

# Rooted in Appalachia: Empowering Rural Students to Envision & Enact Possible Selves in Postsecondary Education

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## *Abstract*

*Scholarship underscores the experiences of Appalachian students who must confront a social reality that consistently expects less from them because of their circumstances and the narratives surrounding their social context (Collins, 2020; Piene et al., 2020). Traditionally, the Appalachian people have been viewed by educators from a deficit approach although some theorists are transitioning to see the value in Appalachian people and, using this alternative lens, are approaching the Appalachian identity with more place-based pedagogies such as funds of knowledge (Collins, 2020; Piene et al., 2020). These culturally responsive approaches see value in the region's people and scaffolds a positive learning environment on the cultural heritages and identities of the region and allows students to expand their views of possible selves. In turn, this contribution explores the pedagogical approaches embodied in possible selves as a theory that builds on rural and small community assets and successes as related to the social resources and capital that rural students represent. Specifically, we look at the connections that possible selves as a theory makes to rural students' socioeconomic, sociocultural, and sociohistorical contexts and how this theory can accentuate concepts like social capital with respect to postsecondary student success.*

**Keywords:** deficit thinking, possible selves, Appalachia, rural students

## Introduction

Appalachian students often face barriers and challenges in academia that stem from stereotype threats that are exacerbated by pedagogical frameworks reliant on deficit thinking. Known as being from the cradle of poverty, Appalachian students face uphill battles when it comes to academic success, stemming from a lack of resources, a deficit of trained teachers, and cultural misunderstandings of the attributes that make the area unique (Adams, 2017; Collins, 2020). In accordance, scholarship underscores the experiences of Appalachian students who must confront a social reality that consistently expects less from them because of their circumstances and the narratives surrounding their social context (Collins, 2020; Piene et al., 2020). Understanding the demographic mosaics, cultural nuances, and social and cultural attributes that elevate and characterize the area known as Appalachia is one step toward reinventing the narrative for students of this area – understanding the pedagogical theories that educators can use to create and facilitate these opportunities is yet another.

In this contribution, we explore the pedagogical approaches embodied in possible selves

as a theory that build on rural and small community assets and successes as related to the social resources and capital that rural students represent. Specifically, we look at the connections that possible selves as a theory makes to rural students' socioeconomic, sociocultural, and sociohistorical contexts and how this theory can accentuate concepts like social capital with respect to postsecondary student success. As part of this connection, we couple critical placed-based learning and notions of social and cultural capital as central to leveraging possible selves theory as an approach to elevating Appalachia students' experiences in academia.

By centering our focus on rural students' experiences in Appalachia, we make connections to how these pedagogical efforts, in relationship to community-based networks and systems, help to address self-limiting beliefs toward postsecondary achievements (Rosecrance et al., 2019). Further, we emphasize how these pedagogical approaches can become a comprehensive effort to shed light on the inconsistencies of rural disadvantage narratives and the role that deficit thinking has on the persistence of rural students in postsecondary education. Rural institutions, especially those in Appalachia, thus may find opportunity and the capacity of hope in leveraging theories like the ones featured in this contribution as they aim to center experiences from unique social contexts as anchors for reinvention and social change (Anderson, 2010; Rosecrance et al., 2019). Additionally, in highlighting how these theories can be leveraged to change the narrative around rural Appalachia, there exists the opportunity for teachers and educational leaders to recognize the challenges and the tools needed to disrupt barriers that continue to influence rural public institutions and students.

## **Sociohistorical Context of Appalachia**

### **Characteristics of Appalachia**

In the story of postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and success, the narrative has emphasized a rural disadvantage wherein challenges including lower socioeconomic status (SES), lower parental expectations, and fewer opportunities for college preparation in high school has made it challenging for rural students to compete with their nonrural peers (Byun et al., 2012; Chambers et al., 2019). This has been exacerbated by the consistent trend of teacher attrition in rural K-12 schools, lower quality resources in rural schools, and the lack of access to comprehensive postsecondary counseling in rural high schools (Chambers et al., 2019; Means, 2017). This is certainly the case in rural Appalachia where there still exists a significant gap in terms of key economic factors including low high school graduation rates, low per capita income, and high poverty which varies across the vast region (Appalachian Regional Commission [ARC], 2022). In particular, graduation with a bachelor's degree in rural Appalachian areas is almost half that of the national average (Pollard & Jacobsen, 2017; Rosecrance et al., 2019; U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Students in rural Appalachia also disproportionately have first-generation status with particular barriers to access related to social resources and capital (Rosecrance et al., 2019).

For any discussion of education in Appalachia, it is important to begin with the historical and sociological context. Appalachia is a vast, diverse region consisting of 423 counties across thirteen states from New York to Mississippi (ARC, 2022b). While Appalachia is most often portrayed as a homogenous region with negative cultural characteristics that impede its development, Appalachia is a diverse region with a rich culture. Of the over 26 million individuals living in the Appalachian region, 10.2% are African American, 5.8% are Hispanic/Latino, 4.2% Other, and 79.8% White are other racial and/or ethnic groups (ARC, 2022b). Even though the diversity of the

region is below that of the rest of the United States, it is growing. While the African American population is currently the largest racialized group within the region, the Hispanic/Latino is the fastest growing racialized group within the region (ARC, 2022b). The diversity of the region varies as well by sub-region (i.e. Northern, Central, and Southern Appalachia) and even by county.

Appalachia is a land rich in natural resources, but with high poverty rates and low investment in the education of its people (Caretta et al., 2022; Gaventa, 2018; Haynes, 1997; Partridge et al., 2013). Outside corporate interests—particularly that of extractive industries—have taken precedence over that of its citizens throughout its history, whether it be traditional mining, mountaintop removal, or oil and gas extraction (Caretta et al., 2022; Gaventa, 2018; Haynes, 1997). As such, this prioritization has led to a lower level of education funding for Appalachia throughout the years.

Overall, research has found that high levels of natural resource extraction leads to lower per capita income, higher poverty, and more social inequality (Mueller, 2020). Even though the region has seen a stark decline in mining in recent years, the history of dependency on extractive industries continues to take its toll on the region (Schwartzman, 2021). Much of the remaining mining implemented occurs through especially environmentally devastating methods—including mountaintop removal—and employs few workers (Gaventa, 2018). In addition, the decline of mining has led to a decrease of funding for schools and subsequently a decline in K-12 enrollment in an already impoverished area with an underfunded education system (Murray & Schaeffer, 2018). Similar to its dependence on mining, the region has been disproportionately impacted by a decline in manufacturing (Mueller, 2020) with the region historically being heavily dependent on lower wage manufacturing (Haynes, 1997), which has experienced a more rapid decline. Appalachia is not unique in that rural areas throughout the world have experienced a sense of marginalization compared to urban areas, with rural areas in general being perceived as culturally, socially, and economically inferior to their urban counterparts (Peine et al., 2020).

### **Social Identity in Appalachia**

While much has been written about the Appalachian culture, most of it is written by outsiders from a culture of poverty lens that blames the poverty of the region on its culture (Gaventa, 2018). In contrast, the Appalachian Studies Association presents an alternative perspective of Appalachia and is more closely aligned with identities of possibilities of Appalachia that emphasizes the positive potential of the region’s cultures that includes the connections to community, family, and place. It is also important to not fall into the trap of characterizing the region as a static, monolithic, other culture but rather to acknowledge the diverse cultures (e.g., Black, Latinx, Indigenous) within the region (Catte, 2018; Turner & Cabbell, 1985) and those cultures are socially constructed and change over time. While acknowledging that culture is socially constructed and that there are various social identities in Appalachia, reclaiming Appalachian identity as a positive social construct can have both a positive impact on the individual and also their ability to positively identify with others and impact their communities (Smith et al., 2010).

Appalachians were first perceived as a sense of “otherness” by the “local color” writers in the 1800s (Haynes, 1997) and occurred simultaneously with the efforts to acquire the rights to the timber and coal in the region. The cultural stereotypes of the region have transitioned to that of the “Hillbilly” in a more modern era. While outsiders often view the region through these stereotypical lenses, it is important to note that researchers have found that most Appalachians do not self-identify as Appalachian (Cooper et al., 2011). Obermiller and Mahoney (2016) suggest that rather

than a focus on Appalachian culture, a more effective approach is to focus on the needs and priorities in Appalachian communities and how to meet those needs and priorities. Simultaneously, Obermiller and Mahoney (2016) purport that it is important to focus on Appalachian identities (interpretation of their lived experiences through social, economic, and political forces) without focusing on the more problematic concept of Appalachian culture while also centering on the possible Appalachian futures.

### **Characteristics of Education in Appalachia**

The lack of funding for education makes it difficult to recruit teachers and, once recruited, there is often a disconnect in Appalachia. While most students in the region come from low income, rural backgrounds, their teachers tend to come from middle class, urban or suburban backgrounds (Hendrickson, 2012). This socioeconomic gap between teachers and students leads to less effective relationships between students and teachers and a reduced sense of belonging, which in turn can reduce engagement with school for Appalachian students (Hendrickson, 2012).

With many of the students in Appalachia being first-generation college students, they are less likely to be mentored by their family for college success (Hendrickson, 2012). Similarly, because of the depressed economies in their communities, they are less likely to envision as many possible employment options. Between the disconnect with teachers and being first-generation college students in communities with few employment opportunities for college educated populations, Appalachian students face additional challenges and barriers. Many may not envision college as even a possibility. In West Virginia (the only state totally within Appalachia) research found that only 26 percent of first-generation college students were considering college in elementary school compared to 53 percent of non-first-generation college students (Noland, 2011).

Traditionally, the Appalachian people have been viewed by educators from a deficit approach. Although some theorists are transitioning to see the value in Appalachian people and using this alternative lens are approaching the Appalachian identity through place-based pedagogies such as funds of knowledge (Collins, 2020; Piene et al., 2020). These culturally responsive approaches see value in the region's people and scaffold a positive learning environment on the cultural heritages and identities of the region and allows students to expand their views of possible selves.

### **Challenges and Barriers**

#### **The Bed of Poverty**

In the 1960s, the Central Broadcasting Station (CBS) released a show called *The Beverly Hillbillies*, which followed a humble family from the Ozarks as they moved to Beverly Hills, California, after becoming affluent through oil. The show featured the family as backwards, not aligned with California, or modern values, and was highly successful due to the humor propagated by these perceptions (Cooke-Jackson & Hensen, 2008). Reflective of the same stereotypes, more recently the same production agency proposed a reality television series which would follow a poor, Appalachian family to California entitled *The Real Beverly Hillbillies* (Cooke-Jackson & Hensen, 2008). The difference: Appalachian advocacy groups became outraged and warned of the issues and potential harms resulting from the propagation of negative stereotypes in Appalachia.

Adams (2017) points out that this type of stereotyping is often embedded with the thought of Appalachia being a bed of poverty - the epicenter of a generations-long war on poverty by U.S.

Presidents, charity groups, and entertainment companies alike. According to Adams (2017) political “poverty tours,” persistent gaps in educational attainment in the area, and the stigma of being from the region may exacerbate students’ abilities to persist in academia or the industrial sector. Adding to the likes of these types of reality series, Adams (2017) comments that documentaries like “A Hidden America: Children of the Mountains” and “Can President Trump Win the War on Poverty,” released in 2009 and 2017 respectively, continue to propagate the narrative of Appalachia as a backwards, dirty place stuck in the past (ABC News, 2009). Decades of being labeled as backwards can, in turn, easily overpower narratives attributed to the academic abilities, individual characteristics, and persistence traits displayed by students from Appalachia (Gorski, 2012; Smith, 2019).

Fraley (2007) painted this picture most effectively in her description of the American public consciousness of Appalachia - as a place devastated by mining companies, a place laid to waste, entrenched by generations of backward thinking and condescension; not the vacation spot that most Americans would want to save. As she puts it, “Dirty children, Moonshine bottles on the porch. Collapsing shacks. Appalachia is a place to escape from, not a place to live” (Fraley, 2007, p. 365). This type of negative depiction of Appalachia typically outshines the hardworking efforts of locals and rural natives that have struggled to advance not only positive images of Appalachia - a region which houses the greatest biodiversity in North America- but also the protection of the region as a whole (Fraley, 2007; Cooke-Jackson & Hansen, 2008).

### **A Bunch of Hillbillies**

Thus, an additional challenge for Appalachian college students are the stereotypes that they face as representatives of the region, both in applying to, and within, college. Scholarship indicates that students from rural Appalachia often experience stereotype threats which derive from negative perceptions of the region, like the ones depicted above, and, in turn, influences their postsecondary success (Smith, 2019). As marginalized individuals in higher education, either they face the dilemma of acknowledging that they are Appalachian and risk being stereotyped or deny their Appalachian heritage and not confront the stereotypes (Tennant, 2022).

Brown and Pinel (2003) for example underscored the development of the perception of discrimination in terms of the visibility of an identity. In their findings, Brown and Pinel (2003) found that it was easier for adolescents to identify discrimination based on a visually-explicit identity (e.g., gender, race, etc.) than a non-visual identity (e.g., political beliefs). In terms of Appalachia students, this type of discrimination often manifests in the form of their accents, cultural markers, or socioeconomic status - characteristics which students are motivated to shed in an attempt to shape their identity and confirm to a sense of belonging aligned with secondary ideals of success (Adams, 2017; Smith 2019). The opposite effect, the internalization of stereotypes, has also been documented in Appalachian youths, especially in the context of being poor, illiterate, and uneducated. According to Adams (2017), “If exposed on numerous occasions to this stereotype over time, Appalachian youth might begin to disidentify with Appalachian culture, or with literacy and education, and become less interested and concerned with academic performance” (p. 12).

Thus, a challenge for many is how to embrace their cultural identity without being viewed as having cultural deficits because of others’ stereotypes of people from the region. Adams’ (2017) study provides insight into how youth from Appalachian contend with this dichotomy. According to a male, senior, high school student in her study, growing up in an Appalachian county it became

imperative for him to both love his hometown as well as break the stereotype of the region through persistent academic performance and high pressure to “[break] the stereotype that we’re all a bunch of incest, drug-addicted hillbillies” (Adams, 2017, p. 23). For most students, Appalachia is both a place and culture, with stereotype threat becoming apparent in the disparities of how they are treated outside of the region, access to resources while inside the region, and availability of support to continue postsecondary education (Adams, 2017; Helton, 2010; Smith, 2019).

Further, to support this claim, according to a recent study by Rittenour and colleagues (2020), perceptions of Appalachia culture are often intertwined with public perceptions of the area. For example, open-ended responses from a survey of American MTurk workers in their study represented an array of positive (e.g., self-reliant, kind, mountain dwelling) and negative (e.g., backwards, uneducated, poor, prejudiced) perceptions. Despite more positive responses on the close-ended questions (i.e., depictions of Appalachians as warm), the scholars found that previous contact with Appalachia did not yield significant differences in attitudes towards the region (Rittenour et al., 2020). Winter (2013) found that even many pre-service teachers from Appalachia who planned to teach in the region failed to identify as Appalachian and harbored many of the negative stereotypes about the region and their future students.

### **Deficit Thinking and Pedagogy**

These stereotype threats often arise in tandem with deficit thinking that emphasizes the limitations of rural Appalachian students based on perceptions of being lazy, unmotivated, and backwards (Gibbins et al., 2019; Gorski, 2010). Valencia (1997) suggests that deficit thinking is the perspective that students from marginalized and minoritized communities perform poorly in schools based on internal deficits related to their families and communities instead of structural inequalities. Deficit thinking frameworks often utilize strategies that blame the victim for any failures, emphasizing shortcomings based on stereotypes that perpetuate the status quo of a traditionally marginalized community rather than acknowledge the barriers within the institution that hinder success (Hurd et al., 2018; Kricorian et al., 2020). In the cases of Appalachian students, deficit thinking may be ingrained by the narratives carried in the rural or low socioeconomic status of residents in the area. For example, student academic failure may be blamed on their poverty, backgrounds, culture, or rural residency, exacerbating limitations on students’ academic skills and chances of success without basis (Horn & Nunez, 2000; Swecker et al., 2013). In turn, deficit thinking frameworks may potentially lead teachers to compensate for these “deficits” rather than acknowledge the potential of the characteristics of their students (Hurd et al., 2018).

Teacher education programs rarely prepare teachers to use culturally responsive education approaches for Appalachian students and thus there is an emphasis on deficit thinking which is often even employed by native Appalachian teachers (Collins, 2020). This can also lead teachers to a lack of understanding of the local culture, perpetuation of negative stereotypes, and undervaluing of the contributions of Appalachian students (Hendrickson, 2012). Hendrickson (2012) indicates “Teachers sometimes make assumptions about the students in rural schools, mistakenly attributing poverty to habits associated with poor people and blaming parents and families for living in poverty; some school employees in rural areas trivialize students knowledge and culture with a ‘saving the poor’ attitude toward education” (p. 38).

The question then becomes how to shift from an oppressive educational model that leads to cultural loss (Collins, 2020) and simultaneously inhibits Appalachians from envisioning all possible selves to a pedagogy that empowers the development of a constructive, positive Appalachian

identity. This can then empower Appalachian youth not only to define themselves but to redefine their communities (Peine et al., 2020). Due to the barriers associated with rural Appalachian students' college-going self-efficacy, there is a need for their learning environment to help them develop other possible selves through effective pedagogies.

### **Pedagogical Approaches**

Scholarship has consistently challenged these disadvantaged notions related to rural areas, showing that most educational differences between rural and nonrural students can be attributed to social class rather than elements of stereotypes associated with rural disadvantaged narratives (Means, 2017). Further, rural students often represent the values of their tight-knit families, schools, and communities which often translate to strong social resources aligned with positive youth development and persistence (Byun et al., 2012; Means, 2017). Gibbons and colleagues (2019) argue that,

One group in the U.S. that would benefit from a culturally sensitive adaptation is people living in rural Appalachia. (...) We assert that when working with cultural groups such as rural Appalachians, career counselors and educators must filter career needs through an understanding of community strengths and values before considering how to address individual needs. (par 2-3)

The social resources linked to rural youth are lauded by scholars as necessary instruments to navigate new educational frontiers and the unfamiliarity of academic norms in postsecondary life (Byun et al., 2012). In the following, we explore how different pedagogical approaches, including possible selves theory, critical place-based learning, and social and cultural capital theory, can be leveraged to counter negative Appalachian stereotypes and build positive narratives around Appalachian student success.

### **Possible Selves**

Theories, like possible selves, emphasize the importance of the social capital embodied by students and build on rural and small community assets in order to counter deficit thinking (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Possible selves can be defined as “the cognitive manifestation of enduring goals, aspirations, motives, fears, and threats” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). Possible selves are anchored in encouraging and enabling a person to envision the person(s) they could become. As such, the conceptualization of possible selves consists of both the person someone seeks to become and the person someone avoids becoming. For instance, possible selves informed by aspirations might include the educated self, the married self, or the compassionate self; on the other hand, possible selves informed by fears might include the ignorant self, the lonely self, or the unhappy self. A person's sociocultural context can influence what is deemed valuable or undesirable (Hamman et al., 2010).

Because they are future-oriented potentialities that are unique and significant to a specific individual at a specific time, possible selves are intimately connected to motivation (Plimmer & Schimdt, 2007). In other words, motivation can be thought of as the bridge between an individual's current self and their future self that is oriented around the realization of goals (Markus & Nurius, 1986). This means that an individual can develop plans and exhibit behaviors—what Oyserman

and colleagues (2004) refer to as roadmaps—that will lead them toward the possible selves they most desire. This can, in turn, provide a roadmap for students that uniquely allows them to integrate positive narratives from their background into their own story of success, catered to their background, beliefs, desires, and motivations.

Research has shown that Appalachian high school students who view college potential as one of their possible selves are more likely to attend college (Chenoweth, 2005). Chenoweth (2005) found that possible selves were a mediating factor between environmental factors (e.g. academic achievement, academic preparation, socio economic factors) and college attendance. While positive possible selves were a mediating factor in college attendance for Appalachian high school students, Chenoweth (2005) found that fear of possible selves such as that of Appalachian stereotypes did not play a role in college attendance.

It is important to consider, then, the role educators at all levels play in this process. To address this inquiry, we offer three pedagogical approaches that can empower rural students to envision and enact possible selves as part of their postsecondary education journeys.

### **Critical Place-Based Learning**

Place-based pedagogy is a contrast to deficit based, culture of poverty approaches to education such as standardization, is place based pedagogy. According to Hayes (2017), is a theory of instruction that advocates situating schools and curriculums within their geographic, social, and cultural surroundings, as a means of improving both student learning and encouraging community sustainability” (paragraph 8). Critical place-based learning involves developing an understanding of the global world through engaging in learning in a local community through a culturally responsive lens with simultaneous goals of educating students and striving for their empowerment to promote positive, culturally sustaining, social change in their communities (Madden, 2016). Often this occurs through problem-based learning in a local context (Madden, 2016). Critical place-based pedagogies connect teachers, students, and communities (Graham, 2007). Students are not perceived as entering the classrooms with a deficit of knowledge and abilities, but rather students are able to build on the skills, values, and knowledge that they bring to the classroom (Hayes, 2017).

Appalachia has played a crucial, historical role in place-based pedagogies and one that has often not been recognized due to stereotypes about Appalachian education and deficit approaches that portray Appalachian education deficits (Hayes, 2017). Place-based pedagogies in Appalachia include the work of John Dewey’s student, Elsie Clapp, the *Foxfire* series, the Highlander Folk School (Hayes, 2017). Using critical place-based pedagogies in Appalachian communities has been demonstrated to have positive impacts on students and their communities (Graham, 2007; Humphreys et al., 2022). These place-based pedagogies can lead to both more positive possible selves but also simultaneously to more inclusive communities for diverse students (Hayes, 2017). Critical place-based pedagogies are currently being employed throughout educational disciplines from writing to art to Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) (Hayes, 2017; Humphreys, et al., 2022; Reeves et al., 2022;). Place-based pedagogies could be particularly effective with Appalachians who do not necessarily identify with an Appalachian culture but do feel a strong connection to a sense of place.



## Social and Cultural Capital

Educational scholarship is rich with examples that highlight the relationship between social and cultural capital and student success (Bourdieu, 1973; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Salis Reyes & Nora, 2012). The pith of this scholarship underscores the notion that institutions often hold and represent particular social and cultural norms, standards, or structures within the language they utilize, the relationship they perpetuate, and the value they place on specific ideals, that reify accepted social structures (Anderson, 2010; Bourdieu, 1973; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Social and cultural capital are thus intimately intertwined with the notion of power within the context in which they are used in that they can be used to offer advantages or barriers to those constructing interactions in this space (Giroux, 1997; Hall, 1980). In accordance, within theories that adopt the notions of social and cultural capital, power can be viewed as potentially holding the promise for constructive, as well as destructive, change for both the individual with the capital or the community accruing, or lacking, it (Anderson, 2010).

Such theories also purport the interaction of social and cultural capital as key elements in the social construction of reality. Berger and Luckmann (1991) offer insight to this point by describing the social construction of reality as a phenomenon reflective of an individual's own social contexts, relationships, social interactions, and accepted perceptions. They emphasize that once we,

...act upon this understanding, our common knowledge of reality becomes reinforced. Thus, our symbols and institutions are part of an objective reality. Collective thoughts gradually crystalize from individual habit into institutions, which are supported by language conventions. Eventually, matters are subjectively internalized through the upbringing and formal education of citizens into a particular culture's identity and belief system. (Berger & Luckmann, 1991, p. 24)

The social construction of reality, and the reliance of the use of particular social and cultural capital accepted as the norms of academic institutions, in particular, poses challenges to students that may not fit within these particular frameworks. For Giroux (1997), this situation makes for students to function as a constant "border-crosser, as a person moving in and out of physical, cultural, and social borders" (p. 96).

In this regard, the disparities between academic institutions and rural realities suggest that the social circumstances that Appalachian students must navigate in academia is potentially and inherently different from the one that represents their daily lives (Anderson, 2010; Hurd et al., 2020). However, what these theories offer is that, instead of simply reproducing the stereotype threats associated with their socioeconomic, sociocultural, or sociohistorical characteristics, both social and cultural capital can be reconceptualized to review the Appalachian narrative as positive within their own social reality (Kelley et al., 2023). These theories may help to recognize all the forms of social and cultural capital associated with rural Appalachian students, incorporating the strengths of their community as part of the success in their postsecondary education.

## Implications for Appalachian Students

Appalachian college students often face barriers such as lower socioeconomic status and are more likely to be first-generation college students. Like other first-generation college students,

they face new challenges without the reference points from family experiences. In addition, Appalachian college students lack exposure to many professions and professionals in those fields such as STEM (Boynton, 2014). The exposure to these fields is important to their development of possible selves (Gillen et al., 2017). Appalachian students, like other first-generation college students, are often unaware of the unspoken rules for college success (Carrico et al., 2015). For all of these reasons, effective mentoring is especially valuable to Appalachian college students.

Often traditional mentoring takes place from the perspective of asking them to discard their old identities and to invoke a new identity of a successful college student (Kelley et al., 2023, Turnage, 2015). Stemming from a deficit thinking framework, these models adopt the notion of Appalachian characteristics as “backwards” or inadequate to be successful in an academic environment (Adams, 2017). Moreover, as scholarship highlights, the norms, language, and institutional standards adopted by academic institutions often convey messages of who is allowed or accepted at institutions, reproducing certain social structures that reify a social reality of what is conceptualized as academia (Anderson, 2010; Giroux, 1997; Hytten, 1997). Within this reality, Appalachia students often find themselves outside the norm, with social and cultural capital that is potentially deemed inappropriate or incongruent to standard foundations for academic success (Adams, 2017).

However, as the theories presented in this contribution emphasize, a more effective approach would not involve this replacement of identities, but would invoke the merging of the identities into a new positive self-identity where one can be both a first-generation college student from Appalachia and a successful college student (Turnage, 2015). Coupled with critical place-based learning and an understanding of the social and cultural capital inherent within Appalachia, these students can view their Appalachian identity as providing positive social capital (e.g., problem solving, independence, resilience, sense of purpose) to help them succeed in college. Since much of one’s social identity is developed in college, a mentoring program that uses place-based learning to help students develop positive identities can be particularly valuable for Appalachian students and other first-generation college students (Turnage, 2015). What these theories offer students is a potential strategy to reconceptualize the narrative that represents Appalachian. This will feature the characteristics of the community – including a strong family-base, resilience, and resourcefulness—as necessary attributes to Appalachia students success and not deficits to academic trajectories (Adams, 2017; Turnage, 2015).

## **Conclusion**

According to a report for the National Association for College Admissions Counseling, over half of the school districts in the United States are categorized as rural, with over 8.9 million students in attendance (Means, 2017). Appalachia encompasses over thirteen states that comprises several rural regions, including 26 million residents across the majority of the Southeastern United States (ARC, 2022). The presence of rural Appalachian students that are making their way on postsecondary education journeys is therefore not minimal and should not be overlooked when considering national objectives related to student retention, persistence, and attainment. In this contribution, we present possible selves as a way to counter the deficit thinking influencing the disadvantaged narrative of rural Appalachia by elevating the importance of the social capital and resources students from this region bring to postsecondary education. By building on rural and small community assets and successes, possible selves theory produces a narrative supportive of rural students’ growth in and beyond Appalachia. Building supporting the social capital and resources of Appalachian students through highlighting their possible selves we simultaneously open

the door for various possible Appalachian futures (Schwartzman, 2021).

Precautions should be taken not to fall back into blaming an Appalachian “Culture of Poverty” for producing negative possible selves, (Chenoweth, 2005). Similarly, educators should avoid using negative possible selves in terms of fears of being seen as a “Hillbilly” as a tool for change. Care should also be taken not to invoke a static, universal Appalachian culture, but view Appalachia as a place with multiple cultural identities (Obermiller & Maloney, 2016). Possible selves theory should be combined with placed-based pedagogies that invoke positive possible selves for Appalachians combined with positive mentoring and critical pedagogies. This combination can expand Appalachians’ possible selves, lead to more success in higher education, and promote more sustainable communities (Gillen et al., 2017).

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