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The Webster County Blues: An Exploration of the Educational Attitudes of a Poor Appalachian Community

Todd D. Snyder

I conducted a survey in order to determine whether or not the cultural values shared by parents from a poor mountain town in West Virginia discourage high school students from pursuing a college education. The results suggest that the persistence of poverty in rural Webster County can be attributed to the region's traditional set of cultural values, which discourage the importance of higher education.

Let's face it, this town isn't computerized. This is our modern way of life. Some of these kids don't have any business going to college. That's the Webster County blues but that's the way it is...

Introduction

The sun rarely shines in Webster County. Dilapidated trailers sink into the earth's moist surface as if they haven't the courage to sit upright. Beat down rusting pickup trucks lie on concrete cinderblocks like corpses in a morgue. Rickety skeletons of half enclosed silos decorate the shadowy West Virginia wilderness. Condemned buildings rear their ugly faces alongside the cracked pavement of curvy roads. Tucked within an unknown county in an invisible state, Webster County hides from the rest of the world. Despite a persistence of poverty and lack of economic opportunity, residents of this region often refuse to relocate. It is as if some omnipresent force shuns them from ever leaving. Perhaps the mountains are to blame. Dark and menacing, they discourage any thought of escape. With each passing year generations of hard working West Virginians die in the same "hollers", trailer parks, and mountain towns where they were raised. In this land where inspiration is as scarce as income, they suffer the cyclical effects of poverty. As is the case for many Appalachian natives, the residents of Webster County possess a strong attachment to the land. It is the only home they have ever known. Unfortunately, I can truly attest to the hardships of living in Webster County.

For the first 12 years of my life Willoughby Trailer Park was home. Growing up in such an environment has taught me much about how Appalachian poverty gives way to a certain cultural mindset. Embarrassed by my living conditions, I would often avoid bringing friends home from school. I now laugh at this gesture because I realize they were hardly of blueblood upbringing. In fact, we all felt the burden when the *National*

Enquirer rolled into town proclaiming us “America’s poorest town”¹. Though our parents informed us of the newspaper’s less than scholarly reputation, it was impossible to shake the prickling resonance of truth left behind. I couldn’t help but feel contempt for those who embraced our town’s newfound status. This was a fate that I refused to accept. In my heart, I rejected the stereotypes perpetuated by the *National Enquirer*. The following year my father received a higher paying job at the local coal mines. Our family was finally able to buy a house and leave Willoughby behind. This Appalachian version of upward mobility was not without its price. Each evening I would watch my father come home from work covered in smothering blackness. Smashed fingernails, dusty boots, and tired eyes continue to haunt my dreams. Because my parents feared this daunting future awaited my arrival to manhood, they began discussing with me the importance of education.

Eleven years removed from my departure from Willoughby, I now find myself sitting in front of the computer in my office at Marshall University wondering why more of my peers have not taken this route. During the past five years I have read some of the most beautiful literature ever written in the English language. I have studied under a Yale scholar and taught composition to students from all over the country. There are mornings where I get up, briefcase in hand, and wonder how things could have been different. What if I would have taken that job at the mines? A sense of guilt consumes my consciousness. Why do so few Webster County students pursue a college education? Is poverty too strong an adversary? To what extent does parental involvement play in the collegiate aspirations of Webster County High School students? These questions have brought me back to my hometown. These questions have forced me to reexamine everything that I have ever known about my identity. These questions have fueled my interest in the economic and educational consequences of traditional Appalachian values. These questions have forced me to look for answers.

Literature Review

Researchers have long sought explanations for long-term poverty in the Appalachian region. Many researchers debunk cultural explanations of the region’s persistent economic problems. In 1974, Dwight Billings argued that Appalachian culture has an insignificant effect on the economic status of the region (315). Billings, who distributed a survey to several thousand North Carolina respondents, suggested that attitudinal differences between respondents from the Appalachian sub-region of the state and from other regions including the urban industrial cities were only marginally dissimilar (315). Moreover, Billings concluded that these slight differences “do not explain the lack of development” in Appalachia (316). According to Billings, blame should be placed on the region’s economic dependency on the coal industry (316). Though this may indeed be the case, Billings’ research neglects to consider how cultural attitudes play a part in this economic dilemma. I would also argue that by limiting his research to the mountainous regions in North Carolina, Billings is able to obtain only a small faction of Appalachia’s culture.

Billings’ argument, that the coal industry strips the land of its wealth and impoverishes its people, has yet to disappear from Appalachian studies (316). In fact, many recent research studies continue to focus on the industrial characteristics of the Appalachian region. For instance, Dean Narciso argues that “the region’s dependence

on extraction industries has left it with almost no infrastructure for business” (3). According to Narciso, workers in this area need only a minimum education to function within their respective communities (3). Narciso’s perspective holds importance because it draws attention to the cultural mindset of the Appalachian worker. By calling for educational funding from the government, Narciso brings us closer to the source of the problem.

Many contemporary researchers refuse to ignore the relationship between traditional Appalachian values and the depressed economy in which they are born. Robert Bickel, for example, argues that the lack of occupational opportunities in this region can be seen as a reflection of the region’s particular set of cultural values (2). For instance, Bickel states that “pregnancy prevention programs” have been met with great opposition by the religious communities of the Appalachian region (2). Bickel suggests that these cultural attitudes have in return lead to high teen pregnancy rates in the state of West Virginia. This is a concept that Katherine Sohn expands on in her ethnographic research study *Whistlin’ and Crowin’ Women of Appalachia*. According to Sohn, some Appalachian churches actually preach against the dangers of education (439). More poignantly than Bickel, Sohn captures the essence of Appalachian attitudes toward educated non-residents:

Because outsiders have caricatured Appalachian speech and culture and implied religious and cultural superiority, mountain people have adopted defensive attitudes about formal education and social mobility. Men especially are often wrapped in a world that is not always of their choice, especially if they are the primary breadwinners. Many did not have the choice of higher education. (439)

Sohn’s exceptional study explores America’s stereotypical perception of the Appalachian men and women along with the gender roles created by their traditional set of cultural values. Her study examines how these feelings of resentment, which are passed down through generations, blatantly discourage the pursuit of higher education.

Although Appalachian poverty has been explored at great length, very little research has been done in order to determine the educational attitudes of West Virginians. More often than not, research studies focus on surrounding states such as Kentucky and Ohio. Erica Chenoweth and Renee Galliher, authors of the first ethnographic study to focus on the college-going rates of West Virginians, report that less than one third of West Virginia high school graduates enroll in two-year and four-year colleges and universities (9). In their ethnographic study, the researchers examine factors that influence rural West Virginia high schools students’ college attendance decisions, and suggest that “several factors specific to the culture, such as economic climate, family and regional influences have an indirect impact upon the development of individuals” (3). Though both Chenoweth and Galliher recognize that these factors are at play, their study is unable to convey “how these factors influence the decision to pursue higher education” (3). This is where my research study will attempt to expand on ideas of Sohn, Chenoweth, and Galliher. The purpose of this study is to determine the fac-

tors, cultural or economic that discourage Webster County High School students from pursuing a college education.

Research Setting

Webster County is located slightly east of Flatwoods, the geographic center of West Virginia. Fewer than 10,000 residents call this mountainous region home. According to the US Census Bureau, 58.2% of Webster County citizens over the age of 25 have obtained a high school diploma or GED (2000). Only 8.7% of the county's residents over the age of 25 have obtained a bachelor's degree or some form of secondary education (2000). There are currently four grade schools and one high school located within the county limits. Webster County is the fifth lowest paying school system in the state of West Virginia². The median household income falls slightly over \$21,000 (2000). A staggering 31.8% of families in this region live below the poverty level (2000). There are currently three coal mines and five logging companies operating within the county limits. Beautiful outdoor surroundings and plentiful game hunting bring thousands of sportsmen to Webster County each year. No major highways or interstate routes pass through this region.

Participants

The target population for this study was parents of freshmen at Webster County High School³. These parents were interviewed in order to determine how early families began discussing the college aspirations of their children. Out of 20 parents contacted, 11 individuals (8 women and 3 men) agreed to participate in the survey. Of the 11 participants, 10 parents had children who were enrolled in the same high school they went to as a teenager. The one parent who attended a different high school had grown up in a neighboring county (Nicholas County). Only one of the participants had received any form of postsecondary education. This individual had enrolled in nearby community college, at the age of 31, before dropping out. Of the eight women interviewed, four were currently unemployed. Of the three males interviewed, two had a job and one was currently on disability. None of the participants had parents who both graduated high school. It must also be noted that none of the individuals interviewed were married to each other. This study represents 11 different families. Two of these families had more than one child currently enrolled in high school.

Table 1.

Subject	Education	Parents' Education	Occupation
Woman #1	HS Diploma	Father: 5 th grade; Mother: 6 th grade	Unemployed Husband: Coal Miner
Woman #2	HS Diploma	Father: 10 th grade; Mother: HS Diploma	Unemployed Husband: Logger
Woman #3	HS Diploma	Father: 12 th grade; Mother: 12 th grade	Bank Teller Husband: Coal Miner
Woman #4	8th grade; Received GED	Father: 8 th grade; Mother: 8 th grade	Unemployed Husband: Disability
Woman #5	11th grade; Received GED	Father: 9 th grade; Mother: 10 th grade	Unemployed Husband: Truck Driver
Woman #6	HS Diploma	Father: 8 th grade; Mother: HS Diploma	Secretary at law office Husband: Coal miner
Woman #7	10th grade	Father: 5 th grade; Mother: 8 th grade	Cook at local diner Husband: Mechanic
Woman #8	11th grade	Father: 8 th grade; Mother: 8 th grade	Cashier at Grocery Store Husband: Logger
Man #1	High School Diploma	Father: 10 th grade; Mother: HS Diploma	Coal miner Wife: School teacher
Man #2	10th grade	Father: 5 th grade; Mother: 8 th grade	Disability Wife: Gas Station Clerk
Man #3	High School Diploma	Father: 8 th grade; Mother: 8 th grade	Coal Miner Wife: Bank teller

The Interview

Participants were contacted over the phone and interviewed in person. Interviews were conducted at separate times for each family and no students were present during the interview process. All participants were asked the same set of twenty questions. Audio recordings of the interviews were made in order assure the accuracy of their comments.

Results

This study will suggest that Webster County parents share six distinct attitudinal characteristics concerning education:

- Parents seem to know little about the college admissions process. These misconceptions have created the false perception the college is only for wealthy or extremely intelligent individuals
- Parents expressed an attitude that I will refer to as “The fear of the outsider”. This mindset suggests that dangerous or predatory individuals dwell just beyond the confining limits of the county
- Parents tend to view college as nothing more than a party spot for rebellious teenagers. Disturbingly exaggerated, these perceptions seem to be tied to the media’s portrayal of college life
- Parents hold strong to the belief that manual labor jobs are more profitable than jobs that require some form of postsecondary education. Largely due to the isolated location of the region, such beliefs have caused parents to view the workforce in a gender specific manner
- Parents seem to be overly aware of the college failures of others from the region. Because few Webster County natives have attempted to do so, these parents consider the pursuit of a college education very risky

In the following sections of this study, I will examine each of these characteristics individually in an attempt to discover their possible origins.

The Cost of a Future: Understanding the Admissions Process

In an impoverished area such as Webster County, it comes as no surprise that parents would suggest that expenses are a major roadblock to their child’s education. In some form, each participant brought up the issue of money when discussing their child’s academic future. Their responses often displayed a hyperbolic understanding of college expenses and entrance requirements:

Interviewer: Would you consider allowing your child to go to an out-of-state college?

Woman #2: “No. I’m cheap (followed by laughter). Seriously though, out-of-state tuition is double or triple the regular cost. I just don’t think it is necessary. A degree from [West Virginia] is just as good as one from anywhere else. I don’t

see the sense in paying \$30,000 or \$40,000 a semester when your degree ain't a lick better than one you can get around here. ”

Interviewer: What would you say is the #1 factor that keeps Webster County students from going to college?

Woman #4: “The high school doesn't teach enough. The slower kids can't make the mark you need on that test. That test you need [to take] go to college. The teachers aren't helping them study for it. That's why they're making low marks. I think money is a big problem too. Most people in this area don't have a lot of money. They can't afford those tests. College costs too much for us poor folk.”

In the above segments, it is important to note that several misconceptions are taking place. To begin, the first participant seems stunningly misinformed about the cost of out-of-state tuition. This attitude, that West Virginia colleges are the only option, was recurrently expressed by parents throughout the interview process. In fact, 10 of the 11 participants stated that they would discourage their children from going to college in another state. Each of these 10 participants cited high tuition as the reason for their stance. To understand the problematic nature of these attitudes, one must consider the average income of families from this area. For instance, if a family who earns less than \$30,000 per year believes that the cost of a college semester exceeds this amount, it would only seem logical that they would discourage their child from pursuing a postsecondary education. Unfortunately, none of these individuals seemed to exhibit a clear understanding of the cost of college tuition. It is also important to note that none of the parents interviewed mentioned any form of financial aid or scholarship program during the interview process.

The second participant in this segment seems to be misinformed about ACT and SAT standardized testing requirements. The participant's comments suggest that she mistakenly assumes that students who did not meet a certain requirement on these tests are unable to apply for college admission. Once again, the idea that only exceptionally intelligent individuals belong in college is clearly expressed. The participant's inability to name the tests or testing fees also exemplifies an obvious lack of understanding of this process. On the other hand, her assertion that the school system is to blame may indeed contain some merit.

Though one can easily make that the argument that schools fail to inform parents of admission requirements, Chenoweth and Galliher suggest that “regional isolation sometimes prevents accessibility of information and assistance” for public schools (7). Chenoweth and Galliher argue that high school personnel from rural Appalachia often find it difficult to obtain and maintain access to admission requirements and financial aid information for various colleges (7). Assuming our public schools are just as misinformed as these parents seems quite troubling. Obviously, some form of communication between parents, counselors, and universities needs to be established.

The Fear of the Outsider

The isolationist attitudes of Webster County parents can be attributed to the region's apparent lack of diversity. According to the US Census Bureau 99.2% of the people in Webster County identify themselves as white persons (2000). Because rural Appalachia, especially West Virginia, is predominately inhabited by white individuals, most Webster County natives have had little contact with persons of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. This lack of exposure to different cultures has seemingly given birth to a "fear of the outsider". This belief suggests that citizens of Webster County are somehow sheltered from the dangerous individuals who exist in the world. This fear is clearly expressed in the following excerpts:

Interviewer: Do you have any concerns about your child going to college?

Woman #2: "Safety. I worry about her getting hurt. You hear about girls getting raped at those bars and clubs. It's awful. There are some real sleazy people lurking around just waiting to take advantage of some innocent little country girl."

Woman #4: "The shape of the world these days. It's wicked out there. There are so many things that can happen. You just want to protect your kids from it all."

Throughout the interview process individuals from areas other than Webster County were depicted in a derogatory manner. Here the description of "sleazy people" is juxtaposed with the "innocent" identity which this participant associates with the people of her home county. It is also important to note that the first participant in this excerpt immediately associated "bars and clubs" with college life. Unfortunately, her perspective on college seems strongly influenced by the evening news. The second participant clearly exhibits this same fear. Her description of the world as "wicked" seems to be reserved for areas outside of Webster County. Subtly, her comments imply that her child will somehow be protected by staying within the county limits. For many Webster County natives, the media is the only connection they have to college life. This can be problematic in several ways. For instance, the media typically reports crimes, such as rape or murder, which occur around college campuses. If this is the only information parents are receiving about college then it should come to no surprise that they are discouraging their children from enrolling.

Hollywood's portrayal of Appalachian life may be equally to blame for this latent distrust for the "outsider". Because Appalachians are frequently stereotyped as "hillbillies", Chenoweth and Galliher suggest that generations of West Virginians grown to distrust the general American community (13). For this reason, West Virginians often strive to preserve their isolated lifestyles (Chenoweth and Galliher 13). Throughout the interview process numerous references to the media and television were made by the participants.

From MTV to “Animal House”: The Rebellious Lives of College Students

Quite often, parents involved in this study were unable to separate college life from teenage rebellion. These parents often viewed college as nothing more than a party spot for rambunctious teens. In fact, all eleven parents brought up the subject of partying during the interview. An unmistakable contempt for MTV and other pop culture outlets was brought to the forefront by their concerns:

Interviewer: Do you have any concerns about your child going to college?

Man #2: “Yes. Partying. I worry about her going crazy when she isn’t under daddy’s roof anymore. The peer pressure is so bad these days. A lot of these good kids get messed up. If she is in her room trying to study and a bunch of kids come in and say ‘hey, lets go out’ what is she going to do? She is going to go. I’m not stupid. I see those shows she watches on MTV. Kids emulate that stuff.”

Man #3: “As a parent, I worry about the party atmosphere. The party scene. It’s the only reason most of these kids go [to college]. They see it on television every night.”

These participants directly associate peer pressure with college life. In both instances, they seem to partly blame television for the creation of this “party atmosphere”. Not only do these parents feel they have to worry about other students providing a negative example, they also express a clear concern for the nightly influence of television. These parents also tend to hold this “party scene” responsible for the past collegiate failures of Webster County students:

Interviewer: What would you say is the #1 factor that keeps Webster County students from succeeding in college?

Woman #5: “They party too much. That’s what gets them into trouble. There is nothing to do around here, so when they actually get somewhere they go nuts. It’s a lack of resources. They have lived in this hole in the ground all their life and don’t know any better.”

This excerpt suggests that some Webster County parents are overly concerned with the past failures of local students. What these participants neglect to mention are the numerous obstacles that first-generation college students must overcome in the pursuit of a postsecondary education.

The Trials and Tribulations of First-Generation College Students:

Webster County parents tend to be overly critical of college dropouts from their region. The majority of these parents infer that partying is the only reason for academic failure. Though this may be the case for many students, these parents seem uninformed of the disadvantages which face first-generation college students. In 1998, the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics released a report which highlighted the characteristics of first-generation college students. The report suggested that first-generation college students are more likely to work while attending school (1998). Though working while going to school full time may seem like a good idea for many first-generation students, doing so undoubtedly adds pressure to the already hectic transition to college life. When considering this information, it seems only plausible to assume that this phenomenon could be just as accurately responsible for the academic failures of Webster County students.

At no point during the interview process did parents blame the failures of recent college dropouts on academic or intellectual immaturity. Researchers Dennis Carroll and Chen Xianglei report that "first generation college students are at a consistent academic disadvantage after entering postsecondary education" (53). Carroll and Xianglei argue that first generation college students "complete fewer credits, take fewer academic courses, earn lower grades, need more remedial assistance, and are more likely to withdraw from or repeat courses" (53). As a result, Carroll and Xianglei suggest that "the likelihood of attaining a bachelor's degree is lower for first-generation students compared to their peers whose parents attended college" (53). Understanding these problems will help the parents of first-generation college students understand the circumstances which face their children. Regardless of their success in high school, all first generation students should be aware of the tutoring programs and help opportunities offered by the universities which they attend.

Ernest Pascarella argues that first-generation college students face problems which exceed the boundaries of academia:

"Not only do first-generation students confront all the anxieties, dislocations, and difficulties of any college student, their experiences often involve substantial cultural as well as social and academic transitions" (252).

This sudden feeling of *culture shock* can be quite traumatic for students from the rural Appalachian region. It is important that students from these regions are educated about different cultures and ethnic backgrounds before attempting to immerse themselves into the multicultural world of college life. Not only do these students have difficulty adjusting to different surroundings, they often possess a limited understanding of how college works. For instance, Pascarella argues that "first-generation students are more likely to be handicapped in accessing and understanding information and attitudes relevant to making beneficial decisions about such things as the kinds of academic and social choices to make while in attendance" (252). If Pascarella's argument is correct, parents should blame the failures of Webster County students on the isolation they so adamantly defend rather than the music videos aired on MTV or VH1. Because these parents believe their children will likely drink away their college opportunity, they often view education as a waste of money. This mindset forces them to believe that the pursuit of a manual labor job is a more profitable decision.

Education v. Manual Labor

The majority of parents interviewed seemed to favor manual labor jobs over those which require a postsecondary education. These parents expressed high praise for the high school's vocational education program. Their comments subtly suggest that the school's core curriculum does not prepare students for "the real world":

Interviewer: Do you think the high school should provide more vocational options?

Woman #2: "Oh yeah. Sure. My oldest boy is going to take vo-tech next year. His friends love it. They can get their [welding] certificate after two years. I say it's a good deal. There needs to be things in school that can help students get ready for the workforce."

Woman #4: "Yes. I think it helps them learn skills that can help them get jobs. Well, it all comes back to opportunity. They offer students opportunity. They can get a good job by learning a trade. I think they are good."

Woman #8: "Yes. It provides the students with a way to make a living. Let's face it, this town isn't computerized. This is our modern way of life. Some of these kids don't have any business going to college. That's the Webster County blues but that's the way it is."

These disturbing comments suggest that a high school education does not prepare students for the workforce. It appears as if these parents consider a standard education offered by local school systems impractical or useless. According to these parents, "skills" are directly linked to physical labor. The last participant's comments seem especially troubling. This is because she blatantly suggests that the majority of Webster County students do not belong in college. This defeatist attitude creates the assumption that Webster County students should accept their fate. Though parents apparently appreciate the value of a vocational education, they often expressed little interest in improving the school's core curriculum:

Interviewer: Do you think the high school should focus more on college preparation?

Woman #2: "I guess they are. They have honors classes that are harder. I'm not sure, but I think they still have gifted [program] too."

Woman #4: "I don't know. I guess that's what they [the high school] are doing."

These indifferent attitudes carry very important underlying messages. By assuming that college preparation consists of difficult courses reserved for only exceptional students, these parents are ignoring the importance of understanding financial aid and scholarship programs. Only two of the eleven parents interviewed were passionate about the college preparation programs in their child's high school. These men seemed to express their beliefs with conviction:

Interviewer: Do you think the high school should focus more on college preparation?

Man #2: “Yes, I think all kids deserve a shot at going to college. They need to have some sort of class that helps kids get ready for college. God knows the parents aren't going to do it. I think kids need to learn about how to do a job interview too. When I went for my job interview at [the coal mines] I was scared to death. I didn't have no idea what they were going to ask me... that's another thing. I would like to see the kids have to take some sort of speech class. So they wouldn't be ashamed when they have to go out and communicate in the real world. Me, I can't get up in front of anyone and talk. I get too damn embarrassed.”

Man #3: “Yes I do. They don't tell them what they need to do to get ready for college. When I was a senior I thought about going to college. I went to the counselor's office and asked [the counselor] what all I needed and she printed me off this thing off the computer and said 'here you go'. Not another word. Well, I looked at that sheet and didn't know half of what it was talking about. I threw that [piece of paper] in the garbage and was on my way. It would have took me all year to get that stuff ready. You see, nobody talked to me about college. Not my parents. Nobody. They [high school students] need to at least see what's out there.”

These comments suggest that some Webster County natives are, on some level, aware of the cultural and educational disadvantages which plague local high school students. In both instances, these individuals call for a change in the school system. Their perspectives show that they are conscious of the benefits of an academic education. In the case of the first individual, he realizes that his vocational education was somewhat incomplete. His comments suggest that a high school education is necessary to function within society. The second individual, more specifically, demands that parents and school system authorities should inform students of the college admissions process.

Both parents are essentially making the claim that all students, regardless of their intelligence, deserve to know the facts about college.

Gender Roles

Webster County parents often view the workforce in a gender specific manner. These parents tend to expect their male children to work at jobs which require some form of manual labor. Females, on the other hand, are expected by parents to work at jobs which are traditionally feminine. For instance, males often worked at jobs which can be labeled as masculine (coal miner, logger, truck driver). Females, on the other hand, seem more apt to become homemakers. Those women who do work often hold jobs which will allow them to care for their children (teacher, cook, house keeper). It appears that both fathers and mothers tend to attach these gender roles to their children:

Interviewer: What type of career do you see your child pursuing?

Woman #2: “I would like to see her become a teacher. They make good money for a woman. They get the summers off. You can be with your kids. When your kids are old enough to go to school, you are right there with them. If they need something, you are right there in the same building.”

This parent, in particular, immediately assumes that her daughter is going to have children. She also assumes that her daughter will teach in the same school that her child will attend. This perspective infers that motherhood should be the main career goal for Webster County females. Fathers also tend to view their daughter’s future occupations in this same gender specific manner:

Man #1: “I would like to see her become a nurse. Her mother wants her to be a teacher but I think she should go into nursing. There’s just no money in teaching.”

This father, unable to imagine his daughter as a doctor, suggests that she should become a nurse seemingly because of the stereotypically feminine history of this job. Boys, on the other hand, are often encouraged to pursue jobs which do not require a college education.

Woman #4: “He says he wants to be a police officer. He has a cousin who works at a prison, so he might do something like that. I would say he will do something with law.”

Woman #7: “My husband is a mechanic. I could see [my son] going into something like that. He is like his daddy. Not much of the school type.”

Viewing the workforce in such a gender specific manner causes children to subconsciously limit their career options. If boys feel pressure to maintain their masculine identities they will likely avoid pursuing any form of postsecondary education. Females, on the other hand, are often pressured into jobs which allow them to maintain their motherly status. From these statements one can see how viewing the workforce in such a gender specific manner can limit the potential earnings for Webster County families.

Final Commentary

Immersed in a culture that deemphasizes the worth of a college diploma, Webster County parents often discourage their children from pursuing a college education. This does not mean that Webster County rarely produces college graduates. Some Webster County students have gone on to have great success in academia. More often than not, these students come from households with college-educated parents. Though I am immensely proud of the students who come from these families, the first-generation college students from this region continue to command my attention. This is because I am the son of a West Virginia coal miner. My father was the son of a West Virginia coal miner. His father was the son of a West Virginia coal miner. Our family tree resides miles underneath the hardened West Virginia soil. For the Snyder family, work has always been synonymous with coal mining. We have been conditioned to believe our fates are unchangeable. When high school is over it is time to pick up your dinner bucket. This socially-constructed Appalachian Truth becomes ingrained into the consciousness of young men and women at a very young age. Before this cycle of economic and educational deprivation can be broken for other Appalachian families we, as community literacy advocates, must become aware of the cultural attitudes that exist within these regions. This, of course, is not an easy task. Appalachia, itself, is an enigma. Defining the Appalachian region can be extremely daunting. Its mythical borders are home to a people suffering from isolation in every sense of the term. As a result of this isolation, countless numbers of books, films, and television programs have been able to falsely portray Appalachian cultural values. My goal as a scholar, educator, and researcher is to uncover *true* Appalachian cultural norms. My hope is that the recognition of these distinctly anti-educational attitudes will somehow spark change. I truly love the people of Webster County. This is why I fear for their future. I want to see other trailer park children rise from the mountains and realize their dreams. I want to free Appalachians from this underlying sense of helplessness which has polluted our minds. For us to prosper we must first separate ourselves from this societal illusion and come to realize that some traditional attitudes have a lasting impact on the futures of our children.

Notes

¹ In 1994 the National Enquirer published a story about Erbacon, a town in Webster County. The title of the story was “West Virginia Town with No hope: America’s Poorest Town”. The National Enquirer subsequently brought truckloads of supplies to the residents of Erbacon for Christmas.

² According to the County Board of Education, the average Webster County teacher makes \$36,789 per-year.

³ According to the principal of Webster County High School, there are 108 students currently enrolled as freshmen.

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