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In the current global economy, higher education is critical for gaining and keeping living-wage jobs. The need for a college-educated labor force has increased interest among youth in pursuing higher education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Despite these demands, the United States has struggled to effectively increase college completion rates, particularly among low-income and first-generation college students. Dual-enrollment programs, in which students are concurrently enrolled in high school and college, are one example of education interventions designed to increase college enrollment and completion.

Applying life course (Elder, 1998; Settersten, 2007) and possible selves theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986) frameworks, the present study explores how an education intervention program influences rural youth identity development. Specifically, the research questions were: (a) What benefits do students perceive themselves to gain as they participate in dual-enrollment programs? (b) How does the perceived significance of these benefits vary based on socioeconomic status, geography, and gender? Participants in this study (N = 17) were students in a dual-enrollment partnership between a local community college and three area high schools. Via focus groups, students from these high schools were invited to share their experiences as high school students
taking classes at their local community college. Particular attention was paid to how youth incorporate the college experience into a vision of a possible self. Students reflected on their motivation for participating in the program, whether and how they perceived it to be a turning point in their lives, and the importance of this opportunity at this particular juncture in life. All students reported that a benefit of the dual-enrollment program was free college tuition, which enabled them to gain knowledge about the expectations and skills associated with being a college student and expand their sense of possible selves for the future. However, the significance of the free college tuition was interpreted differently based on household SES, geography, and gender. Students from low SES households, students from more rural communities, and female students perceived a higher degree of personal gain and increased opportunities for the future based on their participation in the program. The findings from this study may be helpful in informing education interventions to increase college enrollment for underrepresented student groups and in guiding policies to increase the affordability of college for economically vulnerable students.
On Time for The Future: Student Perspectives of a High School-Community College Dual-Enrollment Program

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Terese D. Jones, Author
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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Eric was a high school dropout when his mother told him to make a plan or move out. He was twenty, living with his parents, and had no idea what he wanted out of a future, except that he did not want to work at McDonald’s. He is looking for an alternative to a minimum wage career. Emily is a teen mom who wants to work in the medical field and worries about how she will pay for college and support her daughter. As a teen parent, she feels she is already behind on her future, out of sync with others her age. Zoey dreams of a career in radio, moving to a big city and leaving behind her rural roots. She wants a wider horizon than she can find in her small farming community, where everyone knows everything about everyone. Katie has been accepted to University of Hawaii, and with the help of her parents, she will be able to afford the out of state tuition. She will go out of state for college, but she would like to return to some place near her small hometown to someday raise her own family. These are but glimpses into the lives and dreams of some of the youth who participate in a dual-enrollment partnership program, where they earn college credit while completing their high school diplomas. They come from low-income, as well as middle class, households; some are first-generation college students, others are proud third generation “Beavers,” a reference to the mascot of Oregon State University. Some are raising babies; others are raising livestock. They come from varying backgrounds brought together by an opportunity for free college tuition and a jumpstart on their futures.

In the current global economy, higher education is a critical component for gaining and keeping a living wage job (Goyette, 2008; National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). With an increased need for a college-educated labor force, there is increased interest in pursuing higher education among youth (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Despite the growing interest and demand for higher education, the United States has struggled to meet the
challenges of effectively increasing college completion rates, particularly among low-income and first-generation college students. Increased interest in college has not translated to increases in successful degree completions. The cost of college continues to rise, more than 200% since 1998 and more than 1000% since 1980 (Department of Education, 2015), outpacing wage growth. Many college-curious students see the cost of attending as insurmountable (Gallup and Lumina Foundation, 2014; Stiglitz, Tyson, Orszag, & Orszag, 2000). Given the well-established benefits to students who graduate from college, the persistent achievement gap between students from high and low socioeconomic status remains troubling.

Rural, low-income students and first-generation college students, whose parents have fewer financial and social resources to help them navigate college, are less likely to earn a college degree (Cabrera, Terenzini, & Bernal, 2001). Concerns of academic readiness and lack of role models to help navigate the college enrollment process deter many of these students from pursuing higher education. Dual-enrollment programs, in which students are concurrently enrolled in high school and community college, are education interventions designed to increase college enrollment and improve completion rates. To be an effective intervention in improving college completion rates, dual-enrollment programs need to reach these vulnerable students.

Through a series of focus groups, dual-enrollment students from three communities (for confidentiality, referred to as Mountain View, Farm View, and Town View) were invited to reflect on their motivations for participation, how they perceived the experience to be a turning point in their lives, and the importance of this opportunity being available at this juncture in life. Eric, Emily, Zoey and Katie represent students with experiences to share, whose voices inform our understanding of how youth incorporate educational experiences into a vision of a possible self.
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The goal of the present study is to address a gap in the literature on the influence of dual-enrollment program participation on rural youth. Specifically, by using a life course perspective (Elder, 2003), I examine how students understand the significance of the timing of education across their lives. Using possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), a subset of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934), I examine how dual-enrollment programs influence identity development. After describing the theoretical frameworks that guide this study, I use them to review the literature on dual-enrollment programs and education among rural youth.

Theoretical Frameworks: Life Course Perspective and Possible Selves

Life Course Perspective

The life course perspective is an approach to exploring human development that elaborates the importance of process, context, time, and meaning as it shapes the individual and family life. The life course draws from person-level experiences that consider geography, historical context and time, community context, relationships and social practices, and timing of events as significant to the interpretation of lived experiences (Bengston & Allen, 1993).

In a life course perspective, time is critical to understanding and interpreting life events. Time may be considered across three contexts: historical, generational, and ontogenetic time (Price et al., 2000). Historical time refers to large-scale events or experiences and their impact on individual and family lives (Elder, 1998). The historical context of adolescents coming of age today is one of a global economy, in which the growing demand for an increasingly costly college degree has intensified the challenge of finding and keeping a sustainable, living wage job (Abel & Deitz, 2014). In this study, the relationship between geography and historical time is important because the students in the study are the children of people whose coming of age
experience and employment futures were altered by the contraction of the local economy in the aftermath of the timber collapse (Craig, 2015). The parents of these college students made choices related to career trajectories and higher education, or the lack thereof, based on employment pathways that proved less plentiful, stable, or prosperous than generations prior and leaving them less equipped for living wage employment with upward mobility (Craig, 2015).

Generational time refers to how a person’s biological age defines them in relation to other people, in and outside of one’s own family or community systems. People may belong to a group who shared an age-based experience that produces a measurable cohort effect. Examples of such an effect include Elder’s (1974) work on the children of the Great Depression, or generational demarcation based on exposure to technology, as in the case of defining Gen X or the Millennials (Viechniki, 2015). Generational time can also place a person within one’s family unit, by identifying a direction of influence to family events or patterns that have developed or been sustained over time. A younger generation may be influenced toward or away from a particular practice because of the events of an older generation. Educational attainment often correlates with parents, demonstrating that past generations’ actions or life events become important to future generations, often in life altering ways.

Ontogenetic time is based on chronological age. In framing life events from an ontogenetic perspective, the point in time at which an event occurs may be important developmentally because of its relevance to future life events/choices; age may also be important for how individuals understand their present circumstance, relevant life needs, and available options. In considering educational attainment, biological age may influence educational pursuits differently at age 18 than at age 48. For example, at age 18 a person is more likely to enter an institution of higher education in good health, and with fewer family responsibilities, and with
fewer financial constraints than at age 48, when there may be increases in chronic health issues, financial burden, and family demands, such as parenting and elder care. An ontogenetic interpretation of how events shape the individual life course focuses on the role of biological age in significance and meaning making.

Elder (1985) proposed additional elements of understanding time in the life course, those of transition and trajectory. Life transitions are tied to discrete moments or events, such as getting married or graduating college, when one’s status transitions, from single to married, from college student to college graduate. These transitions are often accompanied by a set of culturally normative patterns.

Life transitions can be formally or informally demarcated by chronological age; sometimes life events leave people feeling ahead or behind the social norms of their chronological age, creating dissonance between their lived years and their lived experiences (Settersten, 2007). The historical time in life contributes to culturally determined norms in which they, or others, will measure the degree of on-time occurrences.

Life trajectories reflect the sequencing of events or transitions within a conceptually demarcated domain of life, and unlike transitions, take a long-view within the life course. Transitions occur within a life trajectory, and the trajectory helps determine which transitions a person may experience, when they occur, and the manner in which they unfold. Although a life course perspective focuses on the individual, or the individual family unit, the primary task is in locating the micro-unit of interest within a macro-social context, to reflect the intersection of social and historical factors with narratives of the person and the family (Elder, 1985; Hareven, 1996). In this study, students are making life choices during a time when the expectation for college is to enroll immediately after high school, the average age for marriage is twenty-six for
women, and twenty-eight for men, and the average age for first-time mothers has climbed four years since 1970 (National Center for Health Statistics, 2015). All of these are examples of life transitions where chronological age influences whether people feel in sync or contrary to socially normative practices of their time.

When people find effective adaptations to create pathways to opportunities or to mitigate the limitations or constraints of their contexts they are acting as an agent of their own life (Elder, Shanahan, & Jennings, 2015; Hitlin & Elder, 2007). A key concept of the life course perspective is the idea that humans are able to influence their futures by mediating the influence of social structures through planful competence (Clausen, 1991; Giele & Elder, 1998). The effort to act on one’s own behalf is agentic striving, and the expression of agentic striving reflects an individual’s understanding of self and the individual’s life context (Hitlin & Elder, 2007). The beliefs regarding whether and how individuals may influence their future may result in specific life choices toward a fulfillment of such beliefs. Students who believe they are capable of success in higher education and are convinced of its benefits may be more motivated to prioritize an immediate transition from high school to college. Students with less confidence in their abilities or the value of education may exercise agentic striving toward an alternate pathway for their future. Students who believe in the value of higher education, but feel it is not attainable for them, may feel stymied in their ability to assert agentic striving. This study focuses on understanding how students perceive their participation in dual-enrollment as an act of agentic striving for a future they desire and see as possible.

Literature on familial patterns of educational attainment supports the important and unique influence of parents on their children’s educational aspirations and attainment (Allen, 2010). These trends reflect the tenet of linked lives. Linked lives emphasizes that individuals are
part of an interconnected social system in which experiences through the family unit and its system of shared relationships can have a significant impact at the individual level, both within and across generations (Elder, 1998). Individual behaviors are influenced by larger macro-level events, such as war or economic depression. As individuals are connected to their family units, the impact of events on individuals reach the members of the family unit even if they were not directly involved in the event. Family members may coordinate life planning and the timing of life events in consideration of the needs of the family unit rather than the individual (Hareven, 1996). For some first-generation college students and students who are part of the economic stability of their families, pursuing higher education may be a life event coordinated with the needs of other family members.

**Possible Selves**

The framework of possible selves focuses on how individuals interpret their social world in order to form a context-dependent vision of a future (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Staff et al., 2000). It is a subset of symbolic interactionism, a broader framework for understanding identity development pertaining to how individuals understand themselves within their social spaces and informs the process of how individuals construct meaning in their lives (Blumer, 1969). Individuals construct a self-understanding through interactions with those around them and in the context of the macro-structural conditions of their time (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). Meaning making is a result of interactions between individuals and their social world. As such, concepts, world views, activities, objects, or roles that are not part of an individual’s social world cannot become part of identity formation because there is no interaction with which to yield meaning (Blumer, 1969). When contexts change, the interactions between individuals and their social world also adapt, creating new possibilities for identity development and narrowing others
(Kroger, Martinussen, & Marica, 2010). The construction of the self remains an ever-changing, dynamic process in which individuals shape and are shaped by their social world (Mead, 1934). A “possible self” is comprised of who individuals believe they could be or become based on the present understanding of self within the scope of their personal lived experiences and events. The current study draws on possible selves to frame how students experience their participation in the dual-enrollment program as a personal benefit to their future.

Possible selves are rooted in both positive and negative role models, where individuals creating a possible self with movement toward and away from identity role models (Erickson, 1994). A possible self is critical for accomplishing goals because it helps create a mental map of what is needed to achieve the desired goals (Porfeli & Vondracek, 2010; Staff et al., 2009; Yeager et al., 2012). The possible self is the rudder needed to give direction to the future. For youth who cannot envision themselves in a future, creating and implementing actionable goals might be likened to a rudderless boat. Yes, it can stay afloat, and it is possible that, with the right current and favorable winds, it may even end up in a desirable location. However, the influence of the captain is relegated to hopeful prayers for good conditions. The possible self provides the opportunity to exert agency, to act on the direction of the boat, rather than be a mere passenger to the prevailing winds.

The formation of possible selves is iterative and spans multiple domains in life (Hooker, 1992; Hooker, & Kaus, C.R., 1992; Ko, Meija, & Hooker, 2014). Possible selves provide a motivation for pursuing a set of behaviors that may contribute to actualizing the future-oriented self, improving outcomes in the daily life as well as over the life span (Hoppman et al., 2007). For students with limited exposure to the domain of education, little understanding of the role and expectations of a successful college student, and narrow, if any intersection within their
personal lives of the long-term benefits of college, the formation of a possible self who feels empowered to be successful in higher education becomes more challenging. Dual-enrollment programs offer the possibility of agency by addressing the barriers to a possible-self who thrives in the domain of higher education. It can become the rudder that offers the captain the power to steer their way to the future they now see as both possible and desirable. A survey of literature focused on rural youth, associated outcomes of educational attainment and the dual-enrollment intervention model offers a context to support the relevance of these theories to the study goals.

The Rural Youth Dilemma

Rural landscapes have changed over the years, as their natural resources and the jobs they provide have dwindled. In the Northwest, many communities that were once thriving timber towns and centers of agriculture have become relics of their past (Craig, 2015). Timber and farming jobs have given way to service sector employment, such as jobs in retail and food industries. Once living wage jobs have been replaced with entry-level, low-wage positions with few or no education requirements. With less economic vitality, many rural communities have struggled to find a way to attract new people or hold on to their youth (Salamon, 2007).

A consequence of declining economic vitality is the outmigration of the very youth whose efforts are needed to breathe life into these towns. The departure of youth who see a potential future for themselves, and with means to achieve it, has resulted in a phenomenon Carr and Kefalas (2009) call the “rural brain drain.” In the declining economy of rural communities, young people have become the export of rural America, producing young people who will be “high flyers,” and become the college educated labor force (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). What, then, is to become of youth who are unable to cultivate a vision for their future, a possible self beyond the borders of their rural communities? What will happen to those who have a vision but lack
the economic means and social connections to bring it to life? Rural youth, and particularly those whose families of low socioeconomic status with networks that provide few or no connections to foster opportunities, are increasingly at risk of being left behind to “hold down the fort” while their more privileged counterparts launch a life filled with the benefits of being on time for their future.

“On time” is a concept within the life course perspective that captures the relationship between the institutional systems and processes of socially constructed normative practices and the real-life time occurrence of a life event (Neugarten et al., 1965). Institutional systems and processes are designed to uphold socially normative practices, creating a benefit to all who follow the “norms” and a penalty, intentional or otherwise, to those who challenge them. Life timing is one of the domains by which normative practices are delineated. There are clear benefits and privilege to being “on-time” in a life event because the very processes engaged to fulfill the life event are designed to support optimal outcomes for age-based life choices. Education, partnering, fertility, and even health status are examples of categories when the timing within the life course can dramatically alter available opportunities and associated opportunity costs (Billari et al., 2011; Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Dannefer, 2003; Riley, 1987). Being “off-time” can be costly, and the cost is often magnified over the life course.

In the context of education, the institutions of higher education are built on an age-based life event, best serving young adults who are unattached and without dependents, able to live away from their natal families, and financially able to focus exclusively on academic achievement rather than earning substantive wages.
Higher Education and the Promise of a Bright Future

The benefits of higher education across the life course have been well established in research. Overall, college degrees contribute to increased access to economic, social, occupational, and health benefits (Abel & Deitz, 2014). College educated adults experience greater periods of economic and employment stability, and average wages of 56% higher than adults without a college degree, resulting in lower poverty rates (Bozick & Deluca, 2005; Economic Policy Institute, 2015; Hout, 2012). College educated adults achieve better overall health outcomes, including a lower risk of stress-related and chronic disease and greater longevity, than their non-college educated counterparts (Dupre, 2007; Friedan, 2010). Education has implications for future generations, too: Children of college graduates are more likely to attend college themselves (Ashburn, 2007; Choy, 2001; Folger, Carter, & Chase, 2004).

The benefits of educational attainment may be bolstered or hindered by when a person pursues college. Delaying college enrollment by even a short period of two years significantly decreases the likelihood of ever completing a college degree (Bozick & Deluca, 2005; Karp, 2007). Pursuing college on a delayed schedule may mean lower average lifetime earnings due to a delay in being able to obtain a higher wage job.

There is an ever-increasing need for a college-educated workforce in order for the U.S. to remain competitive in the global economy, resulting in a steady increase in students seeking to attain a college degree (Goyette, 2008; National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Increased interest in college has not translated to an increase in successful degree completions, however. As the cost of college continues to rise, more than 200% since 1998 and more than 1000% since 1980 (Department of Education, 2015) outpacing wage growth, many college-curious students
see the cost of attending college as insurmountable (Gallup and Lumina Foundation, 2014; Stiglitz, Tyson, Orszag, & Orszag, 2000).

The question of whether one can attend college, or perhaps more appropriately, whether one has affordable access to college, remains critically important in the study of emerging adulthood. Young adults are tasked with carving a trajectory to success as they prepare to leave natal homes and enter the world of work, sometimes via a path through higher education, sometimes without. Therefore, educators and policy makers alike are seeking approaches to enhance the immediacy and ease of the transition to college. An approach gaining in popularity is concurrent high school and college enrollment, commonly known as dual-enrollment programs.

**Dual-Enrollment Programs**

Dual-enrollment or dual-credit programs, in which high school and college credits are concurrently earned through partnerships with community colleges, are now present, in some form, in all 50 states (Allen, 2010). The growth in these programs has generated substantial interest in their contribution to student college enrollment and retention to degree completion. Empirical research suggest that participation in dual-enrollment programs has a positive impact on academic outcomes. A growing body of literature on the quantifiable outcomes of dual-enrollment, sometimes called dual-credit programs has amassed (see comprehensive literature review by Allen, 2010), largely centered on academic readiness, as measured by grade point average, and persistence for 2-year and 4-year degree completion as indicators of successful transition to college (Hoffman, E., 2012; Swanson, 2008; Thomas et al., 2013) For example, participation is correlated with higher GPAs in both college and non-college high school courses; less need for pre-college remedial courses in math and English; reduced occurrence of a gap year
between high school and college; earning credits at a faster rate; fewer failed, dropped, and incomplete courses; and increased persistence through to college graduation (Allen & Dadger 2012; Giani et al., 2014; Hughes et al., 2012; Jones, 2014; Karp et al., 2007; Karp & Hughes, 2008).

Despite the existing research which substantiates positive student outcomes in academic achievement, the mechanisms by which dual-enrollment programs achieve these gains is less well understood (Giani et al., 2014; Swanson, 2008). Exposure to the college processes and expectations, as well as skills needed for academic and social success, contribute positively to academic readiness and achievement, which is particularly true of first-generation students and students from low socioeconomic status (Conley, 2015; Williams, 2015). One possible benefit of dual enrollment is that it provides a supported context to develop an understanding of what it means to be a college student. This understanding is especially likely for those students whose contact with the inner world of college has been limited or non-existent.

The overwhelming majority of studies have employed a quantitative analysis, and personal narratives from participants concurrent with their participation in dual-credit programs are lacking. Personal narrative illuminates the subjective nature of lived experiences and draws out aspects of these experiences that elude quantitative measurement. There is very little published from a life course perspective that inquires about how program participation mobilizes students to make an “on-time” transition to college, or how their experience influences, indeed enhances, educational aspirations and career trajectories toward an expanded horizon of “possible selves” (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Therefore, the present study aims to fill these gaps.
The Present Study

Guided by life course (Elder, 1998; Settersten, 2007) and possible selves (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934; Markus & Nuirus, 1986) frameworks, the present study explores how an education intervention program influences rural youth identity development. Specifically, the research questions were: (a) What do students identify as the perceived benefits of participation in dual-enrollment programs? (b) How does the significance of these benefits vary based on socioeconomic status, geography, and gender? The participants in this study were students in a dual-enrollment partnership between the Local Community College (LCC) and their area high school. Via focus groups, students from three area high schools were invited to share their experiences as high school students taking classes through the community college, with particular attention to how youth incorporate the experience of participation into a vision of a possible self. Students reflected on their motivations for participation, how they perceived the experience to be a turning point in their lives, and the importance of this opportunity being available at this juncture in life.
Chapter 3: METHOD

In this chapter, I will present the methodological approach to this study. I begin with an introduction to the communities in which these high schools reside, followed by a discussion of the study participant sample. Then I summarize the data collection process from the original study, followed by a summary of my own positionality to the original study and its role in the evolution of the secondary analysis that comprises the findings presented here. Finally, I describe the qualitative data analysis used for this project.

Defining Communities as Rural

Rural is a term that captures a geography as well as a construct of culture and practice (Cloke & Little, 1997). Rural places may be conceptualized as being remote or sparsely populated, by activities centered around the use of natural spaces, by customs or practices of daily living, or by an economy of natural resources such as timber or agriculture (Cloke & Little, 1997). Rural is more than just space, it is also the meaning held within. In this study, the residents of the represented communities—Mountain View, Farm View, and Town View—and specifically the study participants, identify their communities as rural in both geography and way of being. Some key areas that participants called out as reflecting rurality include: geographic location, economic reliance on natural resources, daily life practices, social organization, and outsider views of the communities.

Geography

In all three communities, study participants identified their communities as being rural. Some of the participants resided twenty miles from the town center. One student described their nearest neighbor as living more than a mile away. In Mountain View, the school district serves students living as far away as forty miles from their assigned school. All lack a transit system to
access local services. Transportation needs are solved through relationships, bartering for services, and learning basic car mechanics. Students in the study reported arranging carpools from Mountain View to the community college campus, a common practice to meet transportation needs in rural communities. Although all communities are within an hour or less of a larger population center, the communities in this study have been identified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as eligible for rural land development grants (U.S. Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2017). Both government programs for rural development and the lived experiences of community members support these communities as belonging to a rural geography.

**Economies of Natural Resources**

Timber and agriculture are the economic roots of all three communities (Craig, 2015; Richardson, 2006). Although environmental regulations have brought about substantial changes to the economy, particularly to the timber industry, logging and farming still represent a large percentage of the workforce (Oregon Communities Reporter, 2017). Timber is one of the few living wage industries accessible to people without a college degree, creating heavy reliance on natural resources as a means to earn a sustainable wage (Craig, 2015).

**Daily Life Practices**

Animal husbandry and farming are part of the daily lives of many of the study participants. Working and living where one grew up is a normal part of life in these communities. Although there is nothing about rurality in and of itself that mandates these kinds of daily life practices, there is much about it that facilitates them. Access to land for grazing and space for farming make it easier to participate in these activities, and encouraged by thriving programs, such 4-H and Future Farmers of America.
**Outsider Views of the Community**

Farm View and Mountain View students both shared feeling anxious about people on the community college campus identifying them by their hometowns. Mountain View participants were especially sensitive to their community’s reputation by outsiders. Low graduation rates, higher than average teen pregnancy rates, and higher rates of poverty have contributed to less than favorable opinions of this community, opinions that leave residents from Mountain View feeling conflicted. The association between rural spaces and poverty, low rates of education, and multiple generations of families in the same town, even on the same land reinforces these communities as being rural for both insiders and outsiders (Salamon, 2007).

**Three Communities and the Participants**

Participants represented three area communities (Mountain View, Farm View, and Town View) who have high school partnerships with Local Community College (hereinafter referred to as LCC) to offer a dual-enrollment opportunity for students. The high schools are situated in three communities within 60-minute drive of a larger university town, and share similar histories as agri-timber communities that experienced economic decline related to the timber bust (Communities Reporter Tool, 2017). A brief overview of these communities is provided, including background characteristics from participants, to help demonstrate them as representative of their communities. A summary of community characteristics is provided in Table 1. The survey of background characteristics may be found in Appendix C, and participant-specific characteristics are provided in Table 2.

**Mountain View**

Mountain View is a primarily white community, with 85% of the population identifying as Caucasian. Latin(x) as the only other race/ethnicity group to meet or exceed one percent, with
12% (Communities Reporter Tool, 2017a). Mountain View is a predominantly low-income community, with a median income less than $30,000, and a utilization rate of 64% for federal and state low-income entitlement programs (Communities Reporter Tool, 2017b). Educational attainment in Mountain View is lower than state average in high school graduation and higher education participation and completion, where 15% have not graduated from high school or equivalency and only 43% have any participation in postsecondary education (Communities Reporter Tool, 2017c).

Participants from Mountain View reported information on a total of ten parents, none of whom have a two or four-year degree. This is consistent with the average educational attainment reported among adults in Mountain View. The educational attainment of parents in the Mountain View group included five with high school completion (50%) and three with some college (30%), a reasonable representation in a community with a 25% rate of some college (Communities Reporter Tool, 2017). All Mountain View students reported family incomes as ranging between $30,000-$50,000, and household size of four to six, placing these households somewhere between 100% and 200% of the federal poverty line. Some of the participant families in Mountain View may qualify for SNAP benefits; all meet the income eligibility guidelines for HUD (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017). In Mountain View, 48% of households earn less than or equal to 185% of the federal poverty level (Communities Reporter Tool, 2017). Based on family size and estimated household income, the focus group participants appear to be an accurate reflection of average earnings and experiences of low-income and working poor households in Mountain View.
Farm View

Farm View is also a predominantly white community, with 91% identifying as Caucasian; only 4% of the community identifies as Latin(x) and there are no other race/ethnicities with more than 1% (Communities Reporter Tool, 2017). Median income is $34,500, higher than Mountain View but still lower than the state average (Communities Reporter Tool, 2017). Farm View educational attainment tops 50% in higher education participation. Utilization of poverty programs is approximately 55% (Communities Reporter Tool, 2017).

The Farm View participants reflect overall higher rates of college participation among parents than Mountain View. Within the twelve parents, two have a four-year degree, one has an associate’s, three have some college, one has a high school diploma, and one is unknown. All of the participants had at least one parent with some college. Among adults in Farm View, the combined percentage of college experience barely breaks 50%; the focus group participants are over-representative of households with at least some college. One student had two parents with a four-year degree, but the student is actually a resident of another community who commutes to Farm View to participate in the fifth-year program, because their home high school does not have an equivalent program at this time, and a parent works at the hospital in Farm View. This student’s parents would not be represented in the census data for Farm View, but the student is represented in the Farm View participants as a member of the Farm View school district. If these parents are excluded, the four-year degree attainment for Farm View participants falls below the town average of 17%, and the over-representation of college is resolved.

Assessing how well Farm View’s students represent the economic breakdown of households is once again confounded by the non-Farm View resident in the group. This student’s
family income is $60,000 or more. The remaining students are more representative of Farm View in general, with two out of the five reporting $20,000-$50,000, that when combined with family size, puts these families at less than 200% of the federal poverty level (Communities Reporter, 2017; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017).

**Town View**

Like the previous communities, Town View is 95% white, with almost no measurable presence of communities of color (Communities Reporter Tool, 2017). Median income is $43,000, slightly higher than the average in rural Oregon communities (Communities Reporter Tool, 2017). The most significant distinguishing factor of this community is the educational attainment, which includes 75% having at least some participation in higher education, and advanced degrees topping 25% (Communities Reporter Tool, 2017).

In Town View, all of the participants’ parents have at least some college, except for one reported unknown. There are four parents with graduate degrees, the only community to report advanced degrees. With 41% of adults in Town View possessing at least a four-year degree, the participants in the focus group have parents who over-represent this category. Four of the six households also report income higher than the mean for the community. The participants in this group appear to reflect an increased level of economic and educational privilege when compared with the larger Town View community.

**Comparisons of Community Demographics**

The study sample consisted of 17 students who were concurrently enrolled in an area high school as a diploma-seeking student as well as a degree-seeking student with active enrollment at LCC. The students ranged in age from sixteen to twenty-one ($M = 18.5$, $SD = 1.5$). The age range is the result of program variations among the three high schools, in which one
high school permits junior status students to participate in their dual-enrollment program, some
of whom were under 18 years of age, whereas other area schools limited participation to students
in their senior year or beyond. Nine of the seventeen students are first-generation college
students, whereas eight had at least one parent with an earned four-year degree. Table 1 contains
race/ethnicity, household income distribution, and educational attainment rates of adult residents
in 2016, according to the Oregon Community Explorer. Mountain View fairs the poorest in
median income and educational attainment rates. By contrast, Town has median income and
educational attainment rates on par with or surpassing state averages. Mountain View’s
percentage of students without a high school diploma is double that of Town, whereas Town’s
percentage with a Bachelor’s degree or higher is more than three times that of Mountain View.
The range in income and education helps contextualize the variations presented in students from
each of these communities. Table 2 shows demographic characteristics by community and
overall. This information helps situate the participant-specific information as it relates to the
broader community. Mountain View participants reflect the lowest average income and lowest
educational attainment, whereas Town has the highest averages for both, consistent with
community characteristics. Although the samples are small, they appear to accurately represent
the average household. One question to consider in interpreting qualitative focus group data is
whether and to what extent participants are reflective of a broader group, in this case that of their
home communities. In two of the three focus groups, the students who participated in the study
appear to represent average households within their communities. This lends strength to the
method of data collection as being able to accurately reflect the relevant demographic categories
within each town.
Procedure

The present study evolved from a previously conducted program evaluation of the College High School Partnership Program of a local community college, using data from the Student Perceptions of Dual-Enrollment Participation Study, under principal investigator Dr. Leslie Richards. Data were collected between the spring of 2014 and fall 2016. The original study included focus groups conducted with students from three area high schools who all work with the same community college for a dual-enrollment partnership program. The study was organized as a program evaluation to provide feedback to participating institutions on the program’s successes and failures. The research team was comprised of three graduate students under the supervision of the principal investigator. The results of the program evaluation were submitted as an institutional report and presented to the applicable educational and district leadership.

Students from the participating high schools were invited to participate in one of three focus group sessions to share their experiences as part of the local community college high school partnership program. Measures were taken to reduce the risk of errors associated with the use of focus groups. The recruitment process and order of focus group activities remained constant across all three groups to reduce variances in the procedure that may have influenced student participation (Morgan, 2002). The recruitment process involved identical recruitment emails sent via the high school program coordinators, inviting students to contact me by email with questions or express their interest in the research study (see Appendix A). Interested students were directed to a secure, anonymous scheduling poll to provide availability for a focus group. For each high school, there were two session times to reach both day and evening students. Focus group times were determined based on the availability of interested students. The
high school coordinator then re-sent the recruitment email, along with the scheduled focus group times, to all eligible participants. High school counselors also shared the link to the poll with students from the Destination Graduation course, a required course for all students in the high school partnerships program. Because the high school coordinators handled direct communication with the students, focus group facilitators had no way of determining if the participants who arrived for the focus group sessions were the same students who participated in the scheduling poll or made inquiries about the study. Therefore, the response rate is unknown.

Three focus groups were conducted, two at the community college and one at a high school. They were organized so that students from the same high schools participated in the same session. At the entrance to the room where the session was held, students were greeted by the research team. Prospective participants met privately with a research team member where they received a copy of the explanation of research (see Appendix B) to ask clarifying questions and decide if they wanted to participate. Agreeing to hear the explanation of research was incentivized with free snacks (pizza or sandwiches) and $5.00, even if students opted out of the research study. No student who listened to the explanation of research opted out of the focus group session. Students learned from the explanation of research that documentation would be held in a secure location. Confidentiality of participation could not be guaranteed because focus groups were organized by high school, increasing the possibility that participants would know each other personally. Upon agreement to participate, students were read a statement of verbal assent. Per the IRB, to allow for inclusion of legal minors, a waiver of requirement for written parental consent was obtained, on the basis that the study posed limited risk and the assertion that minors able to participate in college classes are capable of representing their own experiences. Participants were then given a brief demographic survey to complete, covering
items such as household income, parent educational attainment, parent occupations, financial planning for college, and how long participants have lived in their communities. The surveys were used to help identify whether and to what degree students were representative of their communities of residence. All focus group participants ($N = 17$) completed the survey. The complete survey can be found in Appendix C.

A tray of sandwiches or pizza was provided along with drinks and various snack items, and participants helped themselves after they returned their surveys. While participants made plates and ate, they had the opportunity for casual mingling. Research team members circulated to make sure everyone had what they needed and then the moderator called the focus group to a start. Students sat in a circle, with three microphones at the center.

To promote anonymity, students were asked at the beginning of the focus group to select a pseudonym and to refrain from the use of others’ real names throughout the group discussion. All focus groups were audio-recorded, with obtained verbal assent. Semi-structured prompts were used for the focus groups. Prompts included questions such as, “What motivated you to participate in the dual-enrollment program?” and “How has participation influenced your future education plans?” A complete list of prompts can be found in the focus group protocol in Appendix D. All focus group sessions were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Our research team was comprised of a moderator, a note-taker, and an additional discussion lead to aid in follow-up prompts during the discussion. Per Morgan’s (2002) recommendation for improving consistency in data collection, I served as the main moderator for all three focus groups, which helped standardize how the research topic and purpose of the project was presented to all participants. The moderator launched the session and was responsible to assess when it was time to move on to the next prompt.
Overall, participation in the focus groups was dynamic. Every participant actively engaged in each of the prompts. The students were all familiar with one another, and the cases of Mountain View and Town View, many of the students had gone to school with each other since elementary years. The pseudonyms chosen at the beginning of the focus groups were difficult for participants to remember, largely due to the extensive relationships that already existed among them. The familiarity of the participants may have contributed to the speed with which the focus groups reached depth and vulnerability in the discussion, as well as the length of the sessions. Participants were asked to schedule sixty minutes, but none of the focus groups were less than one hundred minutes. Mountain View’s focus group was one hundred forty-five minutes, more than twice the planned time of one hour.

**Qualitative Data Analytic Strategy**

Exploratory qualitative research questions are typically grouped into two categories: epistemological and ontological (Saldana, 2013; Daly, 2007). The key questions of an epistemological orientation are centered on what is knowable and how we know what we know (Daly, 2007). Studies in which researchers have this orientation help us understand phenomenon because they interrogate what can be known, primarily from a structural perspective (Saldana, 2013). By contrast, ontological questions focus on what is real, both objectively and subjectively (Daly, 2007). Ontological questions can help identify phenomenon to explore by considering perceptions of reality and then interrogating for how that reality has been constructed; it explores the relationship between the phenomenon and an individual’s lived experience within the phenomenon. The focus is on what is perceived to be real, rather than on what can be known. My research questions reflect an ontological approach to understanding how rural young adults perceive the association between education and their futures in light of the barriers and
challenges associated with low-income rural communities. The focus group questions were designed as semi-structured prompts to invite students to reflect on their own realities of a shared phenomenon (i.e., participation in a dual-enrollment program), keeping the individual reality at the center.

Qualitative research is often a simultaneously deductive and inductive process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The theoretical background of researchers will inform their analysis through an influence on the themes that capture their attention (deductive; Emerson et al., 2011; Spradley, 1979), but researchers will also be open to other emerging themes as they analyze the data (inductive; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). For the present study, I used both approaches to analyze the focus group transcripts.

In the first stage of analysis, I used two coding approaches: attribute and open coding. Attribute coding used any shared demographic information offered by participants. To complete this process, I analyzed content at the individual participant level, creating a narrative thread for each student, to isolate all references to the categories of age, self-identified gender, family income, parental educational attainment, sibling status, and student employment status. These characteristics can be important in more focused coding to help understand the similarities and differences in experiences of reality among participants (Saldana, 2013). Open coding was used to identify significant codes regardless of possible connection to the research questions. This process was guided by grounded theory, focused on iterative readings of the text to see what emerged prior to any effort to align with the research questions or theoretical perspective (Charmaz, 2006). Constant comparative analysis began with reading through each of the focus groups and forming an initial list of codes, first identifying them within each individual focus group, and then cross-referencing for content present in all three focus groups.
Upon completion of the content analysis, I moved to a second stage of focused coding, where codes were grouped into categories which were used to derive content codes and applied to the data. In this stage of data analysis, I intentionally read for themes related to meaning making, life timing and disadvantage, applying the frameworks of symbolic interactionism and life course perspective to the process. After the content codes were applied, an additional focused coding analysis yielded sub-codes to each major code. When I finished the focused coding, I created brief memos on each individual, which included not only the demographic and background details they provided, but which codes each participant contributed to in the focus group session.

The textbook summary of the coding process is sufficient for describing the standard procedural qualitative approach to coding. However, the procedural steps do not account for the researcher’s position to the data, in this case how the data analysis was impacted by the fact that it was completed by an insider to shared experiences, as well as prior knowledge of the data set.

The analytic strategy for this study began with the original analysis for the program evaluation study. Because I conducted the program evaluation using the same focus group data, I had prior in-depth knowledge of the ways students had attributed benefits of participation, as well as some insight into how they interpreted the program’s structure as supporting their positive outcomes. Given this prior knowledge, the analysis for this project focused on applying my understanding of what they had identified as benefits to more focused analysis of how the students attributed personal meaning of the program benefits to their own lives (perception of personal value/gain) and what commonalities/differences within and across specific characteristics of students’ personal lives may contribute to these perceptions and their
significance. The end result was a group of four major codes that became the foundation of emerging themes: Linked Lives, Possibility, Life Timing, and Disadvantage.

**Four Major Foundation Codes**

**Linked lives.** Linked lives captures the influence of key relationships identified by participants, categorized by family, community and references to role models. Family encompassed the influence of parents, grandparents, siblings, and their own children. Community encompassed references to community members and processes, the influence of people beyond the family as well as attributes of the community that are influential in the lives of people. Rural as an aspect of identity is often represented in the way the relationships of the people in the communities are understood. Role models encompassed not only the references to people who served as an exemplar, but the direction of influence within these relationships. This allowed some of the students to both identify others and self-identify as a role model.

**Possibility.** As a major code, possibility captures the sentiments of hope for the future, expanded possibilities in light of new experiences, changes in self-perception related to self-discovery, and stigma as a factor in the manifestation of these sentiments. Sub-codes for possibility were possibility, hope, self-perception and stigma. The content in these codes directly related to the use of possible selves as a theoretical framework.

**Life timing.** In life course perspective, the point in life at which an event occurs bears on the breadth and depth of its impact. The sub-codes of life timing were turning points and age norms. The experience of the dual-enrollment program was identified by students as a turning point in their life trajectories, largely based on the moment of timing in their life narratives. This code captured comments on what students perceived had been their life trajectory prior to participation, and how they attributed participation with trajectory changes. Age norms grouped
comments about the students’ understanding of activities that are expected/anticipated from students in late high school, as well as how they perceived themselves as being aligned or running counter to these norms. *Age norms* also captured content related to how students perceived their participation in the program as having impacted their alignment with these age norms.

**Disadvantage.** Students had active discussions about the various ways they experienced advantage or disadvantage, primarily linked to income, parent education, gender, being from a rural community, and the stigma associated with them.

As previously noted, my personal life experiences share multiple intersections with many of the focus group participants. Throughout the coding process, the content that emerged from the focus groups is not without some leanings derived from my own resonance with the kind of life moments and emotions described by the participants. The codes themselves are rooted in the words of the students, and the selection of the theories through the practice of grounded theory is not without some influence from this resonance. For example, had I not connected deeply with the discussion of low-income students’ transformation to become a role model, I may not have looked to literature on identity development related to future possibility through the lens of socioeconomic status.

**Positionality**

The secondary analysis of data involved recoding the focus groups using a set of theoretical frameworks tied directly to the content that emerged as compelling to me given my own position to the data. The gift of research is increased knowledge for the community, but the gift to the researcher is increased understanding of the self. Throughout the initial data collection and analysis, I continued to find myself drawn to similarities in the lives of many of the
participants and my own. I, too, share a rural upbringing, as a child in a low-income, single parent household. I, too, was a first-generation college student. I, too, had a parent who supported the idea of college, but had no money and no personal knowledge of higher education. I, too, was a youth with dreams for something bigger than my hometown, but I was conflicted about reconciling those dreams with my family, my history. I, too, was an older sibling who saw a chance to make a pathway for my younger sibling, who felt the responsibility to provide for her what my parents had not been able to provide for me. At moments, when sitting with the stories of these participants, it felt as if I was sitting with my own past. The resonance between my experience and theirs prompted me to explore how each of us, low-income, rural youth with parents who at best completed high school had arrived at the doors of higher education. Throughout the methods section as well as in the discussion, I refer to my positionality and its relationship to the data.
Table 1

*Community Characteristics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Mountain View</th>
<th>Farm View</th>
<th>Town View</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Income</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Income</td>
<td>$29,836</td>
<td>$34,475</td>
<td>$42,975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;$29,999</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$30,000-$59,000</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; than $60,000</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents' Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; High School Diploma</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Diploma\textsuperscript{a}</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AA degree</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s or higher</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* The data presented in this table are from Communities Explorer Tool, 2017.

\textsuperscript{a}Includes High School Equivalency and GED
Table 2
Participant Characteristics, by Community and Overall

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Mountain View ( (n = 5) )</th>
<th>Farm View ( (n = 6) )</th>
<th>Town View ( (n = 6) )</th>
<th>Overall ( (N = 17) )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age Range</td>
<td>18-21</td>
<td>18-21</td>
<td>16-18</td>
<td>16-21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Income</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; than $29,999</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$30,000-59,000</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; $60,000</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; High School Diploma</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Diploma(^a)</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AA/Some College</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s or higher</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)Includes High School Equivalency and GED
Chapter 4: RESULTS

The results address the research questions: (a) What benefits do students perceive themselves to gain as they participate in dual-enrollment programs? (b) How does the perceived significance of these benefits vary based on socioeconomic status, geography, and gender? First, I describe a theme that emerged as the impetus for participation in the program, that of the appeal of free college. The appeal of free college is reflected in both the fact that it was universally identified by participants as a benefit and is a prerequisite to the subsequent results. Second, I describe the theme of possible selves, which has three sub-themes: forming an identity as a college student, discovering new pathways to future goals, and becoming a role model. Within each of the results the significance of SES, geography, gender and timing in the life course became apparent. These categories are highlighted for their relevance to each theme.

The Appeal of Free College

The appeal of free college is organized into areas of broad appeal related to financial gains and facilitation of participation, and specific appeal related to variations in how the benefits are experienced based on variations in student characteristics. In the focus groups, students found the availability of free higher education highly appealing. Overall, students reported that concurrent enrollment through college-high school partnership programs improved college affordability and decreased parent and student stress about financing college. The significance of this broad appeal varied when considered in light of SES, geography and gender.

Students across all groups reported that the benefit of free college tuition was a significant pull to participate in the program, and free college courses increased the overall affordability, and therefore accessibility, of college. Saving money was the most cited reason for participation in the dual-enrollment program. Students reported that availability of at least one
year of free college tuition reduced financial strain and eased worries about how to pay for college, for both themselves and their parents. In the following quote, a student called out the value of the tuition as a critical factor in his decision:

For me personally, it was definitely a financial decision. My family doesn’t have much money to be sending me to school, and I figure that if I take away 20,000 dollars over the course of the next two years, of debt to pay back later, then it’s an option that I’m not going to pass up. (Hunter: ACT male student, age 20)

Financial appeal of free college extended beyond tuition savings. Students discussed the financial challenges young people face in trying to balance the cost of education with the cost of living independently. Zoey describes this challenge below:

I wouldn’t know how I was going to be able to save up enough money, while also having my own place, and of course on top of that with bills, and some people around here were actually posting like renting apartments, just renting houses for like $1000 a month. …People with a minimum wage job cannot even afford that let alone also going to college and paying bills that’s not included. It’s ridiculous. (Zoey: Beyond LHS female student, age 19)

In Town View, the highest income high school, terms such as “financially smart” and “investment” were used to describe the financial benefits of participation. At this high school, half reported estimated family income of greater than $60,000; only one reported a family income of less than $30,000. Four of the six students in this high school reported having a college savings plan, funded either by their parents or grandparents. Another student had a parent who works for the local university and referenced family tuition benefits as a means to pay for
school. Students from the school reporting higher income families tended to reference parental influence in the decision to enroll, such as the following quote:

I did it because it’s financially smart. I have like all my classes lined up that are all my prereqs [sic] to get into the classes that I need to be ready for vet school, when I transfer to OSU… My mom is an academic advisor, so she has worked with me. It was her idea for me to enroll in this program, but I agree that it is a smart choice, financially. (Colleen: female Beyond PHS student, age 18)

In stark contrast, only one of the five in the lowest income high school had any money saved for college. One other student had a grandmother who offered to help provide some money each month, but not enough to cover either living expenses or tuition. Every student at this high school reported an estimated annual family income as less than $50,000. Students from the two schools who reported lower household incomes and whose parents had lower levels of educational attainment talked about how enrolling would relieve a burden felt by their parents. Below are two such examples.

My first thought was, “Free college! Let’s do it!” Because my parents have three kids, and all three of us are going to do college, so I thought it would be easiest on them. (Kylee: female ACT student, age 19)

I know for a fact that if college was not free it would even be happening for me. Not now, but also maybe not at all. I would like to say that no matter what I would have come back, but probably, I would just have found a job. I’m a hard worker, and if I tried I could be a manager. And it’s like, if I have a job that can
pay the bills, then that’s what I’m doing. I’d be managing Les Schwab right now if this program didn’t exist. (Hunter: male ACT student, age 20)

Relieving the financial burden for self and family was a motivator for students from the lowest earning families and where parents had lower levels of educational attainment. All of these students expressed that their parents supported the idea of college, although they did not have the financial means to assist. Despite free tuition having broad appeal, it held a specific appeal for the lowest SES households. As expressed in the above quote from Hunter, free college meant college now. The removal of the burden of cost was associated with timely pursuit of higher education, reducing the risk of a gap year that will become a gap decade.

The rural geography of these communities adds another dimension to the specific appeal of free tuition. Students shared that without a college degree, their prospects for a living wage were tied to pursuing a management track in customer service or landing one of the rare, male dominated industries of timber and agriculture. Without a college degree, the lowest SES students felt the only path out of a rural community was military service, an option many of their classmates pursued.

I have a friend who she was going to LBCC for a while and she wanted to go to OSU but she couldn’t afford it and so now she’s actually she’s in the navy so it’s just very interesting to me seeing that that seems to be the choice; college or military. (Kylee: female ACT student, age 19)

These communities have their economic roots in timber and agriculture. The changes in the economies of natural resources have heightened the need for college education in order to offer an opportunity for a living wage while remaining in place, or leaving for desirable
opportunities. Geography presents as an area of special appeal, whether the goal is to stay or to leave.

In this study, the majority of participants were women, and those from Mountain View and Farm View noted the lack of living wage opportunities available to them without a college degree. Ellie, a female student from the ACT program, would like to be able to raise her own family in Mountain View. But she worries about being able to find a job in her field of study.

I grew up in Mountain View. It’s my home, and my family is there. I do think about how I would get a job there after I graduate. I guess probably I would have to commute to Corvallis, that’s probably the best option. I know my mom wonders if I have to work somewhere else, why would I keep living here. (Kylee: female ACT student, age 19)

All students benefit economically from a college degree, but for young women, a college degree may be the only pathway to a living wage if they want to remain in their rural context, given that the fields of employment available to people without a college degree are male-dominated.

The dual-enrollment program offered students free tuition that, if used to the fullest extent, would fund 90 college credits. The appeal of free college drew students from all demographics, regardless of family income, parental education, or even future career aspirations, into a shared experience. However, there were variations in the reported perceptions of the benefit of free college tuition. In short, although all of the participants (and their parents, as reported by participants) attributed free college credits as a motivation to participate, their discussions reflected the perception that benefits of free tuition may vary by class and parental educational attainment. For all students, free college was a financial benefit, but for some
students, free college was an open door to a future – a new horizon for a possible self – that otherwise could not have been.

**New Horizons for a Possible Self**

There was a consensus among participants that the experience in dual-enrollment had changed the way they understood themselves and expanded beliefs about what their futures could hold. Broadly speaking, the findings support that young people are thinking about their futures, and desire to make the best choices they believe to be available. Dual-enrollment participation directly impacted their understanding of available choices, thereby influencing perceptions of future possibilities. There were several notable sub-themes related to participation in the dual-enrollment program and changes in perceptions of future options and possible selves: forming an identity as a college student, discovering new pathways to future goals, and becoming a role model. Variations related to socioeconomic status, geography, and gender were observed.

**Forming an Identity as a College Student**

Students who participated in the dual-enrollment program came from a variety of high school, home, and community contexts, all of which influenced their expectations of what it means to be a college student and informed their perceptions of their capacity for personal success in obtaining a degree. Students reported that participation in the dual-enrollment program solidified an identity as a college student, which broadened a sense of possibility for their future and increased their beliefs about their ability to be successful in college. There were two factors students identified as significant in forming an identity as a college student: increased understanding of college student expectations and bolstered confidence from a sense of success in the college setting.
First, the majority of students generally felt that they had developed a deeper understanding of what it means to be a college student. Nearly all focus group participants reported self-identifying as college students rather than high-school students. Focus group participants reported that their time at LCC broadened their exposure to who can be a college student. Students found themselves in classes with older or returning students, coming to college later in life. They encountered people from diverse life experiences and appreciated getting to know people from other backgrounds. As students from primarily rural, white, working class communities, this kind of exposure can be especially salient. For a young person who has only been in a traditional age-segregated school system, encounters with non-traditional students challenged the stereotype of who can be a college student, which proved useful in helping them accept the ways in which they identified as “breaking the mold” of the traditional student. Surrounded by examples of people who defied the stereotype increased their confidence in the right to belong and unraveled the stigma of rural low-income kids as not being “the stuff” of college graduates.

Students described several ways in which they had identified skills, as well as developed new skills, that are necessary for college success throughout their participation in the program. Academic skills, such as note-taking and study skills supported academic success, whereas interpersonal communication skills, such as participating in discussions, supported engagement and enhanced personal responsibility. Students identified personal responsibility as an important part of the college student role because the demand for self-management is greater in college than in high school.

I didn’t think I would be ready for college. I didn’t have the best grades in high school, and college seemed like something that would be even harder. And, I
think it is harder, but I’m not so focused on that part. The pace is faster, and I really just have to focus on keeping caught up. In high school, it didn’t feel like a big deal to pass a class, or a big problem if I didn’t. College doesn’t feel that way. I know the progress report is kind of lame, and a lot of people don’t like it. But for me, knowing I have to go up and have the teacher say if I’m passing her class, I’m actually going to try harder to pass, and the feeling of getting a good progress report motivates me to keep trying. (Zoey: Beyond LHS female student, age 19)

Participation in the program facilitated a shift in the student’s home base for identity association. Rather than identifying as a high school student on a college campus, students shared they felt like college students, even when in the high school setting.

I would personally say that I definitely feel more like a college student, I don’t feel like a high school student any more. Both, or two of my younger sisters are in high school now, and I go back there and it’s like, “This is weird” [laughter]. And so, I would definitely say I would rate myself up at college student, not at a high school student level. (Colleen: female Beyond PHS student, age 18)

I don’t take any classes at my high school anymore, I do everything at LCC. I was nervous at first, but after the first week, I didn’t even think about it anymore. Everyday I’m just like, I’m working on my college degree. It seems weird, but I kind of forgot about that I’m not actually finished with high school yet. Well, at least I won’t be until the end of this term. (Hunter: male student, ACT, age 20)
Students described feeling a greater sense of responsibility in both their academic and home lives, because they were viewed as college students by others and more importantly, by themselves. By self-identifying as a college student, they accepted an increased level of responsibility by others and within themselves.

The second factor identified as important to the work of forming an identity as a college student was believing themselves to be capable and successful in higher education. This experience was especially true for students whose classes were held on the college campus. One student attributed the separation from the high school setting as essential not only to college enrollment but to his high school graduation as well.

Before I was in this program, I definitely would have said don’t bet on me to graduate. I was barely going to graduate from high school, so yeah, college seemed pretty unrealistic. But my math teacher thought I would do better in a college environment, that it would work better for me. I wasn’t so sure, but it was like, I might as well, and honestly, I don’t know if I would have graduated from high school at all if I hadn’t switched to this program. (Eric: male student, Beyond LHS, age 21)

Eric described feeling disconnected from his identity as a high school student, having dropped out of his community high school years earlier. Prior to enrolling with Beyond LHS, he did not believe he would experience success as a student. By the time he participated in the focus group, he was admitted as a transfer student to OSU to study engineering. He saw beyond his previously perceived limitations to an altogether new future, and he believed in himself. The possible self reflects what is deemed possible, and for Eric, his newfound confidence created a new possible
self, that became his reality. Confidence in his abilities as a student was a literal game changer for his future.

The theme of forming an identity as a college student was prominent in each of the focus groups. However, there were variations on how students attributed its significance. In the students from higher earning families, where college was viewed as inevitable, the formation of the college identity was communicated as a further investment in their future success. The dual-enrollment opportunity gave these students a chance to “try out” college, to test their capabilities as a student, and maybe get a jump start on finding and advancing their career passions. The following quote captures the idea of dual-enrollment as a practice run at college:

I’m taking some classes, and it’s helped me learn about what I do well as a student. I’m smart, but high school isn’t really as hard as college, so I didn’t really know what it would be like. My mom encouraged me to try this out and learn how to get better as a student so when I am doing the real thing, you know, at a four-year school, I’ll feel more prepared. (Colleen: female, Beyond PHS student, age 18)

Another student whose parent is an academic advisor offered these thoughts about her opportunity to begin forming a sense of identity as a college student:

I’m probably going to go to school in Hawaii, it has the program I want and I love water. I don’t even know for sure if my credits here will transfer, but I don’t think that matters. I’m learning about college, which is good. And if they don’t transfer I don’t really need them to be able to afford to go. If I don’t do well in them, I just won’t tell Hawaii and so even a bad grade won’t make a difference. I’m just
enjoying being out of my high school for two classes and if I get more out of it, bonus! (Katie: female student, BPH, age 17)

For students from more economic privilege, there is value in the experience, regardless of whether it saves them time or money down the road, because they still reap the benefits of forming a college identity and expanding skill sets that promote high academic achievement. Further, they do not express a concern about their present success and any future ramifications on college pursuits because, although a potential time and cost saving investment, it is non-essential to their future status of “college student.” There was one participant from Town View whose benefit to participation was tied to confirmation that she is not ready to pursue college. This student recounted a process of multiple conversations with her family about her lack of readiness to make a commitment to higher education. The resolution in her family came only when she offered an alternative plan for her “gap year” that satisfied her parents as making forward progress in preparing for her future. Her plan included two years of international ministry with a mission’s organization that will develop her moral character and religious conviction, something highly valued in her family unit. Despite her plan to delay college, she will still enter her post-high school year with a firm plan that connects to and upholds longer term future goals, and with strong family support, both emotionally and financially.

Comparing this perspective with students who are more economically challenged, who will need earned credits to count in order to make college affordable, and for whom a poor academic performance now will alter their future education options, the stakes and the gains are higher. For all students, free college meant forming a college identity right now. For the most economically challenged students, free college meant forming a college identity at all.
Gender influenced the experience of students’ sense of belonging, related to the dual role of parent and student. Two of the female students reported being mothers to young children, an aspect of their experiences as dual-enrollment students with potential for impact on both their capacity for developing an identity as a college student and their academic development. As teen parents, they were in the minority in their high school environments. But on a college campus, these teen mothers found peers in other parents, especially other mothers who were balancing the role of parent and student. It is unknown whether other teen parents participated, specifically if any of the male students have children.

**Discovering New Pathways to Future Goals**

Students identified new pathways to career goals, such as pursuing graduate degrees, internships, or certificates in their fields of interest. Students described an expansion of what they thought possible after college, which could lead to uncertainty in the present, but might ultimately help them find a niche in the job market suited to their interests and talents. In one focus group, Brittany described how this process unfolded for her:

> When I originally started college, I wanted to become a psychologist and that takes a doctorate, and now I’ve become a little less certain exactly where I want to go. I do know I want to go with psychology in some shape or form, but I’m considering going for a master’s degree or possibly becoming a director of student success and help students and colleges and universities, so I’ve just realized there are more options I wasn’t aware of before I started going to college and then taking several different classes that exposed me to several different branches I can go through. (Brittany: female ACT student, age 20)

Through classes and campus events, and relationships developed with faculty and fellow classmates, students in the dual-enrollment program were exposed to new ideas about their
personal trajectories after college and to the kinds of careers available to them in the future. They noted the potential to develop career-specific skills and knowledge through college courses, partly because their instructors were more deeply knowledgeable about specific topics. In addition, they also noted that college was important in developing marketable skills. One student describes how education may be more valuable than work experience in a precarious economy:

…Because if I try to get a job, focus on something that will get me a job for sure, ten years down the line the structure of our society might change and it might become useless and I’ll have spent all that time working for something I didn’t really care about. (Abby: female student, Beyond PHS, age 18)

By gaining access to the program and the college atmosphere, students gained information about what it takes to obtain the career they want. Perhaps more importantly, the experience provided clarity about opportunities for specialization within a given domain. Students mentioned specifically that they had a better idea about what kinds of career options were available within fields like healthcare, psychology, and animal science. They were able to delve deeper into career pathways, some previously unimagined. By attending classes within a college environment, students learned how diverse some fields really are and what kind of education they need to pursue their goals. The benefit of the dual-enrollment program reducing financial stress allowed students to feel more comfortable with taking the time to explore, which can pay off in expanded opportunities. The following quotes highlight how knowledge of options can shape an individual’s vision for their future:

Because I always had an idea of kind of what I wanted to do. Like, oh, I want to do something with animals, but now I know I don’t want to get an animal science degree because it’s not hands on enough and the vet tech thing is really hands on
so I would really like to move on to that, so… That’s good. (Natalie: female student, BPHS, age 17)

I know that I personally, going into college, wasn’t one hundred percent sure what I wanted to do, and even now, I’m still, like, I think I’m pretty sure that I want to do this, but I maybe want to do something else, and I think that by being here and doing the ACT program, that it gives you the opportunity to kind of venture out and find out what it is that you really enjoy in a more heavily academic area, as opposed to high school, and it’s – it’s nice not to have that financial burden on you while you’re doing it, where you’re like, well I don’t want to take this class if I’m not sure it’s what I want to do, because you have an opportunity to take other classes that you might not have otherwise taken. (Jenny: female ACT student, age 20)

Again, the significance of life timing is highlighted in the process of career exploration. As part of the dual enrollment program, students may take classes and try out career ideas as part of developing a possible self. Exploration as part of free college may increase flexibility in trying on new possibilities and may lead to new future goals.

**Becoming a Role Model**

The identity work related to self-concept and college began with the formation of an identity as a college student, but the significance of that work extended beyond the student themselves. For many students, their self-identification as a college student was coupled with a sense of responsibility to be a role model for others. In particular, students shared a desire to positively represent the college experience for their siblings. This was especially reflected in
comments among students whose parents had little or no college experience. Whereas more economically advantaged students spoke of parents as a role model, the students from lower SES households spoke of becoming a role model through their pursuit of college. In the absence of a personal example of a college role model, they identified strongly with a desire to fill this gap within their family and friend relationships.

Neither one of my parents went to college. And so, my dad was never encouraged, he was actually discouraged to go to college. He wanted to be a teacher, but he never got the opportunity to be. My parents are supportive of me, but I am the first person to do this. I know my younger siblings are paying attention, and I want to be successful, for me and for them. (Miranda: female ACT student, age 19)

My (older) brother is now working security but because he didn’t go to college they won’t give him a raise. They don’t really respect him as much as they do other people who have actually gotten a degree in that type of workforce. I think that, well at least I guess I mean I hope that he will see me and think if his little sister can do it, then he can too. Like, (laughing) “I’m smarter than her!” (Jenny: female ACT student, age 20)

Although Jenny cloaked her comment in humor, her belief that her success in college could help her brother as well calls attention to ways in which higher education is a family experience. The more economically advantaged students, whose parents had at least some college, often referenced their parents as role models and mentors to their higher education pursuits. The students from lower socioeconomic households, and whose parents had little or no college, spoke
of parental support for their education, but not as role models for success. These students
demonstrated an understanding that role models were important, and they were willing, even
compelled, to fill this gap within their family units.

The idea of becoming a role model went beyond sibling family members and friends, but
extended to their own children and to future generations. Two teen mothers in the study
identified their desires for educational attainment because of what it could mean to their young
children.

I am excited that my daughter will be able to see me graduate. She will be able to
look back and be proud, and I will be able to be an example to her. (Kylee: female
ACT student, age 19)

The fact that female students identified as parents and related the impact on their lives as
students is consistent with the disproportionately gendered experience of teen mothers
negotiating dual roles more explicitly than of teen fathers.
Chapter 5: DISCUSSION

Guided by life course theory (Elder, 1998; Settersten, 2007 and possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), this qualitative study filled a gap in the literature on the benefits of dual-enrollment programs. The goal of this study was to provide insights into students’ perceptions of the personal benefits of participating in a dual-enrollment program and how their experiences contribute to meaning making and expanded possible-self concepts that may offer new directions for their futures. Specifically, the research questions were: (a) What do students identify as the perceived benefits of participation in dual-enrollment programs? (b) How does the significance of these benefits vary based on socioeconomic status, geography, and gender?

The Appeal of Free College

The most significant benefit of the dual-enrollment program discussed was free college. Consistent with empirical research, the findings in this study support that students and their parents experience stress and concern over the cost of higher education (Goyette, 2008; National Center for Education Statistics, 2013; Stiglitz et al., 2000). As such, the appeal of free college drew many students to the dual-enrollment program. The students in this study can be separated into two main groups: those who were always going to go to college right after high school and those who wanted to go to college but were not sure how or when that would be possible. Not surprisingly, these groups fell along socioeconomic lines. For the families with higher incomes and parents with at least some college, free tuition was a sweet deal but not a deal breaker. But for others in the study, free tuition was a means to a pathway that was otherwise indefinitely blocked.

The findings in this study supports that free college has particular advantages for low-income and first-generation students, with immediate implications for pursuing higher education.
Although high school dropout rates have been gradually declining across all student groups, dropout rates for students from low SES households are still five times that of higher income peers (An, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2011). A unique attribute of dual-enrollment programs is its capacity as an intervention to prevent high school dropout and promote college enrollment and retention. For students from economically vulnerable homes, the traditional structure of Monday through Friday, 8 A.M.-3 P.M. education may be a barrier. Many students from low-income families are formidable entities in their families’ economic stability, and therefore a daytime work shift would conflict with school hours. The immediate need for economic support interferes with ability for long-term education planning that would reduce or prevent students from being an economic contributor. Two students indicated that high school graduation only happened for them because they could do both high school and college at the same time, and in a manner that allowed them to continue working. This finding supports that the will to pursue higher education may not be what is lacking in low SES or first-generation families so much as the it is the inability to reconcile their daily immediate needs with the time and financial investment needed to complete a college degree. In essence, it may not be smart, or even feasible, to trade immediate stability for an uncertain future.

When male low-income students spoke about their plans for a future without college, they talked about the options of manual labor employment, traditionally performed by men, such as mill work, logging, and farm mechanics. This raises the question of what options young women could find to earn a living wage if they had not pursued college. All of the low-income students expressed a feeling that their prospects for supporting themselves were improved with a college degree. But for female students, college was presented as the only option, which I will discuss further below.
Dual-Enrollment Programs and Forming an Identity

This study is informed by symbolic interactionist perspective to help frame how students experience dual-enrollment. This theory helps to explain Karp’s (2007) focus on how exposure to the role of a college student can be a determining factor in successful transition to college. The more clarity a student has about a role, the more easily the role can become part of the individual’s identity (Mead, 1934).

This study supports the findings of previous research that students benefit from the ability to “try on” the role of college student in a supported context, such as a dual-enrollment program (Allen, 2010; Burns & Lewis, 2000; Karp, 2007; Williams, 2015). It improves understanding of the differences between high school and college student roles, clarifies expectations, and provides experience in navigating institutions of higher education and building skills for college-level learning.

This improved understanding of what it means to be a college student is beneficial to all students, but it is particularly relevant to those students who have had little or no prior contact with institutions of higher learning. Karp (2012) observed that lack of understanding about the world of college and its complexities is a hurdle for students and may deter the most vulnerable students with the fewest supports from even attempting college. Dual-enrollment programs offer an intervention by filling this knowledge gap with personal and supported experience (Adelman, 2006). All participants in this study reported that they better understood themselves as learners; had clearer understanding of what would be expected of them as college students; and had opportunities to improve skills such as interpersonal communication, study skills, and self-organization. Students from higher socioeconomic households reported gains in role clarification, expectations of college coursework, and understanding their learning needs, but
they did not report relying on relationships within the college system to make these gains. Rather, they reflected on help and support from parents and their high school counselor as significant. Students from low-income backgrounds and whose parents had little or no direct experience with college reported more substantive support from college professors and advisors and drew less on examples from their home or high school to help fill gaps in their self-perception as a college student. The reports from low SES students in this study are echoed in An and Taylor’s study (2015), which found that when low SES students and first-generation students were given support at the campus level, their academic achievement outcomes improved.

Geography and gender played important roles in the process of forming a college identity; rural and female students had unique experiences. Students from the most rural community of Mountain View commented on the difference in the experience of attending a large and unfamiliar campus, with classmates they did not previously know, compared to their local high school. This was a point of stress and excitement. There were mixed feelings about adapting to a setting where one could be invisible and remain relatively unknown. For some students, this was perceived as an invitation to reinvent themselves, whereas others felt anxiety about having to assert themselves. All of the students from Mountain View felt grateful for peers they had known from high school, and considered these peers to be an anchor point as they explored this new territory. This reinforces findings from Armstrong’s (2013) study, which emphasizes the significance of social connections in forming a college identity, and for rural students in fostering a sense of familiarity and belonging. Female students noted the benefit of exposure to other females in roles they had not previously experienced, challenging gender constraints that may have been reinforced in their home lives, intentionally or otherwise (Li & Kerpelman, 2007).
On Time for the Future

Living Life “On Time”

For many focus group participants, language such as “supposed to,” or “it’s best to,” captured their awareness of the culturally held sentiment that the “normal” course for high school graduates is to go straight into college. Students expressed belief in the superiority of this choice and the inherent risks and opportunity costs of postponing college. They were concerned about a key life course concept: timing, and the benefits and risks of being “on-time” or “off-time” with respect to pursuing college.

As discussed in the literature review, a key concept of life course perspective is the consideration of life events and their impact on one’s future, through a culturally driven framework of “on-time” and “off-time” (Neugarten et al., 1965). “On-time” reflects alignment with the perceived optimal placement of a life event within social and institutional structures in order to maximize later life benefits; “off-time” reflects non-standard alignment which may result in delayed or missed benefits and a feeling of not fulfilling the proper social process, thereby reducing the feeling of social belonging or acceptance (Meyer, 1986). The experience of an event as “on” or “off” may be influenced by how what people believe about what it means to be “on-time.” If the culturally normative practice is to go to college right after high school, a delay, even for a good reason, may leave a person feeling the need to explain why they are “off-time” and present a plan for getting “back on track.” Cultural definitions of “on-time” persist in part because institutional structures create a context in which a particular life event achieves maximum positive contribution to one’s future if performed in a certain manner, within a given window of time. The structural benefits reify the “truth” of the cultural understanding of being on-time.
The formation of an identity as a college student underscores the significance of the timing of this experience within the life course. Students who participated in dual enrollment programs were offered an opportunity to test their interest and abilities in higher education at a period in time when it would be the least complicated and result in the fewest opportunity costs to embrace this pathway. For the lowest earning families, pursuing college was likely to require a gap year, or in many cases years, to earn money. Students, especially those who are economically vulnerable and put off college to enter the workforce, are less likely to ever return to college. If college can begin during a time frame already established as a period of pursuing education, it may diminish the perception of college as a distraction from the important task of becoming a wage earner. The practicality of college wanes as students take jobs, and find themselves earning a paycheck rather than taking on debt to pay for school. Preventing the gap year becomes a tool in helping college-interested kids enroll and persist to graduation. Free college may be an effective way to deter students from gap year syndrome because it facilitates establishing a college identity at a critical juncture in the life course.

When students spoke of the “gap year” between high school and college many had anticipated they would be forced to take, they did so with an awareness of two important ideas. The first was that taking time off after high school meant it would be harder to go back for college at a later time. The second was that delaying college meant choosing either to further delay other life events (e.g., marriage, children, buying a house) or it meant pursuing those life moments out of the optimal order for maximizing benefits, in favor of an optimal age-driven or personal social/emotional timeline. For example, they could choose to wait to have a baby until they were done with school and in a steady living wage job, but they could not anticipate how long that would take. They could postpone marriage, potentially at the cost of a long-held desire
to be coupled with a romantic partner in a more enduring way. They felt the crunch of the proverbial rock and a hard place. This was especially reflected in the comments from Mountain View and Farm, the two communities with lower average socioeconomic status.

The focus group participants never specifically used the term “life course” in reference to a theoretical model, nor did they reference structural or systematic processes that codify privilege for those who participate in certain life events at specific times and missed or reduced opportunities for those who do not or cannot. They did not talk about the wage gaps or social class stratification or the difficulty of career mobility with limited education (Autor, 2014). They did not talk about the impacts of deferred health care resulting in higher health care costs and shortened life opportunities (Friedan, 2010). However, it became clear in the discussion that there is a level of knowledge about culturally normative, advantaged ways of being that is deeply rooted in personal experience. They have family members who cannot do physical labor jobs any longer, and have no other trained skill to earn a living wage. They have parents who will rely on social security alone because they cannot contribute to retirement accounts. In their own lives, they bear witness to the long-term costs that come from a lack of advantage. They may not know to call their observations “cumulative advantage,” but they know what where they fall on the advantage continuum.

With regard to higher education, students communicated an understanding of the benefits of college now, versus college later- a pattern that supports their inherent awareness of an “on-time” approach to higher education. Mountain View and Farm students communicated previous fears about the impossibility of immediate enrollment into college, followed by statements of belief that the dual-enrollment preempted the need for a gap-year, and literally changed their educational timeline. The program allowed to them to be “on-time.” Town students
demonstrated an understanding of “on-time” education as one where the standard or normal student is the one who goes straight to college. Their comments reflect a high level of familial expectation and long-term planning for on-time higher education. For these students, college is the presumptive norm, and opting to delay college would be seen as aberrant.

Geography and Gender in Considerations of Being “On Time”

Geography and gender played important roles in the process of forming a college identity. In some instances, rural and female students had observations about the unique challenges these contexts present for women who desire a professional career and a family.

Within rural communities is the question of who will go to college and who will stay behind. Corbett (2007) observed that rural communities prepare youth for migration, unknowingly or otherwise, by linking the concept of opportunity with something that exists elsewhere. Carr and Kefalas (2007) observed the practice of students being identified within the community as achievers, stayers, seekers and returners, each reflecting a different set of expectations for their futures, and experiences within the community to help cultivate a trajectory. The significance of these categories is unique for rural students because of the size of and the capacity of the communities, and the geographic distance that often exists between their location and other opportunities. The pattern of rural youth outmigration has become important for rural communities, who must simultaneously balance retaining enough youth to keep their communities alive while sending others out to uphold an economic vitality that often seems lacking in their own backyards (Kelly, 2009). In this way, rural education has become associated with loss. In rural communities, higher education can be a bit of double-edged sword. On the one hand are the perceived benefits of a college degree; on the other is the limited capacity for college educated, professional positions within a rural community. The tension lies in the
realization that for many rural youth, college becomes a one-way ticket from home (Carr & Kefalas, 2007). Rural communities can only sustain so many doctors, teachers, accountants, and so on. If every youth from a community leaves home for college, what will become of the community? Some will leave and have no interest in returning, while others may want to return but not be able to find gainful employment. Higher education has become a factor in the outmigration of youth from rural communities, a reasonable concern for families who wish to live near their adult children, but also for community leaders who fear the future impact of dwindling populations.

Gender can also influence the value of “on time” college. Female students observed the tension of life timing that exists for women who wish to have a career and a family. Students commented that the socially preferred order of college then marriage then babies necessitated an “on-time” transition to college in order to fulfill maternal hopes. This means if college is delayed, young women must consider breaking conventional norms, or putting off the longing for family and perhaps forever changing their landscape for family planning (Billari et al, 2011). In this study, one student was already a teen parent. Although she was pursuing an “on-time” education, she expressed that her maternal experience was impacted by the decision to be a student while parenting. The relationship between education and fertility may be present for all students, but it has unique implications for women, where the issue of fertility might be likened to an additional barrier, as if a ceiling were closing in over the already very tight quarters of the rock and the hard place. This is not meant to diminish any emotions men experience related to delaying parenthood, nor to deny the opportunity costs for men who wait to have children; rather it calls out that within the upheld institutional structures that maximize positive future life outcomes, there are, at times, gendered experiences.
Cumulative Advantage and Disadvantage

In the area of advantages and disadvantages in life, time and timing is significant. The sociological literature on the life course emphasizes the fact that both advantage and disadvantage accumulate over time, and that it is reproduced through social processes, including processes that occur in educational institutions (e.g., Dannefer, 2003). Social processes are often set up to achieve best results if conducted “on-time,” meaning in the conventional form. College immediately after high school is ideal, not only because it reduces the likelihood of never enrolling, but also because the institution of college is designed to best serve single, young adults with no dependents and the ability to focus full-time on school. In this way, the maximum benefit is achieved if done “on-time.” In short, if one starts with more advantage (e.g., greater access to financial resources or social capital, generally healthy family members, easy access to medical care, or parents with higher educational attainment), there are fewer challenges to complying with the “on-time” schedule of life accomplishments, which over time can further the yield on that advantage (O’Rand, 1996). Conversely, if one starts with disadvantages of little or no stable financial resources, parents with less education, or poorer familial health status and less access to comprehensive medical care, the disadvantages associated with those markers also compound over time. Greater disadvantage early in life makes achieving “on-time” benchmarks all the more challenging. What may begin as seemingly minor differences in early life can easily compound and create significant differences in available resources later in life. The cumulative effect of disadvantage means to reach the same peak as a person with more advantage at the start, the less advantaged person has farther to travel and must do so with less.

The impact of cumulative advantage is not above the influence of culturally constructed ideologies regarding who is worthy and why, beliefs about individualism, and the “bootstrap”
mentality that those who have advantage earned it through their efforts, whereas those who do not have failed individually, through a lack of effort. The role of individuals in making their own advantage releases those who have advantage from responsibility for the compounding gap between themselves and those whose birthright seems to yield an increase of deficit rather than bounty.

In summary, there were aspects of the dual-enrollment program that were beneficial for all students, particularly the opportunity for free college tuition, and all students who participated attributed some gains to their experience. However, the findings strongly supported that this particular education intervention more significantly impacted students for whom college was desired but not guaranteed due to financial limitations. As well, through the process of forming a college student identity, the benefits to those students from low-income families included gaining confidence and transforming a sense of self-identity from that of uncertain to that of family and community role model.

Implications

Challenging the Stigma of Community College

Dual-enrollment programs challenge the stigma of community college as less rigorous than four-year colleges as well as the double standard that exists in utilizing free programs or services. Offering free classes to all students, regardless of categories that have traditionally segregated students in higher learning institutions, namely financial means and academic achievement, results in college classes of mixed income and academic abilities (Brand, 2014). This may contribute to destigmatizing community colleges as institutions for those who cannot afford better or achieve more.
The culturally lauded choice for college has been the four-year institution. Community colleges have been attributed as second tier institutions, relegating students who cannot afford better to a less rigorous academic experience and inhibiting future career aspirations and prospects through a narrower range of courses and less cultural and social capital associated with alum status (Holland, 2015). However, this stigma is being mitigated in the climate of rising costs of tuition compared to the affordability of community college. Whereas free was previously associated with cannot afford better, the soaring cost of “better” has shifted the affordability of community college toward prudent or shrewd.

Free is, of itself, a stigmatized concept because of its association as being needed and utilized by underprivileged populations, subjected to discrimination for belonging to marginalized groups (Goffman, 1963). “Free” becomes smart when one can afford to pay but finds a way not to. “Free” becomes freeloader when it is associated with need. If community college coursework becomes free for all, there is no longer the ability to attach the stigma of being unable to pay because paying is no longer relevant to participation. Free tuition becomes an equalizer in the shared learning space, because it is the reason everyone is there. Dual-enrollment programs are best able to influence the stigmatization of community colleges as second tier institutions of learning, and “free” as a handout if programming for students is held on the college campus rather than embedding college credit classes into the high school setting.

**Dual-Enrollment Can Foster a College “Warm-Up”**

Research suggests two approaches to fostering a culture of warming up within the college setting: encouraging students who are not college-bound to attend college (Rosenbaum, 2001) and facilitating warming up for students who are already in college (Deil-Amen, 2006). Both of these approaches are present in the findings in this study. The first approach targets students who
have not yet expressed intent to enroll, or have not followed through on that enrollment. The dual-enrollment program reached students in Mountain View and Farm who had interest in enrollment, but no plan to do so upon graduation from high school. Free college tuition created an effective bridge over a barrier to enrollment, and allowed these students to move from not college bound to enrolled college student. The second approach reaches out to students early in their college career to help identify barriers to graduation. The dual-enrollment program used this approach with all participants, through developing clearer processed and expectations associated with forming and maintaining a college student identity.

Because dual-enrollment programs provide access to free college classes and function as open enrollment, rather than limited to qualification by socioeconomic status, they are more accessible to a wider range of students. Low-income students who cannot afford college tuition can earn free college credit. So too can the student who comes from a lower middle-income family, where the earnings are too high for need-based grants, but not high enough to finance college tuition. Further, because it is open enrollment, the program may also draw students with financial means to afford college, who see the value of getting a head start on credits, at a reduced price tag. They are an excellent example of how one might experience a warming up in which the focus is on attracting non-college bound students to pursue higher education (Rosenbaum, 2001). Because students in dual-enrollment programs begin to develop an identity as a college student, and may experience a gentle, supported immersion into the expectations of college, these programs also achieve a “warm up” effect of reaching students early in college, at a time when increasing confidence and reducing anxiety can be critical to fostering sustained academic success, shaping and ultimately fulfilling academic aspirations. Therefore, these findings suggest that dual-enrollment programs with robust financial support and staffing should
be widely available to all students, as part of the strategic efforts to close achievement gaps in higher education and advance educational equity.

**Limitations and Strengths**

This study has a number of strengths. First, this study addresses a gap in research regarding how participation in dual-enrollment programs influences the way students see themselves. Second, this study offers a qualitative analysis on dual-enrollment programs centered in an ontological view of experiences and identity formation. Prior research on whether dual-enrollment programs contribute to student academic achievements have been focused on quantifiable measurements such as college grade point average or time between enrollment and college graduation. The focus on understanding the student experience from within helped pinpoint what aspects of participation led to personal growth and identity development on the part of the students. Third, this study offers effectively compares participants in the dual-enrollment program through the lens of socioeconomic status. Each focus group was confined to participants from the same home high school, who predominantly shared background characteristics of family income and parental education. Lastly, this study contributes to the impact of dual-enrollment programs on first-generation college students. The study included nine first-generation college students and eight with at least one parent having earned a four-year degree. The findings contribute to creating effective interventions to increase college enrollment for underrepresented student groups who are economically vulnerable.

This study is not without limitations, including selection bias, and program differences. First, each participant who attended the focus groups attributed positive gains to their participation in dual-enrollment and spoke favorably of their experience as an investment in their futures. The students in this study also expressed high levels of parental support for both their
interest in college and their participation in the dual-enrollment program. Although important for understanding how dual-enrollment programs work for students who are finding success, this study does not provide insight into students dual-enrollment programs are not successfully reaching, or who may lack the same level of parental support represented among these participants, leaving an important group of students underrepresented in research. A second limitation is there were differences between the three dual-enrollment programs. Mountain View and Farm View high schools offered 5th year programs, immersing students in the college setting and eliminating coursework taken at the high school itself. This resulted in a more complete experience of being a college student. Town View offered a more traditional blended program where students could enroll in courses at LCC while maintaining coursework at their home high school. This meant that none of the Town View students were fully separated from their high school environment, and did not have the same degree of immersion into the college setting as the other two groups of students. This study sample allows for some comparison between programs, but the sample sizes from each program design are small, so findings may not be representative of all student experiences.
Future Directions

As well, this study raises questions for future investigation. The format for dual-enrollment worked well in these communities, where the on-ground college campus was accessible to most students. Would dual-enrollment be as successful if students cannot spend the majority of their time on a college campus, with particular attention to building an identity as a college student? A larger study comparing the various models of dual-enrollment would help establish the significance of inclusion on campus. This study did not set out to focus on low-income or first-generation students, and the partnership program was not designed to target recruitment for underrepresented populations. Therefore, additional work is needed to determine if dual-enrollment can be an effective intervention with intentional focus on low-income and first-generation populations. Dual-enrollment programs have shown immediate gains for students, but studies have not yet followed students beyond the initial study. Longitudinal studies would help determine the sustaining power of participation across the life course. As identified in the literature review, possible-selves is a framework for thriving in later life. A longitudinal study would inform how the identity work of developing possible-selves earlier in life contributes to a foundation for creating healthy possible-selves in areas such as health status or positive relationships in later life.
Chapter 6: CONCLUSION

The findings in this study support that dual-enrollment programs have the capacity to capture students at a critical moment in their life course, and help identify, if not create entirely a pathway to a future in higher education.

This study sought to explore the benefits of participation in dual-enrollment as understood from the perspective of student participants, and to consider what, if any differences in benefits may be influenced by geography and socioeconomic status. The findings support several conclusions regarding rural youth and educational aspirations. First, the study found that free college held wide appeal, regardless of family SES, but the significance of free varied based on family income, with the lowest SES households attributing the long-term benefit of creating a turning point in their educational trajectories. Second, the study supported research that suggests formation of a college identity is important in developing confidence and clarifying expectations associated with academic achievement. Third, the study found that exposure to college, especially college campuses contributes to forming new and expanded understandings of future possibilities that can alter future goals and pathways. Finally, this study found that through dual-enrollment rural, low-income students who are vulnerable to being delayed in college enrollment stand to gain significant ground in the race to catch up to their more privileged peers. With accessible pathways and adequate support, our most vulnerable students have a more equitable opportunity to be on time for their futures.

Since the time these data were gathered, Oregon has launched the Oregon Promise program, providing free community college to all high school graduates with a minimum qualifying GPA. Upon the roll out of Oregon Promise, many school districts have placed moratoriums on dual-enrollment program entrance, or disbanded the programs altogether.
Because the Oregon Promise is intended to align students with the traditional role of immediate post-high school enrollment in college, it is a qualitatively different approach to engaging students in higher education. For example, Oregon Promise is not intended to overlap with high school completion, requires a minimum high school cumulative grade point average of 2.0, can only be accessed after earning a high school diploma, and must be used within the first college enrollment period following high school graduation. In light of the findings in this study, these distinctions are significant to the students who most identified with the benefits of free-tuition and life timing of participation in the dual-enrollment program.

The dual-enrollment program provided an opportunity for students who may not have met traditional college enrollment requirements to participate and build up confidence in academic abilities. To enroll, students needed only to maintain a qualifying grade point average for a single term, not cumulatively. The ability to overlap with high school was viewed by many students as a jump start, and helped persuade them to enroll, because they could see it as an investment in expediting their future career pathways. Delaying college enrollment until after a traditional high school completion timeline would negate this benefit. Most significantly, though both programs offer free tuition, the funding mechanisms between the two programs are distinct, and may not be experienced as equally beneficial to the most financially vulnerable students represented in this study. Dual-enrollment participation does not access federal financial aid, because students are not yet high school graduates and therefore not eligible for programs such as the Pell grant. Oregon Promise functions as a last-dollar grant, meaning that all available free financial aid is tapped to pay tuition, and the remaining balance is waived, creating a zero-dollar cost to the participant. This means lower-middle income families who were not going to be eligible for the Pell grant save money. However, the lowest-income households actually lose
financial aid dollars in this model, because their Pell grants are accessed to pay for their tuition, leaving fewer grant dollars to fund their transition to a four-year university. The dual-enrollment program left all federal financial aid intact, allowing low-income students to enter four-year university with more financial resources at their disposal.

The findings in this study indicate that free college tuition is indeed an important component of drawing students toward higher education. However, this study also supports that free is not enough on its own to empower the most vulnerable students to embrace higher education. Other factors, such as life timing, more flexibility to build academic readiness, and the opportunity to redefine themselves from the limitations or stigma of their high school experiences were also found to be important and influential in their decision to participate and their perceptions of their personal gains.

In the current global economy, higher education is more important than ever in the journey to a financially stable career. The public responsibility to create accessible pathways to higher education has never been more urgent. Effective and equitable opportunities for higher education will require support for multiple pathways. Free is important, but free on its own will not be enough to reach everyone. Dual-enrollment programs may be one important tool in our effort to ensure that every student can be on time for a future they desire.
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doi:10.1016/j.cedpsych.2012.01.004
Appendix A: Recruitment Email

Dear (Student):
We would like to extend an invitation to you to participate in a research study with Dr. Leslie Richards and a team of graduate students from Oregon State University titled “Student Perspectives of Dual-Enrollment Programs.” The purpose of the research study is to learn more about your experience participating in Mountain View High School’s A.C.T. program or Farm High School’s Beyond LHS program. Your participation includes completing a brief survey on background information and a group question and answer time with other students in the A.C.T. or Beyond LHS program. Sessions will be audio and video recorded. You should not participate if you do not want to be video recorded. You must be 18 years old to participate. For your participation, we will provide a $5.00 research incentive, food and refreshments.

Your participation has no foreseeable risk to you, and your insights about your experience may help to improve this program or others like it. We welcome an opportunity to hear your reflections on your experience! For questions or to express interest in participating in our research study, please send respond to graduate student Terese Jones at jonester@onid.orst.edu.

Thank you,

Dr. Leslie Richards, Oregon State University
Principal Investigator
Leslie.richards@oregonstate.edu
541-737-1071

Terese Jones, Graduate Student

Joy Lile, Graduate Student

Tim Ottusch, Graduate Student
Appendix B: Recruitment Email

**Project Title:** Student perspectives of dual-enrollment programs  
**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Leslie Richards  
**Student Researchers:** Terese Jones, Joy Lile, Tim Ottusch  
**Version Date:** April 2, 2014

You are being asked to take part in a research study. The purpose of this research study is to understand your experiences and perspectives in participating in Mountain View High School's "Accessing College Today", Farm School’s “Beyond Farm High School” or Town’s Beyond PHS program. You will be participating in a “focus group” or group discussion. You and the other participants will be asked several open-ended questions by the facilitators so we can understand your experiences with the program. There are no right or wrong answers, we just want to know about your experiences. The format allows you to shape the direction of the conversation. We will also collect some background information about you and your family on a short form. Your participation in this study will last about two hours. Data from the focus group may be used for research articles, presentations, publications, or in a master’s thesis.

There are no foreseeable risks to participating. This study is not designed to benefit you directly, but your answers may help improve this or similar programs. You will be paid $5 for participating. You must be at least 18 to participate. Your participation in this study is confidential (meaning that you don’t have to give your real name), but it is possible that others could learn that you participated in this study. We will be collecting audio and video recordings of the conversations, which will be used to create written transcripts of the conversations to analyze. We will be sharing a summary of the findings with the Mountain View School District, the Farm School District, the Town School District and LCC. The information you provide will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law, and we ask that all participants keep information that they learn about each other here confidential (what happens here stays here). Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose to not answer any question you do not want to answer.

**Study contacts:** If you have any questions about this research project, please contact: Leslie Richards at Leslie.Richards@oregonstate.edu or 541-737-1071. If you have questions about your rights or welfare as a participant, please contact the Oregon State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) Office, at (541) 737-8008 or by email at IRB@oregonstate.edu.
Appendix C: Participant Survey

Nickname: _______________  Age: _______  Year in HS (circle one):  4th  5th  6th

1. Race/Ethnicity: (Circle all that apply)
   - African American
   - Asian American
   - Latin American
   - Native American
   - White
   - Other (please describe): ___________________

2. Gender: (Circle one)
   - Female
   - Male
   - Neither/ Prefer not to say

3. What is your High School GPA?
   - 2.0-2.5
   - 2.5-3.0
   - 3.0-3.5
   - 3.5-4.0

4. What is your College GPA?
   - 2.0-2.5
   - 2.5-3.0
   - 3.0-3.5
   - 3.5-4.0

5. How many hours do you work for pay each week?
   - 5 or less
   - 5-10
   - 10-20
   - 20-30
   - 30-40
   - 40 or more

6. What is your approximate yearly household income?
   - Less than $20,000
   - $20,000 - $30,000
   - $30,000 - $50,000
   - $40,000 - $60,000
   - More than $60,000
   - I don't know

7. How many people are in your household (including family and roommates)?
   - Only me
   - 3 or fewer
   - 4-6
   - 7 or more

8. What level of education did your mother finish?
   - Did not finish high school
   - High School
   - Some College
   - Associate's degree or certification
   - Bachelor's degree
   - Graduate degree
   - I don't know

9. What level of education did your father finish?
   - Did not finish high school
   - High School
   - Some College
   - Associate's degree or certification
   - Bachelor's degree
   - Graduate degree
   - I don't know

10. If you have older siblings, what is the highest level of education that any of them finished?
    - Did not finish high school
    - High School
    - Some College
    - Associate's degree or certification
    - Bachelor's degree
    - Graduate degree
    - I don't know/I don't have older siblings

11. How long have you lived in Mountain View/Farm View/ Town View? __________

12. Do you currently plan to continue college? (Circle one)
Yes       No

13. If you answered yes to #12, what degree do you plan to seek?

Vocational/Professional Certificate   Associate's (2 year) degree
Bachelor's (4 year) degree           Graduate (advanced) degree
Appendix D: Focus Group Questions

1. Why did you join (Beyond LHS/ACT)?

2. Why did you decide to go to college?
   Probe: What is your “plan” for after high school?

3. How have your plans changed since starting with (Beyond LHS/ACT)?

4. What skills have you gained through the program?

5. What has it been like to transition from high school to college?
   Probe: How is it similar to or different from your expectations? Probe: How has your enrollment with the program been different from being in high school? How has it been similar?

6. How has (Beyond LHS/ACT) helped you prepare for college?
   Probe: Do you feel prepared to transition to LCC or OSU in the future?

7. Who has helped you get through the transition from high school to college?
   Probe: Family, friends, counselors, teachers, other adults in the community
   Probe: How do experiences differ for different people. i.e. is family a positive, negative, or neutral influence on them?

8. How have you grown as a person this year? What are you most proud of?
   Probe: Outside of classes, what kinds of things do you participate in?
   Probe: Are you a member of clubs, sports, or other extracurricular activities?
   Probe: Do you participate more in out of school activities in your home town, or where you go to school?

9. How would you rate your experience with (Beyond LHS/ACT)?

10. How have your experiences in (Beyond LHS/ACT) affected your thoughts on what you will do in the future?