at all, they are viewed as an added bonus.

*College Preparatory Curricula.* Researchers have consistently proven that academic preparation and success are essential factors in predicting both interest in attending college and actual enrollment (Cabrera, La Nasa, & Burkam, 2001). Perna (2000) found that the probability of a student enrolling at a four-year college increased as test scores improved after controlling for race, sex, socioeconomic status, and curricular program. And of course, as test scores improve for students, the possibility of attending college increases as well. In the same study, she found that enrolling in a college-preparatory academic track in high school greatly increased the chances of a student enrolling at a four-year college within two years of high school graduation. For students with strong academic preparation (defined as participation in a college preparatory

academic track and test scores at least one standard deviation above the mean) regardless of racial/ethnic or socioeconomic status, attending a four-year college is a virtual certainty (Alexander, 1987).

However, the literature (Perna, 2002) shows that students who tend to be underrepresented in higher education are also less likely to be academically prepared for these institutions. A major reason that students from low-income, African American, and Hispanic families are less likely to be prepared for college is due to the quality of the schools they attend (Perna, 2002). Enrollment in rigorous courses in high school depends on the availability of these courses. Research suggests that schools located in affluent areas have increased access to college-preparatory coursework (Gandara, 2002).

A second major reason that these students are less likely to be adequately prepared for higher education is because they tend to be placed on lower academic tracks or ability groups. Tracking is defined as the separation of students based on academic ability as a way to better direct curriculum to students' ability level. Ability grouping is defined as separating students based on their demonstrated academic understanding within the same classroom. However, rather than promoting educational equality as intended, opponents of tracking and ability grouping argue that it enlarges the opportunity gap further; research shows that students in upper-level classes tend to receive more quality instruction than those in the lower tracks (Perna, 2002). Additionally, although students are separated based on academic ability, research shows that the tracks are ultimately divided along racial and socioeconomic lines as well, with African American, Hispanic, and poor children concentrated on the lowest tracks (Yonezawa, 2002).

Students who are clustered in higher tracks tend to come from more affluent and white families. In this way, these students are provided something *extra* that students in lower tracks are not, whether it be additional resources or simply a heightened amount of valuable academic

material. Not surprisingly, this feeling of receiving something “extra” is appreciated by both the students and their affluent parents, many of whom support the school financially; schools who may rely on the economic or social support of these families, will be unlikely to de-track their schools for fear of losing these powerful constituents. This satisfaction from powerful families is what Pierre Bourdieu (1984) refers to as form over function. In other words, parents do not always care to know *what* their children are learning, but instead *that* their children are receiving something more than other students. The differentiation from other low-track students will help high-track students during the college admissions process which is centered so tightly around comparative evaluations (Wells & Oakes, 1998). Other factors that may prevent low-income and minority students from attaining academic achievement may include parental education, educational expectations, and academic culture of their schools.

According to the literature (Tierney & Auerbach, 2005), college preparatory programs must emphasize academic enrichment as a way to increase college enrollment rates for disadvantaged students. School-level reforms are unlikely to eradicate the ways in which students are prepared for college based on race or socioeconomic status. Because college admissions is a competitive process, families with high levels of economic, social, and cultural capital will feel entitled to their status at the top of the academic hierarchy and work to maintain this position (Yonezawa, 2002). These efforts may include tutoring or test preparation classes that will raise the standard for all students despite the lack of explicit tracking or ability grouping within the school. To combat this effort, college preparatory programs may include components such as supplemental college-level courses, summer programs, tutoring and remediation opportunities, and courses on effective test taking, in many ways to compensate for the lack of resources of the students’ own schooling (Gandara, 2002). Though the goal is to increase college enrollment, college preparatory programs that focus on academic achievement may also generate

other positive outcomes for students such as increased high school graduation rates, improved college entrance examination scores, greater probability of earning a bachelor's degree by age 30, and higher college retention rates (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000).

*Early Intervention.* The literature shows that the college choice process includes three primary steps: (1) decision to attend college, (2) information gathering about potential colleges, and (3) application to colleges and selection (McDonough, 1997). While all of these steps require a student's participation, the student is informed about college preparation from a number of people including family members, teachers, guidance counselors, and peers (Bonous-Hammarth & Allen, 2002). Students who attend college-preparatory schools or who have parents with college degrees often have smoother transitions in the college choice process. While all students complete the college application process in a similar season (fall through winter of senior year), students need to identify themselves as college bound at an earlier point in their academic career (Bonous-Hammarth & Allen, 2002).

Bonous-Hammarth and Allen (2002) argue that interventions to increase academic, test, and financial preparation should begin by ninth grade at the latest. This allows students ample time to consider higher education as an option, enroll in proper prerequisite courses, gather information about potential colleges, develop a financial plan, take the PSAT, SAT, ACT, and ultimately apply to colleges during the application season. In addition, early intervention provides parents with ample time to develop a financial strategy and assist their children throughout the preparation and application process. Lastly, early intervention helps students develop self-confidence, aspirations for higher education, connections and mentors, and other useful tools to navigate the college admissions process.

However, access to early intervention is certainly not equitable among all students. Students who experience expedited routes to higher education have benefitted from quality

college counseling, rigorous academic preparation, and extra enrichment programs. Students of low-income or minority backgrounds are often concentrated in the non-college track of their high schools, and as a result, not included in this group (Bonous-Hammarth & Allen, 2002). Support for tracking is based upon the fundamental assumption that students have fixed capacities for knowledge and need to be segregated according to capabilities as a way to maximize school resources (Oakes, Quartz, Ryan, & Lipton, 2000). This assumption often identifies a single demographic as “college-bound” and neglects to provide students in other academic tracks with access to early college intervention opportunities.

An excellent example of a college preparatory model that encompasses at least the three essential components of an effective program is Breakthrough Collaborative. The summer-length model hosts enrichment programs in 25 cities throughout the United States and since its creation in 1978 has served over 5,000 public school students who often need academic assistance. Because many Breakthrough students come from families in which no one attended college, the program is often the first exposure to college that participants receive. The seven-week summer program is offered to students entering 6-9 grade and steadily involves each child’s parents along the process. In the following years until twelfth grade, participants attend weekend and after-school enrichment meetings as a way to begin studying for the SAT and to bolster their college applications. According to their mission statement, Breakthrough has a goal to “increase the academic opportunity for highly motivated, underserved students and get them into college ready to succeed.” Additionally, Breakthrough Collaborative places a particular emphasis on hard work and preparation as a gateway to college admission. Breakthrough also excels in emphasizing the culture of their students and providing them with positive mentors.

All nine strategies for a creating a successful college preparatory model, particularly the three strategies explored in depth, are able to be applied to student bodies of all cultures and

geographic regions. While the specifics of the strategies may differ (e.g. family involvement may look different to Latino families than rural Maine families), they can assist all student bodies when employed properly.

### *The Unique Path to College For Rural Students*

College preparatory programs that tailor to the specific cultural, social, and academic needs of the students to whom they serve will be met with much greater success than those who deny the ways in which their students may be different (Gandara, 2002). While many aspects of city-oriented programs are applicable to communities in the city or near the urban periphery, the increasing necessity of higher education has presented unique challenges for rural youth. On average, rural communities have lower family incomes and fewer adults with college degrees than in cities; rural schools have less course options and extracurricular activities, and tend to have smaller per-pupil expenditures (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012). The most unique dilemma, however, is the low demand for highly educated workers that often forces rural students to choose between living in their home communities with little economic advancement or leaving to pursue heightened opportunities and socioeconomic improvement (Corbett, 2007).

Before exploring these challenges more closely, the term “rural” must be defined more accurately. The U.S. Census Bureau for the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (NCES 2016) classifies schools into four categories based on their location to urban cities: city, suburban, town, and rural. The category of rural is further classified by its distance from an urbanized area or urban cluster into three categories: fringe, distance, and remote. *Rural fringe* is defined as a rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area as well as a territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster. *Rural distant* refers to a rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area as well as a territory that is more than 2.4 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban

cluster. Lastly, *rural remote* refers to a rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster. Certainly, generalizations of rural clusters are problematic because there are varying differences of income, ethnic composition, school conditions, population density, and geographic separation within these communities (Johnson and Lichter, 2010). For this reason, generalizations from the following studies should be applied appropriately depending on the community in question.

Frequently, students these communities face a number of challenges in their preparation for college including high poverty. Specifically, students from rural communities are more likely to come from low-income households than students in urban and suburban areas (Lichter and Johnson, 2007). Additionally, adolescents from rural communities are more likely to have parents without a college degree which is one of the most important indicators of social class (McGrath, et al., 2001). Parents with a college degree are more likely to take part in planning activities that lead to their child applying to college and more knowledgeable about the college application process, particularly the availability of financial aid (Choy et al. 2002). Rural students without this advantage lack the parental guidance, social networks, and high expectations that result from having college educated parents. Additionally, wealthy, college-educated parents can provide heightened education supports for their children (e.g., private tutoring, elite schooling, computers) that many rural parents cannot afford (McGrath et al., 2001). Lastly, rural schools have constantly battled with recruiting and retaining quality educators and leaders, which reflects their lack of quality resources (Monk 2007).

The income and educational attainment of students' parents along with the quality of rural schools falls under the umbrella of the economic disparity of rural communities. While economic analyses are useful in some regard, this strategy offers "little direction for educators and policy makers for how to affect changes in educational processes and outcomes" (Singh &

Dika, 2003, p.114). For this reason, research has begun to focus more heavily on the social effects of rural communities as a lens to explore the educational aspirations of rural youth.

In particular, much of the literature focuses on the ways in which rural students balance their aspirations for higher education and economic advancement with their desires to remain in their home communities. Specifically, a rural student's decision to not attend college may not only be a reflection of her disadvantage, but also, a response to the social systems taking place within her school, community, and family (Elder & Conger, 2000). In other words, rural students may place a higher premium on maintaining a physical connection with their families and communities than acquiring a college degree and powerful career in a more urban environment. However, some rural students who seek to maintain a physical connection with their families and communities may have educational aspirations and career goals that do not exist in their rural environment. These students will inevitably face a sort of tension in pursuing these seemingly opposite goals (Corbett 2007).

Young adults leaving their rural environments in search of more opportunity is a problem that has existed for decades. Colloquially known as "brain drain," the individuals who migrate from these rural communities in search of heightened opportunity are often the best and the brightest. Explanations for the outmigration of youth include lack of educational and job opportunities, economic turmoil in rural spaces, and assumptions that better opportunities can be found in cities (Rieger 1972). Leaving rural communities for college is often viewed as a success for the student and their school (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). However, many high-achieving students who leave rural spaces for educational purposes plan to return post-graduation with new skills to improve their home communities. On the contrary, youth who are viewed as "unfit" for college or who do not come from families expected to produce a college-bound child (i.e. poor,

uneducated families) are tracked toward vocational education and jobs that are available more locally (Carr and Kefalas 2009).

Despite these unique challenges, rural students also benefit from a number of advantages that assist them in the college enrollment process. The “rural advantage” often stems from heightened relationships with family, school, and communities contributing to a rural student’s social capital. These unique forms of social capital include enduring and supportive relationships with teachers and close relationships between communities and schools. When “everybody knows everybody” students are more successful at school (Nelson, 2016; Wright, 2012). Rural youth’s educational aspirations are also shaped by community resources such as the church. Rural students benefit from religious involvement because such organizations build relationships between adults and youth outside of home and build the perception of a caring community (Lerner 1995). Adding to this perception, rural parents are more likely to know the parents of their children’s friends than adults in other locales which increases a student’s accountability to others (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012). These unique forms of social capital have been found to benefit rural students in terms of postsecondary education attainment (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012). Paradoxically, however, students who experience strong familial, school, and community support may choose to lower their educational aspirations in order to match the educational and occupational opportunities available in their communities (Howley, 2006).

As the most rural state in the United States, Maine provides a unique backdrop for studying the ways in which rural students navigate the college application process. According to 2010 census data, 61.3 percent of Maine residents live in rural spaces defined as having a population less than 2,500 people- the highest percentage of any state (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Additionally, two-thirds of Maine public schools are found in rural which is twice the national average (NCES, n.d.). Moreover, only 8 percent of Maine’s schools are found in cities

compared to 26 percent of schools nationwide. For these reasons, Maine provides the landscape to study the experiences of rural students across many communities while maintaining state policy and regional culture (Nelson, 2016).

According to Nelson (2016), Maine also provides a unique research site because high school graduation rates are quite high but college graduation rates are relatively low: 90.6 percent of residents over 25 years old have graduated high school compared to 86.4 percent nationally. Simultaneously, only 27.3 percent of young adults in Maine have a college degree or higher, compared to 29.1 percent nationally (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). The discrepancy of graduation rates indicates that Maine students may face unique challenges on their road to higher education.

## Narrative Findings

The findings of this project indicated that students who were afforded certain sources of support fared better on the road to college admission and high school completion. More so, the findings revealed that students from rural communities may have required specific types of support in this process. The students interviewed for this project spoke very frequently of parental support and guidance in their college-decision making process. In addition, they mentioned the role of a challenging curriculum, financial stability, and investment from teachers as major players for their decision to apply and enroll at college. Like the literature suggested, most of the students described the struggle between wanting to be close to their families and wanting to gain new experiences in larger cities or in different geographic regions. Throughout this section the data presented will emphasize three central themes that surfaced during research about what increases a rural student's opportunity to apply and enroll at college: *Heightened Access to Social Supports Who Want and Expect Them to Succeed, Heightened Access to College Readiness Opportunities and College Preparatory Resources*, and *Deep Geographic Tensions*. Each theme has several sub-themes in which specific supports and tensions are examined on a closer level. These themes organize the data in a way that highlights which elements of the college choice process (McDonough, 1997) play the largest role in producing success for the four students who were interviewed in the study. The findings revealed that college enrollment was not a priority for all students at Woodstock High School and Smith High School. At the same time, all students were not *given* equal attention for college preparation by teachers and school officials. The greatest consideration was often given to students who had a strong personal initiative to pursue higher education. However, the findings revealed that this personal initiative was heavily influenced by support systems that had been invested in the child up until the college choice process. These systems included but were not limited to parental support,

teacher investment, academically rigorous course load, and early exposure to the college choice process. These systems of support often manifested themselves as students who appeared to be naturally smart or driven to enroll at college. The four students interviewed in this study were products of heightened access to these supports.

### ***Heightened Access to Social Supports***

*Familial Support.* All four students cited one or more of their parents as the most pivotal influence on their decision to go to college. Brianna, Camille, and Stephen claimed that their parents had always expected them to attend an institution of higher learning. The two young women described specific conversations that they had with their parents about attaining a college degree. Brianna explained, “Mom would always say, ‘You should go and better yourself and go further in life instead of not going and kind of being settled on certain things because you don’t have a degree.’” Brianna’s parents both went to college; her mom worked as a first grade teacher at a local elementary school and her dad held a management position at a manufacturing company. Brielle’s relationship with her parents was one of friendship, in which they “both gave each other the respect that is deserved.” There was a mutual understanding between them that college would be the best option for Brianna.

Camille described her parent’s similar sentiments about college and educational success: “My parents have extremely high expectations of me. It definitely started at a young age... And it wasn’t like ‘Oh, I’ll make them happy if I do this.’ It was like ‘I have to do this or else they’ll be really upset.’ So it was not an option, I had to go to college.” Camille’s father went to Colby and her mother attended Fairleigh Dickinson before they met at Tufts Medical School to study dentistry. Familial influence in the decision to apply to college was most evident in Camille’s case. She explained that her mother moved to the United States from Suriname when she was

fifteen years old and did not speak any English; Camille felt she that she has a heightened sense of responsibility to attend college “in order to make [her] mother’s sacrifices worth it.”

Like the girls, Stephen knew that his parents expected him to go to college, but he could not describe a particular conversation or moment. He spoke more broadly of a looming expectation that did not require a conversation. His father attended the University of Virginia and was now working as a financial planner at Colby College. His mother, who graduated from Kansas University, was a third grade teacher at Mount Merici. All four students demonstrated that parents can influence *if* their child goes to college, while Stephen’s case proved that parents can also influence *where* their children go as well; Stephen hoped to attend his father’s alma mater in the fall and his twin-sister had already committed to his mother’s. He mentioned subtle, but clear pressure from his father to go to UVA even though there were other schools that interested him.

Katelyn, the only participant whose parents did not attend college, never mention the phrase “expectation”. Instead, she spoke frequently of her parent’s excitement that she would be going to college next year. When I asked her who had played the most pivotal role in her decision to get a degree she said her parents: “The fact that I want to be a doctor or somewhere in the medical field makes them excited so they kind of want me to go to college.”

She explained that her parent’s excitement followed the discovery of her potential in the classroom: “Probably growing up is when [my parents] realized how important my grades are. And once I started doing really well in school, my parents definitely pushed me to stay where I am.” Katelyn believed that she was the most hardworking and smart of her four siblings and that this may give reason for her parent’s excitement. Katelyn’s circumstance demonstrated that though a parent may not have a higher degree, his or her unwavering support can be extremely valuable in the college process as well.

Though the students spoke of their parents' want for them to succeed academically, Stephen and Brianna suggested that this *want* was a matter of their children living up to their potential. Stephen said, "My dad has pushed me but not anything further than I can go. He's always been pushing me as far as he knows I can go." Brianna expressed similar sentiments about her parents by saying, "My parents try to push me to do the best that I can. Like if I came home with an 80 on a test, they wouldn't say 'give me your phone', they're just like 'did you really study and try?' If they knew that I didn't put in the effort, they would tell me to buckle down." The way that all four students spoke of their parents suggested that getting to college was a group effort. In other words, there were multiple individuals and systems in place that helped them reach this point. Speaking of their families, students reported, "I could not have even gotten through the admissions process without them" or similar sentiments. The four students seemed to believe that it would have been difficult, or even impossible, to go to college without the aid of their parents; this aid came in the form of inspiration and encouragement and/or by the way that they physically helped with the admissions process.

Additionally, all four students claimed that their parents would be accepting if they decided not to seek a higher degree *directly* after high school. However, from the anecdotes and information that I gathered during the interview about parental expectation, I believe that there was a gap in what the students perceived their parents' reactions would be and the reality of the situation, given the students' hesitation while answering this question. Nonetheless, the students felt agency and ownership over their decision to enroll at college and felt that they were enrolling on their own accord.

*Teacher Investment.* "They always tell me that their job is to help me and that they're here to make sure that I succeed," explained Katelyn. All four students cited examples of teachers going out of their way to make their academic experiences more meaningful. For

example, Stephen recalled a time in which his math teacher ordered pizza in the evening and invited students back to the classroom to review material in preparation for the Advanced Placement Statistics exam. In another example, he described a time in which his band director approached *him* about writing a letter of recommendation for his college applications. These two brief anecdotes demonstrate his teachers' efforts to ensure his success even at the cost of their own time and resources.

Additionally, when asked who they look up to the most in the community other than their parents, all of the students noted their teachers. Katelyn mentioned that all of her teachers had gone to college so they knew what it took to succeed. These role models seemed to be particularly important for Katelyn, whose parents did not go to college. She spoke incredibly highly of all her teachers and found reasons to defend teachers who were not well-liked by other students. From her interviews, it appeared that she wanted to emulate aspects of her teachers, including their education levels and professionalism, that she may not have been able to emulate from other members of her family or community.

High expectations from teachers was a frequent topic for Camille as well. When asked whether teachers frequently approached her about post-graduate plans she responded:

All the time! I think every single teacher I've seen has asked me 'Where are you going to college? Where are you looking? Where is your number one choice?' And I think that's just because I'm a really motivated student and they want to know where I am going. I talk to my art teacher a lot about college because I am the closest with her. I would say that most of the time, teachers are the ones initiating the conversation.

The interest that Camille's teachers have on her college choice process is significant because they are demonstrating their expectations of her success. Though Camille quickly cited

this example of teacher support, she was also able to acknowledge that this support is not distributed equally among the entire student body. When asked to describe the typical student in a low-tracked class, she explained:

Students [in lower-level classes] would probably try their best sometimes but then, I don't know. Like something I definitely see a lot is that if a teacher isn't teaching well and it's difficult, [the students in lower-level classes] are more apt to give up because they feel like the teacher doesn't care so it's a lost cause. Whereas in a class that's harder, they might try a little harder because they know they can get a better grade. So the students in the [lower] classes are easier to give up, I guess.

Here, Camille's evaluation of the problem was somewhat contradictory; she acknowledged the fact that the teachers in lower-tracked classes were of lower quality, but still placed a degree of blame on the lower-tracked students for being lazy and quick to give up, even though they were at a serious disadvantage due to the quality of their instruction. In this way, Camille is rationalizing her privilege by possibly suggesting that she receives more quality instruction because she is willing to work hard and deserves it.

All four students were under the assumption that all students, regardless of academic past or potential, were given the same amount of attention and consideration during the college application process. However, Katelyn believed that certain students were pushed harder because they showed more interest in higher education. She said that "all teachers obviously want everyone to go to college" but students in lower-level classes are less motivated to apply because they "aren't pushed as hard as people like me who really want to attend." She did not seem to have an issue with the distribution of guidance counselor attention because she felt like "everyone had a fair shot at going to college." This seemed contradictory to her statements in which she

credited much of her decision to go to college to encouragement from her parents, a privilege that many students are not given in the college application process and that skews the playing field. Camille maintained similar sentiments about “a fair shot” and explained that there was “college things on the school website and teachers and guidance counselors that met with all seniors and juniors to talk about college.” She believed that all students got equal attention and assistance from teachers, but “you get more support if you seek it out.” However, despite the fact that all students are given access to websites and conversations with guidance counselors, there are other more subtle ways in which certain students are pushed or pulled toward higher education. For example, lower track students may be recommended to join the workforce directly after high school or acquire a technical degree. Meanwhile, according to Camille and Brianna, higher track students are given tips on how to write a successful college essay during the junior year of high school, a skill that was not emphasized in lower-level classes.

*Peer Influence.* All four students mentioned being surrounded by friends and classmates who had similar academic and educational goals. In describing their close peers, the four students used words such as “driven,” “focused,” and “motivated.” Katelyn explained that her friends were “all in the same boat of wanting to do well.” The students also revealed that most of their friends were in similar classes as themselves and agreed that this was beneficial. Brianna and Katelyn reflected on times that they did homework with their friends or were able to call them on the phone to clarify a homework assignment. Not only did this type of support ensure that the young women would receive a better grade, it suggested that academics were equally important to both parties.

For the students, academics was a priority among their friend groups and it was not “uncool” to want to do well at school. Because high school is often a time of conflicting interests and social pressures, being included in a peer group that places academics as a priority was seen

as beneficial to the college enrollment process. When asked whether she had any friends who were not going to college in the fall, Katelyn answered “no,” extremely quickly as if to erase any notion that she would be friends with someone who was not considering higher education. In this way, Katelyn subtly suggested that there may be social pressures within her friend group to attend college rather than explore other options. All four students reported feeling no forms of negative peer pressure throughout high school whether academic or social. Additionally, all four students noted that they knew the parents of their friends well and vice versa. Brianna felt that this held her more accountable in many respects and Camille mentioned that knowing her friends’ families made their bonds stronger. This close relationship among friends and their families heightened their accountability to do well in school and in the community, an advantage that is often unique to smaller towns.

Camille and her friends had already applied to their schools and were simply awaiting acceptance letters. However, they still spoke of college “pretty much every time [they] saw each other.” Camille also mentioned how lucky she felt to have friends in different grade levels: “I met up with some of my friends over Christmas break who are older so we talked about them being in college. And one of my friends is a grade younger, so we’re kind of egging her into the college process.” Like within Brianna and Katelyn’s friend groups, it was entirely acceptable to place academic success as a prime concern within the boundaries of their relationships.

Camille, Brianna, Katelyn, and Stephen all took full advantage of Advanced Placement and honors courses at their high schools and explained that their friends were at similar academic levels. When asked to describe a typical student who would not be attending college next year, all four students were quick to suggest that these students were not motivated or were immature. Like Katelyn, Stephen maintained that all of his friends would be attending college after high

school. When asked to describe a typical peer who would not be going to college, Stephen explained:

If they're 18 they might have already dropped out. The kids who don't go, they're either not equipped to go, or most often, they had the potential to go and they just totally wasted it. They drank and partied in high school. Got kicked off sports teams. And now they're, like, surprised at not being able to do anything with their lives.

Like Stephen's response, the descriptions that students provided about non-college-goers was generally quite negative. Camille described them as often "quicker to give up" than higher-tracked students while Brianna and Katelyn stated that they themselves were in the higher-track simply because they worked harder than others, insinuating that those in lower tracks were there due to a lack of effort.

Regarding lack of opportunities, the four students placed the blame on the individuals rather than on the high school or other institutionalized systems at large. However, when asked at the end of their interviews whether college was necessary for success they all agreed quickly that one could be successful without a degree as long as they were happy. Three of them then proceeded to cite examples like Bill Gates or famous musicians who did not attend or dropped out. This rhetoric about "being happy" is cliché and in sharp contrast to the internalized negative stereotypes that the four students had about their own classmates who were not going to college. It seemed as though the four students believed that you *could* be successful without a college degree (i.e. Bill Gates), but that was seriously unlikely for their classmates who were "not motivated and immature."

### *Heightened Access to College Preparatory Opportunities and Resources*

*College Readiness Activities.* All four students cited activities that they performed outside of the classroom that prepared them for college. Many of these activities were sponsored by their schools and administered by teachers (which also worked to strengthen relationships between students and teachers). Katelyn described multiple college touring opportunities in which students of different grades and classes were invited to attend. One of the trips was mandatory for all seniors possibly in an attempt to make college relevant for everyone, like the one that went to Central Maine Community College and the University of Maine. Other trips to Boston College were only available to the top 40 in the class or, like the trip to Maine Maritime, only available to students in accelerated math classes. The exclusivity of certain trips revealed the school's belief that certain students (i.e. students with a high class rank) were fit for more elite institutions like Boston College. The high school gave few opportunities to visit schools other than elite institutions and community colleges; students who were not equipped to attend high-ranked schools like Boston College were almost only provided community colleges as an alternative. While community college may be the best option for many students, it does not paint an accurate picture of what else is available for middle-tracked students and may lower their standards.

At Woodstock High School, students could also be individually selected to participate in college preparatory activities, like Camille who attended a leadership camp at Stonehill College at the recommendation of her athletic director. The Maine Principals' Association sponsored her participation in the one-week workshop in which she developed her leadership skills and was taught to overcome adversity while surrounded by collegiate athletes and staff. Additionally, her teachers and parents encouraged her to take online courses at Brown University last summer, where she hoped to attend in the fall. These experiences may have given Camille a leg-up in

applying to Stonehill College and Brown University, provided her with valuable knowledge about college-life (i.e. living in a dorm), and exposed her to a number of networks that could help her succeed in her future (i.e. faculty members with connections at other universities).

Brianna and Camille agreed that no students are excluded from conversations surrounding college at their schools. Camille explained that “everyone is encouraged the same amount because we have a lot of different resources,” referring to the college page on the school’s website, guidance counselors, and college preparatory courses offered. She clarified that, “I guess everyone gets the same amount of initial support but you get more support if you seek it out.” Brianna exemplified this initiative in the way that she took advantage of the mandatory college meetings that all seniors must have with their guidance counselor: “Some people haven’t done theirs yet. I scheduled mine immediately. I was like, ‘Can I have the first one?’” This initiative set Brianna apart as a student who was serious about attending college and one that guidance counselors could benefit from making an investment in.

While Stephen acknowledged that these college preparatory initiatives exist at his school, he chose to take more advantage of opportunities presented by his parents. During his sophomore year of high school, his parents took him on a trip to visit a state university, a small liberal arts college, and an urban school. The following year, while his classmates went on a college trip to visit Kennebec Valley Community College, University of Maine Orono, and University of Maine at Farmington, Stephen took the day to go on a separate tour with his parents to visit Northeastern University and Boston College because they “were better suited to [his] interests.”

For Stephen, however, college readiness activities did not begin when he entered high school. He described a particular college visit in which he gained valuable advice for college admissions at a young age:

I was in eighth grade and I was at UVA with my dad's 25th reunion and we went to an admissions thing for people who had brought their kids. And one of the guys, the Head of Admissions, was talking about what looks good on a college application. They talked about consistency, but they also said they want you to be passionate about your clubs. So whether you do three or ten clubs, they want to see that you stick with it. If you try to get a leadership position that's great. So I followed that advice into high school and I hope it works out for me.

I asked Stephen why he thought his dad may have taken him to the conference and he explained:

Well, he took us to the reunion for fun. But he took us to the meeting so we could get ready for the future. I remember him saying, 'I know you're young, but we are going to this. Hopefully you remember what this guy is going to talk about.' He brought my twin sister with us, too.

Evidently, Stephen remembered this bit of advice long into his tenure at Woodstock High School: he was captain of the Varsity swim team, involved in club swimming, and head of stage direction for the Woodstock High School theatre department. This meaningful advice is an example of valuable cultural capital; at UVA, Stephen gained meaningful information or knowledge that gave him an advantage toward social mobility in the form of college admission. It is the culmination of these seemingly small experiences that give certain students an edge over others while competing for coveted slots at colleges and universities.

While the students had ample opportunities to participate in college preparatory activities, they also mentioned their schools' room for improvement. Katelyn and Camille identified the first issue as lack of preparation for the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). Katelyn believed that she could have done better on the test if she had prepared more in her classes. Camille compared

her studying experience at Woodstock High School with her cousin's high school in Massachusetts, saying that his school structured its classes around the SAT and AP exams and "comparatively, Woodstock High School didn't really do much for me at all."

There were opportunities for students to study for the SAT outside of their classrooms, however. Brianna took part in a program called Let's Get Ready offered by Colby College students two nights a week for two months during the fall and spring. Let's Get Ready provides students primarily from low-income backgrounds with SAT preparation, college counseling, and mentoring into their freshman year at college. The program is administered entirely by volunteer college students. Over ninety percent of Let's Get Ready participants enroll in college, which is five times the national average for students from a similar economic demographic. The programs are located in the Northeast with three offered in Maine at Colby College, Edward Little High School, and Portland High School. In order to apply, students must be high school juniors or seniors with qualifying financial need. The program consists of two 3-hour classes each week, 30+ hours of SAT tutoring, 15+ hours of college admissions assistance, and other additional workshops.

During her reflection, Brianna noted that the practice tests were the most helpful aspect of the program and she felt that "the program definitely helped [her] squeeze out a lot of extra points on the test." Brianna appeared to be quite confused about why other students at Smith High School did not take advantage of the program. She also noted, however, that the school did not advertise the program very heavily; she had discovered it through a friend who had taken advantage of it in a year prior. Smith High School's lack of promotion for the free program may reflect its belief that college admissions is an individual undertaking in which students must take responsibility for their own preparation, although there are likely other reasons. Fortunately,

Brianna had social capital in the form of a friend who had participated in Let's Get Ready, to refer her to the program.

Stephen and Camille also believed that their schools should start talking to students earlier about college. Stephen felt that visiting colleges for the first time during junior year was too late. According to him, there are many students at his school who do not even realize that they should be starting the process earlier because they do not talk about college with their parents. This lack of dialogue could be for a number of reasons including the parents may not expect their child to go to college, they may not have gone themselves and feel they have little advice to offer, or they may not understand that preparing for college from a disadvantaged background takes a significant amount of financial, academic, and mental preparation. Like Stephen, Camille believed that college preparatory activities needed to be organized for freshmen,

Because, for example, I knew as long as I can remember that I wanted to go to college. And especially for kids in disadvantaged families, it would be helpful if guidance counselors were like, 'Look, you have the option of going to college in four years,' then they might clean up their acts a little bit and try a little harder during their freshman year. Because I have seen some kids in junior year decide that they want to go to college, but they didn't try at all before and now it's too late. And this isn't just the case at my school, but I think maybe everywhere.

Camille's impression is certainly accurate that schools in many areas do not begin talking college until it is too late for many students. College counseling throughout all four years did not appear to be a priority for Woodstock High School. This model may further emphasize their notion that getting to college is an individual responsibility that must be spearheaded by the

student themselves. Furthermore, it may send a subtle message that getting certain students to college (i.e. those who are not talking about college with their parents or who are in lower academic tracks) is a vain attempt.

*Financial Influence.* Camille and Stephen identified themselves as being a member of the upper-middle class, Brianna felt she fell somewhere in the middle, and Katelyn believed she was in the middle-lower class. They all had a sense of financial literacy in that they understood how hard their parents worked to finance their education and understood the cost of that schooling. All of the students planned to take advantage of resources such as federal financial aid and scholarships. Katelyn had begun working at Olympia Sports three days before our interview and was doing it as a way to save money for textbooks and other college essentials. She and her parents had begun talking explicitly about the cost of college during her sophomore year of high school, though she believed it was something they had always been thinking about. Financial aid and scholarships were a top priority for Katelyn as she began the college process because she knew she would have to pay for a portion of her education. Fortunately, Katelyn and her parents began talking about their financial situation early enough in the process that Katelyn was able to prepare accordingly.

Brianna and her parents had also begun seeking financial aid through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). When I asked her if she had ever felt disadvantaged by her social class, she answered almost immediately: “FAFSA.” She described taking three weeks to fill out the form only to immediately receive an email that they were eligible for zero dollars in federal loans. Because of this experience, Brianna worked harder on getting grants and scholarships that would assist her family financially. According to Brianna, there is a “scholarship drawer” in the guidance office at Smith High School that contains folders of applications for students to browse through. According to Brianna, however, the drawer is not

advertised and students must ask to open it. Brianna and her mother found out about the drawer during parent-teacher conferences when Brianna's mother asked about scholarship opportunities: "The counselor told us that I could use it if I wanted to, but that I have to ask before I do it. I think they're trying to show you that you have to step out of your comfort zone to get things. Not many people use it, but they update it every two weeks. I check it all the time." Brianna was unsure whether the school was intentional in not advertising the scholarship drawer. Regardless, however, the high school evidently did not place a premium on assisting students in financing their education. The students who accessed the drawer were individuals who did so on their own initiative or with the encouragement of their parents, like in Brianna's case. Students who did not possess the cultural capital to understand the processes of applying for financial aid, would miss the opportunity to take advantage of the scholarship drawer entirely. Unfortunately, these individuals may be the students who are in need of financial aid the most. Brianna also mentioned that she took her SAT extra seriously because her guidance counselor told her that scholarships often require the score. Again, Brianna was afforded valuable pieces of information that others may not have benefitted from as a result of social connections.

Stephen and Camille had similar motivations to do well on the SAT. According to Stephen, the University of Kansas offered a scholarship called JHawk Generations to students whose parents attended the school. When he first sent in his SAT score of 1290 they offered him a \$30,000 scholarship. However, they informed him that if he received a score of 1310 or higher, they would offer him a \$50,000 scholarship. He and his parents often joked saying, "20 points for \$20,000." In this way, Stephen was able to contextualize his SAT scores as a meaningful opportunity to earn more money for college, rather than a pointless test that all students must take.

*Academic Rigor.* Stephen believed that colleges cared the most about courses taken during a student's junior and senior years, and that to take these courses, you had to have taken high-level classes during freshmen and sophomore year as well. In order to enroll in AP courses, teachers have to sign off on a student's course registration. According to Stephen, "a lot of students who are not in AP classes either did not try that hard their first two years or they mouthed off in class and teachers did not want to send them off. Even if they got good grades." Stephen disliked being in non-AP courses because he felt like the material was too easy and teachers had to "apply their material lowest common denominator in the class".

The process was similar at Katelyn and Brianna's school and both students were in the highest track. Advanced Placement statistics, anatomy and physiology, and psychology took up the majority of Katelyn's academic schedule. These were her favorite courses because she felt they were applicable to her long-term goals of becoming a medical doctor. Not only was Katelyn in difficult courses at school, she was also participating in dual-enrollment courses through Kennebec Valley Community College and Thomas College. These courses included college algebra, statistics, anatomy and physiology, and psychology and were taught at Smith High School. Upon a passing grade, Thomas College and multiple other colleges would accept this as credit toward Katelyn's degree. Katelyn mentioned that Thomas also has a similar program called College Credits Now in which students can earn free college credits while taking courses on the Thomas College campus. Because she wanted to attend medical school, Katelyn felt as though these courses would give her the jump start she needed knowing that she'll "probably be at college for a really, really long time."

Similar to Katelyn, Brianna was enrolled in psychology at Kennebec Valley Community College and was taking the courses directly on campus. She believed that dual enrollment courses "are not for everybody. They're mostly for students who have had good grades in the

past or who have run out of courses to take at the high school.” Dual-enrollment courses are beneficial for students in many ways: they cut down on the cost of a college degree, they allow students to experiment with different classes without strict commitment to a major, they ease students into a college work-load by taking few courses at a time, and they demonstrate initiative which will benefit high-school students in the college admissions process. Dual-enrollment courses may provide a non-traditional way for students to experience college in a low-stress, experimental, and financially secure way.

Stephen and Camille had each participated in an independent study course at Woodstock High School either because the school did not offer high enough courses or because they could not fit a certain course in their schedule. Stephen explained that he participated in a French III independent study his sophomore year because the regular class was during his music block. Stephen’s independent study required that he learn parallel material to the regular class, but on his own time. Because of the intense amount of individual work, students who partake in an independent study must be self-driven and good at budgeting their own time. They also must have a teacher sponsor; Stephen’s sponsor was the teacher of the highest level French courses at the school. It is worth noting that Stephen’s sponsor noticed the scheduling conflict *before* Stephen and made the initial suggestion for him to undertake an independent study. By doing so, she demonstrated her interest in Stephen and viewed him as an investment for her future courses; because of this experience, Stephen was able to enroll in French V during his senior year, the highest level offered: “It’s my favorite class because there’s only 7 of us and we’re all so close with our teacher.” Due partially to his teacher’s interest and demonstrated commitment to his academic development, Stephen was able to succeed at a high level and improve his credentials for college admission.

Camille was also taking advantage of an independent study in neuroscience because Woodstock High School did not offer it. She purchased the book online and was working through the course material independently. She had a teacher sponsor who tutored her when necessary and was in charge of collecting her tests and assignments. Unlike Stephen, Camille made this arrangement for herself, but that is not to say that a teacher would not have taken initiative had Camille not. In her future, Camille hoped to be a medical doctor and she believed that taking a course in neuroscience would give her the foundation that she needed to succeed in college.

### ***Deep Geographic Tensions***

*Pulls: Desire To Remain in Rural Community.* All four students were eager to attend college in New England; Katelyn, Brianna, and Camille were adamant about staying in New England, but only Brianna and Katelyn were determined to remain in Maine. The two students who were insistent on staying in Maine were the only two students whose families had deep ties to the state; Katelyn's parents and grandparents were from Manchester and Vassalboro while Brianna's family was from Clinton, Maine. Of the other two students, Camille's grandfather was from Quebec and her father was a Bangor, Maine native. Her mother's side of the family was from Suriname in South America. Stephen's mother and her side of the family were from Kansas and Ohio while his father's family came from Richmond, Virginia.

The most frequently cited reason that Katelyn, Brianna, and Camille wanted to remain in Maine was their families. Katelyn explained that a large part of the reason she applied to Bates was so she could go home on the weekends. For her, she wanted to find a college that could satisfy all of her needs, both academic and personal. Brianna wanted to remain in Maine, but also strike a balance with her home and social life: "I want to stay in Maine, but I wouldn't want to go to Colby or Thomas. I want to be far enough away that I don't necessarily run into them in the

grocery store. But also close enough that if someone is in the hospital or something, I can get there in a couple hours.” Having grown up within a fifteen-mile radius of her entire family, Brianna was nervous but excited about getting some “space” though she planned to stay in Maine. Camille was willing to leave Maine, but not prepared to leave New England; she did not want to be too far away from her family and “appreciated the changing seasons of New England way too much to leave.” Unlike the young women, Stephen did not feel a particular attachment to Maine because his family was located in several pockets of the country. His top choice was the University of Virginia where his father attended. The educational attainment of his father meant that Stephen would be a legacy at UVA. This status meant that Stephen had a valuable connection that may give sway in admission and meant that he had unique forms of cultural knowledge passed down from his father that could make him excel at this specific school.

There was also subtle yet explicit pressure from Camille, Brianna, and Katelyn’s parents to stay close to home. Katelyn described how her parents felt about her applying to colleges outside of Maine:

My parents would let me go where I wanted to go, but they would just prefer that I stay in Maine. Because I was at a point where I knew I wanted to stay here, but there were some schools that I was considering in Massachusetts. And both of my parents said they’d rather have me stay in Maine. Like I can do what I want to do, but they don’t know what they’d do if I went that far... Like I said, we just kind of see each other all the time. And it’d just be different. Like it would just feel wrong. It would feel like they were missing a part of their life.

While this sentiment from parents may be echoed in many locales across the country, it is significant for those in rural communities because their options for higher education may be

incredibly narrow. If a parent in Boston were to pressure their child to stay close to home, the student would still have access to a wide variety of colleges and universities to choose from, unlike Katelyn who had much less being from rural Maine. Katelyn very poignantly described a scenario that is often unique to rural students in which she was asked to choose between her home community and heightened opportunities that may exist elsewhere. For Camille, the pressure from her parents was slightly more explicit:

My mom told me that I have a 5-hour limit. She was like, ‘if you get sick, I want to be able to drive to you in the same day.’ I had to beg her to let me apply to Cornell, even though I didn’t end up doing it. I kind of wanted to apply to schools in Atlanta to be by my cousin. She said I couldn’t even think about it.

Camille’s decision not to apply to Cornell was not based on her perceived academic disadvantage, but a reflection on social systems that were taking place within her family. Camille inevitably faced a sort of tension in trying to reconcile these seemingly disparate goals.

According to Stephen, his school also placed pressure on its students to stay in rural Maine for college. Stephen explained that at the end of the school year, seniors are asked to place their names on a map indicating where they will be attending college and “at least fifty percent of the students are *just* going to UMaine Orono, which I call ‘high school round two’ and the other ones are mostly other Maine schools. They want to keep you here. There’s not a lot of young people in Maine anymore because there’s nothing here for us. So [Woodstock High School] does everything it can to keep you in.” Stephen explained that he knew this because of the college tours the school provided that only went to institutions in Maine. Additionally, many students who are not high-achieving are “usually just told that UMaine is the best option for them.”

Other aspects of rural Maine that pulled the students to stay included Brianna and Katelyn's dislike for larger cities and the "everybody knows everybody" nature of small communities. Brianna felt as though the tight connections made in rural communities helped her in more ways than one: she and her neighbors worked to keep their neighborhood safe and clean, she knew her friends' families very well, and she was held accountable by many members of the community. She referred to this network of family, friends, neighbors, teachers, and other community members as her "safety net" and "something I am nervous about leaving behind."

These clear reasons for wanting to stay in rural communities, however, were met with an extreme tension for wanting to gain new experiences. Camille demonstrated this in her desire to apply to Cornell and Katelyn exemplified it again by saying she wished there was a part of her "that didn't want to stay [in Maine]. Because there's so many great colleges out there." Brianna echoed similar sentiments, but seemed to have found peace with her decision to remain in the state:

There are some kids who aren't close to their families and are like 'I'm going to move to California and do whatever.' And it's kind of sad for me because at the University of New England, they have a campus in Morocco which is amazing. But I'm thinking, if I go to Morocco for a semester, then that's a whole semester I can't go home. But ultimately, I think to want to go home is better than to not want to. Because yeah, maybe I miss out on some opportunities, but I'd rather have that relationship [with my family] than be able to go to Morocco. I could never move to California, but some people do because they might not be as close to their family. But I'd rather be close with mine and not want to go far than want to get away from them.

Brianna's uniquely close relationship to her family may play a role in her resolution, but it simultaneously exposes a common tension among rural students: having educational aspirations and career goals that do not exist in their rural environment and being forced to choose between community and heightened opportunity.

*Pushes: Desire to Leave Rural Communities.* There was a common belief among the students that their communities could not provide meaningful jobs to them after college. Katelyn, Brianna, and Camille, who all wanted to enter the medical field, felt as though they would gain more meaningful experiences and impressive credentials in larger cities such as Portland or Boston. Specifically, Camille said that she would like to move to Boston in order "to be in a hospital with really cutting edge and high end equipment that large cities have." For her, it was mostly the opportunities and different options that large cities offered, "whereas Woodstock is pretty limited." Camille added that she has been to Boston and Portland, but had never actually seen their hospitals or confirmed that their equipment was better. It is just something that she "assumed about big cities because their budget must be bigger." Stephen, who was unsure what he would be studying in college, held similar beliefs about Woodstock and did not see himself living in a rural community until he was older because "there's just not a lot of job opportunities."

Camille and Stephen seemed to adhere to the rhetoric that better opportunities could be found in cities and would eventually contribute to the "brain-drain," or the migration of a town's "best and brightest" who are in search for heightened experiences. During his interview, Stephen spoke proudly about leaving Maine for college as if leaving his rural community was a success, regardless of the school that he would be attending. His tie to Maine was lesser than that of Katelyn and Brianna, which could be attributed to his lack of extended family or familial legacy in the area.

The students were also eager to encounter more diverse groups of people, an experience they felt could not be provided by rural communities. Stephen generally liked people from Woodstock, but he felt they were not receptive to young people and new ideas: “There’s a fear that the mills are going to come back and young people are all going to regret leaving. When people believe the mills are going to come back and the town will flourish again, they’re afraid to push the community toward something else.” Camille held similar beliefs about Woodstock residents saying that they were so upset about “change” happening, that they did not realize the change was often for the better. For example, she felt Colby College’s expansion into downtown Woodstock would make the city “more of a college town and less of just a town with a college in it.” She seemed to be imagining the streets of Woodstock booming like downtown Portland, a change she felt would enhance the city greatly. This fear of change was something Stephen and Camille felt was frustrating and unique to rural communities. Stephen noted, “This isn’t a great place to be if you are really forward-thinking.” Having grown up in this environment, Camille optimistically added:

I’m just so excited for college. So excited to just open my wings. Because I’ve said, I’ve taken so many responsibilities at school and just think of what I can do at a school with twenty times the kids. I can not wait to meet a lot of people who think like me. I’m just so excited to see what I can do.

Stephen and Brianna added that many students resisted the push to leave rural Maine because it was all that they knew. In Brianna’s experience, people her age often claimed that they would never live in Central Maine but she knew “they will come back because everybody does.” Stephen believed that leaving Woodstock for good was a difficult feat; many students who leave end up coming back “because their college experience or college friends aren’t what they expected. They just come back and hang out with their high school peers” (a comment that may

also point to the lack of college preparatory information that students received at Woodstock High School). However, he believed that he was different from these students because his parents had prepared him for the challenges that he might face away from home:

It's all about expectations. A lot of kids go in expecting it to be easy. I know college is going to be scary at times. I know of a girl, a friend of mine, her older sister went to Fairfield and then, halfway through freshman orientation, or some stupid amount of time like that, she left and started going to UMaine. Yeah, it's a scary thing, but instead of embracing it and saying 'this is a new opportunity,' they panic and go back to the familiar.

It was this mentality from his peers that Stephen said made him eager to leave and meet new, exciting people. At the end of our interview, however, Camille expressed some of her own fears. Incredibly confident throughout the interviews, Camille demonstrated a moment of vulnerability when she added:

There is something I do wonder sometimes. Was I at a disadvantage because I went to a rural school? And, um, sometimes I wonder if I'm only smart because I go to a small school. Like how will I stack up with other kids? I've never necessarily felt disadvantaged at my school, but is this only because I'm not comparing myself to kids who went to rich, private schools yet?

Though the students did not want to live in Maine after college graduation, they would consider moving here when they were adults with children. Stephen believed that it was a good place to grow up because "there was no craziness or distractions." Katelyn agreed and plans to move back after she has a family of her own.

## Discussion

In addition to a number of explicit college preparatory programs, many of the students in my study were beneficiaries of social supports that played a similar role. However, most of these supports were a result of familial connections and access to outside enrichment activities not sponsored by their high school. Most of the support offered from each high school was argued to be *equally distributed* among students of all academic levels. However, the resources that were distributed by the school (i.e. college visits, scholarship opportunities) were described to be *not adequate* enough to support a student to college if they were a student's sole source of support. For this reason, it is crucial to acknowledge the outside sources of support that the four students in the study received and account for them in the evaluation of an average rural student's preparedness for college. Nonetheless, to varying degrees, each student in the study had access to the three most critical aspects of a college preparatory program: family engagement, college preparatory curricula, and early engagement (Corwin, Colyar & Tierney, 2005), whether they came from official college preparatory programs or outside sources.

The most frequently cited source of support from all four students was their parents and extended family. Though the families were not engaged through an explicit program, their support was nevertheless present in a more organic fashion. Because Stephen, Brianna, and Camille's parents attended college, they may have drawn on their varying levels of cultural capital in order to benefit their children. In other words, they had access to valuable forms of information such as first-hand knowledge of the application process that may have advantaged their children on the quest for higher educational attainment. For Katelyn, whose mother and father did not attend college, the process seemed to look quite different. However, Katelyn's parents were committed to sorting through the complex information and appreciating its

relevance to their lives, a crucial step for parents without a higher degree (McClafferty, McDonough, & Fann, 2001).

Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and cultural reproduction suggest that certain aspects of society (i.e. educational attainment and socioeconomic status) endure over generations (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). This theory outlines a complex system in which "parents transmit cultural capital to children, children exploit their acquired cultural capital in the educational system, and, as a consequence, families who possess cultural capital have an advantage that helps them reproduce their privileged socioeconomic position" (Jaeger, 2016, p. 1080). This pattern of transmission was apparent in the case studies of the students whose parents attended college. For example, Stephen benefitted from his father's *institutionalized* cultural capital when he attended his father's 25th reunion at the University of Virginia. While there, Stephen participated in a workshop geared towards young adults who were planning to apply to college in the future. Heeding the advice from the workshop, Stephen became heavily involved in multiple clubs in high school which boosted his college application. Just as the process of cultural reproduction outlines, Stephen's father transmitted his access and knowledge to his son, Stephen exploited this information by joining extracurriculars, and, as a consequence, was given a privileged position in the college application process. The process was similar for Camille whose parents attended Tufts Medical School and had taken her on multiple campus visits in hopes that she would enroll there as well.

All four students also had academic supports at their high schools; these supports included invested teachers and a course catalog that offered an honors and Advanced Placement curriculum. Not surprisingly, academic success has been proven to be an essential factor in college enrollment (Cabrera, La Nasa, & Burkam, 2001) and students who participate in a college-preparatory academic track greatly increase their chances of enrolling at a four-year

college within two years of high school graduation. All four students in the project categorized themselves as being at the top of their class. Not only did they receive good marks, they were also all enrolled in honors and Advanced Placement courses.

The students' participation in these tracks is deeply intertwined with their cultural knowledge of the college application process and what is necessary for admission. Stephen admitted that he was thinking about his future college application during his freshmen year of high school; he knew to take AP prerequisites during his freshman and sophomore year so he could stand out to colleges during his junior and senior year as an all-Advanced Placement student. This decision was largely based on the support of his parents who passed on the cultural knowledge of early college preparation but also of his high school for offering these courses in the first place.

Like Stephen, the other three students were also placed on the honors track at their high schools. Their participation in this track is certainly reflective of their individual choices, but also a large reflection of their social class and privilege (Yonezawa, 2002). While tracking is based on academic ability, tracks tend to ultimately divide along socioeconomic lines. All four students in the study identified as being members of the middle or upper class suggesting that their placement into this group was not simply a product of their academic success, but also a culmination of the advantages and enrichment activities that they had collected during their educational journeys up until this point. Not only were the students given the option to take more difficult courses, they frequently described the high quality of the teachers who taught them. Katelyn and Brianna's positive descriptions of their teachers reflected the research showing that students in upper-level classes tend to receive more quality instruction than those in lower tracks (Perna, 2002). Unfortunately, the support that they received from being enrolled in the higher-tracks at their schools was at the cost of students who were placed on the non-honors track, often

understood to be the “non-college bound” track. Camille’s evaluation of teacher performance in lower-tracked classes reflected this research at Woodstock High School; she explained that students in lower-tracked classes often feel as though their teachers do not care and are more apt to give up.

Despite research that highlights systemic disadvantages for low-tracked students, Katelyn, Brianna, Camille, and Stephen perpetuated the rhetoric about students who are concentrated in these tracks as being “immature” and “lazy”. They believed that these students were there because they did not work hard or “did not care”. There was little consideration that perhaps the students in lower-tracks did not have the same resources or level of supports that the four students in the study did. At the same time, by portraying other students as “lazy” they rationalized their privilege and suggested that they gained success based on effort and merit, unlike their low-tracked peers. Not only are students in these tracks not often given high quality instruction, but also they may have lacked the cultural capital that taught them there were certain actions (i.e. working hard during the first two years of high school) that were somewhat necessary for college enrollment. Because these students were clustered in the “non-college bound” track, they may have received less attention from guidance counselors or teachers who could have remedied this information gap. This unequal distribution of information is one of the most common inequalities in college access (Perna & Kurban, 2013). The four students in the study were fortunate enough to enroll in the “college-bound” track at their high schools where they had access to high quality instruction and high investment from their teachers and guidance counselors.

However, even if the two high schools were to eradicate tracking, inequalities of access would still exist due to the way that certain students continue to gain a competitive edge over others outside of the classroom walls (Yonezawa, 2002). Because college admission is centered

so tightly around comparative evaluations, families with high levels of economic, social, and cultural capital will work to maintain a position at the top of the academic hierarchy. The four students in the study had supports from multiple sources outside of their direct classroom that may have given this competitive edge. For example, Camille attended leadership training at Stonehill and took online courses at Brown University while Brianna took advantage of Let's Get Ready and was enrolled in courses at KVCC and Thomas. In both cases, their teachers and parents understood the benefits and encouraged their participation in these programs.

Involvement in these activities could be an example of Bourdieu's theory of form over function in which parents care not only about *what* their children are learning but *that* their children are receiving more than other students (Bourdieu, 1984). The four students in the study were not only given academically rigorous material in the classroom, but also access to programs that would encourage them to apply to college, differentiate their application from others, and eventually enroll.

In many ways, these programs and activities work to compensate for the lack of resources of the students' own schooling (Gandara, 2002) and are an incredible supplement to college preparedness. For example, Brianna spoke about the lack of SAT preparation in her classes. There was little to no emphasis at Smith High School on studying for the test during school hours, although the school did lightly advertise about non-school related study opportunities. Fortunately for Brianna, she had access to Let's Get Ready at Colby College which she felt helped boost her test score by a couple hundred points. Alexander (1987) argues that these extra points are crucial for students who may be on the border of enrolling at college; students with strong academic preparation (defined as high test scores and participation in a college-bound academic track) see a dramatic increase in four-year college enrollments.

Similarly, Stephen felt as though Woodstock High School did not do a good job presenting schools other than the University of Maine as viable options for its students. To compensate, Stephen and his parents went on tours of other colleges like the University of Virginia, Northeastern University, Boston College, and the University of Kansas. When the students' schools could not provide adequately, the students had access to supports that would make up for the deficit. Additionally, they had the cultural capital to acknowledge that a deficit was present at all. Of course, not all students have access to these supports. Though the school may claim that they provide equally for all students, the efforts taken by families with heightened access to economic, social, and cultural capital will raise the standard for all students thus heightening the divide among students with and without these supports.

Lastly, the four students had access to early intervention which has been shown to increase academic, test, and financial preparation (Bonnous-Hammarth & Allen, 2002). For Katelyn, early intervention meant enough time for her to strategize with her parents about a way to afford college. While for Camille, it meant that she had enough time to prepare, study, and take the SAT and the ACT multiple times before submitting her scores. While these steps require a student's participation, they are also initiated by several outside sources such as guidance counselors, family members, and teachers (McDonough, 1997). The students described multiple scenarios in which their parents began talking to them about college before ninth grade, though they all argued that their high schools did not begin speaking to them about college in depth until eleventh grade, which many researchers (Bonnous-Hammarth & Allen, 2002) would argue is about two years too late. Camille described a common scenario in which students decide that they want to attend college late in their high school careers before realizing that "they did not try hard enough during their freshman and sophomore years and it was too late."

Early intervention provides students with ample time to consider higher education as an option, enroll in the proper prerequisite courses, develop a financial plan, take the PSAT, SAT, and ACT, and ultimately apply to colleges during the application season. Again, while the high schools in the study may argue that they provide the same amount of preparation for all students, it must be acknowledged that certain students have access to outside tutors, college preparatory programs (i.e. Let's Get Ready), and parents who have undergone the process themselves. For students who do not have access to these supports, their schools are often the only place in which they come in contact with conversations about college. Access to college preparatory materials was said to be equal among all students, though this material was not presented to the student body until their junior year of high school. While this may not present an issue for students who were already discussing college within their family, it is detrimental for students who did not *know* to begin the process before their junior year or even know *how* to begin the process at all. Unfortunately, these students are often clustered in the “non-college bound” tracks at their high schools and are often from families of low-socioeconomic status (Bonous-Hammarth & Allen, 2002). This demographic of student who does not receive early college intervention is commonly the student who needs the most time to prepare financially and academically for higher education.

The aforementioned sources of support were frequently a result of the student's social, cultural, or economic capital. However, there were a few mentions of support that could be applied to rural students more broadly. These supports include enduring and supportive relationships with teachers and close relationships between communities and schools. All four students spoke highly of the teachers in their schools and their supportiveness. For example, Brianna explained that her mother has a very close relationship with many of the teachers at Smith High School because she is a teacher herself. Additionally, Camille described projects that

she has organized with Green Team in which she has been working with the community to spread awareness about the benefits of recycling. While other factors must be considered, the small town nature of the greater-Woodstock community certainly had a role in these events. The study revealed that the four students benefitted from community social resources, which has been shown to benefit students in terms of college enrollment (Byun, Meece & Irvin, 2012).

Additionally, Nelson (2016) and Wright (2012) argued that “when everybody knows everybody” students are more successful at school; they often believe that they are being held more accountable by a larger number of people who know them personally, academically, or socially. Brianna and Katelyn touched on this in their interview as a reason for disliking big cities; they did not have the “community feel” that a small-town provided them. Brianna used the term “safety-net” to describe her family, neighbors, and other community members who knew her well and worked to keep her successful. This safety net was “something she was nervous about leaving behind.” In a similar vein, rural parents are more likely to know the parents of their children’s friends than adults in other locales (Byun, Meece, and Irvin, 2012), an experience that all four students had experienced in their friendships. The students recalled that this held them more accountable to their actions and may have kept them on track academically.

The “rural advantage” such as relationships with parents of friends can be applied to rural students at large. And certainly, there are other systems of support that can only be applied to students with a certain level of valuable levels of cultural, economic, and social capital such as those interviewed for this project. However, there is also “rural disadvantages” that can be applied to a rural student body at large and must be acknowledged in order to set all rural students up for success.

While all of the students in the study received non-school related systems of support on their journey to college, many relied solely on their high school for the same preparation. In

many ways, however, their high schools did not provide adequately enough to function as a sole system of support for students. According to Katelyn, Brianna, Camille, and Stephen, their high schools did not provide enough SAT/ACT preparation, did not begin talking about college early enough in the process, did not advertise enough scholarship opportunities, and failed to make college seem like a legitimate option for students in the “non-college” bound track. These are challenges that students across the country may face and that can easily be addressed with necessary resources and supports through a college preparatory program.

The literature (Corbett, 2007; Elder & Conger, 2000; Carr & Kefalas, 2009) and the students in the study echoed one another in regards to the largest disadvantage facing rural students: the seemingly disparate goals of wanting to remain in the rural environment that you grew up in and the desire to acquire heightened socio-economic opportunities in a larger city. The most frequently cited reason that the students wanted to go to college in Maine or New England was their families. This desire was internal but was also a result of subtle pressures from their families and more explicit pressures, like in Camille’s case. Elder and Conger (2000) explain that rural students may place a higher premium on a physical connection with their families rather than on acquiring experiences in an often more booming urban environment. Fortunately for most students in the study, they were able to find a relative balance between wanting to be close to home and wanting to attend a highly regarded school: Katelyn planned to enroll at Bates College, Brianna at the University of New England, and Camille at Brown University. However, for many students, particularly those concentrated in “non-college” bound tracks, remaining in their rural community and attaining a higher degree may seem mutually exclusive given the minimal amount of college options in the area (Corbett, 2007).

This is extremely relevant in communities unlike Woodstock that do not have colleges or universities nearby. For small towns with no institutions of higher learning, to go to college is to

leave home. While Woodstock, Maine is fortunate enough to contain three institutions of higher learning, there are many rural communities that do not have similar opportunities even remotely close. This is an issue for rural young adults, particularly those who are talented and seek prestigious educational and employment opportunities (Carr and Kefalas, 2009). This became obvious for Camille, Brianna, and Katelyn who each verbalized that there were schools that were off-limits due entirely to geographic location and distance from home. While a student from Boston could make a similar argument, they have access to nearly twelve times the amount of colleges and universities close to home, many of which are elite and prestigious institutions. Despite having three institutions nearby, Woodstock students can still be considered disadvantaged due to the limited number of choices in the area.

The students in the study acknowledged this tension and related it to their own lives often, particularly Camille who expressed her desire to enroll at Cornell but realized this was too far from home and would upset her mother. However, the students seemed to feel as though this was a personal tension that they were having rather than one that affects many rural students at large. In other words, they resented the small number of institutions close to home, but they did not draw broader conclusions about this being a popular epidemic that affects rural students across the country, particularly those who live in rural communities even smaller than Woodstock.

In the interviews, the rhetoric surrounding students who did not want to attend college was largely negative and criticized the student's merit rather than respecting individual choice. Despite the fact that the students mentioned systemic disadvantages for low-track students, they still managed to categorize non-college bound students at their high school as "lazy", "immature", and "unmotivated." Certainly, many rural students may not be interested in college for other reasons including lack of effort, but it is important to acknowledge this heavily-

researched tension facing rural students who may not be prepared or willing to lose physical connections with their families and community. A rural student's decision to not attend college may not be a reflection of her disadvantage, but additionally, a response to the social systems taking place within her school, community, and family (Elder & Conger, 2000). The students did not mention that perhaps the low-tracked students did not want to go to college because they truly wanted to join the work force, had responsibilities at home, or could not afford college at this time. Rather, they spoke under the assumption that all students should aspire to college and quickly attacked the low-tracked students' work ethic and motivation. This rhetoric is dangerous for low-track students as it sets low expectations for them and may create a self-fulfilling prophecy of academic failure, not unlike the two cousins mentioned in the introduction of this project.

Other important disadvantages facing rural students is the difficulty of recruiting and retaining quality educators and leaders (Monk 2007) and less course options (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012). This was evident in the study among all four students who either enrolled in courses at a local college (Brianna and Katelyn) or created an independent study (Stephen and Camille) because they had run out of difficult courses at their high schools. Additionally, Camille made reference to teachers in the low-track classes who often do not teach as well as those in her classroom. Furthermore, rural communities have lower family incomes (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012) and rural adolescents are more likely to have parents without a college degree (McGrath, et al., 2001). This was certainly the case in Woodstock and MSAD 49 in which under 38% of residents in each community had a college degree and over half of the student bodies received government assistance.

Because of the low socioeconomic status and educational attainment of their families, many rural students may rely on their high schools for support in the college process. However,

all four students in the study spoke often about the need for “initiative” in the college process and the importance of “actively seeking” school resources; the students mentioned that the resources are *available* to everyone, but only those who take *advantage* of them will benefit. For example, Brianna knew of a scholarship drawer at Smith High School that was technically available to all students, but was not advertised heavily. She frequently checked the drawer on her own initiative and felt that she benefitted from it greatly. Other students who did not find out about the drawer through parent-teacher conferences may never have been given the opportunity to use it, despite the fact that it was accessible to all students. Like in this case, students who rely solely on their school for college support may lack the cultural capital to start taking advantage of these resources at the proper time or in the proper fashion. By placing the responsibility on the student, Woodstock High School and Smith High School disadvantaged a particular demographic of student who may be in the most need of assistance. The tracking of students into “college-bound” and “non-college” bound did not appear to be an explicit separation, but a implicit cutoff of resources as a way to maximize the school’s efficiency toward more promising students.

## Conclusion

Findings of this study revealed that a student's familial and geographic upbringing play a large role in determining a student's probability of applying to and enrolling at college and an even larger role in determining the specific type of college a rural student may attend; however, I argue that Woodstock, Maine presents unique opportunities for rural high school students in regards to attaining a higher degree. While familial influences gave the students in the study a distinct advantage, there are multiple pre-existing college preparatory programs in Woodstock that could serve to close the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students if used by more students and advertised more heavily by their high school. Additionally, while the literature argued that living in a rural community often means not having access to nearby college and universities, the greater Woodstock area is home to three institutions of higher learning. For Woodstock students, access to these colleges could mean that living in their home communities and going to college is not mutually exclusive. More importantly and more relevant to this project, however, access to these colleges could mean increased access to college preparatory opportunities for students in middle school and high school. This study revealed pre-existing resources in Woodstock, validated their need for rural students, and highlighted ways that Woodstock schools can continue to increase their students' interest in attending college.

It is important to note that this study had limitations and influences that may have restricted its methodology and conclusions. First, the perspective of rural Woodstock students who chose to not attend college after high school is important. Their perspectives could further highlight the disparity of resources between college-track students and low-track students, could expose challenges faced by rural students that college-goers may not be aware of, and could provide explanations for why students *choose* to not attend college despite the amount of resources or capital they have. Their perspectives are critical, but because the selection of

students for this study was done in the fall, many high school guidance counselors did not know which students would not be enrolling at college the following year. Without the perspectives of non-college bound students, the study was altered to research college-goers, identify the influences that placed them on this track, and attempt to simulate these influences for other rural students who may not have access to the same resources. Lastly, the study may be limited in the gender diversity of the students interviewed. However, the students interviewed did not frequently mention the influence of their gender intersectionality with other aspects of their identity. These limitations should be acknowledged moving forward with any element of this project.

Throughout my research, it became obvious that the discussion of educational attainment as it relates to low-income communities often falls under the category of economic disparity of rural communities. However, the lived experiences of the students in the study revealed that focusing on the social effects of rural communities may be more beneficial as a lens of exploring the educational aspirations of rural youth. Additionally, unlike economic analyses, a social analysis offers more direction for policy makers looking to effect educational change and outcomes for rural students (Singh & Dika, 2003).

The unique nature of rural schooling as presented by the literature (Corbett 2007; Elder & Conger, 2000) suggests that because of the low level of higher educational opportunities in small communities, rural students are often forced to choose between receiving a degree or remaining in their home communities, a tension that students from urban spaces do not often have to experience due to the vast number of colleges surrounding them. As mentioned previously however, Woodstock, Maine is lucky in that it is host to three institutions of higher learning in and around its immediate borders: Colby College and Thomas College in Woodstock and Kennebec Valley Community College in a neighboring community. Moreover, each college

differs in their purpose, mission, and specialty. Because of the presence of these colleges, the literature suggesting that remaining at home and going to college were mutually exclusive events did not seem to apply to my project focusing on Woodstock, Maine. However, while the literature may not apply directly to Woodstock, it certainly highlights how fortunate Woodstock is to present rural students with an opportunity to remain in their communities and attend institutions of higher learning nearby. More importantly, the presence of Colby, Thomas, and KVCC can provide rural students with access to supports and programs during high school, regardless of whether they choose to actually enroll at these colleges for an undergraduate degree.

The ways in which Woodstock students could take advantage of these colleges while in high school became obvious in my conversations with Katelyn, Brianna, Camille, and Stephen. Katelyn was dually enrolled at KVCC and Thomas while Brianna was dually enrolled at KVCC and took advantage of Let's Get Ready at Colby College. Camille and Stephen were not involved with local colleges, but both benefitted from experiences on college campuses (i.e. Stonehill and University of Virginia) that could be replicated for students in Woodstock at one of the three institutions there.

Participating in various college activities could have multiple benefits for rural high school students. Students who take advantage of dual-enrollment courses or Thomas College's College Credits Now program have increased access to valuable forms of cultural capital, such as time management in college, college classroom expectations, and heightened academic independence. These forms of cultural capital could be particularly valuable for students whose parents did not attend college and who cannot give them useful, first-hand advice. Dual-enrollment courses offer these students an environment in which they can learn by experience without the pressures of being a full-time college student. Because they are free, dual-enrollment

courses can lessen the financial burden for families who are deterred by the cost of their child's college education. As an added bonus, Thomas College's College Credits Now program allows its high school students to have access to the Student Success Center which provides tutoring and other academic support. Lastly, dual-enrollment courses may work to increase a student's confidence or excitement about applying to and attending college. However, dual-enrollment courses may be limiting in that they can only include students who have demonstrated academic success.

An additional resource for students in Woodstock, Maine is Let's Get Ready, which not only increases a student's chances of doing well on the SAT, but gives them the opportunity to make connections with Colby students and get accustomed to the campus during the classes offered twice a week. Brianna expressed her confusion that more students were not involved in the program, but also mentioned that her school did little to advertise it; she had only heard about it through one of her friends who had done it in a year prior. Smaller efforts to get students involved with local colleges, though they may not have a strong effect on their desire to apply may be advertising free speakers and events held at the colleges or including academic trips to campus, like a visit to the Colby art museum, into the curriculum. These events may not prepare students for actual college enrollment, but may get them excited about college as a prospective path in ways that had not excited them before. For example, students may not know about certain resources such as the art museum or art library until they step on campus and see it for themselves.

While Woodstock, Maine may not have college-preparatory programs that care for all elements of a rural student's development, there are clearly programs in place that heed to some of the more critical elements, namely access to college preparatory curricula, mentoring, and results that can be achieved at a reasonable cost (Tierney, Corwin, & Colyar, 2005). Woodstock

High School, Smith High School, and other area high schools need to place a heightened emphasis on these opportunities as a way for unlikely students to have an opportunity to prepare for and enroll at an institution of higher learning. The literature and the students from the research all suggested that programs directly affiliated with colleges had a large impact on their decisions throughout high school (i.e. their decision to join more clubs, work harder in class, etc.). All four students in the study suggested that they participated in these programs under the advice of family members or peers and remarked on the lack of advertising by their schools. Woodstock provides an incredible backdrop for students to begin thinking about college early at three separate institutions of higher learning. High schools in the area, particularly those mentioned in the study, need to advertise these opportunities to students, particularly ones who come from low-income or first-generation families.

Increasing attention to pre-existing programs in Woodstock, Maine is an immediate change. However, as my final component to this project, I suggest the formation of an intensive, summer-length, college preparatory program for Woodstock middle school and high school students hosted at Colby College by Colby students. Creating a program similar to Breakthrough Collaborative in Woodstock, Maine is a much larger undertaking that would require the support of multiple parties, though I believe the model of this urban college preparatory program could benefit students in Woodstock, Maine as it does students of New York City. After having worked at Breakthrough Atlanta and having completed this study, I discovered that many challenges facing urban students are similar to the challenges facing those of small towns: parents without a college degree, concentration of low-income students in low academic tracks, lack of early college exposure, and lack of an academic mentor. Breakthrough programs across the country attempt to alleviate these disadvantages for students by providing them with an 8-week opportunity to grow and realize their potential. The model emphasizes early engagement

by offering it to students in 7-9th grade, focuses heavily on academic growth, provides students with access to information on how to prepare academically and financially for college, includes parents through weekly phone calls and meetings, and employs current college students as its teachers in order to provide students with positive mentors.

While the introduction of a summer-length, academically intense, all-encompassing program such as Breakthrough Collaborative into Woodstock, Maine would require immense time and resources, I believe that it would benefit multiple parties in the process. The positive effect on Woodstock students is the most apparent. It would increase their academic performance, test scores, knowledge of the college process, accessibility to a mentor, and other critical elements of a student's development toward college. Additionally, Breakthrough-like programs often emphasize getting students *excited* about college, rather than simply prepared. For students who routinely struggle in the classroom, being eager about something in their future may be an excellent way to keep them focused and motivated in a way that may be sustainable until they begin the college application process.

The presence of a Breakthrough-like program can enhance the local community as well. Nearly 68% of Woodstock residents do not have a higher degree; of those, the median income is \$25,700 per year, less than half of what a degree holders in Woodstock earn. Investing resources in students who are not traditionally placed on the "college track" can increase the number of skilled laborers in the community. Furthermore, demonstrating that students can get a quality college education while remaining in their home communities could stunt the outmigration of a small town's "best and brightest students" to larger cities where they perceive more opportunities.

Lastly, the presence of this program could have positive benefits for Colby College as the host institution. As Colby begins constructing new buildings in downtown Woodstock,

skepticism among residents persists; Stephen and Camille mentioned this skepticism multiple times in their interview saying that residents are unsure whether Colby has good intentions to revitalize the town or if Colby simply wants to expand the “Colby Bubble” into downtown Woodstock. Colby’s commitment to improve the prospects of young Woodstock residents by hosting a college-preparatory program during the summer months could demonstrate its commitment to the holistic development of the town, rather than its sole interest in expanding the institution. Additionally, Colby students (or students from other colleges) who serve as the Breakthrough summer teaching fellows could improve their teaching skills, foster deep ties with community members, bolster their resume, and earn college credit.

While the four students in the study briefly mentioned college-preparatory initiatives *within* their schools (i.e. mandatory guidance counselor meetings), the literature (Yonezawa, 2002) revealed that school-level efforts for reform are unlikely to eradicate the ways in which students are prepared for college based on socioeconomic status. The reason is that parents with heightened levels of social, economic, or cultural capital will utilize their additional resources (i.e. professional tutoring) as a way to boost their child’s competitiveness, thus raising the standard for all students in the classroom and perpetuating the inequality that existed in the first place. College preparatory programs such as Let’s Get Ready, College Credits Now, or Breakthrough Woodstock are important because they operate outside of the local school jurisdiction, target a particular demographic of student, and provide students with an opportunity to increase their competitiveness based on their own initiative and without cost.

My strong commitment to expanding and improving college preparatory programs in Woodstock, Maine is not based on the belief that all students need to go to college. Certainly, jobs and opportunities for individuals without a college degree exist and many individuals can best match their career and life goals without the possession of a college degree. However, each

student, regardless of geographic location, academic track, or parental involvement has the right to be considered and prepared for a college education.

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