



AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

Devora Shamah for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Human Development and Family Studies presented on September 21, 2009.

Title: Looking Toward the Future: Examining Aspirations and Sense of Purpose Among Rural Youth.

Abstract approved:

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In light of recent economic and social changes rural communities continue to worry about the future of their young people. Will they be prepared for the challenges that lay ahead as they move into adulthood? The aspirations youth hold set them on a pathway toward achieving goals, beginning post-secondary education, and entering the world of work. Sense of purpose, or a sense that one has a place in the world and has something to contribute, is an important developmental task that I argue helps position youth to navigate the challenges that await them as they transition into adulthood.

Knowing that context matters for human development and that rural communities provide a unique context, this dissertation examines aspirations and sense of purpose among youth living in a remote rural county in Oregon. Two studies were conducted to examine how growing up in a rural place shapes the aspirations and sense of purpose of high school youth living in a remote rural county in the Pacific Northwest. Study 1 examined

the processes of developing a sense of purpose within a rural context. Results indicated that despite sharing the same school and community, youth with low sense of purpose scores had a distinct set of developmental experiences as compared to youth with high scores on the sense of purpose measure. These experiences were, at least in part, guided by youth's perceptions of their family's social location. Study 2 examined the educational, occupational, and residential aspirations of rural youth in the same county. Results showed that these rural youth do aspire to higher education (only 8% planned to end their educations with a high school diploma) and many youth (68%) would like to live in a rural place as adults, suggesting youth would easily return to rural places as adults if they perceived a way to make a living. Youth's aspirations are particularly shaped by the narratives communities tell about the opportunity structure and how they define success. Overall, these studies suggest that rural communities can benefit youth and position them well for the upcoming transition to adulthood.

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Looking Toward the Future: Examining Aspirations and Sense of Purpose Among Rural  
Youth

by  
Devora Shamah

A DISSERTATION

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the  
degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Presented September 21, 2009  
Commencement June 2010

Doctor of Philosophy dissertation of Devora Shamah presented on September 21, 2009.

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Chair of the Department of Human Development and Family Sciences

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Dean of the Graduate School

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

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Devora Shamah, Author

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation has been a journey. There have been many friends, family members, and colleagues who have helped along the way with words of support, exciting discussions, and shared wisdom. My advisor, Kate MacTavish, mentored me through every step of my development as a researcher. From my initial apprenticeship with her learning how to begin a qualitative project to her insights on life in the academy, she has supported my work, supported me, and graciously given endless hours of her time. Her deep respect and love for rural places and the people who live in them are an inspiration. My committee members have also given greatly of their time. Leslie Richards has discussed qualitative work and read manuscript drafts; Alan Acock helped develop the mixed methods design of this project and frequently answered my many questions about Stata and latent class analysis; Michelle Inderbitzen has provided wonderful insights into the ways education and social justice intersect, and often provided needed encouragement to keep moving forward.

A special thanks goes to the people of Wallowa County, who opened their homes and hearts to this project. I hope I have done justice to your story. My friends and family have provided great faith in my project and in the value of this work. Of course, many academic journeys begin at home and mine is no different. Thank you to my mum and dad for supporting me throughout the process. I hope to make you proud.

There are a few others who deserve special mention, Sujaya Rao, who mentored me and allowed me to explore the broader issues of rural education while at the same time sharing her own passion for science and insects and inspiring us all to follow our

dreams. Dawna Hansen, a student with a deep interest in the study of human development and families, volunteered many hours to code data. Thank you for your insights; it was a pleasure to delve into the research process with you. My final year of writing was made easier by the support of Molly, who listened as I talked out ideas, gave me infinite hours of editing help, and most of all believed in me. There are far too many people who supported my work to thank you all here. To everyone who crossed my path during my dissertation work, thank you.



## CONTRIBUTION OF AUTHORS

As co-author for both manuscripts in this dissertation, Katherine A. MacTavish assisted with securing funding for the project and provided conceptual, methodological, and analytic advice for both manuscripts.

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to the young people of Wallowa County. They have been and are my inspiration. May they all find their place in the world and fulfill their dreams, both the dreams they had as they headed into adulthood and those that will come later.

Looking Toward the Future:  
Examining Aspirations and Sense of Purpose Among Rural Youth

## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary youth in the United States are coming of age in a world that is quite different from the world their parents faced when they were in their early twenties. The economy has shifted from a manufacturing based economy to one that is knowledge based. College educations are, in some ways more available than ever (cite) (Furstenberg, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2005; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Stevenson, Kochanek, & Schneider, 1998); at the same time a high school diploma no longer opens the doors to economic opportunity as it did when mills and manufacturing operations dotted the American landscape (USDAERS, 2003). The traditional steps toward adulthood, work, marriage, and children no longer occur in one particular order, and youth can expect to change careers multiple times during their adult lives (Bidwell, Schneider, & Borman, 1998; Furstenberg, et al., 2005; Topel & Ward, 1992).

Rural communities have been on the front lines of these changes, with mill and manufacturing plant closures completely altering the job opportunities while living wage jobs disappear and are replaced by lower-paying service jobs. At the same time rural schools, which have always faced funding challenges now face even more budget reductions while more of their students need to be prepared for higher education (Johnson & Strange, 2005; Johnson & Strange, 2007). While traveling throughout rural communities in Oregon in 2005, as part of the Communities and Natural Resources Class at Oregon State University, I consistently heard adults talk about their concerns for their community's youth. Adults frequently spoke about preparing youth for college, to live in cities, and for economic opportunity elsewhere. They talked about "exporting" their

youth meaning sending their youth off to be productive adults in urban communities. At the same time, adults talked about the economic development of their own communities that needed to remain healthy—living wage jobs that would attract young families and keep school classrooms full. In every community I visited with the class, community members pointed to their schools as the “heart of the community.” They repeatedly expressed concern that schools would close and the community would die, because without schools, communities lose those families crucial to maintaining community life—families who volunteered in schools, service organizations, and community government.

The tension between the desire for a strong community and the implied belief that the best life for youth coming of age exists in the cities is not new. However, this tension has become particularly relevant within a more global economy that lacks a social contract to provide a structure to the relationship between urban and rural places (Stauber, 2001). This study came into being against the backdrop of these conversations about exporting rural youth, the value of rural living, and the need to understand how rural communities shape the lives of adolescents developing within the contemporary historical and economic context.

#### What is known

The goals and dreams that young people develop and commit to pursue during adolescence set them on developmental trajectories toward attaining these goals. Researchers have paid attention to the aspirations of rural adolescents for over 300 years (Sizer, 1996) with the classic study with rural adolescents having been done by William

Sewell in 1964. Sense of purpose was coined as a term in 1959 by Victor Frankel. The sense of purpose construct was first studied in adults, and has only more recently been recognized to be a critical part of adolescent development (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003). Before discussing the role of aspirations and sense of purpose in development, both terms need to be defined.

### *Defining Aspirations*

Although it is clear that aspirations are future oriented goals, researchers define aspirations in different ways to distinguish them from dreams and fantasies. Sherwood (1989) defines aspirations as ambition and as motivators. He argues that an aspiration is both a goal, ambition, and the motivation to work toward one's goals. Aspirations have been defined as that which drives individuals to do more and be more than they currently are (Cobb, McIntire, & Pratt, 1989). This definition suggests that aspirations are not just future-oriented but must also include growth or development. Plucker and Quaglia (1998) define aspirations as inspiration and ambition, with inspiration being the willingness to engage in activities for inherent value and future worth, and ambition referring to the ability to set goals. They identify eight conditions for aspirations: achievement, belonging, curiosity, empowerment, excitement, mentoring, risk taking, and self confidence. All of these conditions are malleable and can be nurtured by families, school, and communities (Odell, 1988).

The majority of aspirations research has focused on educational and occupational aspirations (Cobb, et al., 1989; Haller & Virkler, 1993; Howley, 2006; Plucker & Quaglia, 1998; Sewell, 1964; Walberg, 1989). Many studies essentially conceptualize



aspirations as years of schooling (Cobb, et al., 1989; Haller & Virkler, 1993; Odell, 1988; Sewell, 1964). This translates into research that ultimately considers aspirations as a continuum from no high school diploma up through years of college and graduate study. Using an economic metaphor to establish the height of aspirations, Sherwood (1989) defined aspirations as any future-oriented goal in which an individual is willing to invest time, effort, or money. The investment metaphor suggests that individuals evaluate the benefits and constraints and choose to invest in aspirations knowing that, as with all investments, some degree of risk exists. This metaphor also acknowledges individuals must have resources to invest in their aspirations for the future. In addition, Sherwood suggests that when aspirations are on a continuum, aspirations should be considered in terms of the amount of resources an individual invests. For example, a youth who spends time studying to maintain her grade point average may be investing in an aspiration for higher education, however the comparative strength of her aspiration is determined by the amount of time (resources) she has to invest. Sherwood also proposes a model for measuring commitment to aspirations in terms of intensity (share of an individual's resources) and duration (time). Sherwood's models to examine the height and commitment of aspirations are helpful in considering the complexity of the variation between individuals who hold similar aspirations. For example if two youth aspire to be doctors, but one is a single mother and requires childcare to complete school, her aspiration is higher and she has more commitment than a youth who has unlimited time and money to invest in her work toward medical school.

The above definitions all acknowledge the complexity of aspirations. Based on the above definitions, aspirations must be defined as distinct from dreams, and simultaneously have an ambition, or investment component. Despite these complex definitions research has generally operationalized aspirations as years of schooling or job prestige. In this study we allowed youth to define their aspirations in their own terms, and attempted to examine the diversity of such aspirations without making judgments about some aspirations being “higher” but instead to evaluate the strength of aspirations in terms of youth’s ability to move toward those aspirations.

#### *Defining Sense of Purpose*

Aspirations are related to another critical construct in adolescent development, sense of purpose. Viktor Frankl, a holocaust survivor, coined the term in his treatise (1959/1992) on the necessity of meaning and purpose in human development, produced as a result of his experiences in concentration camps. The original construct of sense of purpose, or meaning, as defined by Frankel was defined in terms of adversity. In Frankl’s writing, meaning and purpose were used interchangeably. The definitions have been teased apart by Damon and colleagues (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003)(Damon, et al., 2003). Sense of purpose, defined this way is a part of meaning, but includes a future orientation and goals that can be worked toward. Additionally the research of Damon and colleagues (Damon, 2008; Damon & Hart, 1992; Damon, et al., 2003) expanded the definition of sense of purpose to include a sense of place and obligation within the world as well as a set of ideals and goals or aspirations. Sense of purpose complements the definition of aspirations by providing a context for how youth see their place in the world

as they move into adulthood. In this study, we use Damon and colleagues definition of sense of purpose, “Purpose is a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to self and of consequence to the world beyond the self” (2003, p. 121).

### *Adolescent Development*

The development of aspirations begins in childhood, in most cases continues throughout adulthood, yet is most salient during adolescence. The emergence of aspirations during adolescence is linked to biological, psychological, and social changes associated with adolescent development. Adolescent development is marked by identity development, an inward focus on peers, and preparation for transition to adulthood which requires a separation of the individual from their family and childhood community according to stage theorists (Burton, Allison, & Obeidallah, 1995; Donaldson, 1986; Erikson, 1968; Steinberg, 2002). The cognitive changes that occur in adolescence allow youth to better think about what is possible in the future, and to think in more abstract ways allowing them to understand how they are viewed by others (Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004; Steinberg, 2002). This understanding is essential to identity formation among adolescents and allows them to construct meanings of their world through social encounters (Damon & Hart, 1992; Mead, 1936). As youth further their development of sense of self they can recognize their actual, ideal, and feared selves, a process that is integral to the development of their aspirations and expectations (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Identity development is seen as the primary developmental task associated with adolescence (Damon & Gregory, 1997; Erikson, 1968; Swanson,

Spencer, & Petersen, 1998). As adolescents move through high school they negotiate identity, and this identity lays the foundation for their educational and occupational aspirations (Gandara, Gutierrez, & O'Hara, 2001). Thus, educational and occupational aspirations are particularly relevant to adolescent development. Sense of purpose is an integral part of identity development (Damon, et al., 2003; Swanson, et al., 1998) and as such is a necessary task of this period as well. Though, thus far, most research on sense of purpose has merely measured its presence rather than examine the processes of developing sense of purpose as they relate to adolescent development leaving questions of how to support sense of purpose development in youth. This study focused on middle adolescence because during this stage of development youth are constructing their identity, developing a sense of purpose, and making critical decisions that will influence their ability to attain their aspirations as they prepare to transition into adulthood and the world of work.

### *Influences on Aspirations and Sense of Purpose:*

#### *Individual and Family*

Individual attributes and family processes play important roles in the development of sense of purpose and aspirations. How youth experience and construct meanings can be shaped by individual factors such as gender, temperament, intelligence, and physical skills (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1997). Although, adolescents generally center their social world on their peers (Damon & Gregory, 1997; Steinberg, 2002), their development continues to be shaped by the family, especially in the realm of future plans. Family processes that influence aspirations include civic engagement, opportunities for youth to

contribute through chores, and transmission of cultural capital-- the general cultural background, knowledge, disposition, and skills that are passed from parents to children (Beaulieu & Israel, 2005; Bourdieu, 1986; Elder & Conger, 2000; Howley, 2006; Smith, Beaulieu, & Seraphine, 1995). Parenting style also shapes the development of aspirations (Lareau, 2003). Lareau shows that middle-class parents who actively develop their children's vocabularies, teach them to advocate for themselves in school, and provide multiple enrichment activities expose their children to possible career paths and adult role models and give their children a sense of entitlement. Children of working-class parents generally have smaller vocabularies, fewer skills to negotiate with institutions, and less exposure to possible career paths which leads to a sense of constraint for their children (Lareau, 2003). These distinct parenting approaches position children differently in terms of their aspirations and the social and material resources available to invest in their futures.

The ideas parents have about their child's future influence the aspirations of youth as well (Crockett, Shanahan, & Jackson-Newsom, 2000; Delgado-Gaitan, 2001; Haller & Virkler, 1993; MacLeod, 2004; McCracken & Barcinas, 1991; Odell, 1988). Although children may not always share their parent's aspirations (e.g., taking over the family ranch), parents with strong aspirations are likely to foster strong aspirations in their children even if their children aspire to different goals. Families often mediate negative neighborhood effects on their children such as lack of safety due to high crime rates, health hazards, few role models, poverty, and poor-quality schools (Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999; Furstenberg & Hughes, 1997; MacLeod, 2004;

Williams & Kornblum, 1985; Wilson, 1987). Moreover, families indirectly influence their child's development through limiting or expanding their child's peer group by where they live, and opportunities for interaction they provide their children (Ianni, 1989). For example, parents may encourage church participation which increases the number of peers that share the family's religious values and access to local mentors. In this way families also shape peer influences on youth aspirations. Thus, the aspirations parents have for their children and the actions they take to support those aspirations in their children have great implications for the development of aspirations during adolescence.

Damon (2008) argues that parents have similar influences on sense of purpose when they encourage children to engage in endeavors that provide purpose such as raising money for a cause that is meaningful to them, building a small business (e.g., lemonade stands, lawn mowing), or helping a neighbor, these types of activities move youth toward developing a strong sense of purpose in later life. There is also evidence that religious institutions provide the language of purpose for youth (Damon, 2008). Parents who facilitate connections to religious institutions may support the development of sense of purpose by providing exposure to the subject of purpose.

### *Community and Neighborhood*

Although rural communities generally describe themselves as being "all about youth," the reality is that some small towns are far more successful than others in supporting positive youth development. There is much about some rural places that is good for youth. Connections to an agrarian way of life have been shown to produce youth

who have higher academic performance and higher aspirations (Elder & Conger, 2000). Small towns with an agrarian heritage often nurture strong community engagement and social norms around expectations for youth (Salamon, 2003).

Much of the research on neighborhood effects has been conducted in urban settings, generally the urban core with a majority of low-income residents (Furstenberg, et al., 1999; Furstenberg & Hughes, 1997; MacLeod, 2004; Williams & Kornblum, 1985; Wilson, 1987). Residence in a poor urban neighborhood has been found to level aspirations among youth, in part because of a lack of role models, a limited opportunity structure, and poor quality schools (MacLeod, 2004; Wilson, 1987). Although some rural places share characteristics such as high unemployment, inexperienced teachers, or poverty, rural places generally do not have high crime rates, gang activity, or health hazards associated with urban living. Despite the relative safety and fewer risks of rural neighborhoods, however, rural youth often have been found to have lower educational and occupational aspirations when measured in terms of years of education and occupational prestige (Crockett, et al., 2000; McCracken & Barcinas, 1991; Sewell, 1964). There is evidence that limited economic opportunity in a community can work to level aspirations (Burton, et al., 1995; Crockett, et al., 2000; Ianni, 1989; Semyonov, 1981). If rural youth are exposed to fewer possible career paths, it may be a logical outcome that their aspirations will be lower than their urban and suburban counterparts in terms of years of education and occupational prestige (Crockett, et al., 2000; Haller & Virkler, 1993).

Historically more jobs were available in rural economies that did not require education beyond high school. In this context many rural communities may have defined success as working a job that provided a living wage and allowed parents to support their families. This may have created less community and family interest in higher education as a pathway for successful development in rural communities. However, with changing rural economies, some rural residents, alongside other Americans are finding that a college degree is necessary for economic stability. In spite of this awareness, research as recently as 2001 showed that rural parents were less supportive than urban parents of their children earning a college degree, and rural youth were less likely to aspire to more education (Gandara, et al., 2001). This leaves the current body of research without a definitive answer as to how rural communities support and hinder the development of aspirations. Community contexts have yet to be studied in terms of the development of sense of purpose.

### *Schools*

Schools are a primary setting for the collective socialization of youth as they are the avenue through which community priorities, values and shared norms are transmitted to youth. Rural schools in particular are often the hub of community life, with the buildings themselves serving as symbols of community identity. Rural schools act as cultural centers providing space for community activities and sporting events that bring together parents as well as community members and provide an opportunity for young people to form positive relationships with a variety of adults (Lyson, 2005). There is a general belief across rural communities that to lose their school is to lose their



community (Lyson, 2002). Historically known for smaller class sizes, more personal attention, and multiage classrooms, contemporary rural schools struggle with threats of school consolidation and program cuts which may undermine these positive factors (Johnson & Strange, 2005). As schools are funded and operated on a local level, each community has made choices about how to implement smaller budgets and which programs to cut. The results have varied widely from town to town, and reveal how community priorities are reflected in schools.

Research suggests school-related processes shape aspirations (Boyle, 1966; Plank & Jordan, 2001; Walberg, 1989). The way schools organize their curricula, the diversity of programs they provide, and the opportunities they incorporate into their programs for both exposure to possible careers and adult role models all influence youth development. The way schools create inclusive or exclusive cultures is often apparent in who is able to play for the varsity teams, serve as team captain, and participate in student government (Duncan, 1999). These processes have important implications for who has a better chance for academic success. As schools limit their curricula to academic skills (e.g., reading, math, and writing) students receive less exposure to possible career paths. In this way schools lose their ability to provide positive connections to work (Childress, 2000; Williams & Kornblum, 1985) and curricula that is relevant to place (Sobel, 2004; Theobald, 1997). Traditional school curricula that focus on literature, reading, writing, math, and social studies prepare youth for professional work, something Corbett (2007) argues makes schools the training grounds for the leavers in rural places, because the skills that are necessary to make it in a rural community are neither valued or taught.

Ultimately, reduction in programs and services diminishes the ability of schools to be the location for collective socialization and the transmission of community norms to youth, and may increase the lack of relevance of schooling for youth who aspire to live and work in rural places.

### *Opportunity Structure*

The perception of the type of jobs available and how open these jobs are to individuals in context of their social and cultural locations defines the *opportunity structure* of a place (MacLeod, 2004). How parents perceive opportunity affects the future directions and education they encourage for their children and even more importantly, influences how youth perceive the opportunity structure that will be available to them when they enter the world of work or seek further education (Farmer, et al., 2006; Semyonov, 1981; Shattuck, 2009). A highly constrained opportunity structure contributes to leveling aspirations and youth who disengage from school (MacLeod, 2004). Youth gather information about the opportunity structure and construct their own perceptions of what they can and cannot do as adults from their parents, schools, and community narratives (Farmer, et al., 2006; Ianni, 1989; MacLeod, 2004). In turn, their understanding of the opportunity structure influences their aspirations (Farmer, et al., 2006; Semyonov, 1981; Shattuck, 2009).

### *The Rural Dilemma*

In current economic times, as rural places offer limited economic opportunities for residents of all ages, aspirations to higher education and professional jobs often implies a life trajectory that requires suburban or urban residence. Furthermore, growing

up and transitioning into adulthood is conceived of as identity separation from one's family and childhood community. Although this separation can be achieved within larger cities without geographic mobility, it almost always means a move for rural youth away from their home and their kin (Donaldson, 1986). In this way rural residence creates a unique conflict, researchers have termed, the "rural dilemma" (Donaldson, 1986; Hektner, 1995). The rural dilemma manifests itself through the costs of aspiring to higher educational levels or professional careers that will likely take rural youth away from their communities (Donaldson, 1986; Hektner, 1995; Ovando, 1994) versus "lowering" occupational and educational aspirations that allow them to stay in the rural places they call home. It is possible that this dilemma affects young adults who do attain high levels of education, but then return to rural places where they are often underemployed. Research on the rural dilemma acknowledges the importance of attachment to place and community for adolescents and suggests that rural place is uniquely important in shaping aspirations. Without examining educational and vocational aspirations in context, however, research is unable to determine whether rural youth level their aspirations (Cobb, et al., 1989; Hektner, 1995; Sewell, 1964) or simply aspire to different but equally productive and successful trajectories as compared to their suburban and urban counterparts (Howley, 2006). Few studies consider how characteristics of rural places that influence positive development (e.g., collective socialization and civic engagement) (Elder & Conger, 2000; Salamon, 2003) might also shape aspirations. Understanding how youth construct meaning around both place and economic opportunities in their

communities as they think about their futures may provide insight into how rural places can support successful development of youth, however such success may be defined.

### *Measuring Aspirations*

The majority of studies that examine aspirations rely on self-reported data and readily available data related to academic performance (Cobb, et al., 1989; Cosby & Picou, 1973; Haller & Virkler, 1993; Howley, 2006; McCracken & Barcinas, 1991; Odell, 1988; Sewell, 1964). Studying aspirations in this way ignores the complexity of distinguishing aspirations from mere dreams or whims. Without adequately collecting data on behavior to corroborate the seriousness of aspirations, or youth's understanding of the necessary steps needed to make progress toward their aspirations, it is impossible to measure the height or amount of commitment of youth to their aspirations. Since aspirations are goals which youth are willing to commit to and work toward (Sherwood, 1989), self-reported aspirations may not provide the whole story. In addition, college educations have gained greater value in the contemporary United States, introducing an element of social desirability that may influence youth's survey answers, especially when surveys are administered in school.

Some researchers have examined aspirations qualitatively (Childress, 2000; Gandara, et al., 2001; MacLeod, 2004). In MacLeod's (2004) ethnographic study of urban youth, he examined the complex issues of race, poverty, and peer influences on the aspirations of youth living in an urban housing project. His study of one predominately White youth gang and one predominantly Black youth gang living in the same housing project revealed unlikely racial differences. In the face of extremely limited economic

opportunities, the White boys had leveled aspirations, while the Black youth in the study were optimistic that the Civil Rights movement had opened avenues toward social mobility that had not existed for their parents. Consequently, the Black youth and their parents held higher aspirations for their futures. In a qualitative study of rural youth in Northern California, Childress (2000) observed that the few youth who participated in work that allowed them autonomy expressed a passion for something (e.g., theater, engineering) that kept them engaged in school that other youth lacked. Gandara and colleagues (2001) found a clear inverse relationship across grades nine to twelve of aspirations and grade point averages (aspirations went up and grade point average went down as students moved through high school) on a quantitative survey. The survey work was extended with focus groups. During their focus groups researchers realized that students still felt that graduation was far away with plenty of time to bring up their grade point average. Additionally, Gandara and colleagues (2001) discovered through focus groups that contrary to their assumptions, rural youth in the sample were struggling more than urban youth to establish their autonomy. In addition, despite exposure to fewer risks as compared to urban youth, they were more at risk of leveling their aspirations. This risk was a result of their parent's conservative values and lower expectations around education and expectations that rural youth will engage in agricultural occupations.

The existing body of research on aspirations lacks an understanding of aspirations in contemporary rural youth across all realms: educational, occupational, and residential. Additional previous studies suggest that there is more to understanding aspirations than merely examining how youth report their aspirations for the future. Using both

quantitative and qualitative methods is imperative as these strategies allow researchers to gain broad understanding of large samples *and* the ability to observe behavior, providing a window into the subtleties of context and the multiple ways youth make sense of their place in the world and think about their future.

### *Measuring Sense of Purpose*

Sense of purpose has been examined in both adults and adolescents. The sense of purpose construct includes future goals, or aspirations, and should be considered in measuring aspirations. Methods used to examine sense of purpose have included surveys, qualitative analysis of diaries, interviews, and written statements (Damon, et al., 2003). A number of researchers have found that adolescents can have a strongly developed sense of purpose and are able to describe and discuss their sense of purpose with adults (DeVogler & Ebersole, 1983; Fry, 1998; Hutzell & Finck, 1994; Showalter & Wagener, 2000). All of these studies with adolescents measured the presence of sense of purpose rather than the processes of developing sense of purpose (See Damon, 2008 for a notable exception). Thus, although much is known about measuring sense of purpose, and there is much evidence that sense of purpose is critical to adolescent development (Damon, 2008; Damon, et al., 2003), little is known about the processes of developing sense of purpose and how families and communities can facilitate the development of a strong sense of purpose in a majority of youth.

### Study Overview

In August 2007, I moved to Wallowa County, Oregon to examine how growing up in a rural place shapes adolescent development in a rural community known to support

its youth well. Part of the study goal was to address the concerns expressed by parents and community members alike about what the future may hold for their children. Like other rural communities, the adults of Wallowa County know that many of their young people will leave their hometown to pursue educational and occupational opportunities in metro areas. Residents worry that young people who leave will not return making youth the community's "best export." At the same time, residents know that for youth who do not leave, the *stayers*, rural communities may have fewer job opportunities making the stayers vulnerable to poverty and instability as adults. Using a symbolic interactionist perspective along with survey and ethnographic methods I asked four general questions about youth growing up in Wallowa County:

- 1) How did youth perceive their community as a place to grow up?
- 2) What were their educational, occupational, and residential aspirations at the time of the study when they were in high school?
- 3) How did living in a rural place shape sense of purpose?
- 5) How did a rural context shape the processes of constructing aspirations and developing sense of purpose at the family, school, and community levels?

Although these general questions guided the study, I expected new questions to emerge during the course of the study (Berg, 2004).

Data collection began in August 2007 and continued through March 2008. During that time I lived in the county for a total of six months and was participated in community life as a resident. I came to this project as a former K-12 teacher, and I found that especially in my interactions with school principals and teachers, my knowledge of

schools and classrooms was an asset. Although I did not share the experience of growing up in a rural place, my understanding of youth and the many competing demands on teachers and school staff time helped as I worked with principals to conduct the study without disrupting their daily work. My regular presence both at school and at school events was noticed by principals and I believe helped develop trust that we all shared the goal of helping youth move through adolescence as successfully and smoothly as possible.

I documented observations, interviews with key informants, and day to day interactions in field notes that provided crucial information about the community context that Wallowa County youth inhabit. A survey was administered in September to 9<sup>th</sup>- 12<sup>th</sup> graders attending each of the three high schools. The survey captured a broad measure of the aspirations and sense of purpose among youth along with the barriers youth perceived about their future. A latent class analysis was done on the survey data and the resulting three classes were used to recruit twenty juniors and seniors to participate in an “intensive” study which began in December 2007. These youth participated in interviews, created digital slideshows, and wrote *This I Believe* essays ([www.thisibelieve.org](http://www.thisibelieve.org)). In addition, I interviewed their parents and I reviewed their academic records. These rich data provided access to the ways in which youth perceived their social worlds, constructed their aspirations, and developed aspirations and sense of purpose within the context of small town life.



### *Theoretical Concerns*

The focus of this project was to understand how youth themselves perceive their communities and social worlds and how they construct meanings of their place in the world and their futures within a rural context. These questions were guided by an ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1997), which demands attention to the microsystems (e.g., family, school, peers, clubs, sports, work) for youth and the mesosystems or connections between the microsystems as well as the broader historical and societal contexts within which youth are developing. Symbolic interactionism posits that meanings are socially constructed and that these socially constructed meanings about the world around us also allow us to construct and develop our own identity (Mead, 1936). In keeping with symbolic interactionism I focused on how the subjects of this study, high school youth, made sense of the world around them and thus gave them multiple opportunities to share these meanings through surveys, interviews, and activities.

#### *Study One: Finding my place: Sense of purpose development among rural youth*

Initially I had expected sense of purpose to complement aspirations and to provide insight into the strength of the aspirations youth held. Once data collection was complete, however upon attaching the sense of purpose scores from the surveys to the intensive study participants for the first time I noticed a striking similarity among youth with low sense of purpose scores. This similarity was especially visible in the ways their families were located within the community social structure. I then re-examined the data within and across sense of purpose categories. The categorical analysis was used to answer the

question of how experiences within place shape the development of sense of purpose among rural youth. Study one provides a contextual understanding of some of the processes crucial to developing a strong sense of purpose for youth growing up in Wallowa County as well as the ways in which sense of purpose provides information that is distinct from academic and social competence in determining how youth are positioned to move into adulthood.

*Study Two: Aspirations in a changing world: A case study of the educational, occupational, and residential aspirations among rural youth*

The second study focused specifically on educational, occupational, and residential aspirations of contemporary youth. This study first evaluated what the aspirations of Wallowa County youth are, and then used the latent class analysis of the survey results to deepen our understanding of how these youth are thinking about their futures. The results showed that community narratives, the opportunity structure, and the need to finance their own educations all influence the ways youth think about their future aspirations. At the same time, most high school youth prioritize one realm of aspirations above the others; for instance some youth focus on enrolling in college and others focus on moving to a more urban location. Although most youth plan to leave the community to pursue training beyond high school, many youth valued rural living and want the same for their children when they have them. This study is particularly relevant to the proverbial question in rural communities of who among youth leave, stay, or return because it shows that many youth plan to revisit the idea of rural living in their late twenties or early thirties.

FINDING MY PLACE: SENSE OF PURPOSE DEVELOPMENT AMONG RURAL  
YOUTH

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This study was supported by an American Fellowship from the American Association of University Women; Stanford Center on Adolescence Youth Purpose Research Award supported by the John Templeton Foundation and the Thrive Foundation for Youth; Sustainable Rural Communities Initiative at Oregon State University, the College of Health and Human Sciences at Oregon State University, and the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at Oregon State University.

### Abstract

Finding one's place in the world is a developmental process that spans the life course. For adolescents, sense of purpose development is a critical part of their identity work. This study examines the processes of developing a sense of purpose within one rural county in the Pacific Northwest that is known to do well by their youth. A case study in a rural place provided unique access to social and developmental processes. Using survey and ethnographic methods youth were divided into three groups based on their sense of purpose scores. Results showed that youth were engaged in community differently, held different types of jobs, and perceived their families differently across the three groups. The key factor was the way youth constructed their family's social location within the county social hierarchy. School was found to have the ability to buffer youth with a low sense of purpose through sports or relationships with school staff. This study suggests that there is much communities can do to support the development of a strong sense of purpose that might better position their children for a successful transition to adulthood.

## Introduction

Finding one's place in the world is a developmental process that spans the life course (Damon, 2008; Frankl, 1992/1959). In adolescence, individuals are just beginning to develop their sense of place or purpose, that is "a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self" (Damon, 2008; Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003). Understanding the processes by which youth develop a strong sense of purpose is critical component for supporting youth. Unlike measures of academic achievement and social competence (Elder & Conger, 2000; Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999), sense of purpose provides a window into the identity work adolescents have or have not completed/ achieved. Adolescents with a strong sense of purpose will likely maintain more positive developmental trajectories even if the specifics of their goals change. Understanding youth development with respect to a sense of purpose may help us think about ways to position youth to successfully navigate the upcoming transition to adulthood.

This paper examines sense of purpose among youth living in one county in rural Oregon. We focus on a rural context in part because the social processes important to development are more visible in small communities (Colocousis & Duncan, 2008) offering an ideal setting for our initial examination of the processes surrounding development of sense of purpose. We also focus on rural youth in response to the need to better understand the strengths of rural places (e.g., strong intergenerational relationships, small schools, and productive work opportunities) in the face of global changes that are dramatically altering the social structure of rural communities across the United States

(Hamilton, Hamilton, Duncan, & Colocousis, 2008). Our study used a symbolic interactionist perspective paired with survey and ethnographic strategies to examine the development of a sense of purpose. Specifically, our study was guided by the question: How do experiences within place shape the development of sense of purpose among rural youth? Our findings suggest that there is an important interplay between family, school, and community processes.

## Background

### *Sense of Purpose*

*Sense of purpose* was first coined by Holocaust survivor, Viktor Frankl, who identified meaning or purpose as a critical factor of human survival—especially within the context of extreme adversity (Frankl, 1992/1959). In the last several decades, Frankl’s work has been extended to broader contexts and across the life course (Damon, 2008; Damon, et al., 2003; Molcar & Stuempfig, 1988) Research has demonstrated that adolescents are able to discuss meaning and purpose as related to their own lives (DeVogler & Ebersole, 1983; Fry, 1998; Hutzell & Finck, 1994; Showalter & Wagener, 2000). The definition of sense of purpose has been expanded to include a sense of place and obligation within the world as well as goals or aspirations (Damon, 2008; Damon, et al., 2003). A strong sense of purpose is associated with positive developmental outcomes that include: prosocial behavior, moral commitment, achievement, and high self-esteem (Damon, et al., 2003). The majority of the research on sense of purpose has measured the *presence* of purpose rather than the *processes* associated with its development (see Damon, 2008 for a notable exception).

### *Understanding Identity as Part of Adolescent Development*

Adolescents are deeply involved in developing their identity. They experiment with different roles in reaction to the ways they make sense of social norms as they interact with those around them (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). For instance youth may take on a leadership role within the context of their sports team and experiment with being rebellious at home (Goffman, 1959). Despite general agreement that identity work is an important developmental task of adolescence (Erikson, 1968; Mead, 1934; Steinberg, 2002), past research has primarily measured successful adolescent development in terms of competence and psychosocial adjustment. For example, Elder and Conger (2000) measured successful development with academic competence, social competence, self-appraisal, and avoidance of problem behavior; Furstenberg and colleagues (1999) used measures of academic competence, self-competence and psychological adjustment, problem behavior, and prosocial involvement (Ianni, 1989). All of these developmental measures may include but do not specifically focus on identity work.

Youth develop in the contexts of their families, schools, and communities (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Sealand, 1993; Elder & Conger, 2000; Gandara, Gutierrez, & O'Hara, 2001; Ianni, 1989; Steinberg, 2002) and we argue that sense of purpose development (as part of identity formation) occurs within the same contexts. The constant interplay between individual characteristics and contextual factors (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1997) defines the developmental pathways of youth. While the exact processes of ecological influences on development are muddled (Cook, Herman, Phillips, & Settersten, 2002), context has been shown to matter in terms of the

developmental opportunities that are or are not available to youth. These opportunities are shaped by myriad contextual factors that may include: identity options available to youth (Rockquemore & Brunnsma, 2002), the congruence of values between social worlds such as school, home, and activities (Damon & Gregory, 1997; Ianni, 1989), the physical spaces available for youth (Childress, 2000), a sense of neighborhood safety (Furstenberg, et al., 1999; Wilson, 1987), and access to developmental resources (Duncan, 1999; Furstenberg, et al., 1999; MacTavish & Salamon, 2006). Thus, we expected contextual factors to matter for processes related to sense of purpose development.

#### *Youth Development in a Rural Context*

Rural places differ greatly from one another, in part due to geographic location and economic base (Hamilton, et al., 2008). Some rural places reinforce the popular notion of small town life as an idyllic setting to raise families and support youth development. A sense of safety, trust among neighbors, intergenerational relationships, and collective socialization, all support successful youth development (Salamon, 2003). When a small town possesses such attributes, youth develop a strong sense of belonging to place (Elder & Conger, 2000), which may support identity development and specifically the development of a strong sense of purpose. Work and activity participation through farm and ranch work offer youth opportunities to experience responsibility, autonomy, and a clear sense of how they contribute to their workplace and community (Childress, 2000; Elder & Conger, 2000). Social class composition, especially the presence of a strong middle class, within rural communities has been shown to be a particularly crucial factor in opening pathways to social mobility (Duncan, 1999;



Hamilton, et al., 2008). In contrast, rural places that suffer from generational poverty and economic instability offer youth limited developmental opportunities (Duncan, others). Rural places differ as well in access for youth to public spaces (Childress, 2000; MacTavish & Salamon, 2006; Salamon, 2003) and how inclusive or exclusive school programs are, all factors important to youth development.

Rural places are better able to support youth when they have the capacity to maintain strong schools and a culture of collective investment in youth. Youth growing up in small towns negotiate and construct their identity and sense of purpose within social settings that offer minimal, if any, anonymity. Rural communities with a strong investment in the collective socialization of their youth provide youth with access to productive work, school and community activities, positive intergenerational relationships, and are inclusive of all youth regardless of class background. That is, they provide a supportive environment that we know to be important to development. As such, rural places that “work” should support the development of a strong sense of purpose.

#### Theoretical Perspective

The symbolic interactionist lens is particularly valuable in examining the processes of developing sense of purpose because this perspective focuses on how youth *themselves* construct meaning and make sense of their social worlds (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). The symbolic interactionist framework simultaneously examines individual agency—by stressing the ways youth respond to and react to the norms, roles, and available meanings within their social worlds (Blumer, 1969) *and* the ways that structural conditions—historical time, culture, and environmental context (Blumer, 1969; Kiter Edwards, 2004) shape these norms, roles, and available meanings. Thus in this study,

rural community may be the *structure* within which adolescents assert their *agency*, producing the contexts within which adolescents actively create their lives as they do their identity work (Settersten, 2002). We situate this perspective within an ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1997) which focuses on the influence of environmental contexts on development. Microsystem settings, those contexts most proximal to daily life (e.g. schools, peers, families, and immediate communities) are expected to influence the development of sense of purpose in adolescents.

## Methods

### *Looking Toward the Future Project*

The current study is a focused analysis of data from a larger project examining how growing up in Wallowa County (a remote rural county in northeastern Oregon) shapes youth development in ways that potentially support upcoming transitions to adulthood. We focused on high school youth (ages 13-18), a developmental period during which adolescents are in the process of making decisions about their future and constructing their identity (Steinberg, 2002). We employed survey and ethnographic methods to develop a contextualized understanding of youth development. The study began with a survey of high school students, grades 9-12, ( $n = 270$ ) and community observations. We then studied a small group of high school juniors and seniors ( $n = 20$ ) intensively over six months. Together, these data allow us to examine how experiences within place shape youth development in general, and sense of purpose development in particular.

### *Study Site*

Like much of rural America, Wallowa County (population 7,266) has faced challenges in an increasingly global economy (Johnson, 2006; Snyder, 2007). As a remote rural county, Wallowa struggles with above average poverty rates (14% as compared to 9% in Oregon), shrinking employment opportunities (during data collection the county unemployment rate of 5.1 – 9.6%, was consistently above state level (Oregon’s unemployment rate ranged from 5% to 6% over the same time period), limited household incomes (median of \$32,129 as compared to state median of \$47,385), outmigration (county migration rates of -4.6 as compared to statewide rates of +7.3), and the persistent threat of school closure or consolidation for the past two decades. In spite of such challenges, Wallowa County maintains its historic reputation of doing well by its youth. In 2005, Wallowa County was the best performing county on the state education index based on math and reading scores and the dropout rate and ranked fourth on child well-being based on prenatal care, child abuse, teen pregnancy, youth substance abuse, and smoking during pregnancy (Temple, 2005). The county appears to support youth in other ways as well. High school sporting events are popular Friday night activities, youth accomplishments make front page news, and youth are regularly featured in local arts and community events. Community leaders often joke that youth have become the county’s “best export” as young people leave for greater opportunities in urban areas. Wallowa County thus provides a unique context in which to study the development of sense of purpose and a place where we might identify aspects of small town and rural life important to successful youth development.

### *Survey and Background Study*

Data collection began in the fall of 2007 when the first author moved to the county to conduct field research. Students (grades 9-12) attending all three county high schools were surveyed with 87% ( $n = 270$ ) responding. The survey captured demographic and family background information, assessed students' notions about the future (aspirations and sense of purpose) and their self reported levels of school and community engagement. The sense of purpose scale included 18 of Hutzell and Finck's (1994) original 20-item Life Purpose Scale and 5 additional items to capture the "beyond self" aspect of sense of purpose. Examples of items included: "my life is meaningful," "if I should die today I would feel my life has been worthwhile," "most days seem to be the same old thing," and "it is important for me to contribute to my community as an adult." Each item was scored on a four-point Likert scale (*strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree*). The 23 item modified scale had similar reliability scores to the original ( $\alpha = .87$  &  $.89$ , respectively) with a possible range from 23 to 92. Actual raw scores ranged from 32 to 91 ( $m = 67.87$ ). Each survey was initially assigned a number, to ensure that we were unaware of individual sense of purpose scores until after data collection was complete.

Youth completed the surveys at school. Eighty-eight percent of the youth who participated in the survey identified as White (5% identified as Hispanic), 54% were male, they had lived in the county for an average of 11 years, and their average age was 15.5 years. As a group they were fairly representative of the general county and high school populations.

During data collection, I (first author) observed at the three schools, in the community, and in places of business. I interviewed principals and other individuals involved in youth programs, and I attended community and school events. After each interview and event detailed field notes were constructed as soon as possible. The survey and background study phase thus allowed us to construct a broad, place-specific understanding of the community and of youth development against which we could situate what we later learned in the intensive phase of study.

#### *Intensive Study of Sense of Purpose*

In an effort to recruit a balanced sample of youth for an intensive phase of study, a latent class analysis of the full survey was conducted. The latent class model included 20 variables including aspirations, sense of purpose, family background, and demographic variables (See Table 1, see manuscript 2 in this dissertation for additional information). Three classifications of youth emerged<sup>1</sup> from the latent class model. Forty youth randomly selected from across these classifications were invited to take part in an intensive study. The intensive sample was restricted to juniors and seniors in an effort to control for developmental variation. Twenty youth (including nine females, eleven males, nine juniors and eleven seniors) agreed to participate and completed the intensive phase. Recruitment efforts were curtailed once the first 20 youth were enrolled. As might be expected, recruitment was toughest with the third group which included youth who were doing poorly academically. Most members of this group who were eligible for recruitment were enrolled in the alternative high school program, a GED program, or distance education making them more difficult to contact. Thus, the intensive sample was

representative of youth attending the three public high schools in the county, but not wholly representative of youth in the county.

Intensive study data collection spanned four months and employed in-depth interviews, observations, academic record reviews, and specific exercises to allow multiple ways to become familiar with both the youth and their context (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Youth completed a series of interviews including: a background interview that documented family, school, and residential history; a youth-led community tour designed to capture youth's perception of their experiences within place; and a future interview where youth were asked to talk specifically about their educational, occupational, and residential aspirations, supports or barriers they perceived relative to these aspirations, and their sense of purpose. Parents were interviewed as well to capture additional family background information, perspectives on community life, and hopes for their youth's future.

Our interest was two-fold: seeking both to understand how youth define themselves in the context of place and how they construct meaning around their developmental experiences within the contexts of home, school and small town community. To capture life through the lens of youth, an essay and photography exercise were also completed. Youth were given digital cameras (that they kept as partial compensation for participation) and a set of prompts such as: “six places you would/ would not take a visiting friend,” “six places you would/ would not want to see change.” Each youth took photos and compiled a slideshow using PowerPoint or a movie making software program. Essays used the prompt provided by the *This I Believe* program on National Public Radio (see [www.thisibelieve.org](http://www.thisibelieve.org)).

Further, the school records of each youth were reviewed to determine patterns of academic performance and compare “official” academic histories with the ones presented. Youth were also observed in school, the community and at home. On average, five hours of interviews were conducted with each youth over a period of four months of intensive study. In addition, the researcher spent at least 30 hours in the classrooms and hallways of each school observing youth. Detailed field notes were recorded as soon as possible after each interview and encounter in the field. Combined, these data provided a holistic and contextualized view of development among the youth in the intensive sample.

Although the survey data provided broad trends across the county in terms of sense of purpose and aspirations, the intensive strategies provided insight into how youth construct meaning about their communities and future (Charmaz, 2004). Community observations provided data with which to triangulate the words, behaviors, and perceptions of youth. Multiple data collection strategies were critical because we were capturing the development of sense of purpose as it was happening, before youth might be able to reflect on the process themselves (Charmaz, 2005; Patton, 2002).

We make use of a categorical analysis for this paper based on sense of purpose scores (not the latent class model used for recruitment). Using sense of purpose scores (Hutzell & Finck, 1994) we labeled the middle 50 percent ( $M \pm 2/3$  SD) of the survey sample as *average* (61-74) with scores below that as *low* (32-60) and those above as *high* (75-91) to create categories rooted within the general population of Wallowa County youth. Youth from the intensive sample ( $n = 20$ ) were then sorted and grouped by sense of purpose scores. These 20 high school juniors and seniors reflected the survey sample

of juniors and seniors ( $n = 141$ ), with 30% scoring in the high sense of purpose group. Within the intensive sample there were six youth in the high, ten in the average group and four in the low sense of purpose group.

We then sought to identify distinct patterns and themes relevant within each of high, average, and low sense of purpose categories. Field notes were read and reread, first on a case specific basis and then within each sense of purpose category. Patterns of community and school engagement, perceptions of school and community, and the ways youth talked about the future and sense of purpose were all coded. To protect confidentiality the participants were assigned pseudonyms. Some youth described below are composites of two youth to further obscure identities. Each of the youth in our study possessed a unique story, but when examined categorically by sense of purpose scores these youth provide insight into how youth's perceptions of their experience within their social worlds potentially shape their sense of purpose.

## Results

There were distinct patterns within each of the three sense of purpose groups (See Table 2) that manifested in the developmental experiences, the ways youth in each group were moving toward their future goals, and how youth constructed their own position within the community, and how much space they had to do the identity work, so important to adolescence.

### *Youth with a High Sense of Purpose: Clear Pathways to Possibilities*

As a group, the six youth with a high sense of purpose (HSP) shared a confidence about their immediate futures. HSP youth were comfortable with themselves, viewing themselves as good students and/or athletes. They had positive relationships with peers



and adults. As a group HSP youth appeared well prepared to move toward adulthood. Each of these youth had a goal or set of possible goals for their future education and occupation. More importantly, they had clear pathways to reach their goals (See Table 2). Melanie's specific goals are illustrated by the following field note passage:

“Medical School *if I can make it*...A doctor-- muscles, bones or the nervous system.” She explained that she was interested in muscles first, and then thought bones were more interesting, but now she is leaning toward the nervous system ... I ask her why not nursing, and she explains, “I was thinking nursing, my parents said that was good. But I didn't want a bunch of fields, I want to specify in 1 thing and learn a lot in one thing and get good at it rather than learn about a lot of things.”

Her understanding that medical school is competitive shows that while she is confident she will find a place in the medical field, she also recognizes that she will have to work at it and may have some bumps along the way. Other HSP youth had similar conceptions that their goals were just that—plans that may need to be adjusted along the way.

Consider this field note excerpt from Anthony:

“I know what I'm doing for four years, but once I get into college and study more about engineering it might change. I know what I'll be doing to get there.” I clarify and ask if he will be ok if he changes from engineering. He replies, “It will be a wasted year of college, but I'll have learned – I just don't want to go too far if that's not what I'm doing.” I ask if he is thinking he would drop out if engineering is not right- “No, I'm not going to be a bum or something.” I clarify again and he confirms that a change would just be within college areas.

Anthony was steadfastly committed to completing a four-year degree, and exemplified the ways that HSP youth incorporated multiple possibilities within their conception of their goals. It is likely they will not be completely derailed if their primary plans do not come to fruition. Justin was set in his plans for vocational training in diesel mechanics, but also spoke about a set of possibilities once he had completed the training:

“Working in a shop, doing mechanic work, have a family or something and buy a house; or work on boats and move to Alaska, where I can work on big cruise liners. I don’t know about a family up there. I would have to marry an Eskimo” He then laughs.

Like Anthony, Justin had a commitment to part of his plan, vocational training, but also had some flexibility that would enable his plans to change or adapt as he actually moves along the pathway toward adulthood. HSP youth were comfortable with their identity and viewed themselves as capable young adults- they easily and confidently took on the roles of athlete, or good student. Consider this field note excerpt: [I had asked Sarah how she describes herself as a student] She pauses, and says slowly and firmly, but with an expression that shows she knows this could sound arrogant, “I am an exceptional student.” This set of developmental characteristics that HSP youth shared position them well to move into the space of adulthood.

#### *Developmental Experiences in Place*

HSP youth shared a set of developmental experiences that included being active participants in school and community activities, holding jobs that provide meaningful work experiences and opportunities to build additional relationships. These developmental experiences gave HSP youth a sense of fitting in well within the broader community and within their more intimate social worlds. While driving me along her favorite running routes as part of her community tour, Sarah explained, “It’s my home. I was born here. I know most of the people here.” Other youth expressed pride in their affiliations with community organizations like the symphony, spoke to the uniqueness of their county, or shared their awareness of community government during community tours and interviews. The ability of these youth to fit into their community was linked to

their involvement in *both* school and community activities such as sports, drama, school clubs, church, scouts and the Teens Against Drinking Alcohol club. Three HSP youth were very active in their church communities, a place where the term “purpose” is common. They each were taking leadership roles within their church such as leading prayer groups or giving a teaching during services. These youth reported they were known by adult community members either because of their parents, or because of their own participation in sports. As Justin explained, “I go places and everyone knows me, mostly because of basketball.”

HSP youth had good relationships with both peers and adults, and perhaps even more notably, did not speak of contentious or difficult relationships with others in their social worlds. Melanie (who loved drama) was an outgoing junior, active in both drama classes and clubs. She was often asked to show new students around, many of whom became her friends. She mentioned one friend in particular, adding that she considered his mom to be her second mom. Melanie had so many friends that when asked to talk about her friends she added a “misc.--just in case I forgot someone” to her response. Another HSP youth, who moved to Wallowa County before high school and had not formed deep friendships, still spoke of having generally good relationships. When I asked about his high school experience he said, “Exceptional, really...everyone’s really nice. I can always find someone to hang out with. The staff here is really good. I like all the teachers here. It is a great place.” Overall HSP youth were embedded within their school and community, and had positive relationships with peers, adults, and school personnel.

In addition to being embedded in school and community contexts, the jobs HSP youth held offered responsibility and opportunities to interact with older community

members. Three HSP youth did ranch work, one apprenticed in the family business, one worked for a local tourist attraction, and the sixth worked with her parents when needed. It was not necessarily the work itself that these youth enjoyed, but the relationships they had with the people they worked for and the developmental benefits of work. As Justin said, “I liked working with my grandpa. He was pretty cool, old and full of lots of wisdom.” Work that provided opportunities to develop both skills and relationships were typical of the jobs held by youth in this group. Moreover, these youth were characterized not only by the type of work and activities they participated in, but also by the ways they made sense of their experiences. As a group they spoke positively of school and community activities (despite the work it took to balance their commitments), they enjoyed the lack of anonymity that resulted from being visible as members of sports teams and drama performances, and they took pride in their accomplishments. Although all of these youth intended to leave the community to pursue post-secondary education and most did not intend to return to the county as adults, they all perceived the county positively in terms of rural living and a “good” place to grow up. HSP youth were comfortable in the community resulting in progress in the development of both identity and sense of purpose.

#### *Family Social Location*

HSP youth all shared the experience of growing up in families who were firmly embedded and respected in the Wallowa County community, something we characterize as their *family social location*. While family social location is linked to income, in this study more pertinent than being above or below the poverty line were the ways families formally engaged in community activities, the work that they did, and the way their

children *perceived* and *constructed* their family's place within the local social hierarchy. HSP youth viewed their families as well-regarded within the community. Further, these families' position at the top of the local social hierarchy, in their children's eyes, was a result of the community engagement by the adult members of the family and their livelihoods. Although some families were poor by federal poverty standards, the parents of HSP youth held respectable jobs, and none were unemployed or using state assistance. These parents were teachers, social service professionals, truckers, and ranch hands. They were members of service organizations. They served as board members and committee members for clubs and government groups, and were dedicated fundraisers. Their children noticed this involvement, illustrated by Luke's observation that, "A lot of parents are involved in things. ... More often than not they are trying to be involved... It's more [a] farming community, they know everybody, working with kids, they know them." Melanie's mom worked at the senior center and would ask her daughter to "volunteer" and help out every once in awhile. Along with generally engaging their children in the community, these families created opportunities for youth to observe multiple pathways to successful adulthood (a variety of occupations and interests, differing levels of education, and multiple ways of balancing work and family life). For the most part, this group of parents conveyed the importance of contributing to the community through their own actions, but they also provided their children with opportunities to engage in community work. These families were generally residentially stable; four youth had spent their whole lives in the county, and six had spent the majority of their lives in rural places, making all of them deeply rooted in their rural community.

HSP youth shared a set of developmental experiences because of their family's social location. These youth perceived their families as respected throughout the community and perceived their parents as resources. They held their parents in high regard and wanted to emulate them upon becoming adults themselves. When HSP youth talked about their families their respect was clear in their tone as well as their words. As Luke said, "I'm not going to be exactly like them, but there are traits from each that I have. They pretty much have all plus sides to them." Because of their social location these families were able to pave the way for their children to access the benefits of rural living, especially through community engagement and productive work, all activities congruent with the community's core values.

#### *Family Support*

One of the ways parents of HSP youth created smooth pathways for their children was by providing plenty of guidance as to how and where children should work toward their goals. One parent advised her child to attend a public university because the cost of a private university would not allow her to take more than four years to complete her degree and would limit her ability to explore different majors. "At [private school], because it is so expensive there is no room to play, and they know it so they push their engineering students through. But at a state school there will be more flexibility and if it takes longer it will be ok." One step-mom was already in touch with the recruiter from the technical school her child planned to attend to gather information about the application process and cost of the program, even though he was still a high school junior. When I asked Luke's parents about their goals for their children in the coming year they first commented that they would use their regular "family council" meetings as

a vehicle to teach their children needed skills. As his mother explained, “Family council, have the kids involved on bigger decisions, or see the process. Focus on the family budget. Teach them money management. Is my 18 year old ready? So many things I need to teach them.” These parents were intentionally taking the time to teach their children skills to help them become more successful as adults.

As a result of their shared developmental experiences, HSP youth appear ready and able to move into the life space of adulthood and navigate the challenges inherent in that transition. While these youth varied in terms of personality, family structure, favorite activities, and future goals, they shared a set of developmental experiences that included multiple school and community activities, positive peer and adult relationships, jobs that encouraged responsibility and skill building, and families that were engaged and well-regarded in the community. These experiences resulted in youth who fit easily within the community, respected the county values (especially the values of a strong work ethic and social trust), were comfortable with their identity, and had scores indicating a strong sense of purpose.

#### *Understanding Low Sense of Purpose.*

The four young women in the low sense of purpose (LSP) group (in the larger sample this group was only 51% female) were different from HSP youth in that they appeared unsure about their upcoming transition toward adulthood. LSP youth varied in their self-presentations as athletes, as rebels, as closer to the fringe, and as testing conventional boundaries with their dress, behavior, and identity roles. (See Table 2). In contrast to HSP youth, LSP youth were either trying to rebel (adopting a typical edgy urban identity) or constantly working to fit in while trying to let everyone know they did

not care if they did. As a group, the four LSP youth all had questions about their immediate futures.

When the four youth in this group discussed their future plans, they are less certain and less confident about what comes next as compared to their peers with high sense of purpose. None of the LSP youth respond to “What are you going to do next?” with “I don’t know.” Their answers, however, suggest that although they have come up with an answer to this question that adults keep asking, they lack a sense of just how to get there. Beth says, “I don’t know what I want to actually do so I am going into x-ray technician.” She explains that it is a two-year program at [community college located in an urban area] with starting salaries of \$32- 52,000 a year.

Mary sounds more sure of herself at the beginning of our interview when she tells me that after high school, “I’d like to be at college, OSU.” She adds that she is interested in sports training and would like to play college softball. At the end of the interview, when asked whether she has a sense of purpose and feels like she has a way to get what she wants, or feels lost she admitted, “I think I will be a little lost. Right now I don’t know what I have to do to get there. What to do at college, the best place for my occupation.” She then adds, “Is there stuff I have to do in this world? No. Stuff I want to do? Yes.” Unlike the HSP youth, these youth lack confidence in their plans and more importantly have not thought about how to navigate any changes in their plans along the way. Beth has no passion for her plan to be an x-ray technician, and mentions that her dream would be to write, though she understands that writing may be an unrealistic goal. Mary is more certain about what she wants to do, but has no sense of the pathway by which to successfully complete college and begin a career as an athletic trainer.



This lack of confidence extends to their perceptions of themselves. LSP youth rarely described themselves as a “good student” even though two of them were solid A students. When Mary was asked to describe herself as a student she said, “I am very busy. I try to be organized... I want to say I do my hardest, but with everything that is going on, it’s just good enough. I know I could do better, but I don’t have the time.” Mary is an A student, but unlike her HSP peers she does not embrace the role of a good student. Together these developmental characteristics and a lack of clear possible pathways by which to reach goals may create challenges for LSP youth as they move into the space of adulthood.

#### *Developmental Experiences within Place*

The developmental experiences that LSP youth shared were different from those of HSP youth. LSP youth were not engaged in community activities and held jobs that were less stable and did not build skills and, although they did not feel excluded, they did not describe fitting in easily as did their HSP peers. LSP youth experienced community support very differently from HSP youth. Rather than feeling embraced by the community, they described more tenuous relationships with community members that essentially placed them at the fringe of the community. And while these youth most definitely were being supported, especially by their schools, they were also aware of the fragility of any community support. Mary maintained her grades and attended school regularly. Mary revealed how hard she was working to avoid “mistakes” when she commented, “It seems like with one bad mistake they [the community] are really down on you.” This leaves youth supported but vulnerable because they perceive that they have limited opportunities to work through mistakes. I asked Mary what would keep her from

accomplishing her goals and she easily provided a list: “My choice in friends, teaching you bad habits, procrastinating, having kids too early, not graduating.” Mary was cognizant that early pregnancy and/or drug use and other behaviors were certain to derail her future and prevent her from reaching her goals. Unlike HSP youth, LSP youth were acutely aware of behavior that could change their position within the community and the amount of community support they could access. LSP youth experience tensions between doing well and doing the work necessary to avoid mistakes that are not reported by their HSP peers. Unlike their HSP peers LSP youth do not talk of being known as a positive aspect of rural living. Beth makes this comment about living in a small town without anonymity in this field note excerpt,

It is cool to be able to talk to anyone who knows what you are going through. But then rumors spread so fast.” She explains that something can happen in Joseph and by the time you are back in Wallowa the entire town knows about it.

LSP youth do not construct their lack of anonymity as supporting their identity and role within the community.

LSP youth centered their social worlds beyond their families, almost exclusively on school. As a result, these youth were less connected to adult community members outside of school than their HSP counterparts because they were not engaged in formal community activities. As evidenced by their rotating dress (sweats one day, all black another), dark make-up, and black fingernail polish, they were experimenting with different roles and possible identities. By testing boundaries with their dress, they set themselves apart from the “typical” youth in the county. Despite such boundary testing, two of these youth were engaged in school both athletically and academically. Mary was doing well at school, played sports all year, and appeared to have successfully developed

her academic and social competence. She differed from peers in the HSP group in that she had a history of contentious relationships with her peers (perhaps magnified by the small class sizes) and described “ex-best friends” in our interview.

In contrast to Mary, Beth appeared vulnerable by both traditional measures of social and academic competence as well as sense of purpose development. Beth was a poor student who sporadically participated in school activities. She was always dressed in black with dark make-up and dyed black hair. Beth put effort into performing her role as an edgy urban teen stuck in a small town. Her dark dress and make-up were intentionally and carefully worn and was noticed by the interviewer. She enhanced this role by peppering her interviews with harsh slang that was absent in the interviews with the other participants. She described discord between adults and youth explaining, “Kids are treated like shit. If they don’t get a job they aren’t worth anything. It depends who the kids are and who their parents are.”

LSP youth tended to work at jobs that differed from those of their HSP peers. They tended to work in low wage jobs that lacked regular hours and had little status such as babysitting informally for friends and family, cleaning hotels, or fast food service work. Of a cleaning job Mary said, “I’d never recommend it, ever. It was horrible, I think, because of the lady in charge.” These youth did enjoy some of their jobs, though they commented that much of their pay was eaten up in gas money driving to tourist jobs away from town at the far end of the lake. These jobs did not carry with them the same long term responsibility and respect as jobs held by HSP youth (e.g., ranch work, the public contact for tourist activities, full apprenticeships). LSP youth also lacked the relationships with their employers that HSP youth recognized and valued.

*Family Social Location*

Like HSP youth, the social location (community engagement, type of work, and children's perception of their place in the social hierarchy) of their families within the county created unique developmental experiences for their children. All four of the LSP youth came from families with parents who worked on and off, moved frequently, and were not formally engaged in community activities. All four LSP youth spoke of exposure to the drug and alcohol in the community, often through their parents or parent's partners, something that was not part of the general discourse in this county. Mary, who adamantly avoided drugs and alcohol, commented on the ease and proximity of drug access: "Wallowa County, like, has the poor druggie families. To me it is easier to get involved in that stuff around here anyway." Beth, the "edgy urban" youth, explained that her dad, "is known as a druggie, so they think I am, I have a reputation in this town." All four youth spoke about actively avoiding hard drug use, yet they had all observed the effects of drug and alcohol use in their families and their families' friends. This exposure shaped the way they made sense of their family's social location, their opportunities for risky behavior, and the reputations they were negotiating within the community. These youth perceived their families on the fringe of community life and struggled to establish their own social position with their peers.

Unlike HSP families, LSP families did not pave the way for youth to formally engage in the community beyond school activities because of their family social location. Instead, LSP families focused on family-based activities with their children—family gatherings, barbeques, and hunting trips. These families did not intentionally hinder their youth's involvement in valuable community or work experiences, but at the same time

they did not create similar pathways to these opportunities in the ways that the HSP parents did. It is important to note, however, that LSP youth did not feel excluded from activities or opportunities, as Mary says when I ask about programs that she does not take part in, “I think I’m in everything I’m able to be in.” LSP youth were simply unaware of, or did not see the value of, additional opportunities to engage with the community through scouts, community symphony, or church groups that were such a part of the developmental experiences of HSP youth.

### *Family Support*

All families cared about and sought to support their children, but LSP parents went about supporting their children differently than HSP parents. Both Mary and Beth acknowledged that their parents want to support them, but they did not perceive their support as particularly useful. As Beth explained, “My parents are supportive, but that won’t help, they won’t understand, they are not that kind of family.” When LSP parents talked about their goals for their children’s future, it was evident that they were allowing their children to guide their own futures and not providing support in the steps toward the realization of their children’s goals, perhaps because these goals were vastly different from their own experiences as adults. Beth’s “step-mom” said she hopes their children will, “be happy and successful people, whatever that is in their eyes.” Her dad added, “It is totally up to her. Once she’s 18 it sounds like she is moving to Portland, more power to her.” Beth recognized the potential to be unsuccessful once she ventures out on her own beyond the community. “I have people nagging me now. I won’t have that when I move.” But Beth did not have a sense of an alternate plan, or how to manage that change. Her goals revolved around moving and enrolling in community college, an educational setting

that would require her to take initiative to enroll and keep up with her coursework along with an array of adult decisions about housing, meals, and personal finances. Unlike HSP youth, Beth did not have an alternate plan if she was unable to maintain interest or be successful in the x-ray technician program, with the potential of leaving her completely lost once she leaves the comforts of home and school in her town. When Mary's mom talked about her children's futures, she said, "I want to see them succeed with whatever their goals are. I don't know what her choice is yet. She wanted CSI [criminal scene investigator from the popular television show]. She has the ability. I know she wants sports, [but] for girls sports don't take you very far." Mary's mom is similar to Beth's parents in the way she lets Mary take the lead. Mary, like Beth has the potential to lose focus if her family cannot support her in the way she has been supported at school as a "good student."

School played a powerful role for LSP youth, both as the link to social worlds and as a place to engage youth in sports and activities. For Mary, sports participation facilitated her fulfilling attendance requirements and established structured relationships with peers and adults. For Beth this was achieved through the relationships that some school personnel, including the principal, maintained with Beth even while disciplining her for poor attendance. The school demonstrated a willingness to work with Beth's parents and to consider alternate programs to keep her engaged in school. This connection appears to have kept Beth from delinquency even as she presented herself as an edgy urban teen. Beth described school support this way, "The teachers, they actually talk to you. You can have good conversations with them outside of school. They come to the basketball games. If you need help, they are more willing to help you. Mrs. X, I have

known her my entire life – she is my grandparents’ friend. She explains everything.”

Though she also adds, “The only thing is if you have parents with a bad reputation you’re cursed, you’re screwed. A lot of people don’t like my grandparents so I’m punished for it.” This sentiment highlights the tension Beth and other LSP youth feel between the support they get at school and the fragility of that support because of who their families are. Despite the immense role schools played in buffering these youth, LSP youth themselves do not perceive the strength of this support or acknowledge it in the same way HSP articulate the benefits of their school and the support they received there.

School also provided a place for LSP youth to make sense of their futures. Two of the county schools asked all students to explore future possibilities as part of their senior projects. This exploration was particularly valuable for youth whose paths will diverge from their parents. As part of these projects, LSP youth were able to observe the ways their peers have made sense of their place in the world and their futures.

LSP youth shared the same school and community contexts as the youth with high sense of purpose scores; however, as a group they had different experiences within their schools and families and ultimately constructed the experiences they did have differently from HSP youth. LSP youth demonstrated that they were aware of their family’s social location within the community. As part of their developmental experiences within their families, they had been exposed to the drug culture in the county, and felt they had to negotiate their parents’ reputations within the community, and were unsure about their futures as adults. LSP youth did not “fit” as well within their community as HSP youth. In terms of their future, they lacked a clear pathway to achieve their goals. All of these youth were planning to try their luck in urban areas, a place that could limit the support

they currently have within their schools. In comparison to HSP youth, LSP youth may be particularly vulnerable to challenges or unexpected events as they move toward adulthood because they lack alternate plans and perceive they have less support from their families and community.

*In the Middle.*

Thus far our analysis has focused on the extremes—those youth with either high or low sense of purpose scores. We now turn to those youth “in the middle,” those with average sense of purpose scores within the context of the youth of Wallowa County. Ten youth in the intensive sample were in the average sense of purpose (ASP) group. ASP youth thought more broadly about their future plans than either HSP or LSP youth. As one ASP member explained, “I don’t really know, I’ve thought about owning my own bookstore and bakery, and I’ve thought about teaching.” Another youth in this group stated, “I am going straight to college,” and then reveals that she is unsure of what she will study—it could be history, writing, acting, or education. Overall, these youth appeared to be solidly working on their identities while maintaining academic and social competence, but unlike the HSP youth they are not yet sure of who they are or who they want to be.

In contrast to their LSP peers, ASP youth appeared reasonably prepared for their upcoming transition into adulthood. They were more comfortable with their identity than their LSP peers. ASP youth viewed themselves as solid but not excellent students (though their grades ranged from solid Bs to As). They all felt that they had adults to turn to for support and that there were some benefits to growing up in Wallowa County, but not all embraced the adults of Wallowa County and their relationships with them with the same



enthusiasm as HSP youth. ASP youth focused on the next immediate step (e.g. getting to college, moving to a city) rather than long-term goals. Most were planning to attend college, though many were unsure what they would do. Two youth planned to take some time off before settling in to pursue their secondary educations.

### *Developmental Characteristics in Place*

The youth in this group are “in the middle.” Many of them fit within the community in ways similar to HSP youth. They were engaged in the community, and most worked jobs that provided skills and relationships in ways similar to the HSP youth. ASP youth were actively engaged in school, though few youth in this group crossed the line between drama and sports: most participated either in sports (5) or drama (3). Like their HSP peers these youth also participated in community activities. ASP youth included young people who were creative, chose to participate in drama *instead* of sports, and identified as more liberal, artsy, and unique than their peers. These youth dressed in colorful outfits and intentionally looked different from their peers who were more commonly observed wearing a “uniform” of jeans and plain shirts or athletic sweatshirts. All of the ASP youth acknowledged having a group of adults they could rely on for support. Jasmine exemplifies the above characteristics, often wearing layered skirts in several colors. Consider this field note excerpt from Jasmine:

“You have to surround yourself with people you want to be surrounded by.” I asked if she had enough adults to support her, even if she did not feel that all adults did, and she agreed. I ask, “so did they find you or did you find them?” She thinks for a moment and then says, “me finding them.”

Other youth in the middle were much closer to their HSP peers in their relationship with the community. Dan echoed the sense of being known, “For some reason we (his family)

are well known people.” ASP youth were active in school, and generally considered good kids by the adults around them.

Most youth in the middle worked jobs that were similar to those held by their peers in the HSP. They did ranch work, worked in tourist positions where they were actively interacting with the public as ticket takers or waitstaff. Like their counterparts they took advantage of the intergenerational relationships they were exposed to, and embraced the responsibility they were given. Four youth worked cleaning jobs which were far more similar to their peers in the LSP groups. And, like their peers, they complained about these jobs—especially the low pay.

#### *Family Social Location*

Families of youth who are in the middle also structured the developmental experiences of their youth within the county. Families in this group were perceived by their children to hold respected positions in the community. These parents were ranchers, ranchhands, retirees, forest service employees, and school faculty and other similar professions; only one parent was unemployed at the time of the study. All of the parents except one were active in the community as members of service organizations, members of various local boards, as coaches and 4-H leaders, or organizers of fundraisers for school activities. In general these youth regarded their parents with respect and expected to be similar to them as adults. As one young man explained, “how I was raised is how I would raise my children.”

#### *Family Support*

Youth in the middle perceived their families as supportive, but they all were expected to contribute to the financial cost of their next step whether that was college or a

training program. Many parents were guiding the college application process for their children to and one parent was taking her daughter on college visits. In cases where parents were unsure of the process and not college graduates themselves, ASP youth generally had older siblings or friends who had already gone through the process and could act as resources for them.

ASP youth also shared developmental experiences that were largely guided by their family's social location. Although most of these youth had families they perceived as well respected and who were formally engaged in community activities, youth lacked the same clarity about their future possibilities and the pathways to get there that was characteristic of the HSP.

#### *Sense of Purpose Across the County*

The survey data provides general information about the youth living in Wallowa County and a baseline with which to compare the results from our intensive study. Family social location, youth participation in school, and youth's perceptions of community support all emerged from the intensive study as important to sense of purpose development. Correlations were run with the full survey sample ( $n = 245-271$ ) using sense of purpose *group* membership and survey variables that emerged as meaningful based on the findings from the qualitative data analysis: parent education level, family years in the county, youth's years in the county, youth's desire to live in a rural place (a proxy for how they perceive rural living); family involvement with ranching, timber, or farming; church attendance; participation in 4-H, Future Farmers of America, or school sports. Family social location, family community engagement, and residential stability had also emerged as important from the analysis of the qualitative data but were not

captured by the survey questions. All the variables were significantly correlated with sense of purpose group membership except church attendance and family years in the county. The strongest correlations were with participation in sports (.31) and the desire to live in a rural place (.29). Taken together with the findings from the qualitative data, the survey results support that both family social location and student participation in school and community are important developmental experiences that shape the development of sense of purpose.

### Discussion

Our analysis sought to examine the processes associated with developing sense of purpose within a rural context. Within the intensive sample, youth that would traditionally be considered successful by measures of academic and social competence had a range of sense of purpose scores and therefore were members of all three sense of purpose groups. Despite their academic and social competence some youth were confident about the future and ready for upcoming challenges (HSP and ASP) and others (LSP) were unsure and questioned how their futures might go. These results suggest sense of purpose provides unique insight into adolescent development beyond traditional measures of academic and social competence and is critical to understanding successful development. These data reveal four sets of developmental experiences that shaped the development of purpose for Wallowa County youth: school and community activities, work, family social location, and family support. Each of these experiences influenced the ways youth perceived the county, how fully they embedded themselves into their community, their perception of their own place within the county, and the progress they had made in developing a sense of purpose. These developmental experiences created the

structure within which youth had agency, producing individual variation within each group.

Youth who “fit” or held values that were congruent with the community had the space and energy they needed to smooth the processes of identity work. For youth who share similar values of a strong work ethic and social trust with the community they are respected by adults (Damon & Hart, 1992; Elder & Conger, 2000; Ianni, 1989) and supported by their families in both academic and social areas; developing a strong sense of purpose appears to be part of the package. This was true for the six HSP youth. Essentially, family social location paves the way for how smooth or difficult it is for youth to engage in identity work and development of sense of purpose. For youth who do not quite fit and perceive their family to have a reputation, developing a sense of purpose appears to be abandoned for the work necessary to maintain their roles within peer and community contexts. The four LSP youth demonstrated this.

### *Families*

The most striking finding from our study is the role that family social location (community engagement, type of work, and children’s perception of their place in the social hierarchy) within the community played for youth. Regardless of the youth’s own accomplishments or natural talents, where youth perceived their family was located within the social structure of the community created different developmental experiences for these youth. Family social location essentially structures the lives of these youth within place. Researchers have long known that families are the key to youth development through parental support and residential stability and mobility (Furstenberg, et al., 1999; Ianni, 1989; Lareau, 2003). Parents are themselves interacting with social

institutions even as they pave the way for their youth to engage in community activities or guide them toward family social gatherings (Ianni, 1989; Lareau, 2003). Our results showed that the processes of family influence played out in relationship to the family's social location, and that social location determined whether youth were aware of the drug and alcohol culture, how youth perceived community support, youth participation in community activities, and the extent to which they spent time with older non-family community members. Youth who grew up in families that were disengaged from community, poor, connected with the drug and alcohol culture, and less residentially stable were supported by their parents in general ways. Nevertheless they were not being given concrete skills in anticipation of their transition to adulthood, they perceived the community as offering fragile support, and they were aware of the drug and alcohol culture and actively worked to keep apart from this scene. Mary and Beth both suffered a double disadvantage of poverty and poor family reputation. Mary and Beth perceived community support as fragile and while both felt that their families wanted them to succeed. They also anticipated that their families could or would not help in concrete ways such as helping them find a place to live or enroll in college. Youth, like Luke, with parents that were embedded within the community, residentially stable, and held traditionally respected occupations found it easy to respect agrarian values and "fit" easily within the community. The way youth fit or were more on the fringe was reinforced by the ways they engaged in the community through the work and community activities.

Wallowa County is an exemplar in the support the county is known to provide for youth. Wallowa County tries to minimize stigma and has been successful in being

inclusive. None of the youth felt excluded from sports teams or other youth activities. If family social location is key to differing developmental experiences for youth in an exemplar county, family social location may have dramatic consequences in rural places that are more exclusive and have greater divisions between respected families and those that are from the wrong side of the tracks.

### *Work*

Paid work is a developmental experience that all the youth in this study shared, but as the results showed not all paid work is equal in the experiences it provides for youth. Youth were doing everything from ranch work to cleaning for the tourist industry. Productive labor (Elder & Conger, 2000) or jobs that provided responsibility and clear skill building support youth achievement (Childress, 2000; Williams & Kornblum, 1985). These jobs were held by HSP youth. Jobs such as housecleaning, babysitting, and fast food restaurant work do not build skills and tend to be more rigid although there are exceptions where a good manager can make any job skill building for youth as illustrated by Damon in *A Path to Purpose*,(2008), in general these types of jobs do not contribute to youth's development.

### *Community Activities*

Some of the youth were not only engaged in school activities but also in community activities. Community activities included church, scouts, and the Wallowa Valley Symphony. The youth participating in these types of activities along with school activities were more firmly embedded in their communities and scored higher on sense of purpose. Sense of purpose requires being able to have a sense of one's place within the world and focusing on more than just self. Community activities and productive work

provide just this type of developmental opportunity, engaging youth with a broad spectrum of community members and modeling ways in which they can fulfill their obligation to contribute to community—a value that is an important component of many agrarian communities (Elder & Conger, 2000; Salamon, 2003) like Wallowa County. Youth who participated in orchestra practiced and performed with adults and classmates alike. Youth participating in scouts or church groups worked alongside adults on service projects, allowing them to make sense of their own role in the community and to observe how adults contribute to community activities as part of their daily lives.

### *School Participation*

While families pave the way and provide the structure for a youth's developmental experiences, schools are a primary social world for all adolescents (Steinberg, 2002; Swanson, Spencer, & Petersen, 1998). School provides both academic and social experiences. In a rural community, schools also provide the majority of “out-of-school” opportunities which structure pathways toward community engagement (Lyson, 2005). In places such as Wallowa County where schools are small, youth grow up with their classmates and view them more like siblings as they share classes and activities with the same small group of peers year after year. The extent to which youth participated and embedded themselves formally within school activities created different developmental experiences. Youth who were actively participating in activities including sports, clubs, and drama were more embedded in school. These types of activities provide a sense of purpose on a small scale as youth understand their role in the group and what they contribute to the group task, whether that is playing a solid game of basketball, putting together food baskets, or raising money for the senior trip. Youth who



participated in a multitude of activities had more opportunity for relationships with school faculty and were more known by community adults through their roles in sports, student government, or theater productions. This facilitated being embedded and belonging, not just in school, but also within the community. All twenty participants who were the focus of this analysis were engaged in some school activities, but those who were engaged in more activities over the year were more embedded in school and generally scored higher on sense of purpose.

Youth “in the middle” had families that held social locations similar to the families of youth in the high sense of purpose. As these families provided a similar structure for these youth, it appeared that these youth exerted their own agency within the family and community structure in a different way from their HSP peers, or that they were developmentally not ready to grab onto a strong sense of purpose. ASP youth had small goals, but had not yet really thought about where they were going past the next step whether that was more schooling or a move to an urban area for work. Perhaps these youth simply need more time to develop a strong sense of purpose and locate themselves within the broader world.

### *Rural Communities*

Rural communities make these patterns more visible because youth are developing within small social spaces with minimal anonymity. As Duncan so compellingly showed in *Worlds Apart* (1999) rural communities can stigmatize and exclude certain populations quite effectively when they have rigid social structures and lack middle class residents. Wallowa County is a community that has worked hard not to exclude residents, and there was no evidence of overt exclusion. Youth did not complain

of being discriminated against in sports teams or school clubs. In fact we heard the opposite as youth explained that one of the benefits of their small towns and schools was the breadth of opportunities available. However, there were still subtle vestiges of stigmatization from the perspective of the youth. For youth whose parents had reputations—those reputations subtly, but clearly followed their children. This went unnoticed by youth with parents whose position in the community was solid and respected. For youth with parents on the fringe there was a perception that adults in the community assumed they were making mistakes before they made them. Beth, for example, was sure that adults assumed she was a drug user because of her dad's history with drugs and alcohol which confirmed her perception of the fragility of community support.

### *Schools as Buffer*

While family social location created distinct developmental experiences for youth in Wallowa County, our study also revealed the powerful role of school in supporting youth. For LSP youth, none had at the time of the study entered the juvenile justice system, all were still connected to school, and two were excellent students. Despite these youth having less than optimal relationships with some of their peers and school staff, school had engaged them. This study of course was limited by the students who chose to participate in it, and there are likely some youth who were no longer engaged with school who are not represented. But for the four LSP youth school and especially school activities including sports and drama were crucial in keeping them engaged with their peers. While the youth did not perceive school this way, observational data taken with their accounts suggests that school was able to minimize the structural effects of family

social location on youth development and provide youth with more ways to exert their own agency within community social structure.

#### *Other Considerations*

The results of this study did not show any evidence of significant gender effects on sense of purpose development. In the smaller sample all four members of the LSP group were females, however, within the survey sample 51% were female suggesting that the boys were as likely as girls to have a low sense of purpose. Community observations allowed researchers to both directly observe and learn about some of the youth not included in the intensive study sample. The county does have a small population of youth who were attending alternative education programs or pursuing online education programs as homeschoolers. While some of these youth shared characteristics with members of the LSP group, such as poor families who were disengaged from the community, others were youth who simply did not fit because of their own personal interests. Youth who had no interest in sports participation often had trouble finding peers and adults with whom to form solid relationships; regardless of their family's social position, and could find themselves on the fringe of the school social hierarchy. These youth are an important group and need to be included in future research to deepen our understanding of how youth develop of their sense of purpose.

#### *Implications*

This study focused on Wallowa County, a rural county that has historically supported youth development in multiple ways. Within the microcosm of this particular rural community our study provides clues as to what aspects of small town living protect youth and how some youth may be excluded from positive developmental pathways.

First, the results show that sense of purpose provides a useful way to evaluate how youth are doing. Used along with measures of academic and social competence, sense of purpose can provide a more holistic evaluation of how adolescents are developing and provide a window into their success and struggles with identity work that is not obvious through other means. As communities consider the programs and services they provide for youth, providing avenues for youth to develop a strong sense of purpose will better prepare them for upcoming transitions.

In our contemporary society there are few spaces where purpose is discussed or modeled (Damon, 2008), with church being a notable example. Without practice discussing sense of purpose, youth lack the vocabulary to consider sense of purpose. It is important that adults in family settings and schools talk about their own sense of purpose and challenge young people to think about why they have the goals they have and what purpose they may gain from those goals. Adults in Wallowa County were very engaged in community organizations, and their children noticed the involvement. To increase the impact on youth development, adults need to share why they find community involvement important so their children consider how community engagement fits into one's identity and relationship with the world beyond self. Parent education programs should include instruction on sense of purpose and the importance of sharing one's own sense of purpose with children.

Study results suggest that youth who have the easiest time developing their sense of purpose are those who share the values of their families and communities, have intergenerational interaction, have work experiences that provide them with agency, and perceive the community as supportive of their achievements and goals. Communities can

help support youth “on the fringe” by identifying who they are, recognizing that it is more difficult to experiment with identity in a rural setting, and by providing multiple opportunities for youth to engage with community members. As school resources have dwindled, extra-curricular activities often are eliminated. This study suggests the importance of having multiple opportunities for youth to engage in activities. Not all youth want to embrace the role of “athlete” or “jock,” so it is important to have a range of activities that provide the space for rural youth who need to experiment with their identities to do so. Sports, clubs, art programs, and positive work experiences all provide ways for youth to move beyond self and make meaningful contributions. This study was conducted in a community that works hard not to stigmatize residents, we suspect in communities that are more exclusive, there are youth who struggle even more with identity work because they are managing stigma instead.

Schools in Wallowa County already take advantage of some “newcomers” residents who have joined the county as retirees. Encouraging these newcomers to engage with youth is another opportunity to provide youth with mentors and adults who can not only support them, but can actively engage youth in considering the importance of community engagement and their aspirations, both aspects of sense of purpose development. These newcomers need to be encouraged to share their experiences from outside of the county as these experiences may be particularly useful in helping youth understand the wide diversity of ways to find one’s place in the world. Schools can include projects for youth that intentionally identify individual contributions, how to search for meaning, and vocabulary related to purpose, or “one’s place in the world.”

These issues can easily be addressed within literature, history, and service learning courses as well as in service clubs, agricultural clubs, and on the sports fields.

Communities, especially rural communities, need to be paying attention to how their youth experience moving toward adulthood. When communities are successful in supporting and buffering youth as Wallowa County has been for the youth in this study, it is possible that youth will flounder when they leave and community support is less accessible. This may leave some youth vulnerable to negative outcomes without the “people who nag them.” Future research should follow rural youth through their transition to adulthood to identify the ways that communities can maintain support and to examine if those with a strong sense of purpose fare better over time. Additionally, we should consider this work more fully across the life course. This study hints at the linkages between the ways parents develop and maintain sense of purpose and the ways their children may replicate these patterns. Ultimately, our results suggest that communities need to bring attention to the development of sense of purpose in youth so that parents, teachers, and community members can better support youth development and position youth to be successful in their transition to adulthood.

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<sup>1</sup> A latent class model sorts participants the way other analyses sort variables. The latent class model included both continuous and categorical variables. The result was a set of three student groups ( $AIC= 9924.53$ ,  $BIC= 10292.32$ ,  $Entropy = .899$ ,  $Lo- Mendell Rubin = 291.58$   $p = .049$ ) based on survey responses.

Table 1. Variables included in the Latent Class Model of Survey Results

Variables	Variables	
Aspirations		
	Educational Aspirations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education want</li> <li>• Education expect</li> </ul>	2
	Occupational Aspirations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Four categories based on census categories: professional; service and sales; farm, fishing, forestry; construction and production</li> </ul>	1
	Residential Aspirations Want to return to Wallowa County <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expect to return to Wallowa County</li> <li>• Ideal place to live as an adult</li> </ul>	3
Youth Perceptions		
	Place Combined score from 5 items asking about the importance of place	1
	Barriers Mean score of 18 items that youth might perceive as a barrier to their aspirations	1
Sense of Purpose		
	Average score from adapted Hutzell and Fink scale with 23 items	1
Demographic Information		
	Gender	1
	GPA	1
	Lived outside of the County	1
	How long participant has lived in Wallowa County	1
Family Background		
	Education level of two parents	2
	Occupations of two parents	2
	How long extended family has lived in Wallowa County	1
	Family connection to Ranching, Timber or Farming	1
	Family connection to art or music	1
TOTAL		20

Note. All variables come from the participant's self-reported responses on a survey given at school.

Table 2. Patterns of Engagement among High and Low Sense of Purpose Youth

	<b>High Sense of Purpose</b> <i>n = 6</i>	<b>Low Sense of Purpose</b> <i>n = 4</i>
<b>Key Developmental Characteristics</b>	Youth view selves as <i>good</i> students; are confident about their accomplishments, have positive relationships with adults and peers; have clear <i>possible</i> pathways for their futures.	Youth view selves as <i>mediocre</i> students; lack confidence about their accomplishments, have some strained relationships with peers and adults; have plans <i>without</i> clear pathways to achieve them.
<b>Youth Engagement in Place</b>	Youth are active in sports, church and community; engaged in work that builds skills and includes responsibility.	Youth are somewhat active in sports and drama through school; engaged in work either informally or in low-paying seasonal service work.
<b>Youth Perceptions of Place</b>	Youth view the county as a <i>good</i> place to grow up, respect the rural way of life and embrace agrarian values, perceive the community to be strongly supportive.	Youth question the county as a <i>good</i> place to grow up, are very aware of the drug and alcohol element of community, reject key agrarian values, perceive community support as fragile.
<b>Families</b>	Parents tend to have college degrees; steady work, are <i>both</i> family-oriented and civically active; explicitly work to develop skills in youth for adulthood.	Parents have high school educations; unsteady work, have past connections to drug and alcohol activity within community; are family-oriented; are supportive overall but let youth <i>lead</i> with reference to future.



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ASPIRATIONS IN A CHANGING WORLD: A CASE STUDY OF THE  
EDUCATIONAL, OCCUPATIONAL, AND RESIDENTIAL ASPIRATIONS AMONG  
RURAL YOUTH

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This study was supported by an American Fellowship from the American Association of University Women; Stanford Center on Adolescence Youth Purpose Research Award supported by the John Templeton Foundation and the Thrive Foundation for Youth; Sustainable Rural Communities Initiative at Oregon State University, the College of Health and Human Sciences at Oregon State University, and the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at Oregon State University.

### Abstract

Aspirations are important for youth as the goals youth set provide direction for their future and engage them in work and school. With the dramatic changes to the economic and social landscapes of rural places in recent decades, the question of how youth construct their aspirations and talk about their futures is particularly salient. Using survey and ethnographic methods this paper examines the aspirations of adolescents growing up in Wallowa County, a remote rural county with a reputation for producing successful youth. A latent class analysis of survey data revealed three groups of youth: *college bound, heading to the city*, and *working with my hands*. Findings suggest that rural youth perceive post-secondary education as necessary, want a variety of professions, and many hope to return to rural living as adults. Youth are concerned about financing education or training, leaving their support systems, and being seen as successful by the community. Youth also internalized the stories their community tells about a lack of economic opportunity, which may deter many of them from actually returning despite their love for rural places. These findings have implications for the ways rural communities support youth in preparing them to leave for educational and training opportunities and then in providing space for them to return.



I know what I want to do. School is the foundation—college is the first story and a job is the second story. You just build it and have a happy life.... If you have goals in life you will make things work. If you have no goals then it won't work. I know what is ahead of me is great; I just have to get through school.

– High school senior.

For many contemporary adolescents, coming of age presents a different set of occupational choices and educational requirements than their parents faced two or three decades ago (Furstenberg, Rumbaut, & Settersten Jr, 2005). The United States economy has shifted from a manufacturing to a knowledge based economy resulting in a dramatically altered work landscape. Rural places have seen a decline in extractive industries (e.g., timber, mining, and fishing) and manufacturing due to broad economic forces, changes in environmental policies, and new approaches to land management and stewardship (Kelly & Bliss, 2009). These economic shifts have radically changed the education requirements for living wage jobs. In previous decades rural youth could graduate high school and have solid working-class incomes at a mill, cannery, or mine. Today, by contrast youth need more training to hold even working class jobs. Ultimately, economic shifts have altered the opportunity structure—that is the type of jobs available and how open these jobs are to individuals in context of their social and cultural locations. Contemporary rural youth are facing this new opportunity structure as they think about their future and the occupational possibilities available to them.

Research has historically found that rural youth hold lower educational and occupational aspirations than urban and suburban peers (Cobb, McIntire, & Pratt, 1989; Haller & Virkler, 1993; McCracken & Barcinas, 1991; Sewell, 1964). These findings may have been related to the job landscape of prior decades which was more limited in

rural places and generally only required a high school diploma (Sewell, 1964). More recent work has shown that characterizing rural youth as having lower aspirations may be an overgeneralization, (Howley, 2006) perhaps because of the changing job landscapes and the ease of access to media for rural youth (Swanson, Spencer, & Petersen, 1998). As rural communities continue to worry about brain drain and *how* and *where* youth will move into adulthood, understanding and fostering strong aspirations is a critical part of supporting youth development. Aspirations have been linked to educational and occupational attainment (Howley, 2006) and as such are important to fostering successful development into adulthood.

This study used an ecological framework and symbolic interactionist lens along with survey and ethnographic methods to examine aspirations among the youth of Wallowa County, Oregon, a remote rural county of about 7,000 residents. Our study had two main goals. First, we considered how Wallowa County youth were talking about their future in terms of educational, occupational, and residential aspirations. Second, we examined what influenced these aspirations among the rural youth in our study.

#### *Aspirations and Adolescent Development*

The changes in cognition that occur in adolescence allow youth to better think about what is possible in the future (Oyserman, Terry, & Bybee, 2002; Steinberg, 2002). As youth are more able to conceive of time and the future, aspirations become particularly salient. Goals for the future are considered aspirations when youth have an understanding of both the goal itself and an understanding of the work or investment necessary to reach that goal (Plucker & Quaglia, 1998; Sherwood, 1989). This study focuses on middle adolescence, a developmental stage during which youth are making

critical decisions that will affect their ability to reach their aspirations as they prepare to transition into adulthood.

### *Influences on Aspirations*

#### *Individual and Family*

Naturally, how youth experience and construct meanings about their future is shaped by individual factors such as temperament, intelligence, and physical skills (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1997). The focus of this study, however, is the influence of family and community on aspirations. The importance of family in shaping youth development is clear. Although, adolescents generally center their social world on their peers (Damon & Hart, 1992; Steinberg, 2002), their development continues to be shaped by the family, particularly in the realm of future plans. Family processes that influence aspirations include civic engagement, opportunities for youth to contribute through chores, and the transmission of cultural capital -- the general cultural background, knowledge, disposition, and skills that are passed on from parents to children (Beaulieu & Israel, 2005; Bourdieu, 1986; Elder & Conger, 2000; MacLeod, 2004; Salamon, 2003).

Parents directly influence aspirations for their children through their own hopes for their children's futures, and parents with strong aspirations are likely to foster the same in their children, even if the specific goals are different (Odell, 1988). Parent perceptions of the opportunity structure at home and elsewhere influence their children's perceptions of these opportunities (Shattuck, 2009). Parent education levels and occupations have also been shown to impact aspirations (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004). In light of what is already known, we would expect youth to pay attention to their parent's aspirations as a crucial part of their process of socially constructing their own views of the world and their aspirations.

### *Community and Neighborhood*

Few studies of aspirations have integrated the community context into examinations of rural youth and aspirations. There is much about small town life that is good for youth. Connections to an agrarian way of life have been shown to produce youth who are engaged in their communities, have higher academic performance, and have higher aspirations (Elder & Conger, 2000). Small towns with an agrarian heritage often nurture strong community engagement and social norms around expectations for youth (Salamon, 2003). It is also known that rural communities vary widely in their economic vitality and their capacity to support youth by engaging them in school and community and by transmitting clear values (Damon & Gregory, 1997; Duncan, 1999; Ianni, 1989; Ley, Nelson, & Belyukova, 1996).

The basis of what we know about neighborhood effects comes from research and theory building in urban settings. Most of this body of work focuses on the urban core with a majority of low-income residents and structural neighborhood features that weaken aspirations including limited educational opportunity, lack of role models or mentors, and few available jobs which creates a closed opportunity structure (Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999; MacLeod, 2004; Wilson, 1987). Residence in a poor urban neighborhood can level aspirations among youth (MacLeod, 2004). Despite the relative safety and fewer risks of residing in rural neighborhoods, rural youth have often been found to have lower aspirations (Cobb, et al., 1989; Haller & Virkler, 1993; Sewell, 1964). If rural youth are exposed to fewer possible career paths or limited educational or economic opportunities, it may be a logical outcome that their

aspirations will be weaker (Burton, Allison, & Obeidallah, 1995; Crockett, Shanahan, & Jackson-Newsom, 2000; Haller & Virkler, 1993).

Historically, more jobs were available in rural economies that did not require education beyond high school. Success was defined as working a job that provided a living wage and allowed parents to support their families. This may have created less need for higher education as a pathway for successful development for those living in rural communities (Corbett, 2007). Indeed, as recently as 2001, research showed that rural parents were less supportive of their children earning a college degree than were urban parents (Gandara, Gutierrez, & O'Hara, 2001). As such, the perceived value of a college degree may be in flux in rural communities. In addition to economic changes, rural youth now have more access to media—the same media that influences their suburban and urban counterparts. Rural youth are watching the same movies and television shows, listening to the same music, participating in the same social networking sites, and reading the same blogs as young people living in suburban and urban neighborhoods. Thus, rural youth are constructing their aspirations for and notions about adulthood not just within their rural community but also within the wider society. The conflicting results in previous research suggest more work is needed to understand community influences on the aspirations of contemporary rural youth.

### *Schools*

Schools facilitate relationships to peers and non-family adults in both formal and informal ways. In this way, schools are a crucial context within which youth construct aspirations. The way schools organize their curricula, the diversity of programs they provide, and opportunities they offer for both exposure to possible careers and adult role

models all influence youth development (Boyle, 1966; Corbett, 2007; McCracken & Barcinas, 1991). Schools subtly or explicitly (in the case of tracking) guide youth toward particular classes and reinforce what youth are and are not capable of, thereby creating or limiting opportunities for youth. As schools limit their curricula to core academic skills (e.g., reading, math, and writing) schools lose their ability to provide positive connections to productive work (Childress, 2000; Corbett, 2007; Elder & Conger, 2000; Williams & Kornblum, 1985) and curricula that is relevant to place (Sobel, 2004; Theobald, 1997). Ultimately schools are integral to the ways rural youth construct an understanding of their community's local opportunity structure as compared to urban places.

#### *Measuring Aspirations*

Researchers have traditionally privileged one path (i.e., that of college education and professional work) as higher than others, often measured in terms of the amount of effort needed to achieve this pathway (Howley, 2006). For instance, higher educational aspirations and aspirations toward more prestigious occupations are privileged in research (Cobb, et al., 1989; Hektner, 1995; Sewell, 1964). This may be a logical simplification, especially when considered in context of higher educational attainment and social mobility. However, simplifying research on aspirations in this way discounts youth who have priorities or dreams beyond the realm of career or college degrees. For example within this framework, rural youth who aspire to live in a rural place and contribute to their community by doing ranchwork or cobbling together a string of seasonal jobs are categorized as having low aspirations. The view that privileges the aspirations of youth who intend to leave their community suggests that rural places are inherently deficient (Howley, 2006). In keeping with a symbolic interactionist perspective we allow youth in

this study to define their aspirations on their own terms, and seek to understand the breadth of those aspirations without making judgments about some aspirations being “higher.” Instead, we seek to evaluate the strength of aspirations in terms of youth’s efforts to move toward those aspirations.

### *Study Site*

Wallowa County is an isolated rural community located in Northeastern Oregon. The county is home to about 7,000 people, 97% of whom are White. The county is amenity-rich, including a lake that has been a popular vacation spot since the turn of the last century, the Wallowa Mountains, and the west side of Hells Canyon both of which provide multiple hiking and backpacking trails. The contemporary Wallowa County community prides themselves on their pioneer heritage, strong sense of independence, and agrarian values. Along with tourism, this county has always relied on timber and ranching as sources of income. Like all rural places, Wallowa County, where 57% of the county is public land, has deeply felt the forces of globalization and changes in the forestry industry that have resulted in the closure of all the mills, decreased harvests, and a loss of jobs. In 1994 three sawmills closed, resulting in hundreds of lost jobs that presented the county with a challenge from which it is still recovering (retrieved from: [http://www.wallowaresources.org/about\\_wc.php](http://www.wallowaresources.org/about_wc.php)). Despite these challenges, the people of Wallowa County have been quite innovative: locating a niche market for grass fed beef, building a small diameter post and pole plant to provide wood for furniture and small structures, and investing in their tourist industry by purchasing the train tracks that once brought visitors to the lake and logs out of the county, to run tourist trains for both sightseers and fishermen. Regardless of the many unique ways Wallowa County residents

find to make ends meet, there is a clear perception across the county that job opportunities are few, especially for young people in their twenties. The pervasive pessimism about job opportunities adds to the perception that youth are the county's "best export."

## Methods

### *Looking Toward the Future Project*

The current study is a focused analysis of data from a larger project examining how growing up in Wallowa County (a remote rural County in northeastern Oregon) shapes youth development in ways that may potentially support their upcoming transition to adulthood. We focused on high school youth (ages 13-18) as this is a developmental period during which adolescents are in the process of making decisions about their future (Steinberg, 2002). We employed survey and ethnographic methods to develop a contextualized understanding of youth development. The study began with a survey and background phase. We then studied a small group of high school juniors and seniors ( $n=20$ ) intensively over a period of six months. Combined these data allow us to examine how experiences within place shape the residential, occupational, and educational aspirations of youth.

### *Survey*

Data collection began in the fall of 2007 when the first author moved to the County to conduct field research. Students in all three county high schools (grades 9-12) were surveyed, with 87% ( $n = 270$ ) participating. The survey captured demographic and family background data, assessed students' notions about the future (aspirations and sense of purpose) and documented self-reported levels of school and community engagement.



Youth completed the surveys at school during class time. Eighty-eight percent of the youth who participated in the survey identified as White (5% identified as Hispanic), 54% were male, they had lived in the county for an average of 11 years, and their average age was 15 ½ years. As a group they were representative of the general county and high school populations.

### *Community Study*

During data collection, I (first author) resided in the county observing at school, in the community, and local businesses. I interviewed principals, and other individuals involved in youth programs, attended community events, and school athletic events. After each interview or event, I recorded detailed field notes as soon as possible. I also engaged in conversations as part of everyday life, and recorded details of as many of these daily interactions as possible in observational field notes each evening. Data from the survey and background study phase thus allowed us to construct a broad, place specific understanding of the community (Lofland & Lofland, 1995) and of youth development against which we could situate what we later learned in the intensive phase.

Surveys were analyzed using a latent class model which also served as a recruitment tool for the intensive study. The intensive study generated rich qualitative data which was then analyzed to provide deeper understanding of the latent class analysis. We will first describe the latent class analysis, after which we will discuss the intensive phase methods before presenting the full study results.

### *Latent Class Analysis*

The survey data was analyzed using a latent class model. Latent class analysis sorts participants into groups in much the same way factor analysis sorts variables

(McCutcheon, 1987). In this case we were looking for groups of survey participants that shared characteristics related to aspirations and sense of purpose. We used Mplus for this analysis because Mplus allowed us to use both categorical and continuous variables in the same model (Acock, 2006).

### *Variables*

The survey question about occupational aspirations was open-ended. We took the range of answers about occupations—from forensic scientist to nurse to teacher to professional athlete—and coded the occupations using the same categories as the U.S. Census. Three categories of: service and sales; farm, fishing, and timber; and production had minimal responses so the occupation categories were combined into four categories that were used in our latent class model: professional and management; service and sales; farm, fishing, forestry along with construction, and production; and do not know or blank. For sense of purpose, which was measured using an adaptation of Hutzell and Finck's purpose in life scale (1994), we used the mean of the twenty-three responses rather than a summed score to better capture the responses of youth who skipped questions within the scale (Hutzell & Finck, 1994). The latent class analysis included: three variables reflecting residential aspirations (whether youth wanted to live in the county as adults, whether they expected to, and their ideal place to live), two variables on educational aspirations (how far they wanted and expected to go in school), one variable for occupational aspirations (occupations within the four categories mentioned above).

We also included some background variables that included, gender of the participant, the education level of two parents (as reported by survey participants), the occupations of two parents (using census categories as reported by survey participants),

and the youth's self-reported academic success in categories, (3.5-4.0), (3.0-3.5), etc. To capture a sense of how youth were connected to the county we also included the length of time their families (including kin such as grandparents) had been in the county (logged to bring the variable within scale of the others); how long they had lived in the county (also logged); two binary variables that indicated whether their families were involved in ranching or timber, and art or music (all major components of Wallowa County life); whether they had ever lived outside the county; a place variable (that was a mean value of responses on five items to capture perceptions of rural as good or bad ( $\alpha = .63$ ); and a barrier variable that averaged their responses to a series of 18 possible barriers ( $\alpha = .89$ ).

#### *Latent Class Analysis Model*

Using a latent class model, two, three and four-class solutions were considered. The three class solution held best in terms of both the empirical fit statistics and usefulness as it separates out youth who are doing well academically into two groups that are distinct in their immediate residential aspirations. The result was a set of three student groups ( $AIC= 9924.53$ ,  $BIC= 10292.32$ ,  $Entropy = .899$ ) with three groups having improved fit over the two-class solution ( $p = .05$ ), and the four-class solution not a significant improvement over the three-class solution ( $p \geq .78$ ) see Table 1 for the results of two and four-class solutions. Based on the typical members of each class we labeled the three classes of youth as: *college bound* (class 1), *heading to the city* (class 2), and *working with my hands* (class 3) (see Figure 1). As the labels reflect, each group privileges one realm of aspirations above the others. College bound youth are focused on their educational plans, heading to the city youth focused on moving away, and working with my hands youth are focused on finding meaningful (in their eyes) local work.

College bound youth were the most common within our sample and are youth that are doing well in terms of academic and social competence with solid aspirations especially in terms of education and career. A typical youth from the college bound group aspires to a four-year degree, has lived in the county for most of his or her life (about 12 years), has parents who have some college, and gets A's and B's in school. Heading to the city youth are similar in many ways to the college bound, as they are solid students and are doing well socially, but are intent on relocating to an urban area. A typical youth from the heading to the city group aspires to a four year degree, has probably lived in the county for about 6 years and thus has experience living elsewhere, has parents with marginally less education than the college bound group (though are still within the some college range) gets B's in school, and feels less favorably toward rural living. Working with my hands youth look different, as they are generally doing poorly in school though they value rural living. Most want to work in jobs that are often considered "working class." The typical working with my hands youth aspires to a high school diploma, or less, has lived in the county for about half of his or her life (about 8 years), gets B's and C's in school, has parents who have a high school diploma and favors rural living more so than those heading to the city, but less so than the college bound youth. Of all three groups, the working with my hands youth perceive the most barriers to their aspirations.

#### *Intensive study of aspirations*

The latent class analysis results were used to recruit youth into an intensive phase of study. Random samples of high school juniors and seniors from the three latent class groups were invited to participate from the subsample of youth who had provided consent during the survey phase to be recruited for further study participation. Consent rates

differed by latent class groups. The college bound group had a 60% consent rate, heading to the city 66%, and the working with my hands group only 36%. This meant that only 16 youth working with my hands juniors and seniors gave consent to be recruited for the intensive sample. Because these youth do more poorly academically and were ultimately less engaged in school, school as the recruiting point was a likely disadvantage with this group whereas with the other groups, being associated with school legitimized me as a researcher. Many of the working with my hands group were no longer enrolled in school in December when recruitment began (several had transferred to online home school programs or had moved) and thus only one youth, Tara, is represented in the intensive sample. Despite the slim data on this group, the intensive sample participants do provide insight into each group, particularly highlighting the between group differences. To protect anonymity, some of the youth described in the next section are composites of multiple participants. The final intensive sample included twenty youth of whom nine were females, nine were juniors and eleven were seniors. Reflecting the demographic make-up of the county, all of these youth were White. As already mentioned, only one youth in the working with my hands group was represented, of the others, 11 were members of the college bound group, and 8 belonged to the heading to the city group (Figure 1).

The random samples for recruitment were all done with case numbers which were separated from latent class membership before names were reconnected with names of possible participants. Thus, at the time of data collection, survey results (latent class group membership, aspirations, sense of purpose scores, etc.) for each individual were unknown to the interviewer (this may also have contributed to the limited participation of

the working with the hands group, as I did not know which youth were part of working with my hands during recruitment). Data collection in this phase made use of in-depth interviews, observation, and additional data collection strategies over the course of four months. This analysis focused on interviews when youth talked about their futures, parent interviews, and sections of their slideshows that portrayed what they liked and disliked about their community. As one indicator of how aligned youth's aspirations were with their effort to succeed and ability, academic records of each youth were reviewed. Youth were also observed in the context of school, community and home. On average, five hours of interviews were conducted with each youth over a period of four months of intensive study. In addition, I spent at least 30 hours in the classrooms and hallways of each school observing youth. Again, detailed field notes were recorded as soon as possible after each interview and encounter in the field. Combined these data provided a holistic and contextualized view of development among the youth in the intensive sample.

A spiral approach (Berg, 2004) was used to analyze the intensive phase data. The spiral approach has its roots in a grounded theory analysis. Unlike grounded theory, though, a spiral approach is rooted in existing literature and the research questions, while at the same time, provides room for new themes to emerge from the data. The field notes from interviews with the participants of the intensive study were first read and coded case by case for references to aspirations and the future in keeping with the goals of this study. Subcodes for occupational, residential, and educational aspirations were then developed. It quickly became clear that youth talked about each of these realms of aspirations distinctly rather than as interconnected. We also noticed that family formation came up in

conjunction with residential aspirations, so field notes were reread to code family formation themes. The relevant data were examined within each of the three themes: residential, educational, and occupational aspirations. Subthemes emerged including: benefits of rural living, pre-professions and concerns about financing further education and training, and college as a place to continue exploring future possibilities and family formation. The themes were then considered through the lens of the three latent class groups.

The data from community observations were also part of this study. Prior research (Farmer, et al., 2006; MacLeod, 2004; Shattuck, 2009) indicates that the way others perceive the opportunity structure is critical to how youth themselves perceive their own possibilities, therefore analysis included ethnographic data (field notes from community observations, along with newspapers and other materials generated by Wallowa County residents). Major themes that emerged included community definitions of success, mill closures, and limited economic opportunity within the county. The analysis of these data provides an in-depth picture of the context within which the study participants are developing during their teen years (Lofland & Lofland, 1995).

## Results

Data from the intensive phase enriched the findings gained from the latent class analysis. The latent class analysis provides three groups of youth who each prioritize their futures differently: college bound, heading to the city, and working with my hands. Using data from interviews provided a way to examine how youth talk about their futures within each group and what family and community influences were most salient to youth. We begin by considering a case study from each group, then describe how each group talks

about educational, occupational, and residential aspirations, and then examine the influences on those aspirations.

*Talking About the Future.*

*College Bound*

Dan represents a typical college bound youth. He is a Wallowa County kid in every sense of the word. Dan was born in the county and has extended kin who still live nearby. Dan plays sports all year long and his grandparents are often at games cheering him on in the stands. When I asked him how involved his parents are in school, he tells me that his parents still come to everything and adds, "They support me in choices, they give me their opinion, but then they say it's your choice." During the summers, he works for local ranchers moving irrigation pipe and doing any other task that needs to be done to keep the cattle healthy. A solid student who earns mostly B's, Dan has been frequently told by his teachers that he could do better if he focused more on his school work. He has a good sense of humor and has often found himself at the center of school pranks (moving a friend's car) general teasing and the like. He loves the lake and on rare opportunities when he is able to get off work early chances are he can be found at the lake with friends from school, with whom he has grown up. Dan's dad is a high school graduate who has always had steady and stable work; his mom holds a master's degree. Dan has always known he would go to college, and his sights are set on a school a few hours away that his older sibling attends. "I always knew I would go to college. I never thought about just going into the workforce or the military. It's just how I grew up, even though my dad didn't [go to college]." He plans on studying engineering in college, but is open to the possibility that his career path could change during his college experience.



Dan's parents support his aspirations and "hope [their children] like what they do and enjoy their profession." While Dan talks of his residential aspirations and desire to live somewhere smaller, he says, "I don't want to live in the big city, but if I am an engineer I am not sure there are a lot of jobs in a small town." Like others in the college bound group, Dan's primary focus in terms of his future, is attending college, and he is confident that where he lives will fall into place later.

### *Heading to the City*

As a member of the heading to the city group, Jackie is a bright student who speaks eloquently about abstract ideas. When walking the halls of the high school, Jackie's outfits attract attention. She dresses with flare, often wearing skirts and multiple layers and colors, showing her allegiance to the arts and drama over sports. Although Jackie's family has multigenerational connections in the county, she spent her early years in rural communities outside of Oregon. She is earning B's in school and participates in drama because as she tells me, "I enjoy acting and theater. It is something that piques my interest." She lives with her mom who is an alumna of a county high school and who earned an associate's degree from a nearby community college. Jackie's mom works in the schools as an aide, a job without benefits. Jackie has a love for the lake and has many places around town that she has named and often uses to just "hang out" with friends. Despite her affinity for the landscape and beauty of the county, Jackie is eager to go experience the world in the city. She explains how she sees Wallowa County as shaping her aspirations, "It helped me want to move to a bigger place. It is a really artistic town with all the bronzes. I have met some good artists here. One of the things I do for fun is art. In a bigger place I may not have – I might have gone to the movies or the mall or

something.” She is anxious to get to Portland or Seattle and begin exploring. In Jackie’s words, “I like the Seattle area, I knew I would go there or Portland.” Although she thinks she may want a four-year degree someday, she talks of getting some professional training through a community college and starting with what she calls a “pre-profession” to get on her feet. Jackie’s mom supports her exploration and says she is not worried that Jackie will not complete her education, even if does get delayed. Her mom does worry about her finding an occupation that is financially sound. She says, “I want [Jackie] to finish whatever education and want her to work in an area most interesting and exciting to her. She will never be able to do a regular job, it would kill her spirit. Experience as much of life, and travel. Be happy and be herself.” Jackie describes her twenties as her “adventure time” but is sure she will eventually settle in a smaller rural place to raise her children at least for their “young part.” Jackie shares a strong desire to experience urban places with the rest of the heading to the city group.

### *Working with My Hands*

Tara is a member of the working with my hands group, and is immediately identifiable as different from the college bound group members. Her hair is dyed black and she always wears black eye liner applied thickly around her eyes. For most of the year we were collecting data, she wore a black hooded sweatshirt nearly every day. She has piercings along the edges of both ears and often paints her fingernails black. Tara is an atypical member of the working with my hands group in that she has only officially lived in the county for four years (most of the others from the survey sample have lived here for most of their schooling), but her grandparents live in the county and she has visited every summer since she was born. While she acknowledges the beauty of the

county at times, especially the visibility of the stars in the night sky, she also laments consistently that she misses Plaid Pantry (a twenty-four hour convenience store that can be found on every corner in Portland where she is from). She is failing school, in part because she is frequently late or absent. She loves to write and is curious about history, but has not found a school activity that truly engages her. She does not play sports, has cursorily participated in drama, and does not really have a good core of friends at school. Her dad has a high school diploma and has a journeyman certificate from a community college program. Tara's dad currently works in construction, though he says the opportunities to work vary by season. Tara has never really had aspirations toward a four-year degree and her father has left what she does after high school "up to her." Her plans at the time of the study were to move to Seattle after graduation, get a job (possibly at her beloved Plaid Pantry), and maybe train as a massage therapist. When asked about her aspirations to be a massage therapist, Tara explains why she is drawn to this type of work. "I don't know, about 4<sup>th</sup> grade I got the hand of massaging people. When my Mom got pregnant, I did it for her. I am good at massaging. My aunt's friend was a masseuse, I went to her place one time, I was 8 or 9 years old. I thought she picks her clients and works out of her home, I thought it was cool." Despite her desire to become trained as a massage therapist, Tara is ultimately unsure if she will successfully graduate high school or should try to get a GED instead. Like the others in the working with my hands group, Tara is focused on how she will earn a living and is not expecting to need much education for her chosen profession.

### *Aspirations Compared*

As Dan, Jackie, and Tara illustrate, each group talks about their future in different ways. Overall, Wallowa County youth generally do want education beyond their high school diplomas and are thinking about a wide range of occupations and places to live. However, each group prioritizes their aspirations differently across the three realms.

#### *Education*

Dan, Jackie, and Tara provide some insights into the mainstream educational aspirations of Wallowa County youth (See Table 2). Fewer than eight percent of the youth who were surveyed aspired to conclude their schooling at high school graduation. Across the full survey sample, over 54% of youth aspired to a four-year degree and an additional 24% of youth aspiring to graduate school of some kind. The latent class analysis, however, suggests that educational aspirations are distinct between groups. Jackie and Dan, like most of the youth in their groups, aspire to a four-year degree. Tara, in contrast, is unsure about her educational goals and temporarily aspires to a vocational program. This difference in educational aspirations is reflected across the three groups. College bound youth (Dan's group), as might be expected from the overall numbers, have high educational aspirations and 98% of them aspire to a college degree or higher with a mean of 4.3 with a four being a four-year degree and a five being graduate school (See Table 3). Heading to the city (Jackie's group) youth look very similar to the college bound, in terms of educational aspirations. They have a mean score of 4.23, just slightly lower than the college bound and, of this group, 94% aspire to a four-year degree or higher, however some of them expect to work before pursuing their degrees, only 60% plan to go directly to college. Working with my hands (Tara's group) have a mean score

of 1.73 on educational aspirations, indicating that, on average, they aspire to complete high school or community college. In fact, 36% aspire to obtain a high school diploma and end their education there, another 62% of this group aspire to community college, or vocational school. Even more of this group plans to delay their education, with only 21% planning to begin post-secondary education immediately following high school.

### *Career*

As in the case of educational aspirations, the rural youth in this study aspire toward mainstream occupations, many of them in professional fields or entertainment. They want to be doctors, teachers, professional athletes, and musicians. Fifty-four percent of county youth fall into this professional category which is far greater than the percentage of Wallowa County residents currently working as professionals (32.9%). Like educational aspirations, the latent class analysis shows who aspires to what type of job. College bound youth (Dan's group) aspire to hold professional occupations (62%), with few (just under 6%) aspiring to agriculture, construction or production work, jobs that are more working class and occupations that resonate with the county's identity.

Working with my hands youth (Tara's group) primarily aspire to work in those agriculture, construction or production occupations (41%), and just 17% aspire to professional work. In terms of strength of aspirations or the investment these youth are making in their aspirations, the working with my hands who aspire to agriculture, construction and production work are more likely to achieve their aspirations, as these occupations match their educational aspirations. For the 17% who aspire to professional work, they have a gap between the education they will be expected to have and the education (high school diplomas, vocational programs or associate's degrees) to which

they aspire. Heading to the city youth appeared quite similar to college bound in their educational aspirations. In terms of career aspirations, even more heading to the city youth aspire to professional work (74%) and only 2% aspire to work in manual labor. Again, these occupational aspirations may be congruent with their aspirations to settle in more metropolitan areas, where more professional work may be available. It is important to note that the college bound group had the highest percentage of youth who left this question blank or responded “don’t know” (17%), both heading to the city and working with my hands hover around 11%.

*Where to live.* Residential aspirations are particularly salient for rural youth because opportunities for work may differ in small rural places as compared to metropolitan areas. Only 34% want to return to Wallowa County. However, the mean of the place variable (an average of five items) that attempted to measure importance of place was 2.19, or very important. More relevant is that just under 70% of youth want to live in a small city, town, or rural place as adults, meaning they want to live in smaller places even if they do not want to return “home.” Parents in the intensive sample valued Wallowa County for the safety of a small town and its benefits in raising kids. Many of the youth themselves discuss these same benefits (sense of safety, access to nature, and a strong sense of social trust) of growing up in a rural place. Dan explains why the slower pace of life in Wallowa County is beneficial,

In Wallowa County things aren’t as busy as in the city so there is more family time when things aren’t busy. In the city parents are in business or flying around the country. I think I’ve been privileged to have time with my family both my parents are very close.

One youth who is heading to the city and is craving more adventure talks about the safety and the goodness of Wallowa County as a place to raise children,

It (WC) has made me sleep better, there are no sirens. It has kept me safe from gangs, drive-bys, being abducted- it has kept me away from a criminal rate. It is a good place to raise a kid, but your kid won't like it.

All of the youth who turned in slideshows included images of the natural spaces around the county, the mountains and lake (even Tara). They all also access natural spaces for recreation, using the Lake as a swimming hole and hiking and camping both with their friends and families. Of course some youth enjoy the County more than others, but ultimately all twenty youth in the intensive sample were able to point to some benefits of growing up in a small place.

Across the three classes, youth think differently about residential aspirations. Both college bound and working with my hands youth value rural living more than heading to the city youth. For each, the mean for importance of place was above two (2.4 and 2.14, respectively, with very important being a 3). Like Dan, most of the college bound youth (84%) want to live in a small city or smaller when they are thirty. Similarly, for the working with my hands youth, Tara's group, 78% aspire to rural living. Heading to the city youth, like Jackie, while looking similar to the college bound group in educational and occupational aspirations, they differ in their value of place. Members of this group do not seem to value rural places; indeed, not one of them listed a rural place or village as their ideal place to live, and only 38% of them want to live in a small city or smaller place. These are the youth who are focused on leaving the county and experiencing the city, at least for the beginning years of adulthood. For many youth, residential aspirations are tied to family formation. Youth in both the heading to the city group and the college

bound group spoke of wanting to eventually settle down in a small town when they had kids so that their kids could experience the same sense of safety and benefits of rural life that they had growing up.

Overall, most youth understand the need for additional education and aspire to more than a high school diploma. At the same time, however, youth differ in which aspiration realm is the focus of their energy. The realm of educational, occupational, or residential aspirations that is the most important to youth places them on particular paths toward adulthood—either attending college, moving somewhere new and joining the world of work, or trying to find work close to home.

### *Influences on Aspirations*

In using an ecological framework, it is essential to understand the community and family contexts in order to understand what is shaping the aspirations of Wallowa County youth. At the community level, we must consider how youth perceive their community and what messages they receive about success and opportunity. How these same messages are congruent (or not) across family and school contexts requires attention. The three major themes that emerged from interviews and observations were: the stories of success and opportunity that were prevalent across Wallowa County, expectations that youth finance their own educations, and the connections they have to the college campuses they choose to attend.

### *Stories of Success and Opportunity*

While talking with a young woman who was working for a community development organization and living in the house she grew up in, she commented about her belief that communities tell stories about themselves. In Wallowa County, like other



places, youth receive conflicting messages from different parts of their community, but there is an overarching story or narrative about the lack of available work—especially for young people in their twenties and thirties. At the same time, the community itself reinforces this notion by highlighting youth who have achieved success elsewhere. While conducting observations in the county, shopkeepers often shared their thoughts on the general success of Wallowa County kids as adults when they heard about this research project. One shopkeeper said,

We've had some success stories from here, the author of *Good Will Hunting* is from here. And there is another guy who left for New York and is designing furniture. He lives in New York now and is designing furniture around the world. He was just here with his wife visiting his family. She didn't like it here much, there wasn't enough to do. I guess you would say those are some successes.

Another older woman I met in the museum remarked, “We got kids doing great things here, we have kids graduating from West Point, and one this year who graduated from the Air Force Academy, we have doctors, we have everything.” The examples these individuals and others I met while living in the county shared were primarily stories about youth who had left and became successful elsewhere. Newspaper headlines often focused on employment statistics, though there were also many stories about Wallowa County economic successes as well. But when newspapers interviewed people “on the street” about the need for low-income housing, the familiar refrain of family wage jobs resurfaced again: “The big thing is lack of family wage jobs.” And, “A lot of jobs here aren't very high paying.” (Chieftain, 2007).

Parents of youth who participated in this study told me about their older children who had moved away for work and wanted to return but as parents they had discouraged their children from moving back because they would earn less money in the county than

they were making elsewhere. Youth themselves made comments about the limited jobs in the county, as one youth wrote as part of her slideshow, “A young single person in Wallowa County won’t find much in the dating scene. Wallowa County needs more things that appeal to the ‘fresh out of college’ age group like cheap real estate, and more professional type jobs” (1057). Young people made similar statements on their surveys: “It’s too small—I think it best for kids to go somewhere else where they can go to college and actually get a job” (1225); “It’s a pretty place. It’s just hard to make a living” (1031). These comments echoed those made during parent interviews when parents were asked to describe their goals for the county. Many shared the sentiment of this parent, “I hope it (the county) can continue to develop family wage jobs- and not turn into a retirement/tourist community. The problem is keeping families here, the new hospital helps- doctors with families. I used to log and know everyone for 100 miles. So many have had to move to find jobs. To me, work—the mills are part of the community. The thing I don’t like is the change I see coming, it’s inevitable, change is coming” (1172). These sentiments echo the overall sense that the county is unable to provide a livelihood for the young people they need to keep their schools strong and their communities vital.

At the same time, the woman who had shared her belief about community stories said, “I am not sure where the perception of there being no work in the county came from, because that has not been my experience. I am not sure if it’s what the youth see, or what adults tell them.” She added that she has a small group of friends in their late twenties, all of whom had managed to find enough work to support themselves. There are several Wallowa County young adults who were making it by running their own businesses, working as teachers, doing professional work, or working for government

agencies within the county. Many of these individuals are “homecomers” rather than “stayers,” meaning that rather than staying in the county to work after high school graduation they left the county for education, working and living elsewhere before returning to the county. Some of the parents in the intensive study recounted similar stories in their own paths. They left, went to college, lived elsewhere, and then returned to raise their children in a safe place. In fact, the local paper did a feature story of just such individuals in November of 2007 (Greene, 2007). Others in the County—teachers, members of Wallowa Resources (a local, non-profit organization), and newspaper reporters frequently pointed to the “homegrown” individuals as success stories. Youth thus hear stories of success outside of the county and are encouraged to leave the county, but at the same time they know and interact with many adults who are county natives and are successfully living in the county.

Youth in the intensive sample shared comments and observations that suggested that they have internalized the perception of lack of opportunity in rural places. When I asked Dan where he will live at age 30, he told me; “I don’t want to live in the big city, but if I am an engineer I am not sure there are a lot of jobs in a small town like Joseph.” An aspiring mechanic and college bound youth explained that he was willing to compromise where he lives for work, but not in terms of raising a family: “ [Where I live] can’t be a big huge place, like New York, I hate huge towns. If I had a really high paying job and had to live there it would be ok, but I wouldn’t raise my kids there” (1172). While there may be some truth to the lack of opportunity present in Wallowa County, the repeated narrative about the opportunity structure adds to the tension that youth already

feel between aspiring to a job and career they will enjoy and their desire to live and raise their families in rural places.

Youth, like Jackie, also spoke of the pressure to succeed if they did leave the County. Consider this field note excerpt:

“Living here- it feels like I have to face up to where I come from and be responsible. I want to make people here proud- or you have to prove you can do it, there is a lot of sense that the city is a big place, you have to take care there, so you need to prove you can do it. Need to show you can owe up to something.” She pauses, “I think they overdramatize it, preparation for the real world- they over conceptualize it. They say college is so important, but it’s not the right timing for everyone, and not the end of the world if you don’t go, some people find perfectly alternative education or lives they like over college.”

Jackie touches on both the pressure to go to college and the need to prove oneself, which implies that youth who leave and return are failures in some way. At the same time youth hear over and over that the county needs to provide more work for young people, especially families. Thus, a tension exists between the community story of needing more work, and parents pushing their children to try their luck elsewhere in the world so they have more options. Part of this tension is the difference between pursuing careers and piecing work together. While entrepreneurs in the county, teachers, medical professionals, and forest service employees all have “careers,” that is occupations with long term stability and trajectories, much of the work in a rural place is simply that: work. Firefighting, seasonal tourist jobs, construction, and ranch work all fluctuate with the seasons, meaning that many residents of the County piece together a string of jobs to “make it.” For youth, this translates into some productive work opportunities as they too participate in the seasonal work of ranching, tourist attractions and restaurants, and once they are 18, firefighting. However, this means there are fewer role models for them that

mimic the career type jobs they see on television or hear their teachers talk about. As Dan explained, in some ways Wallowa County “maybe” hindered his goals “because I don’t see all the jobs that there are, if you don’t see it, I don’t know about jobs that there are.”

### *Financing My Education*

The culture in Wallowa County is for youth to be active participants in financing their educations. Youth are expected to work and save money for college during high school, to continue working at least during summers throughout their post-secondary experiences, and most expect to take out loans. While a few youth in the intensive portion of this study will receive financial help for their education from their families, not one was expecting a full ride. Within the intensive sample, it was more common for families to help youth find summer work or to co-sign loans rather than to give money directly for their educations. When I asked about barriers to achieving their educational goals youth expressed their concerns about the cost of college, in the survey 84% of youth marked money for education as maybe a barrier or definitely a barrier. During the interviews 14 of 20 in some way youth mentioned money during the future interview, with 12 describing money as the main barrier to achieving their aspirations. Nine youth said money or financing was what they needed help with to achieve their goals. One young woman, a heading to the city youth said: “I am kind of anxious, if I don’t get scholarships I might have to go a different way.” (1032). Another young man, a college bound youth, who was planning on vocational school echoed the sentiment, “Money, always money. Getting big scholarships and grants from big schools.” (1172). While no one said they were not attending college because of money, it did sway at least one youth’s decision to pick a state school instead of a private one.

Concerns about money were also linked to what one youth termed a “pre-profession.” Three participants talked about a pre-profession as a job that involved training for one to two years and would result in lucrative, easy-to-find work. As Jackie explained, “I want a short-term career to earn money for college.” Youth who were contemplating pre-professions were considering training in: radiology technician, massage therapy, and holistic medicine. These youth perceived a pre-profession as easing the financial burden of college, because the pre-profession would allow them to earn enough money to fund their college education at a later date. As one heading to the city young woman says, “I don’t know what I want to actually do so I am going into X-ray technician.” She then explained that x-ray technicians train for two years at a junior college starting salaries range from \$32,000 - \$52,000. Of course, if these youth do indeed return to college for a four year degree (all of them were considering liberal arts degrees) they would not complete their degrees until their late twenties or early thirties.

Money is naturally a concern of many young people who are planning on post-secondary education or training. Much attention has been paid to the rising costs of college tuition, and private vocational programs can be as expensive as attending private colleges. The difference lies in who is responsible for the financial burden of education. In this community, there is a clear social norm that places the burden of financing education on the youth. Families help by facilitating summer work and co-signing loans. Few families plan on paying for their children’s education or have large college funds set aside to cover tuition and living expenses. This makes worries about money for the youth a legitimate concern that affects their decisions around post-secondary education.

*Finding College Through Connections*

Youth like Dan and Jackie from both the college bound and working with my hands groups who planned to attend four-year institutions did not view those institutions as the end of career training, but rather as places to continue the career exploration they had begun in high school. These youth expect to change majors following in the footsteps of their older friends and siblings. Dan explained, “I applied to the college of engineering. I will give that a try. I know how often people change majors. My cousin has already decided he is not going to be an Ag teacher. So I am going to start out in engineering.” Despite their views of college as a place for exploration, these youth understand the economic benefits of a college degree. As a college bound youth put it when asked about a graduate degree, “[I will get] at least a Master’s in whatever I do. Depending on how burnt out I am and how in debt I am.” I ask why and her reply is immediate and confident, “because you make more money” (1406). Other youth were confident about and committed to attending college, but had no idea what they would study once they got there. As one young lady (heading to the city) explained, “I am going straight to college” (1169). I asked her what she will study and she commented it could be foreign language, journalism, some sort of writing, or acting. She added that the colleges she was looking at were all in a close radius, a decision she explained “isn’t based on education, it’s based on my brothers went there.” For rural youth, attending college almost always means moving away which separates them geographically from the network of support many youth relied on through their high school years.

Several of the youth had a strong connection to the schools they were planning to attend. They had visited family members or friends, participated in camps, or had

attended athletic events or competitions on campus. Western Oregon University was a popular choice because it is the location of the state track meet and most of the teens had spent a few days there each year. Another college bound youth, chose Eastern Oregon University a campus that is just an hour from Wallowa County. "I am going to attend Eastern Oregon taking general studies. Basically, my brother started there a few years ago, I've been down there quite a bit. It fits me I think. It made a good impression and it's close to home, too" (1193). Over and over again, youth talked about choosing a college based on a social connection or the school being close to home. Even youth who were heading to the city and wanted to be in a larger place planned to stay in the Pacific Northwest. All three college graduations announce the plans of their graduates. Almost all of the youth who were attending college were staying within Oregon, Washington, or Idaho. There was the occasional student who was attending college in Montana or heading to the East coast for a liberal arts college education. Overall, however, these youth intentionally stayed close to home, on campuses where they had previous experiences and could start with some familiarity. By staying close, they also had more access to their families and peers.

### *Staying, Leaving, Homecoming*

Although most youth planned to stay close for their next step after high school, there are those who plan to return to Wallowa County and those who although they may stay in the Pacific Northwest plan to establish their adult lives elsewhere. The three latent class groups provide a window into how youth positioned on the edge of adulthood perceive themselves in terms of their future connections with the county. The heading to the city youth are the leavers, though even some of those, like Jackie, expect to return to



rural living to raise their children. Working with my hands are the youth most likely to stay, despite Tara's aspiration to return to Portland. Overall, these youth will not be leaving for education, so only have work opportunities to draw them out of the county. The college bound are likely to be both the leavers and the homecomers. Most college bound youth will leave the county to get an education and launch a career in a larger place with more opportunity. Some college bound do plan to become homecomers in their late twenties and early thirties after their educations. This group will establish their adult lives in a rural place once they have acquired skills through post-secondary education and work experience outside the county.

#### *Value of Rural Living*

The adults of Wallowa County have made intentional choices to live in the county because they value rural living. Dan's father told us, "I think agriculture- our way of life is one of the best for raising kids." Another couple talked at length about the benefits and challenges of living in Wallowa County for their children. Consider this field note excerpt:

"In a lot of ways it is a very positive place to grow up- so much hiking, backpacking, hunting, don't have drug traffic (though law enforcement will say otherwise, but having lived in Eugene, they don't know) school is a part of life- as we were talking about before. There is a lack of diversity here, it is a handicap for kids, there is a lack of opportunity, jobs for teens- our kids have been lucky with jobs, but there are not that many. We are strapped in the school district, we don't have electives, we lost the art program, thankfully we still have music. In those ways it is a disadvantage. We scramble around and make do, the Enterprise School Foundation has paid for a half time art teacher for the elementary school." They then add that doors are rarely locked, and bicycles can be left anywhere without worry.

These parents acknowledge the natural spaces as a resource for their children and value the small schools and relationships those schools promote, even though it also means that

programs are harder to maintain and fund. They also value the safety of living in a place where doors do not have to be locked; during this conversation their daughter interrupted to say that the one time she locked her car she locked her keys in it and had to get help from home. Another mother echoes these themes when talking about the benefits of the county for young people.

I think they do have a sense of security and safety. Many, many take advantage of the outdoor beauty, hiking boating, ranching. A huge advantage is the small class size, more individual attention, big sense of school safety. It may be a pitfall for kids going out of the county- I wonder how much they are prepared. The diversity (other places) how prepared are they to deal with that?

Even as the adults of the county value rural living, they tell their children that they will be more successful elsewhere and do not acknowledge that their children may in fact value the same aspects of rural living that they do. This narrative adds to the tensions that youth must navigate as they construct their aspirations for the future.

### *Family Formation*

Youth were most able to talk about why they valued rural places and that they would want to return in the context of family formation when they are closer to their thirties. All the youth in the intensive sample except for one male (in the college bound group) are planning to delay childrearing until their late twenties. When asked what their life would be like at thirty, youth mentioned of starting families and many want to raise their families within a rural setting. As Jackie said, "I don't want to raise a family in a city, not for their young part." A college bound youth described her home at age 30 this way: "a big yard. My kids have to have animals... maybe right outside of town. I don't want any cows, though maybe a horse." Another college bound youth tells me about

where he wants to live, “It can’t be a big huge place like New York, I hate a huge town. If I had a really high paying job and had to live there it would be ok, but I wouldn’t raise my kids there.” When talking about family formation, youth did begin to touch on some of the tensions between their priorities whether those are career oriented or place oriented and their desires for their future families. While aspirations about family formation are well into the future for most of the intensive youth, talking about families was a way for youth to more fully explain what they wanted their adult lives to look like.

### Discussion

This study takes us another step forward in beginning to understand how the recent shifts in rural places due to the globalization of their economy and changes in policy have trickled down to shape the way rural youth construct their futures. Youth who desire rural living to be part of their future talked about the benefits of raising a family in a rural place and the access to natural spaces, both benefits that their parents gave as positive aspects of Wallowa County as well. At the same time youth like Jackie told us that they worried that they had to “prove they could make it” if they went to the city. In our study, as in other studies, these two narratives create a tension for youth around “success” because youth know the county needs young adults for community vitality and youth are encouraged to leave. In addition, youth expressed that returning home is a sign of failure. At the same time youth may feel tensions between the need to psychologically separate themselves from the social worlds of their youth (Donaldson, 1986) and the availability of their desired occupations and where they want to live (Corbett, 2007; Hektner, 1995; Shattuck, 2009). While youth referenced these tensions in their discourse around their futures similar to rural youth in other studies (Chenoweth &

Galliher, 2004; Hektner, 1995; McCracken & Barcinas, 1991), our study found that youth constructed residential, occupational, and educational aspirations as distinct realms.

Essentially, each latent class group appears to prioritize the three realms of their future aspirations differently. College bound youth are most focused on their educational goals as their most immediate concern, occupational goals next, and residential goals last. This may in part be a result of the perceived distance they feel between where they stand now as a 17 or 18 year old and the time when they will be on their way to settling down and having a family (preferably in a rural place) in their late twenties or early thirties. For the youth heading to the city, clearly residential aspirations take precedence as they are totally focused on how to get themselves out of Wallowa County and to Portland or Seattle– the closest west coast cities (small by national standards, but huge in their eyes). Heading to the city youth then focus equally on education and work, with some using school to get them out and on their way, and others planning to work, save, and perhaps start a pre-profession before deciding on schooling. Working with my hands are focused on work and staying rural as their primary goals, education is least important to them as many of them are ending their education experiences with their soon to be earned high school diploma or GED. The result is that each of the three latent class groups are more or less congruent with middle class aspirations.

### *Middle-Class Aspirations*

Ultimately, researchers consider middle-class aspirations: aspirations for college degrees and professional occupations to be the gold standard against which everyone is compared. American culture, especially media, defines success in this same way: professional work, a house in the suburbs, and college educations. The youth of Wallowa

County seem to have generally bought into these middle-class ideas of success. Overall, when the youth of Wallowa County are considered as a whole, they appear to have middle-class aspirations as a majority of these youth were aspiring to college educations and professional occupations. Perhaps, even in the context of middle-class aspirations contemporary rural youth are not lagging behind their suburban and urban counterparts as previous research has suggested (Cobb, et al., 1989; Gandara, et al., 2001; McCracken & Barcinas, 1991; Sewell, 1964). In a more recent analysis of national data, the gap in educational aspirations was shown to be more within graduate school differences than college aspirations (Howley, 2006).

Yet, when the three latent class groups are considered only the college bound fully fit with the profile of middle-class aspirations. Heading to the city kids are close behind, but many of them are aspiring to lower prestige work in service occupations that only require an additional two years of schooling rather than the professional occupations and college degrees associated with middle-class aspirations and attainment. Working with my hands are in fact resisting middle-class aspirations and aspiring to work that requires them to use their hands and produce—values that are supported by traditional agrarian values (Corbett, 2007; Crawford, 2009; Elder & Conger, 2000). Working with my hands youth will also have to contend with the lack of respect that manual work has in contemporary society (Crawford, 2009).

How youth perceive the opportunity structure and their aspirations has a great deal to do with whether they set their sights on staying, leaving, or homecoming. For youth aspiring to middle-class values (professional jobs and college degrees) they have learned from the adults around them that these jobs best fit in the suburbs and metro

areas. First and foremost these youth must leave for a larger place to acquire their four year degree (Donaldson, 1986; Hektner, 1995), online programs being a recent exception. These youth hear their parents encouraging older siblings to stay in larger areas and know many friends and relatives who are settling outside the county in more metro areas. These youth will be leavers initially, and while some may become homecomers—they will only return if they feel confident about earning a living wage within a rural place.

Working with my hands youth appear to be the most likely candidates to be stayers unless they have family or work to draw them out of the county. Unlike their peers pursuing education or adventure they have no motivation to leave the county. These youth too are influenced by the opportunity structure. They will be left to choose from the few available jobs in the county that do not require additional education or training or that can provide training within the county. The working with my hands are the youth who need jobs to replace the mill jobs that are no longer available, otherwise they are good candidates to become idle young adults and perhaps later adults who are not in school or the work force (Snyder, McLaughlin, & Coleman-Jensen, 2009).

Heading to the city youth may also consider homecoming, but for many of them their plans include work first (pre-professions) to finance the educations they plan to continue later. This extended period of education and finding one's calling may preclude them from returning easily, and place them at risk of lowering their earnings across adulthood (Topel & Ward, 1992).

### *School*

School, along with family plays a large role in teaching youth about the opportunity structure and what they are capable of in the world. In *Learning to Leave*,

Corbett (2007) argues that schools prepare youth for suburban and city living and that rural youth who succeed in school often lack the flexibility in thinking and toughness that is required by rural work- specifically the fishing industry in Newfoundland. This argument easily extends to ranch work where individuals need to be able to problem solve frequently and quickly and have to react immediately to what needs to be done whether that means repairing equipment, helping a cow with a calf, or removing a dead animal from a pasture.

In Wallowa County, the schools along with the community have worked hard to preserve programming and maintain strong relationships with their students. Sports, Future Farmers of America (FFA), leadership clubs, and drama have survived in some fashion at each of the three high schools. In addition, community groups have worked with the nearest community college to provide dual-enrollment courses (those in which youth simultaneously earn college and high school credit). All of the schools have also attempted to create opportunities for challenging academic classes such as physics and calculus, in some cases enrolling their students in an online course and enlisting a community volunteer to guide the students through the course. Youth in FFA have the opportunity to work on hands on projects that are related to the farm and ranch work many youth participate in either at home or for paid work. However, most classes remain singularly focused on particular academic skills which youth find irrelevant to their everyday work lives.

If schools, instead of fostering quick thinking, toughness and strength needed for the tasks of rural living, only teach youth to carefully take their time with problems and think abstractly, then according to Corbett schools are effectively working to separate the

stayers from the leavers. While this paradigm may have worked in rural communities when there was plenty of work, the changes in rural economies have complicated the relationships between education, skills, and work.

### *Implications*

Developing strong aspirations is a crucial piece of developing strong young adults. This study suggests that rural families, schools, and communities can play key roles in providing a support for strong aspirations that is goals that youth are working toward that will make them contributing citizens regardless of occupational prestige or years of schooling. While these results provide a picture of rural youth from one particular county with a reputation for supporting youth well, there are some important implications to these findings. Future research needs to continue to ask how youth are constructing ideas about their future and what supports are necessary for contemporary youth, especially youth in the working with my hands group that were underrepresented in this study.

In the changing economy, youth need and want more exposure to a variety of occupations (through real people, not just through television characters) and want school to be relevant to their future goals. This requires more place-based learning, and more breadth in what *all* students learn and experience as part of their school experiences. Reductions in programs such as art and shop have meant that school becomes even more of a sieve separating youth heading toward professional work and those headed toward more hands on type work as suggested by Corbett (2007) in *Learning to Leave*. As schools work to better serve rural youth developing within the global economy, schools need to be mindful that they do not return to the era of tracking. All youth need access to



a range of careers and skills learned in art and shop class are as valuable to creating youth who are ready for the challenges of adulthood and work as are basic academic skills such as math and science.

Youth do not necessarily perceive the interconnections between the realms of aspirations. As such, while completing high school, many youth focus on one realm or the other. They also expect to continue to establish their goals and thoughts about the future in the years immediately following high school, especially if they are attending college. Knowing this, families and school faculty need to provide youth with the space to talk about their future goals and some guidance around thinking about how what they want to do interacts with where they will do it and particularly what education or training they will need, and where they might need to go for the right educational opportunities. Since youth often choose college based on a direct connection or experience, college (including community and technical colleges) visits for even short amounts of time are an extremely effective way to broaden opportunities for youth.

The perception of the opportunity structure that youth have is shaped by their experiences and how the adults (especially their parents) perceive the opportunity structure (Shattuck, 2009). Helping youth understand the constraints of the opportunity structure without squelching their optimism for the future is difficult. In part, adults need to help youth recognize alternate ways to make a living if traditional work is limited. This applies to both the community at large and parents. This study makes it clear that youth internalize the stories that communities tell about economic opportunity and what constitutes success. Everything from who the newspaper highlights as successful, to how

youth hear adults talking about recent graduates and the work their friends are doing is shaping the way youth think about and construct their future.

Perhaps, most importantly, this study directs attention to why rural living is treasured by rural residents and suggests that many youth value the same aspects of rural living as their parents: access to nature, safety, lack of anonymity, and strong relationships. Tensions are created for youth when they are encouraged to leave rural places for careers without an acknowledgement of what is good about rural places. At the same time youth know that rural places need more young families to stay vibrant. Rural communities need to share the benefits and costs of rural living with young people. And when young people are encouraged to explore and gain more education and training they need to know that if they choose rural living later in adulthood, they will be welcomed back to rural life and that there are a multiple of ways they can make a living within that rural context. These findings suggest that rural communities can recruit and retain their young people after they have enhanced their education and skills elsewhere, if they create an opportunity structure that allows these youth to support their future families while enjoying the benefits of rural living.

Table 1. Comparison of fit statistics for the LCA models

	AIC	Adjusted BIC	Entropy	Lo-Mendell	Adj Lo-Mendell
2-class model	10154	10185	.95	-5323 ( $p < .001$ )	630 ( $p < .001$ )
<b>3-class model</b>	<b>9925</b>	<b>9968</b>	<b>.89</b>	<b>-5006</b> ( $p = .049$ )	<b>290</b> ( $p = .05$ )
4-class model	9813	9871	.91	-4860 ( $p = .79$ )	173 ( $p = .79$ )

Figure 1. Sample distribution by latent class membership

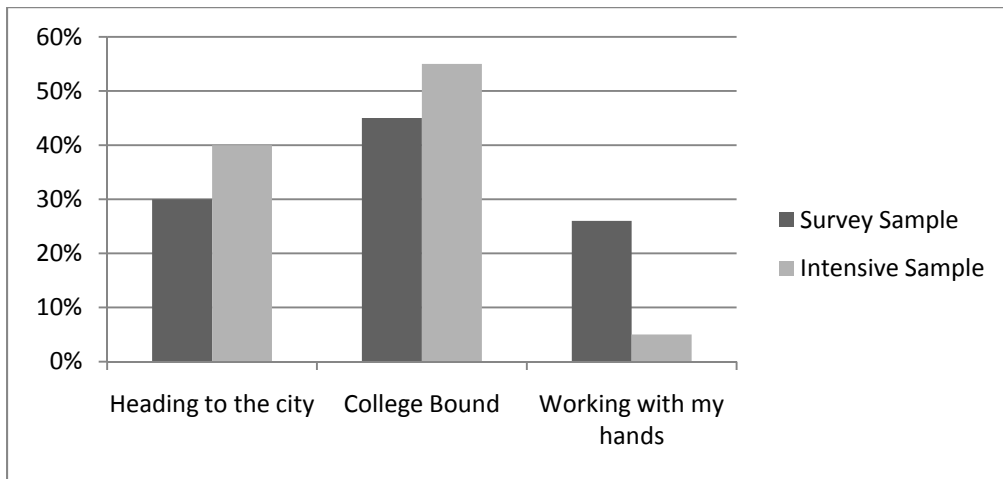


Table 2. Aspirations across the full survey sample

Educational Aspirations	High School Only      8% Four-year-degree      52% Graduate degree      24%
Occupational Aspirations	Professional and Management      54% Service and Sales      15% Timber, Ranching, Agriculture, Construction, and Production      14% Don't Know      16%
Residential Aspirations	Want to live in Wallowa County as an Adult      34% Ideal place to live as an adult <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Large city      20%</li> <li>• Suburb      10%</li> <li>• Small city      28%</li> <li>• Small town or rural      40%</li> </ul>

Table 3. Means for the three Latent Classes

Class	Educational Aspirations	Years in WC(logged)	Family in WC (logged)	Parent Education	Sense of Purpose (rowmean- 4 is high )
College bound n=121	4.3 (Four year degrees or graduate school)	2.54 (6.90)	3.28 (8.91)	3.28 (some college)	3.15
Heading to the City n=81	4.23 (Four year degrees or graduate school)	1.93 (5.24)	2.24(6.08)	3.07 (some college)	2.75
Working with my hands n=70	1.73 (high school or vocational training)	2.16 (5.87)	3.1 (8.4)	2.68	2.78

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## CONCLUSION

Much attention has been paid recently to young adults and the transition to adulthood. In part this attention is well deserved as there have been changes in the ways youth move into adult roles as a result of both social and economic changes in recent decades (Furstenberg, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2005). These changes are in many ways even more pronounced for youth coming of age in rural places that are still reeling from mill and manufacturing plant closures and changes in policy that have affected their timber production and agricultural practices (Hamilton, Hamilton, Duncan, & Colocousis, 2008). This study sought to understand how growing up in a rural community shapes the development of adolescents as they prepare to move into the space of adulthood. Both psychological (sense of purpose) and sociological (aspirations) perspectives were deliberately used to enhance our ability to understand youth development within place. By combining the two, this project revealed the deep way that context and structural factors intersect with agency that youth have as they develop both sense of purpose and aspirations.

An array of data collection strategies were intentionally used in this project. Survey data which consisted of self-reported demographic data, aspirations and a modified Hutzell and Finck (1994) sense of purpose scale provided a broad sense of youth in Wallowa County, but also provided a way to compare participants to one another. Ethnographic methods included observations in home, school, and community settings along with semi-structured interviews and activities. Ethnographic data collection provided rich, thick data that allowed me to begin to tease out the influences and processes associated with sense of purpose and aspiration development.

Overall, this dissertation has shown that rural places are unique contexts for adolescent development. Adolescents in Wallowa County value the same aspects of rural living as their parents; access to nature, a sense of safety, a focus on family, and the sense of social trust. Youth acknowledged the benefits of small schools even though some wished for greater variety in their classes. Furthermore, regardless of how they felt about the lack of anonymity, every young person in this study acknowledged that Wallowa County was a place where they often ran into neighbors and where news of their mistakes (and accomplishments) traveled throughout the county at lightning speed. As one adult who grew up in the county and returned for work explained, “It really is like Mayberry, there is a certain lifestyle choice that you adopt to live here. Not everyone likes it - you have to adopt the attitude of the county to live here, well you can live anywhere, but to be happy here.” The youth of Wallowa County shared this sentiment, with many of them wanting similar experiences for their children, and others eager to see how they fit into a larger place. In terms of the future, the young people of Wallow County were keenly aware of the economic changes in the county and knew that there are few jobs left in timber and ranching. Like their urban and suburban counterparts, these youth aspired to more education beyond high school and a range of careers.

The relationship between sense of purpose and aspirations is not a simple one. At the beginning of this study I hypothesized that a strong sense of purpose would indicate strong commitment to aspirations and thus would be a measure of strength of aspiration. The results of this study show that the relationship is not so linear. Neither strong aspirations nor the *realm* of aspirations youth focus on is directly related to sense of purpose. The relationship between the constructs of sense of purpose and aspirations is

complex and may be related to other constructs that were not measured as part of this study. Sense of purpose likely supports youth in working toward their aspirations, while at the same time allowing aspirations to change in response to experiences, however further research is needed to delineate this relationship. The focus of the analyses presented here was on the developmental experiences associated with developing a sense of purpose for rural youth and the influence of rural living on aspirations.

### Summary of Findings

The first study in this dissertation, *Finding my place: Sense of purpose development among rural youth*, examined the processes of sense of purpose development. The results show that the developmental experiences of youth in place shape their sense of purpose. Family social location is a key to the developmental experiences of adolescents in Wallowa County. More specifically, the set of experiences for youth with families that are perceived as low on the social hierarchy interferes with the ability of youth to develop a strong sense of purpose. This barrier exists in part because these youth are less involved in community activities and are spending more time managing their current roles as high school students and spending less time working on their identity development. Youth with families that were perceived to hold a high family social location, easily participated in a variety of experiences, found productive work, and just “fit” into the community as “good kids.” For youth who perceived their families to hold a low family social location, fitting in was more difficult. These youth were aware of the local drug culture, perceived that mistakes would not be easily forgiven, and had less encouragement to participate in a breadth of activities which limited their social worlds. Youth from these families who held a low social location

were spending more time experimenting with roles and trying to fit in, and appeared to lack the time and resources to work on their identity development. This study was conducted in an exemplar county that is inclusive and supportive of youth. In rural places where there are deeper divisions between respected families and those who remain on the fringe of community life, family social location may exacerbate the disadvantages poor youth experience even more than for the youth in this study and have devastating effects on their developmental progress.

Study two, *Aspirations in a changing world: A case study of the educational, occupational, and residential aspirations among rural youth*, finds that youth do not perceive the three realms of aspirations (educational, occupational, and residential) as integrated. Instead, they see them and prioritize them as separate realms. Overall, a majority of Wallowa County youth value rural living and hope to live in a rural place as adults when they start their own families. These youth value the safety, access to nature, and social trust that are associated with rural living and are the same qualities their parents value in rural places. Wallowa County, like all places, has some inherited stories about success and the opportunity structure. In Wallowa County success is often equated with leaving and succeeding in work in more urban places. At the same time, youth internalize the message about the lack of local jobs as a result of mill closures and other economic changes. While Wallowa County youth are planning on college or post-secondary training, there are a set of concerns that shape the way they think about the future, financing education or training, holding on to their support networks (family and peers), and being seen as successful. Financial concerns stem from the county value of independence as most families in the county do not directly pay for their children's



education. As the costs of college educations rise, the ability of youth to earn enough money to pay for college without loans or other support becomes more difficult. Youth choose their schools based on the distance from home and experiences they had on campus through formal programs or people they know as a way of staying connected to kin. And youth were concerned that if they left, they would be successful, and not return home as failures. In addition to these concerns about their futures, many youth expressed their desire to return to rural living when they start their families, in their late twenties.

#### Implications for Practice

The findings of this study provide guidance for rural communities as they consider programs within school and community settings to support youth. Both study one and study two suggest that a diversity of curriculum and activities such as shop class, music, art, drama, and sports are important to youth. These activities can be provided within school curricula or as community programs providing that communities seek to engage all youth in a breadth of activities.

In terms of aspirations for the future, youth are profoundly affected by the stories that communities tell about the opportunity structure for and success of previous youth. While there is a clear basis for the perception of limited opportunities in rural communities, if communities want to support a pathway back for their young people, they must tell the stories of opportunity. Communities must also help youth understand not only the limitations but also the benefits of living in a rural place, so they can negotiate the tensions between the careers they aspire to have and the place where they want to raise their families. Adults need to recognize aspirations around families and place as legitimate and valuable.

Financing education continues to be a consideration as youth make future plans. Especially within the context of a rural community that values youth contributing to their own educations, youth need help with the financial aid maze. While Wallowa County schools do assist youth with scholarship applications and financial aid, not all youth have the same access to such help at their schools. In addition to help with applications, policy makers need to find innovative ways that help youth finance education whether that is vocational training or a four year degree. One year scholarships are helpful, but may leave youth vulnerable as they enter their second year. There are innovative programs such as Individualized Development Accounts that match dollar for dollar what youth save over their high school years and then allow them to use the account for education or to start a business (see <http://www.cfed.org/focus.m?parentid=2&siteid=374&id=374>). Programs like these are particularly suited to rural youth as they reinforce the community's values of youth contributing significantly to their education while increasing their earning power, which helps narrow the gap between what a youth can earn and the cost of a college education.

Sense of purpose is a critical part of adolescent development. All students need encouragement to find their calling and figure out how they will contribute to the world (Damon, 2008). Communities can encourage this discourse by including discussions about sense of purpose and integrating work into other realms of life into career development curriculums. If adults share with youth why they do their work, what their priorities are, they are modeling purpose. Adolescents are eager to have discussions about how they fit in the world and creating the space for these conversations beyond church

would support the natural desire for adolescents to explore their identity and sense of purpose within their community.

The youth who had developed a strong sense of purpose were engaged in both school and community activities, had productive work for their summer jobs, and enjoyed the relationships they had throughout the community. Youth who struggled with developing sense of purpose were more on the fringe and although they were engaged in school they were not engaged in the broader community. Communities and school personnel can reach out to all youth to find ways to engage them in the community and create real opportunities to experience productive work through internships and mentoring programs. Having a broad range of activities so that youth who do not want to identify as athletes can find a niche will provide young people with the space to develop an understanding of what they can contribute to the world which is part of developing their sense of purpose.

#### Limitations

Both studies are part of a case study of an exemplar rural community (Zussman, 2004). While case studies provide deep rich data, we cannot know how these processes play out differently in rural communities that do not share similarities with Wallowa County, an amenity-rich community that has a tourist industry and second-home owners. The focus of this study was the three county high schools, as such youth who were already disengaged from school and either not attending school or participating in alternative online or homeschool programs were not represented. The perspective of these youth is crucial and should be a priority for future work. This study was also done over the course of one academic year which provides data on the ways youth construct their

futures and sense of purpose over a short period of time, but cannot assess the nature of how these develop over time. Longitudinal work would strengthen the findings and allow some of the hypotheses of the included studies to be tested over time.

#### Future Directions

Overall this dissertation confirms that in light of current social and economic changes- paying attention to the experiences of rural youth is critical. Both studies were done in a county that is doing well by its youth and despite challenges is dealing with the globalization and economic changes with innovation and optimism. Wallowa County is a high amenity county and has been able to develop its tourism in the absence of its mills. While these jobs are qualitatively different from the mill jobs that used to be plentiful, they are jobs. Additionally the tourist industry has provided a niche for small entrepreneurs. Repeating these studies in the other types of rural: *declining resource dependent, chronic poverty, and amenity decline* (Hamilton, et al., 2008) is a natural next step to examine how these processes work across rural communities. Study one theorizes about the future of youth in each of three sense of purpose groups. Future research should employ a longitudinal design to examine sense of purpose over time and how sense of purpose works to help youth through the challenges of adulthood. The disengaged and homeschooled youth who were woefully underrepresented in this study need attention. They will require recruitment studies that are located outside of traditional school settings, but their perspectives will teach us much about how to support youth who struggle with our formal education institutions.

## Conclusion

Attention has been paid in the past to adolescents developing in rural places, however most of this research has focused on academic competence (Elder & Conger, 2000), aspirations in terms of occupational prestige and education level (Boyle, 1966; Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Cobb, McIntire, & Pratt, 1989; McCracken & Barcinas, 1991), or the influences on youth who leave (Corbett, 2007). This dissertation examines rural youth in the context of recent economic and policy changes. The two studies look beyond academic and social competence to the identity work in the form of sense of purpose in an attempt to understand how rural places can and do support youth as they prepare to move into the space of adulthood. The findings suggest that measuring sense of purpose is an important tool in identifying youth who are likely to be vulnerable in their upcoming transition to adulthood. Communities can facilitate more youth developing a stronger sense of purpose by engaging youth in community programs and encouraging intergenerational relationships for all their youth, particularly those who seem disengaged at school. In terms of aspirations, contemporary rural youth are very aware of the need for education or post-secondary training to be competitive on the job market. Many youth do want to return to rural places, but are not clear whether that will be possible. Youth's perceptions of the opportunity structure are strongly influenced by their families and the communities at large. If rural communities want to see their young people come back to raise their families, they have to make visible the many ways that rural residents make a living and the ways they negotiate the benefits and limitations of rural living.

Both studies show that there are benefits of rural living as youth prepare to transition into adulthood. Rural communities provide many opportunities for youth to be engaged in activities and take on leadership roles. Youth are known by many adults in the community which can provide multiple mentors beyond their families. In communities like Wallowa where youth are valued and respected, youth move easily around town and are welcomed by business owners and other adults. Youth are encouraged to use the lake for recreation and many also take advantage of hunting, camping, and hiking further from town. The small schools provide long-lasting relationships with teachers, and plenty of opportunities to get help with homework and projects or just access to computers and Internet after school for youth who lack these resources at home. Along with the benefits of rural living, these studies show that rural communities can also hinder youth. Because of their small size, rural communities may lack diversity in the types of activities open to youth. If sports and agricultural activities such as 4-H or Future Farmers of America are the only options, many youth will not be able to find their talents and may disengage from school and the community, hindering their development of a strong sense of purpose. Youth are being influenced by media, which primarily portrays adults in suburban and urban settings. If youth do not see the wide variety of ways rural residents in their community make a living, then youth will assume there is no opportunity structure in rural places and will be more likely to leave even if they value rural living. Rural communities that focus on engaging youth in both school and community activities and seek to provide art, music, and shop programs whether through school or as extra-curricular activities are more likely to support greater numbers of youth in developing a

sense of purpose and strong aspirations and thereby positioning them well to begin the transition into adulthood.

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