

PROMOTING STUDENT ASPIRATIONS FOR POSTSECONDARY PLANS IN A RURAL HIGH SCHOOL

By

Justin Holt

May 2026

Director of Dissertation: Dr. Jerry Johnson, PhD

Major Department: Educational Leadership and Foundations

ABSTRACT

This Dissertation in Practice examines the promotion of aspirations for postsecondary plans for students in rural schools. While rural communities often possess strong relational assets, students frequently encounter structural barriers that limit access to postsecondary opportunities. Using convergent mixed methods design, this action research study was conducted in a rural high school in eastern North Carolina to better understand how student aspirations, perceived barriers, and advising supports interact within a localized context. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently to address three guiding questions: (a) What are students' postsecondary aspirations? (b) What barriers do they perceive? and (c) How can advising supports influence both aspirations and outcomes?

Findings reveal a consistent misalignment between student aspirations and postsecondary enrollment patterns. While a majority of students and families expressed aspirations for four-year university pathways, enrollment outcomes more frequently shifted toward community college options. Quantitative results identified key barriers, including financial constraints, uncertainty regarding career goals, and competing responsibilities such as employment and family support. Qualitative findings provided deeper insight into these patterns, highlighting the influence of

self-efficacy, peer networks, and the perceived relevance of education. Students frequently described how the decisions and expectations of those in their immediate social context shaped their own postsecondary choices, underscoring the importance of proximal influences in rural settings.

This study reframes these findings through a spatial equity lens, emphasizing that postsecondary outcomes are shaped not only by individual aspiration but also by access, exposure, and local opportunity structures. Results suggest that rural schools can leverage existing community assets while addressing gaps in exposure to diverse postsecondary and career pathways. Implications for practice include strengthening advising systems, intentionally mapping and activating local resources, and fostering student self-efficacy as part of a comprehensive strategy to align aspirations with outcomes. This work contributes to the development of a practical framework for school leaders seeking to advance equitable postsecondary opportunities in rural contexts.

PROMOTING STUDENT ASPIRATIONS FOR POSTSECONDARY PLANS IN A RURAL
HIGH SCHOOL

A Dissertation
Presented to the Faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership and Foundations
East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

By
Justin Holt
May, 2026

Director of Dissertation: Jerry Johnson, PhD
Dissertation Committee Members:
Matthew Cheeseman, EdD
Elizabeth Hodge, PhD
Travis Lewis, EdD

©Copyright 2026
Justin Holt

DEDICATION

I want to dedicate this work to the primary focus of my professional life, the public schools of North Carolina. Since I accepted the North Carolina Teaching Fellows scholarship to UNC Chapel Hill, I have devoted my career to improving the communities of the Tar Heel state. I appreciate all the hard-working educators who share this mission.

The driving force for my professional commitments is to serve the family that I love so dearly. To my wife Barbara, you have sacrificed so much to support me, and as always, you are the best part of my day. To my two beautiful children, Franklin and Rowan, you truly give me purpose and joy. With humility I recognize the tremendous support of my parents and my wonderful sisters in shaping the arc of my life.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my dissertation chair, Dr Johnson, your expert knowledge and support in this field have been of tremendous value on this journey. I have learned that there is a great degree of opportunity to serve in the rural education space under your guidance.

To the many professors in the Educational Leadership Department at East Carolina University, I appreciate that you have organized outstanding program of learning and field practice experience. Thank you for being a beacon of progress in Eastern North Carolina.

To my former Superintendent, Dr. Cheeseman, you have demonstrated so much service to others in this field, including myself. I owe many great opportunities to you and I am grateful for a long friendship.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE.....	i
COPYRIGHT.....	ii
DEDICATION.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
LIST OF TABLES.....	xiii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	xiv
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Background of the Inquiry.....	2
Context of the Inquiry.....	4
Statement of the Focus of Practice.....	9
Inquiry Guiding Questions.....	11
Overview of Inquiry.....	11
Inquiry Partners.....	13
Conceptual Framework.....	13
Definition of Key Terms.....	14
Assumptions.....	16
Scope and Delimitations.....	16
Limitations.....	17
Significance of Inquiry.....	18
Advancing Equity and Social Justice.....	19
Advances in Practice.....	21

Summary.....	22
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	24
Social Cognitive Career Theory.....	24
Social Inequality.....	25
Educational Attainment Inequity.....	26
Wealth and Funding Inequity.....	27
Leandro Case.....	29
Academic Inequalities.....	30
Postsecondary Enrollment Barriers.....	33
Parental Educational Attainment.....	34
Cultural Factors.....	35
Postsecondary Employment Barriers.....	36
School Efforts to Mitigate Barriers.....	38
Advising for Postsecondary Plans.....	39
Access to College Preparatory Courses and Employment Credentials....	40
Summary.....	42
CHAPTER 3: METHODS OF INQUIRY.....	43
Inquiry Guiding Questions.....	43
Inquiry Design and Rationale.....	44
Context of the Inquiry.....	45
Collaborative Inquiry Partners.....	47
Ethical Considerations.....	49
Inquiry Procedures.....	50

Instrumentation.....	51
SIAR Phase I	55
SIAR Phase II.....	59
Inquiry Design Rigor.....	61
Assumptions.....	62
Delimitations.....	64
Limitations.....	65
Role of the Scholarly Practitioner.....	65
Summary.....	66
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS.....	68
Demographics.....	68
Data Collection.....	69
Results Inquiry Question #1: Aspirations for Student Postsecondary Plans	69
Results Inquiry Question #2: Perceived Barriers to Postsecondary Plans.....	77
Results Inquiry Question #3: Impact of Student Advising Support.....	83
Summary.....	86
CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	90
Summary of Findings.....	91
Interpretation of the Findings.....	94
Limitations of the Study.....	97
Implications of the Findings for Practice.....	97
Interpretation of the Findings for Equity.....	98
Recommendations for Practice.....	99

Recommendations for Future Study.....	103
Conclusions.....	104
Scholarly Practitioner Reflection.....	105
REFERENCES.....	107
APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL.....	113
APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM.....	115
APPENDIX C: INFORMED ASSENT FORM	118
APPENDIX D: POSTSECONDARY PLAN SURVEY.....	120
APPENDIX E: FOCUS GROUP GUIDED QUESTIONS.....	127

LIST OF TABLES

1. Performance Data for Mason County Schools’ High Schools for 2024-2025.....	8
2. Collaborative Inquiry Partners.....	48
3. Timeline of Phases of Inquiry.....	56
4. Matrix of Inquiry Guiding Questions with Planned Data Collection and Analysis..	63
5. Themes Related to Barriers to Postsecondary Goals.....	89

LIST OF FIGURES

1. Demographics of Pleasant Grove High School 2024-2025.....	6
2. National Rural Education Association Research Agenda 2022-2027.....	20
3. Model of inquiry design framework.....	46
4. Student educational aspirations.....	71
5. Parental educational expectations.....	72
6. Perceived expectations after high school by influencer.....	73
7. Planned job or occupation after high school.....	75
8. Expected job or occupation at age 30.....	76
9. Reasons for not continuing education beyond high school.....	78
10. Postsecondary plans for seniors at exit survey.....	82
11. Sources of information about college entrance.....	87
12. Test participation plans.....	88

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Educational outcomes in the United States vary significantly by location, reflecting differences in community context, access to resources, and postsecondary opportunities. One measure of this is postsecondary plans for students to enroll in continuing education or obtain high-quality employment immediately after high school. Among the various reasons for these disparities, the environments of rural communities often contain educational barriers for students and families (Agger, 2018). The National Rural Education Association (NREA) Research Agenda 2022-2027 focuses on rural community access to postsecondary success and is centered on spatial equity (Hartman et. al, 2022). Beyond the core category of spatial equity, college and career trajectories are a focus of the NREA agenda. While rural schools and students face challenges, they also enjoy unique assets because of their communities. Rural communities have close ties between schools and families and often enjoy shared responsibilities among community members to promote student success. This can be an asset in influencing educational aspirations (Agger & Byun, 2018).

In North Carolina, public schools support the journey to postsecondary plans beginning well before the high school level (NC General Assembly, 2023). Former State Superintendent Catherine Truitt, who led the work of reorienting schools toward workforce alignment, notes that all students are on a career pathway (Arend, 2023). Highlighting this focus is the recently developed “Portrait of a Graduate” program in North Carolina. This framework is designed to identify and promote durable skills to support student success beyond high school (2023). The focus of workforce alignment for K-12 Education is clear with this statewide initiative.

In rural contexts, parental educational attainment plays a critical role in shaping students’ postsecondary enrollment and long-term employment outcomes, as it influences access to college

knowledge, expectations for educational attainment, and exposure to career pathways beyond the local labor market (Byun, et al., 2012; Irvin et al., 2011). Additionally, challenges in local labor markets impact rural students' employment opportunities as well as the need (perceived or real) for additional schooling beyond high school (Hartman et al., 2022). In one study on North Carolina's Pipeline of Education and Workforce, there was a 20% gap between the percentage of working-age adults (47%) with a postsecondary degree or credential and the percentage of jobs (67%) requiring this training (Tippett & Stanford, 2019). These realities highlight the need for postsecondary plans that include education and training for improved employment quality.

More than one-third of students attend school in rural districts in North Carolina (Showalter et al., 2023). Therefore, the number of North Carolina's rural students who plan to enroll in postsecondary institutions and employ high-skilled positions is vital for public education to be successful and to contribute to a healthy economy and society. This inquiry examines disparities between North Carolina's rural and non-rural students in postsecondary opportunities and ways to provide equity between these groups. It is the purpose of this inquiry to enhance rural students' postsecondary aspirations. Students will have increased access to and knowledge of college enrollment and high-quality employment opportunities.

Background of the Inquiry

Rural students constitute a large segment of public-school enrollment. More than 9 million students are served in rural schools, and 20% of students live in rural areas (Hartman et al., 2022; Showalter et al., 2019). In 2022, North Carolina ranked tenth in the country according to the NREA. This is partly because North Carolina has the second largest number of rural students, behind Texas (Showalter et al., 2023).

North Carolina has a history of challenging inequity in rural funding since at least 1994 in the Leandro case. The Leandro Case was brought by parents of twenty students from the low-wealth, rural school districts: Cumberland, Vance, Robeson, Hoke, and Halifax. These rural districts asserted that the state constitutional right to an education was violated, and centrally, this was due to wealth disparities (Packard, 1998). In the Leandro decision of 1997, the court ruled that the state of North Carolina had failed to implement a “sound basic education” for all students. In this ruling, two important outcomes of a “sound basic education” were articulated; “to enable the student to successfully engage in postsecondary education or vocational training” and “enable the student to compete on an equal basis with others in further formal education or gainful employment” (Grant, 2023, p. 5). This case has been litigated for more than thirty years and yet remains unfunded by the General Assembly as it remains in appeal even from the most recent decision in 2022 (Grant, 2023).

While rural spaces are diverse, they face consistent economic challenges, such as high levels of income disparity, population decline, and shifting labor markets (Butler et al., 2020; Thiede et al., 2019,). North Carolina is again at the top of the nation in terms of rural diversity, with an NREA priority ranking of 6 for student and family diversity (Showalter et. al, 2023). The factors of resource wealth and minority group composition impact the levels of resources for public schools and the postsecondary opportunities for students.

Student achievement disparities have greater implications beyond test scores and graduation rates. These data are precursors to disparities in college enrollment and maximum employment, which cause lifelong economic gaps in our communities (Agger, 2018). Student achievement measurements at the high school level in North Carolina capture math, reading, and science college and career readiness on state exams. North Carolina students take the ACT

college entrance exam, and there are opportunities for the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) military exam, as well as Career and Technical Education (CTE) WorkKeys testing to measure and promote student postsecondary readiness. There are consistent gaps in student groups as measured by these assessments, and these persist in longitudinal economic gaps (MyFutureNC, 2022).

Analysis of SAT scores shows that test-takers whose families are in the top 20 percent of earners are seven times more likely to score above 1300 than those in the bottom 20 percent of earners (Miller, 2023). Analysis of ACT scores showed that first-generation and low-income groups scored lower than wealthier and better-educated peers (ACT, 2014). One common theme from these conclusions is that rural communities face barriers to college access, which, in turn, impact the quality of employment opportunities (Brown et al., 2020).

North Carolina has a large rural population. Many characteristics of racial diversity, educational attainment in the community, demographic trends in the population movement, and poverty levels within these rural communities must be part of the calculus for school leaders when considering how best to advance student outcomes. Rural communities also have valuable assets that can be utilized. Strategic planning for the utilization of rural assets can support maximum achievement for students and families. This study aims to enhance the development of rural students' postsecondary plans. Rural students face unique obstacles in their postsecondary plans. This inquiry will help identify and overcome these barriers. The intended result is enhanced enrollment, enlistment, and employment opportunities for rural students.

Context of the Inquiry

This inquiry focuses on the postsecondary aspirations of senior students at Pleasant Grove High School (PGHS) in Mason County, North Carolina. The names of the schools and

districts are pseudonyms. PGHS is a comprehensive public high school for grades 9-12 serving a rural community in Northeastern North Carolina. The PGHS serves approximately 430 students. Figure 1 shows the racial diversity of the students.

Of the student body, 64% are identified under the Community Eligibility Provision, which is used to identify families that qualify for nutritional support. An additional 14% of students were identified as having a disability.

Mason County is a small county with a total population of less than 44, 500 and a general population decline (minus 3,000 since the 2010 census). Countywide data show that 38% of students live below the poverty line and 20% of the adult population have a bachelor's degree or higher (USDA, 2023, c & d). These statistics show higher child poverty and lower adult educational attainment than the state averages.

The rural community that PGHS serves shares many common characteristics with rural South and regional Eastern North Carolina. Some of these illustrate students' postsecondary obstacles to college enrollment or advanced employment opportunities. These obstacles include population decline, the cost and distance of postsecondary education, and parental educational attainment (Brown et al., 2020). The community also has strengths, including partnerships with several faith-based groups and additional community support for the high school. The attendance zone is anchored by a small town just a few miles south of the larger county seat. A much smaller town is in the attendance zone but is nearly 20 miles from the school. The remaining community is scattered across the southern half of Mason County, which is the fifth largest county (by square miles) in the state.

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction rates each school using a School Performance Grade (SPG) ranging from 0-100. This system has been required since 2013 when

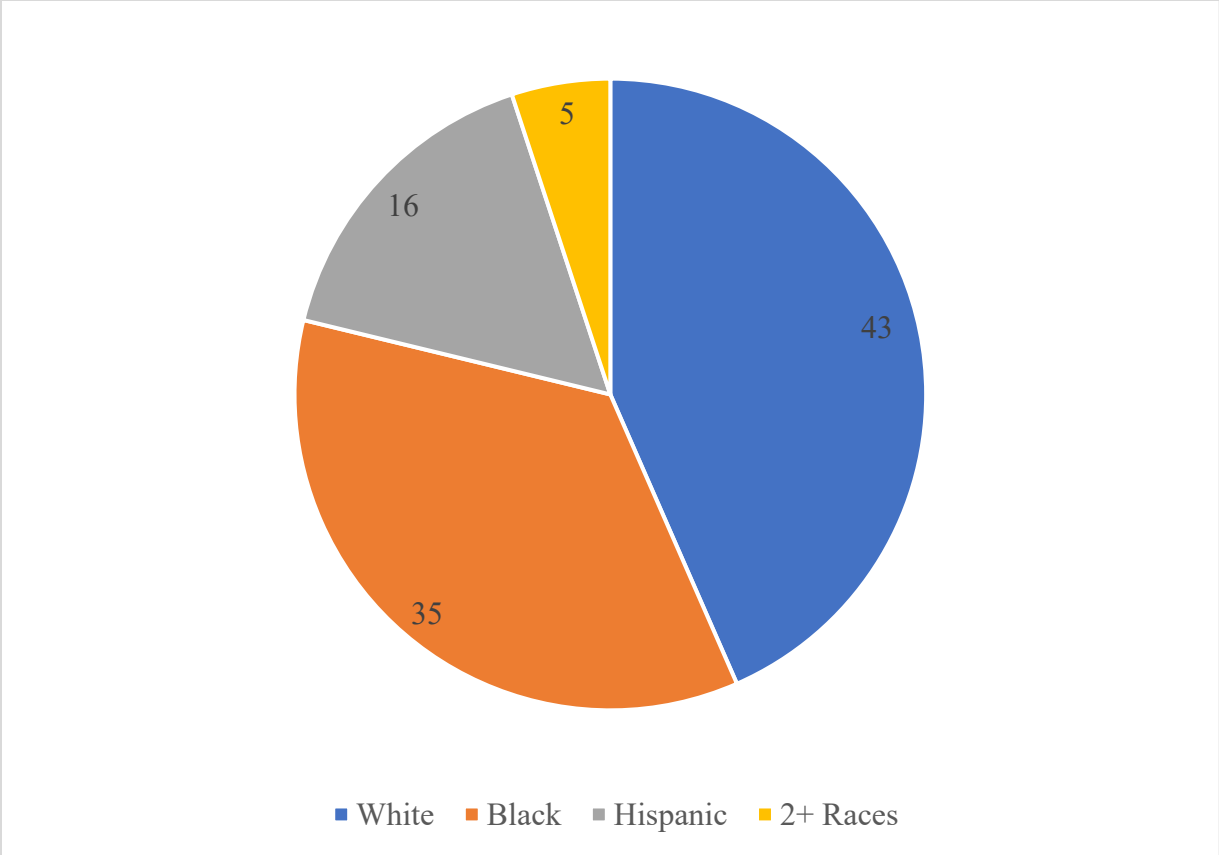


Figure 1. Demographics of Pleasant Grove High School 2024-2025

the NC General Assembly passed the Excellent Public Schools Act as part of the annual appropriations process (NCDPI, 2022-23). The final grade is based on a 15-point scale and assigns letter grades as follows: A: 85-100 - B: 70-84 - C: 55-69 -D: 40-54 - F: Less than 40. These scores are calculated using various factors. At the high school level, this includes a formula that weighs proficiency on state exams at 80% and growth on these exams at 20%. Academic growth is an indication of student progress from the prior year and is measured by a statistical tool known as the Education Value Added Assessment System (EVAAS). High school state exams are English II, Math I, Math III, and Biology. Other factors in the SPG include graduation rate, ACT proficiency and ACT WorkKeys scores (NCDPI, 2022-23).

PGHS performs at least as well as its peer schools in the district, and in some measures, better than the other high schools. The district has three traditional high schools and an Early College. The overall school performance grade from 2023-24 for PGHS was 67 (on a scale of 100 by the NC Report Card). The other two traditional high schools scored 51 and 67, respectively. The Early College was a National Blue Ribbon school in 2022-23 and scored a 94 on the report card in 2023-24. The Early College was the only one of these four schools to “exceed growth” as measured by the State. ACT and WorkKeys scores for PGHS ranked third among the four schools at 48.8% (see Table 1).

Student aspirations for postsecondary goals have been identified through annual surveys administered directly to seniors. Graduates of Pleasant Grove self-reported in a survey of the class of 2023 (n=95) that postsecondary aspirations for university (37%) and community college (44%) enrollment were the highest. The data showed that 12% of students planned to directly enter the workforce and 7% reported plans to enlist. Seventeen senior students reported scholarships, and many reported multiple scholarship offers. These were generally evenly spread

Table 1

Performance Data for Mason County High Schools for 2024-2025

	School Performance Grade	School Growth Score	School Growth Status	4 yr Grad Rate
Early College	91 (A)	91.9	Exceeded	95+%
High School A	62 (C)	58.3	Not Met	88.1%
High School B	68 (C)	82.1	Met	90.8%
Pleasant Grove	61(C)	73.2	Met	89.5%

across the class demographics. Analysis of student information from this graduating class, collected directly from students, showed that there was a gap between the aspirations and the enrollment into postsecondary education. Seventeen students (18%) enrolled in 4-year universities and 18 (19%) students enrolled in community colleges.

The employment of students directly after graduation is less well documented, although one student entered a local fire department after graduation. Three students enlisted in Armed Services. One of these students was awarded more than six figures in an educational scholarship by the Army. Postsecondary education was almost exclusively regional. North Carolina State and East Carolina were the most common 4-year universities. Four state Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) schools were part of the class of 2023's 4-year institutions. Mason County Community College enrolled 14 of the 2023 graduates, and three nearby community colleges enrolled four additional students. Therefore, a total of 81% of PGHS continued their education, whereas 19% entered the workforce or enlisted in the military.

This inquiry focuses on enhancing the development of students' postsecondary plans. Rural students face real and perceived obstacles to their aspirations for postsecondary plans. This inquiry has the potential to identify barriers that impede rural students' aspirations to continue their education after high school graduation.

Statement of the Focus of Practice

This inquiry focuses on enhancing the aspirations and development of postsecondary plans for students in a rural NC high school. This includes supporting rural students to build skillsets that mitigate any barriers they perceive toward collegiate aspirations and successful enrollment, as well as increasing employment quality in postsecondary workforce plans. The focus will also support opportunities for rural students to enlist in a service branch as part of their

postsecondary plans. These problems of practice align with the NREA Research Agenda 2022-2027 to support college and career trajectories within the spatial and educational equity (Showalter et al., 2023).

Rural students enroll in four-year and two-year colleges at a lower rate than their non-rural peers (Wells, 2019). However, students may aspire to achieve this goal in much higher numbers. Various factors may inhibit this goal. These factors include parents' lower educational attainment, geographic isolation from universities and community colleges, and budgetary constraints that limit course offerings or extracurricular support for postsecondary aspirations (Niccolai et al., 2022). Some of these obstacles are more difficult to overcome than others. However, schools can provide students and families with advice, education, exposure, and tools to mitigate these postsecondary barriers. The intentional use of school resources to advise students and families along the high school pathway can improve enrollment and completion chances.

Precarious employment, or lower-quality employment, is more common in rural environments, especially among poor populations. People of color, those with less education, and people from the South have higher rates of precarious employment (Oddo, 2021). Many students lack a holistic view of employment regarding its quality and long-term impacts. Over time, working conditions and total compensation packages impact physical and mental health (Oddo, 2021). MyFutureNC published many relevant data sets in their 2022 North Carolina State of Educational Attainment Report that exemplify the need for closing gaps between demographic groups in terms of quality employment. This report found that less than half of Black and Hispanic workers were employed with family sustaining wages (North Carolina State, 2022).

The immediate goal of this inquiry is to enhance the outcomes of postsecondary plans at Pleasant Grove High School. This effort seeks to explicitly identify the obstacles to stakeholders and inquiry partners and couple school resource assets to offset these barriers. This will include strengthening the advising process at a variety of levels, from teachers and counselors to building administrators, and directly to students and families. Beyond the school building level, district resources are also engaged. Over time, this work seeks to improve the health and economic security of the local community by strengthening postsecondary plan success. The outcome will have a direct benefit for both the metrics of the school district and the local economy. Two other comprehensive high schools and an Early College within the district will be engaged and can benefit from the framework and research focus within this problem of practice. Ultimately, the problem of practice and the innovations developed during this focus of practice will apply more broadly to rural students within North Carolina's public education system.

Inquiry Guiding Questions

The questions guiding this inquiry are as follows:

1. What are the aspirations for postsecondary student plans at Pleasant Grove High School?
2. What are the perceived barriers to Pleasant Grove students' postsecondary plans?
3. What impact did student advising support have on promoting aspirations and addressing perceived barriers to student postsecondary plans at Pleasant Grove High School?

Overview of Inquiry

To answer these guiding questions, I will use a convergent parallel mixed-methods research design grounded in the Improvement Science Dissertation in Practice (ISDiP) model

(Crow, 2022). Each academic year begins with a cohort of seniors who face the prominent decision of their next step after graduation. Individually, these student responses form baseline data for postsecondary plans. These plans, along with the identified obstacles and assets, represent both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the inquiry. College applications, FAFSA completion, target employment fields, and available workforce skill credentials are all examples of data collected in the early phases of this inquiry process. The exploratory sequential mixed methods design provides the framework for the qualitative data that students will provide in the fall of their senior year. This dataset can be analyzed and articulated into quantitative data based on metrics of postsecondary plans for enrollment, employment, or enlistment. To a degree, postsecondary obstacles and assets can also be quantified. One example might be the common financial challenges of college enrollment. (Creswell, 2023)

Within this inquiry's mixed methods approach, descriptive statistics and inductive analysis methods will be employed to identify the experiences and themes of students' journeys toward their postsecondary plans (Creswell, 2023). Students will be invited to provide feedback in various settings. Individual responses can be collected efficiently using electronic surveys. Students will also be addressed as a cohort group since the senior class size is approximately 100. For qualitative data, students will be formed into focus groups of various sizes and compositions. The phases of the inquiry work will include both quantitative measures of students' plans in action in June, just after graduation, as well as qualitative data on how particular school actions impacted this journey. There will also be a need for summative data that can be used to adjust the next cohort of graduates. Summative data can also inform the process to better invite the next cohort toward measured personal success in the future. In theory, this can increase student and family engagement by demonstrating real, personal gains.

Inquiry Partners

A wide variety of school staff support students in developing their postsecondary plans. For this focus of practice, there will be key players to serve as inquiry partners in this effort to surge resources toward identification and mitigation of the barriers these rural students face. These inquiry partners included fellow building-level School Administrators, Principals, Assistant Principals, and a Dean of Students. School Counselors play important roles in the education and guidance of students and families. Other inquiry partners in the school and student services include our Community College liaison and Career Development Coordinator. Teachers will also support this work both within their classrooms and in an advisory role as homeroom teachers. Within the district office, certain director roles (CTE, Student Services, Curriculum, and Instruction), as well as cabinet-level staff able to align resources (Assistant Superintendent, Superintendent, Chief Academic Officer), will serve as partners in this work. Finally, Senior students and families will be at the center of this work as inquiry partners and active participants.

Conceptual Framework

This study employs the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) framework. This work was developed by Robert Lent and associates in their 1994 article, *Toward a Unifying Social Cognitive Theory of Career and Academic Interest, Choice, and Performance*. This framework helps to explain the factors impacting career development and postsecondary plans. Self-efficacy, expected outcome, and goal mechanisms are identified in Lent's theory to help articulate and predict the academic and career choice processes (p. 79). Further in Lent's work, it is important to note that this framework "view(s) academic development...dovetailing with career development" (p. 81). Finally, the SCCT conceptual framework also focuses on the "life

periods of late adolescence life period associated with preparation for, and implementation of, career choice” (p. 81).

The conceptual framework supports the mixed-methods inquiry approach used in this study. More precisely, the inquiry method will be a convergent parallel design. Quantitative data will include baseline goals for postsecondary plans (number of enrollments, employment, and enlistments). The next layer will be qualitative work with students and families to identify perceived barriers and subsequently aim to mitigate these for their postsecondary aspirations. SCCT posits that human ability is a dynamic attribute (Bandura, 1991). This means that the personal factors of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals can positively shift to support postsecondary plans (Lent et al., 1994). The inquiry approach will plan several cycles of student advising support to increase success in postsecondary plans in a rural context.

The contextual and experiential facets of student life are important factors within the SCCT framework and its focus on practice. SCCT analyzes how personal factors such as self-efficacy interrelate with contextual (e.g., support system) and experiential/learning factors (Lent et al., 1994). This focus of practice will closely examine the contextual factors of rural students at Pleasant Grove High School.

Definition of Key Terms

The following terms are used throughout this study and are defined as follows:

Career Development Plan - North Carolina’s State Board of Education has adopted minimum requirements for all students to create and maintain a career development plan that shall include: 1) self-assessment of aptitudes, skills, values for career interests, 2) exploration of pathways aligned with self-assessment (that is, needed education and training), 3) alignment of

academic courses with identified career interests, and 4) creation of a career portfolio, including documentation of postsecondary plans (Career Development Plan Act, 2023).

Enrollment: This term indicates that a student beyond the age of compulsory attendance enrolls in a “postsecondary educational institution,” which can be academic, vocational, business, professional, college, or university (Putnam, 1981).

Employment - a full-time employee is, for a calendar month, an employee employed on average for at least 30 hours of service per week or 130 hours of service per month (Internal Revenue Service, 2024).

Enlistment: This term indicates commitment to a service branch.

Precarious Employment is best conceived as the accumulation of multiple unfavorable facets of employment quality. These include material rewards, working time arrangements, employment stability, workers’ rights, collective organization, interpersonal relations, and training opportunities (Oddo et. al, 2021).

Spatial Inequity - geographic unevenness in access to necessary resources and services (Tieken & Auldridge-Reveles, 2019).

A workforce Credential, an education- and work-related credential, can be defined as a verification of an individual’s qualification or competence issued by a third party with the relevant authority to issue such credentials. The term credential encompasses educational certificates, degrees, certifications, and government-issued licenses (U.S. Department of Labor, 2010).

Self-efficacy refers to people's judgment of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performance (Bandura, 1986).

Assumptions

This inquiry focuses on enhancing postsecondary student plans at Pleasant Grove High School. As the researcher of this study, I recognize several assumptions. I assume that students will engage with fidelity in developing and implementing postsecondary plans for their future. A related assumption is that students and families will value the process and share the goal of a high-quality postsecondary plan. Furthermore, the definition of high quality will need to be clarified and can be an assumption: do all students and families seek a higher quality of life and see that a postsecondary plan can help secure this outcome? Do all agree on what constitutes a higher quality of life? For some, graduating high school could be the achievement goal, and there is no shared recognition that another plan is worthwhile. Another assumption is that students and families will answer honestly when assessing the perceived barriers to their aspirations. Qualitative analysis is susceptible to bias from both the researcher and the subject. It is assumed that they will behave responsibly in striving toward their goals. This includes, for example, completing the FAFSA, being honest with self-inventories, completing applications (enrollment or employment), and following through on final commitments.

Scope and Delimitations

This inquiry will be delimited to the class of senior students that enter their fourth year in the fall of 2024 and graduate in June of 2025. The class size will be approximately 117 students, evenly split between 58 males and 59 females. The school setting was in a rural community. The racial demographics of this class included 44 White students, 42 Black students, 25 Hispanic students, and six students reporting two or More Race. A deeper review of this group's socioeconomic status may prove to be difficult to track as there are confidentiality limits on reporting to the individual level, and self-reported data may be subject to personal limits for

privacy. The timeline scope will be to measure impacts in the senior year decision-making and advising process, and so this timeline delimitation also obstructs certain longer-term barriers to postsecondary plans. The delimitation of scope as a 180-day school year largely limits the analysis of the long-term barriers to postsecondary plans. Long-term barriers might include course pathways established earlier in the secondary education setting and resources provided in education settings before high school.

Limitations

The limitations of this study include the fact that it was conducted in a single high school. This limits the generalizability of the findings. Another limitation is that certain factors identified as barriers cannot be overcome using school resources. These may be called macro-barriers. A macro barrier refers to a wide range of factors that limit the postsecondary planning process. Resources to provide college preparatory courses (teachers, course offerings such as Advanced Placement or AP, upper Math/Science), family resources, employment opportunities in the region, family educational attainment, and preconceived bias toward postsecondary options. One of the limitations of these macro barriers is that the study will be within the scope of the academic calendar timeline constituting the senior year of high school.

A limitation of data reliability is the concept of locus of control. This aligns with the assumption that students will act with fidelity in pursuit of postsecondary plans. This may limit the ability of school staff to enact changes in a student's or family's mindset. One example is ethical considerations regarding personal autonomy, especially in personal decision-making. Additionally, respect for privacy may inhibit the collection of relevant information. Families may have boundaries on sharing the reasons for their decisions regarding postsecondary

planning. These could include confidentiality on financial matters or other cultural concerns, such as being judged by others.

Methods to mitigate the trustworthiness of the data collected include triangulation and negative case analysis. Adult staff will act as collaborative inquiry partners through mentorship in roles such as advisory teachers, counselors, coaches, or content experts. As these adults identify one or more students who make progress toward advancing their postsecondary aspirations, these observations can be logged and compared to other student cases. Data from multiple adults and students will be triangulated, leading to similar and supporting conclusions concerning the research questions (Mertler, 2022). This may occur as the research explores student disposition toward student support designed to promote postsecondary plans beyond the barriers they face.

Significance of Inquiry

The NREA has identified college career readiness/preparation for postsecondary experiences as one of its ten priorities in its five-year Research Agendas from 2016 (Hill & Turney, 2016). A significant number of students in America's public schools live in rural areas. As these students experience barriers to college and career readiness that differ significantly from their non-rural peers, it is important to research ways to identify and mitigate this equity issue (Agger et al., 2018). It is important to advance rural learner success on a national, state, and local scale. Rural students comprise 20% or more than nine million of America's schools (Drescher et al., 2022, Johnson et al., 2021). North Carolina is second only to Texas in terms of the number of rural students (Showalter et. al, 2023). Eastern North Carolina, and Mason County, have significant rural school populations. Pleasant Grove High School serves a county with a high degree of rural areas. The population density is 57 people per square mile. The NC

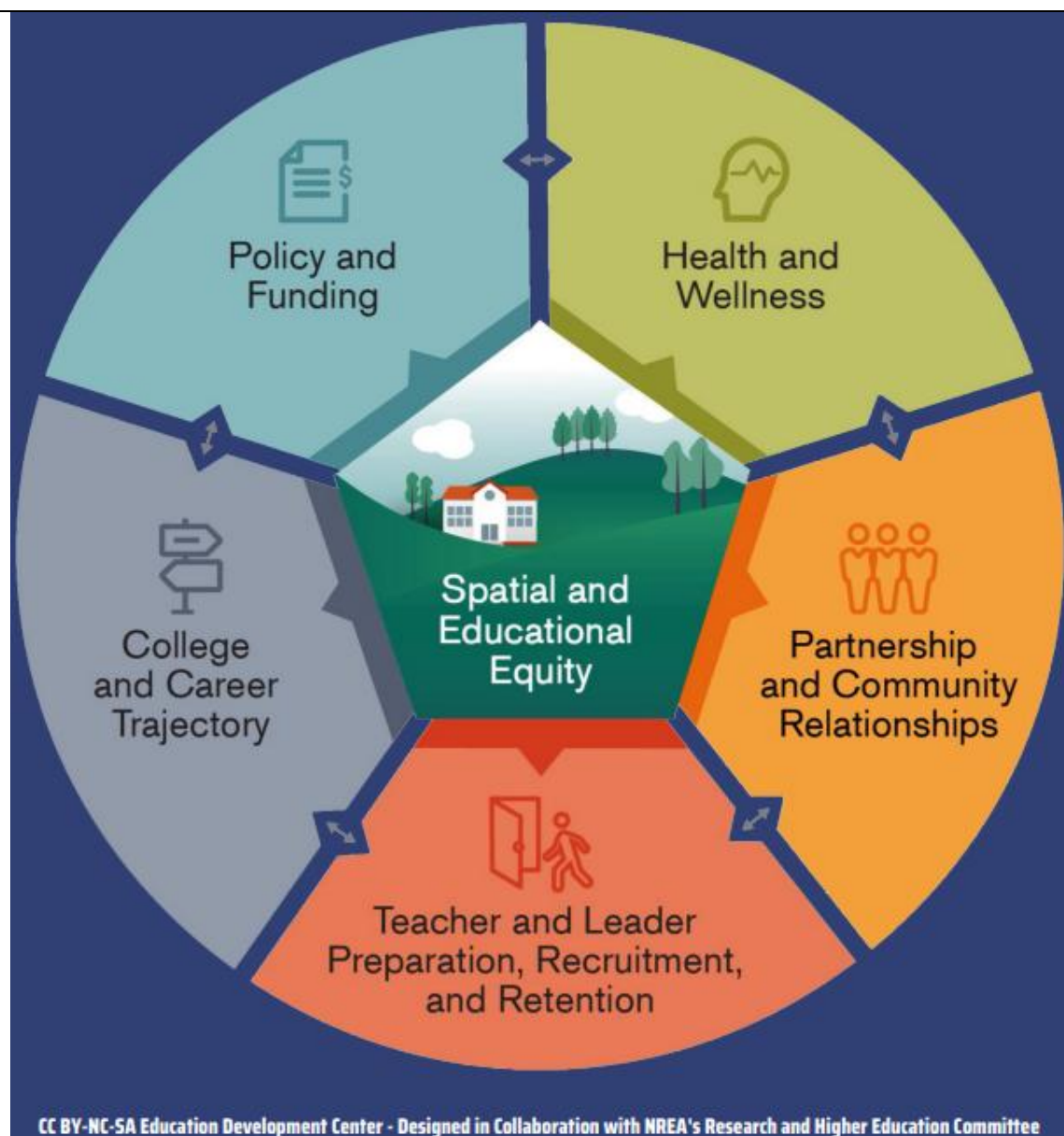
Rural Center uses 250 people per square mile to define a rural population (US Census Bureau, 2024). The purpose of this inquiry is to advance high-quality postsecondary plans for rural students. This work has the potential to provide equity and increase social mobility for affected populations. Participants may enjoy an improved quality of life through higher-quality postsecondary plans. .

Income inequality, wealth and education funding, and educational attainment are all barriers to enrollment in postsecondary education (Butler et al.; 2020; Thiede et al., 2019). These conditions are characteristic of parts of the Pleasant Grove High School community. An additional focus of postsecondary plans is attaining high-quality employment. Family sustaining wages are disproportionately lacking in rural populations in North Carolina (MyFutureNC, 2022). This inquiry seeks to improve postsecondary outcomes for students at PGHS. Additionally, this study seeks to generalize ways to broaden the outcomes for rural students in other settings. This will support educational equity and opportunities for all students.

Advancing Equity and Social Justice

The focus of practice centers squarely on the National Rural Education Association's (NREA) Research Agenda 2022-2027 central theme of spatial equity (McHenry-Sorber, 2023). Within this conceptual framework, the problem of practice will explore the college and career trajectory category, also highlighted by the NREA, as shown in Figure 2.

There will be important work within partnerships and community relationships that build on rural assets to promote advances in postsecondary plans for students. These partnerships manifest as part of targeted student advising support. Examples include partnerships with important community assets, such as local churches and social service providers.



Source: Hartman et al., (2022).

Figure 2. National Rural Education Association research agenda 2022-2027.

Research on educational attainment in rural settings also indicates that promoting first-time college students exemplifies advancing equity in this focus of practice. Additionally, the site location of Pleasant Grove High School is an economically and racially diverse community. This incorporates a dynamic of attention to power within and across the diverse communities that constitute a larger school community. This social justice issue is conceptualized as intersectionality within rural challenges (McHenry-Sorber et. al, 2023).

Intersectionality is a framework that examines how systems of inequity produce advantages and disadvantages (Nichols & Stahl, 2019). These students represent a diverse range of racial and ethnic backgrounds, as well as socioeconomic levels, in a rural community. These factors impact the experiences and outcomes of students within a rural setting.

Advances in Practice

The aim of advancing the quality of rural student postsecondary plans and success is to advance rural learner success. Advances in practice will aim to enhance student outcomes, as measured by postsecondary readiness. These practices will focus specifically on seniors and help illustrate other readiness measures that can enhance the secondary school program. Through the identification of perceived and real barriers to postsecondary plans, adjustments may be made to the 9-12 program, and potentially beyond.

In holistic practices, there are several advances that this work may provide, which also align with the goals of the NREA. A recently published agenda on rural postsecondary research conducted by a working group summarizes these factors as critical: the rural institution as a catalyst for mobility and economic growth, capacities for effective service and innovation at

rural institutions, the rural student learning journey, and the value of postsecondary education for rural learners (A National Rural Postsecondary Research, 2021).

Improvement science is the structure of this dissertation in practice. The high-leverage action that serves as the problem of practice in this model is to advance and promote postsecondary pathways in rural communities (Crow et. al, 2020). This study should elicit perceived barriers and couple mitigating strategies within the school's resources to support improved student outcomes. This work will be centered around the spatial equity theme that impacts rural learners, including diversity and intersectionality within rural settings.

Summary

While educational outcomes vary across schools, it remains an important outcome for all high school graduates to have high-quality postsecondary plans. Students from rural schools can benefit from student support and are poised for success in the implementation of specific supports according to their unique demographics. North Carolina has the second highest number of rural students in the United States. North Carolina has also focused on promoting all graduates to be college- and career-ready, exemplified by their state-level work in Portrait of a Graduate.

The study will be conducted at PGHS in Mason County, NC. PGHS is a small school located in a rural area. This inquiry focuses on enhancing the aspirations and development of postsecondary plans for 100 students in the 2024-25 Senior class at PGHS. The inquiry will be guided by three questions: What are the aspirations for postsecondary student plans at Pleasant Grove High School? What are the perceived barriers to Pleasant Grove students' postsecondary plans? What impact did student advising support have on promoting aspirations and addressing perceived barriers to student postsecondary plans at Pleasant Grove High School?

This inquiry addresses equity issues aligned with the NREA Research Agenda. Efforts to improve outcomes in postsecondary plans across the full class of graduating seniors seek to promote quality of life and improve the community. The work will use Social Cognitive Career Theory as a conceptual framework. This theory holds that students develop self-efficacy and can positively shift their mindset to aspire to career interests.

In Chapter 2, a review of literature will expand on the social elements of rural education and related postsecondary planning. Spatial equity identifies many different resource layers that impact student outcomes. These resource concerns include wealth and funding, academic opportunities, and parental educational attainment, among others. Cultural layers also impact postsecondary enrollment and employment patterns. Student advising can support the assets that rural students enjoy, promoting aspirations toward high-quality postsecondary plans.

The methodology guiding this inquiry is detailed in Chapter 3, including a description of the phases of inquiry and the model used to strategize, implement, analyze, and reflect. This chapter also outlines the inquiry design, instrumentation choices, and procedures used to collect data, ensuring alignment between the research questions and the methods employed. Findings from the study are presented in Chapter 4 and are organized around the inquiry questions, drawing from both quantitative and qualitative data sources. These findings are intended to provide a comprehensive understanding of student postsecondary aspirations within the contextual realities of this particular rural high school setting. Finally, Chapter 5 offers an interpretation of the findings, including recommendations for practice and equity, as well as reflections on the role of the scholarly practitioner and the implications for continuous school study in this context.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This study aims to advance the postsecondary plans of rural high school students in North Carolina beyond the barriers they face in seeking quality employment and enrollment in higher-education institutions. This study employs the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) framework from Lent et al. (1994). The framework will help clarify the factors impacting career development and outcomes in postsecondary plans, especially within the rural context. The body of knowledge that broadly relates to social inequities, especially in relation to educational funding and attainment, is first examined in this chapter. The following section reviews the academic inequalities between rural and non-rural students. The literature review then examines enrollment and quality employment for rural students and finally, examines school efforts to mitigate these obstacles. Read as a whole, these varied areas of literature illustrate stratification within American society. These social stratifications are tied to wealth, place, and education. This inquiry has the potential to ameliorate this space by identifying and mitigating the ways in which schools can tackle rural inequities to improve students' postsecondary outcomes.

Social Cognitive Career Theory

The basic building blocks of social cognitive theory that underpin the SCCT framework include Goals, Self-efficacy beliefs, and outcome expectations. Additionally, SCCT focuses on learning experiences, personal interests, and environmental factors that influence career decision-making. This framework provides a foundation for career coaching and school guidance (Wang et. al, 2022). Student aspirations are an important piece of this theoretical framework, as Albert Bandura defines self-efficacy “as people's judgements of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances” (1986). While

there are many layers to students' sense of self-efficacy, directed student advising support can increase this factor and improve students' aspirations for postsecondary goals.

An important advance in SCCT that applies to the work for this inquiry is found in the 1994 work by Lent and associates in the article entitled "Toward a Unifying Social Cognitive Theory of Career and Academic Interest, Choice, and Performance." This work builds on the personal aspects of career development such as self-efficacy by addressing "extra-personal factors." The rural context of the students helps identify certain factors that may both promote and inhibit career development and choice. This theory helps explain behaviors that influence how educational and vocational interests develop and change, as well as the educational and career choices individuals make and do not make (Brown & Lent, 2023). This framework is well-suited to inform the promotion of postsecondary aspirations among students in rural school settings.

Social Inequality

Social inequalities in the United States seriously inhibit a person's quality of life and the overall health of society. Education is a key lever to analyze the inequalities that exist and to serve as an antidote to mitigate this phenomenon. Underscoring the importance of education is the fact that life expectancy is shortened by eight years for adults who have not earned a college degree by age 25 (Case & Deaton, 2023). In addition to health benefits, four-year college degrees impact quality of life by increasing employment security and flexibility in hours (Agger et al., 2018).

Where a person lives in the United States exacerbates social inequalities. The American South has both the highest official poverty rate among the country's regions and the highest relative poverty rate. North Carolina ranks tenth in terms of the highest poverty rate in the

country (Baker, 2019). This literature review examines student achievement in the context of rural students. Clear evidence shows that low-income students struggle with several measures of student achievement compared to their wealthier peers. Therefore, to the extent that rural communities face greater poverty, rural students face greater barriers to academic achievement. There are complex causes of social and economic inequality, many of which are interlaced with the challenges in rural America.

Rural areas also have disproportionately high levels of income inequality (Thiede et al., 2019). This leads to adverse social and health concerns and a lack of general community development in the region. Income inequality is also consistent with population drain, which is more prevalent in rural communities (Butler et al. 2020). Higher income inequality also reduces children's opportunities to succeed, as measured by social mobility (Nam, 2021). Since rural communities consistently face disproportionate inequities in wealth, there are reverberating effects on students' educational outcomes. This general social inequity is correlated with inequities in college enrollment and quality employment opportunities after high school. This study aimed to identify and mitigate the barriers that rural high school students face in developing quality postsecondary plans.

Educational Attainment Inequity

Education is a key factor in social inequality. In addition to the impact on life expectancy, other quality-of-life measures are affected by educational attainment (Case & Deaton, 2023). Wealth accumulation is associated with educational attainment. Individuals with professional degrees earn more than three times the median earnings of people with less than a high school diploma (Cain, 2023). Data from the National Center for Education Statistics in 2019 identified that inequity in educational attainment for rural locations was 13% to 19% lower than

measurements from suburban and urban areas (NCES, 2015). As rural communities have disparities in college enrollment, economic inequalities are exacerbated.

An important layer in examining inequality between rural and non-rural demographics is the experience of other minority groups within these spaces. There are significant variations in educational attainment across gender and ethnic groups in the United States. According to North Carolina's Educational Attainment Report 2021-22 (MyFutureNC, 2022), postsecondary enrollment was 14% and 5% lower for Hispanic and Black students than for White students. The gaps increased for Black students when measuring postsecondary completion rates (23% lower), although they narrowed for Hispanic students (4%). Other educational preparedness measurements for North Carolina students demonstrated gaps between subgroups. College and Career Reading and Math scores show double-digit disparities between Blacks, Hispanics, and Whites (MyFutureNC, 2022). Rural spaces vary in ways that impact educational outcomes, including their racial composition (Drescher, 2022).

Wealth and Funding Inequity

North Carolina serves as a case study of the inequities rural communities face in school funding. Federal, state, and local governments combine to fund public schools to various degrees. The educational funding structure in North Carolina disadvantages lower-wealth counties. Local supplements by county constitute 26% of funding sources, and the state constitutes approximately 60% of total school funding (WestEd, 2019). While a larger state funding source could theoretically offset the county's share, North Carolina ranked sixth lowest in the country in total per-pupil expenditure (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). These findings are corroborated by the most recent report on Why Rural Matters (2023), in which North Carolina

ranks 43rd in state revenue to schools per local dollar (Showalter et al., 2023). County inequities in wealth persist as a problem in North Carolina and are correlated with population size.

A review of county-level datasets from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA, 2023) Economic Research Service corroborates these concerns. There are 100 counties in North Carolina. The bottom 14 counties have county median incomes measuring less than 70% of the state median income. All 14 of these counties are relatively small in total population; they range from the smallest County Tyrell, population 3,365, to Columbus 49,885, with one larger outlier county, Robeson, population 116,663. Five of these counties have populations between 20,000 and 30,000, and four counties have populations below 17, 200. Only two of the 14 counties in this dataset have had a positive population trend since 2020: Robeson County, with a negligible 0.1% increase, and the smallest county, by population, Tyrell (+3.6 %) (USDA, 2023, c). This county-level data for NC reinforces the larger trend of rural population drain and contributes to economic inequity (Thiede et al., 2019).

This same USDA data review identifies two other important shared factors: the percentage of educational attainment and the percentage of the population in poverty. These poor counties have more than 30% of children aged 0-17 in poverty (USDA, 2023, a). These counties also have the lowest percentage of the population completing college; only five counties have more than 15% of the population completing college. The highest percentage in this group was Bladen County (17.7 %). The average percentage of adults over 25 years of age who completed college in all counties in North Carolina is 23.8%. However, the disparity is even greater when analyzing the five wealthiest counties for educational attainment; the percentages of the population are highest in Orange County at 61% and range from 40% to 55% in the next wealthiest counties measured by the percent of state median income earned (USDA, 2023d).

Leandro Case

Inequity among counties has a well-documented history in North Carolina. In 1994, the Leandro Case was brought by families representing five low-wealth school districts. School districts in NC are organized by county. These rural districts asserted that the State Constitutional right to an education was violated, and that this was due to wealth disparities (Packard, 1998).

The Public School Forum (2023) of North Carolina offers an updated analysis in a Local School Finance Study that indicates that this disparity continues today. The average local spending per student in the top 10 counties was \$4,157 compared to the bottom 10 counties per student spending of \$968. This is fundamentally based on the great disparity in real estate wealth per student: \$2,465,625 in the top 10 counties and \$495,079 in the bottom 10 counties (Public School Forum, 2023). There is a spending inequity between counties based on their wealth.

In the Leandro decision of 1997, the court ruled that North Carolina had failed to implement a “sound, basic education” for all students. In this ruling, two important outcomes of a “sound, basic, education” were articulated; “to enable the student to successfully engage in postsecondary education or vocational training” and “enable the student to compete on an equal basis with others in further formal education or gainful employment” (Grant, 2023). The case has been in a state of flux throughout the appeals process, as the General Assembly of North Carolina has refused to fully implement the remediation plans endorsed by the court (Grant, 2023). Both these issues cited in the 1997 ruling reinforce the purpose of this study, which is to examine and mitigate the barriers facing rural North Carolina students in attaining college enrollment and quality employment.

Academic Inequalities

There are many ways to measure academic progress and identify academic inequalities. Student outcomes can be measured in terms of college preparedness and enrollment. Income inequality correlates with disparities in standardized testing results and college enrollment patterns (Chetty et al. 2020). Importantly, students' access to high-quality curriculum and instruction is a resource factor in analyzing equality. Education funding is critical for supporting access to high-quality teachers. There are also several demographic factors that impact school quality, including the socioeconomic makeup of the community, parent educational attainment, and the percentage of students with learning disabilities or English language learners. These factors are evident in both rural and nonrural schools (Drescher et al., 2022).

Rural students comprise 20% or more than nine million of America's public schools (Drescher et al., 2022, Johnson et al., 2021). A recent macroanalysis of student achievement measured 430 million standardized test scores in reading and math between third and eighth grades. These scores were obtained from the Stanford Education Data Archive, which measures educational opportunities and achievements for every community in America. The general conclusion was that there are no major disparities in outcomes between rural and non-rural students (Drescher et al., 2022). Additionally, this study notes the wide variety of rural spaces. Geographic isolation can vary, labeled by Drescher et al. as "rural fringe," "rural distant," and "rural remote" (Drescher et al., 2022, p.126). This is important because access to resources can be limited depending on the degree of rurality.

Other analyses of national assessments support the conclusion that there is a lack of achievement disparity between rural and non-rural students. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has been given since 1969 and is administered by the National

Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2023). The Rural School and Community Trust published a report reviewing 2015 NAEP scores that showed rural fourth and eighth-grade students to be within a percentage point of the overall national scores (Showalter et al., 2019). The ACT is another national measurement of student readiness. The ACT published an Information Brief from its Research and Policy division that analyzed student scores by student background and school location. The four student groups were: First Generation College, Low Income / not Low Income and not First Generation, Low Income / not Low Income. The four locations were Rural, Town, Suburban, and Urban. Average composite scores in this measurement were also within one point for rural students compared across all these categories (ACT, 2014).

It is important to note that there are disparities in poverty and among minority groups in the review of student achievement. The ACT review identified that low-income students scored more than one point below their peers. However, this was true across rural, suburban, and urban locales. In North Carolina, the achievement gaps between minority groups on NAEP fourth and eighth grade scores were nearly 25% (myFutureNC, 2022). Since rural communities have high levels of poverty and many have diverse racial makeups, this achievement analysis is complex.

Despite these general findings of parity in achievement between rural and non-rural students, rural students attend and graduate from college at a lower rate than their non-rural peers (Drescher, 2022). Among the many factors that may contribute to this trend, the lack of access to rigorous curricula and high-quality teachers are some of them. Teacher quality is paramount in supporting high-achieving students and preparing them to be college-ready. In fact, there is a positive relationship between education quality, student performance, and teacher pay (Artige & Cavenaile, 2023). Smaller schools are less likely to employ teachers with high levels of education and have fewer opportunities to supplement salaries (Monk, 2007).

Limited funding and access to high-quality teaching are linked to a more restrictive set of curriculum choices that can serve high-achieving students and improve college and career readiness. Rural schools also have limited access to cultural and educational resources and personnel (Weinlein, 2019). A lower tax base, stemming from lower property values and incomes, adds to educational funding inequities. Consequently, students in rural schools are less frequently offered advanced coursework. This includes fewer AP courses and fewer opportunities for higher-level math courses (Knox, 2023). Rural students have been found to start high school with lower math skills and therefore graduate with an overall lower course level in math, as well as have less access to AP math courses (Anderson & Chang, 2011). A lack of rigor in math preparation is cited as one of the college preparatory gaps for minority groups. The academic rigor of high school courses is also cited as a major predictor of college enrollment (Britton, 2019). The challenges faced by rural schools in staffing higher-level courses is a clear example of academic inequity.

AP courses provide college preparation for high school students and the potential to earn college credits. The College Board governs the curriculum and AP programs and has tracked the expansion of its program in rural schools. A Special Report from the Education Commission and College Board (2017) analyzed rural access to the AP program since 2000. The report notes that the disparity in rural student access has narrowed since 2000. There is still more than a 20% gap in opportunity between rural and non-rural students access to any AP subject (Education Commission, 2017). STEM subjects are at a much lower access for rural students, where the opportunity gap in 2015 was over 30% less than their nonrural peers (Education Commission, 2017). The same report noted that the receipt of credit-granting AP scores increases on-time bachelor's completion (Education Commission, 2017). This highlights the importance of access

to quality AP Programming. There are limits to this analysis, as the report only considered schools that offered AP courses. Research has shown that in 2007, only half of rural schools reported offering AP courses (Planty et al., 2007). Notably, dual enrollment course offerings in rural schools are offered at approximately the same rate as those in urban and suburban schools (Planty et al., 2007). Dual enrollment is further reviewed in the later section on school efforts to mitigate barriers.

Research on teacher shortages tends to focus on urban areas compared to research on rural teacher shortages. Ingersoll and Tran (2023) reviewed existing research on teacher shortages and identified a case of “spatial injustice” due to resource deficits, including staffing, that impact rural schools (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023, p. 399). The factors impacting this have been mostly stated (lower tax base, lower salaries, fewer classroom resources, and limited personnel). There are also positive elements of teacher retention in some rural schools. These include strong ties to the community and positive working conditions. Additionally, demographic trends impact teacher resourcing. Rural areas often have a population drain, which exacerbates the issue from a funding element per pupil as well as a labor pool (Ingersoll, 2019).

Postsecondary Enrollment Barriers

The National Rural Research Agenda (NREA) 2022-2027 identifies five themes that support its central Spatial and Educational Equity focus (NREA, 2023). College and Career Trajectory is one of these themes. This includes identifying cultural factors that impede access to college and career processes for rural students (NREA, 2023). Parental expectations and better academic preparation also constitute strong variables that impact the odds of college enrollment (Wells et al., 2019).

Parental Educational Attainment

Rural youth face many factors that inhibit their postsecondary plans for college enrollment. High school costs and low family educational attainment discourage students from seeking college enrollment (Niccolai et al., 2022). Rural communities in North Carolina have a lower percentage of family educational attainment, and first-generation college students face obstacles in navigating the selection, enrollment, financing, and other facets of enrollment (Crain and Sowl, 2021). Students from rural high schools are not only less likely than their suburban and urban peers to attend postsecondary institutions, but they also attend less selective institutions. They are more likely to delay their entry and select two-year colleges over four-year universities. Finally, they are less likely to remain continuously enrolled (Byun et al., 2015). These gaps are exacerbated by a lack of knowledge about accessing grants and scholarships. Lower economic family resources are documented as disproportionate to rural communities, and this is an inhibiting factor for families to support their students in post-secondary education (Cain & Class, 2023).

The role of parents in postsecondary education planning is complex. Economics is an important factor that parents (or families) must consider. Other factors include the search and application process, building student aspirations, and the use of social networks to support access (Slocum et al., 2019). While there are many obstacles for first-generation and low socioeconomic rural students, there are also plenty of opportunities to support students outside of parents. These include extended family, the high school itself, and other parental and community connections. Parental expectations play a role, whether this is supportive of postsecondary enrollment or demotivating college attendance in lieu of other plans (primarily career).

High schools can still leverage the knowledge and influence of parents and families. This involves actively engaging parents in postsecondary planning early and recognizing their values

in education while bridging knowledge gaps. The school-parent relationship is more effective when viewed from a value-added perspective rather than a deficiency perspective (Slocum et al., 2019). All families bring valuable qualities to the support of students. It is also important to state that not all rural communities consist of families without college preparation.

Cultural Factors

Rural communities have cultural traditions that may inhibit students from aspiring to enroll in postsecondary educational institutions. Cultural factors such as class and gender impact students' aspirations for work and college. In many rural communities, both genders are commonly expected to work, and there are higher expectations for middle-class families to attend college (Niccolai et al., 2022). Rural identity, or the extent to which adolescents understand themselves to be part of the community, is a pull factor that shapes future residence decisions regarding postsecondary schooling (Agger et al., 2018). Families in rural communities often have deep social connections, with many community members sharing the responsibility of raising children and supporting each other. This can result in strong community attachment and can be an obstacle to enrolling in a college that takes them away from their homes (Crockett et al., 2000).

There may also be cultural obstacles to overcome for rural students to succeed in a university environment. Larger universities may provide a cultural lifestyle adjustment to rural students that urban and suburban students do not experience (Cain & Willis, 2022). Another layer of rural identity is the potential for marginalization if students belong to a minority group. This can include race, gender, gender identity, or sexual orientation. Cain and Willis (2023) conducted a qualitative study via student interviews to articulate the identity struggle of students from rural backgrounds and marginalized groups in the university setting. Students may have

adjustment issues depending on their personal identity, and a rural background is one element of identity.

Finally, several barriers arise because rural communities are often geographically distant from institutions of higher learning. This makes exposure more difficult and likely makes self-efficacy a barrier for rural students (Roberts & Grant, 2021). Geographic isolation can make community resources, such as libraries, early childhood and youth development programs, and extracurricular activities, harder to secure (Nadel et al., 2002). These can be important character development supports for self-efficacy toward enrollment beyond high school.

It is important to keep in mind that rural communities are not monolithic. School and community contexts are important in rural life and influence student aspirations and college enrollment attainment (Sowl & Cain, 2021). The contexts that impact students can vary widely, from the role of high school leadership and high school composition in demographics and socioeconomic status to the community value of college measured by parent perception or opportunities for work.

Postsecondary Employment Barriers

Postsecondary plans for a large percentage of high school students involve directly entering the workforce. Workforce entry can compete with college enrollment, although vocational training and industry credentials can satisfy a form of enrollment and enhance the quality of employment opportunities. Rural students may face additional challenges in accessing quality employment compared to their nonrural peers. Traditionally, rural economies have been populated with industries wherein a living wage could be earned with only a high-school education. These industries are broadly in decline, and the fastest-growing and highest-paying job sectors require postsecondary education (Budge, 2021; Niccolai et al., 2022). By 2027, 70%

of U.S. jobs are predicted to require education beyond high school, even though many jobs require skills that are not captured by a Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree but rather by postsecondary job training (Hendricks et al., 2021; Mcnamee & Ganss, 2023). North Carolina aligns with this trend, as 95% of projected growth in occupations through 2026 require postsecondary training beyond the high school or General Equivalency Diploma (GED) (Tippett & Stanford, 2019). As rural communities have lower college completion and enrollment, it is important to promote access to high-quality employment.

“Precarious Employment” is a term described by Vanessa Oddo et al. as “the accumulation of multiple unfavorable facets of employment quality” (Oddo et al., 2021, p. 171). These facets include important elements for the long-term health of individuals, such as wages, employment stability, hours and schedules, workers’ rights, and training opportunities. Minority groups and less-educated populations have higher rates of precarious employment (Oddo et al., 2021). Rural students must calculate the impact of precarious employment on postsecondary workforce plans. Schools can offer support and pathways to mitigate this outcome.

Another important feature of employment quality is the measurement of family sustaining wages. MyFutureNC is a statewide nonprofit whose mission is to “promotes a shared vision for an education-to-workforce continuum across North Carolina” (myfuturenc.org). MyFutureNC’s Educational Attainment Report 2021-22 identified major disparities between labor participation rates and family-sustaining wages. Gaps were evident across all racial groups, yet the percentage of Hispanics (30%) and Blacks (45%) earning family sustaining wages was the most glaring compared to Whites (66%) or Asians (77%). Additionally, only 40% of rural county residents earn a family sustaining wage as compared to 60% of urban and 54% of suburban residents. Students must consider the implications of working without a living wage.

Schools can help educate and align workforce skills and pathways for students that involve industry-valued credentials. In addition, this dataset underscores the gaps between race, gender, and class. School leaders must recognize these contexts when developing strategies to advance high-quality postsecondary plans for every student.

Schools also need to partner with local business leaders and vocational training centers to ensure that high school pathways lead to gainful employment. Career and Technical Education may not always match local employment needs. Several studies of rural communities in Appalachian Tennessee and Kentucky have identified that Agriculture and Health Sciences programs for high school students do not align with the Business Technology, Advanced Manufacturing, and Family/Consumer Sciences jobs available (Kannapel & Flory, 2017). Rural economies are dynamic in nature, shifting with recession, pandemics, and information technology innovations. Robust and ongoing partnerships are necessary between schools and local economic leaders to remain up to speed and lead students toward quality employment opportunities.

School Efforts to Mitigate Barriers

Schools have the opportunity to mitigate barriers to high-quality postsecondary plans. These broadly include strengthening advising resources and ensuring access to rigorous coursework for college and workplace credentials. Schools can also advocate policies to support students and their families.

Advising for Postsecondary Plans

Postsecondary plans for students should involve building knowledge through a comprehensive advising program. Families are central to the context that shapes a student's outcome, especially considering the lens of parental educational attainment and support for

college attendance (Agger et al. 2018). The process of college enrollment decisions lasts for many years in high school. Certain behaviors, such as completing the FAFSA and submitting applications, demonstrate postsecondary intent (Tippett & Stanford, 2019). Individuals who receive assistance with the FAFSA and financial aid information are substantially more likely to enroll in college and receive more financial aid (Bettinger et al., 2009). Providing robust advice to students and families can build on the existing social capital in rural communities. Research from numerous articles supports that not only parental involvement but also extended family, connections to the community, and school assistance with college searches are valuable in mitigating the enrollment barrier (Sowl & Crain, 2021).

Advising for postsecondary enrollment should support access and success in college. This pre-college preparation advising should affirm students' social and cultural backgrounds (Kuh et al. 2006). To do this, counselors and school staff must listen to students and create a college-bound culture to demystify and mitigate diminished expectations, if they exist in the community. In this process, recognizing the barriers that first-generation college students or other marginalized cultures may face is important. Students from rural, first-generation, low-income households may not engage in conversations about college (Chambers, 2020). Schools can support these conversations. Additionally, rural school counselors can speak to rural identity barriers in college. One example of an identity barrier is the urbanormative characteristic or the idea that urban spaces might be superior to rural ones. This characteristic describes some colleges and universities (Cain & Willis, 2022).

Access to College Preparatory Courses and Employment Credentials

Strategies for schools should also include the expansion of rigorous and college preparatory coursework. This could include a range of options: AP courses (face-to-face and

online), dual enrollment options, and advanced math courses. Taking AP and dual enrollment courses is associated with successful college completion (Mohker et al., 2019). Rural students need more access to AP courses and more support in passing AP exams (Showalter et al., 2019). Limitations may include cultural resistance to AP classes (extra work, impact on GPA, and unpreparedness).

These strategies are exemplified in an effort in rural northeastern Tennessee to improve high school students' college and career readiness, which began in 2010. The focal points of partnership activities were increasing access to rigorous courses, professional development of teachers to increase instructional quality, and expansion of student access to college and career counseling (Mokher, 2019). These partnership schools were evaluated by Mokher et al. (2019), who found a positive outcome on AP Participation, AP Performance, college enrollment, and college persistence.

Rural students take dual enrollment (DE) courses at higher rates than their urban and suburban peers (Harmon & Johnson, 2023; Showalter et al., 2019). Despite the debate over which option (AP or DE) is better for college preparation (Speroni, 2011), DE can support student preparation by increasing rigor and exposing students to community colleges. Starting at a community college can ease barriers to higher education in terms of cost and distance (Harmon & Johnson, 2023; McNamee & Ganss, 2023). However, barriers to transferring to 4-year institutions can remain, including difficulty with credit transfer, lack of financial aid, and differences in campus culture (Byun et al., 2017).

Another strategy to mitigate barriers to quality employment is to strengthen Career and Technical Education (CTE) programming. Students seeking postsecondary credentials are largely underserved, and this training is critical to increasing access to higher-wage employment

(Passarella, 2018). An important element in promoting student access to career training is ensuring that college and career pathways are not exclusive of each other (Symonds et al., 2011). An additional effort that schools can leverage for a strong CTE program includes ensuring that schools partner with Human Resources to recruit and retain teachers in level two courses. Level two courses are where students earn most credentials, and this would improve students' long-term financial health (Hendricks et al., 2021).

Schools can also support policies that increase equity for all students. In “An Action Plan for North Carolina” (WestEd, 2019), eight critical needs were identified to ensure that every child receives a sound basic education (WestEd, 2019). These areas include funding for equity, expanding early childhood education, and revising the student accountability models. Other critical needs identified are even more within the locus of control for schools: well-qualified teaching staff and directing resources to poor students. Finally, districts can support some of the critical needs identified: providing well-qualified principals and building regional support for high-poverty schools (WestEd, 2023).

Finally, schools can continue to identify and strengthen practices that have been found to support rural students' persistence in postsecondary education. These include small classes, faculty and staff relationships, supportive family members, social support, and campus involvement (McNamee & Ganss, 2023). In addition to these advantages for rural students, college entrance exam preparation would increase the success of students, especially those from lower-income homes (2023).

Summary

Studies of rural America are substantial in their connections to inequities. There are many levels of analysis of general wealth inequalities. Rural communities in the United States are

unique in that the variation in studies provides both common themes and observations of distinct regions. Rural students face consistent barriers in their postsecondary plans to seek enrollment and high-quality employment opportunities. Schools, districts, and other stakeholders are making efforts to identify and mitigate these barriers. High schools can provide systemic and intentional efforts to improve postsecondary plans for rural students by using the existing body of knowledge and articulating high-leverage practices to serve their unique community. The measures and methods designed to implement the change effort are outlined in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS OF INQUIRY

High school students should graduate with aspirations to pursue high-quality postsecondary plans. As students and school communities are diverse, so too are postsecondary aspirations. The environmental contexts of rural communities are like all high schools in that rural students and families have strong aspirations and values for postsecondary success in their lives (Agger, 2018). However, spatial equity remains a common challenge in US schools. This is the central focus of the NREA Research Agenda 2022-2027 (Showalter et al., 2023). Beyond the core category of spatial equity, college and career trajectories are categories of focus within the latest NREA agenda. This study aimed to improve rural students' aspirations for postsecondary plans. Specifically, this study has the potential to increase students' access to and knowledge of college enrollment and high-quality employment opportunities.

This inquiry was designed to support student aspirations with intentional student and family advising activities throughout their senior year. As a scholarly practitioner, I outline the inquiry framework and articulate the nature of data collection and analysis that will inform the dynamic process of this study.

Inquiry Guiding Questions

The questions guiding this inquiry are as follows:

1. What are the aspirations for postsecondary student plans at Pleasant Grove High School?
2. What are the perceived barriers to Pleasant Grove students' postsecondary plans?
3. What impact did student advising support have on promoting aspirations and addressing perceived barriers to student postsecondary plans at Pleasant Grove High School?

The first inquiry question examines the proposed intervention on student advising supports with the problem of practice of rural students facing barriers to postsecondary plans. While student advising support will focus efforts on the senior year, there will likely be wider implications for the secondary education years (grades 9-12), and perhaps beyond this level. The next inquiry question will explore the perceived barriers faced by the target population, including students and families. Finally, the third inquiry question will conclude the research, which may or may not have wider applicability in rural settings. Ultimately, this inquiry is significant as rural students comprise a substantial demographic throughout the country.

Inquiry Design and Rationale

This inquiry focuses on enhancing the development of postsecondary plans for students in a rural NC high school. A further goal of this research is to narrow the gap between rural student aspirations and the execution of postsecondary plans. This includes narrowing the gaps that rural students face between collegiate aspirations and successful enrollment, as well as increasing employment quality in postsecondary workforce plans. These problems of practice align with the National Rural Research Agenda 2022-2027 to support college and career trajectories within spatial and educational equity themes (Showalter et al., 2023).

This study will model the IS approach using a mixed-methods convergent parallel research design. Quantitative analysis of student aspirations for postsecondary plans will be further explained through qualitative investigations (Mertler, 2022). There are also elements of Social Cognitive Career Theory that deserve qualitative exploration. These include the elements of self-efficacy related to career and academic choices (Lent et al., 1994).

This inquiry will occur in two phases, segmenting the senior year. Each phase will be organized using the SIAR cycle (Crow et al., 2020). The sample size for this study will be a

senior class with approximately 100 students. Students will be engaged in student support, advising, and data collection activities that span two cycles, generally from early January to March. The second cycle occurs from late March to early June. Students will be engaged in whole group assemblies and activities, directly through surveys, and in small groups to gather quantitative and qualitative information. Email, Google Surveys, College Foundation of North Carolina resources, and FAFSA are examples of ways in which quantitative data will be collected. Open-ended surveys, anecdotal responses, and focus groups are examples of ways qualitative data are collected.

The design of this inquiry method is meant to build upon the data collected at each phase and layer this knowledge by informing action steps with the goal of enhancing students' postsecondary plans. This is similar to Crow's (2020) model, whereby cycles will be short in duration and inform action steps based on root cause analysis and drivers or assets. An example of the Strategize, Implement, Analyze, and Reflect (SIAR) phase of inquiry is summarized in Figure 3. There will be two major SIAR cycles in this inquiry.

Context of the Inquiry

The inquiry centered on the senior class at Pleasant Grove High School (PGHS) in rural Mason County. Mason County serves 5,700 students across one of the largest counties in the eastern part of the state. PGHS is one of two smaller high schools, both serving approximately 400 students in the rural Northern and Southern halves of the county. At PGHS, there are 117 students in the senior class. This class is almost evenly split between 58 males and 59 females. It is also diverse, consisting of 44 White students, 42 Black students, 25 Hispanic students, and 6 students of two or more races.

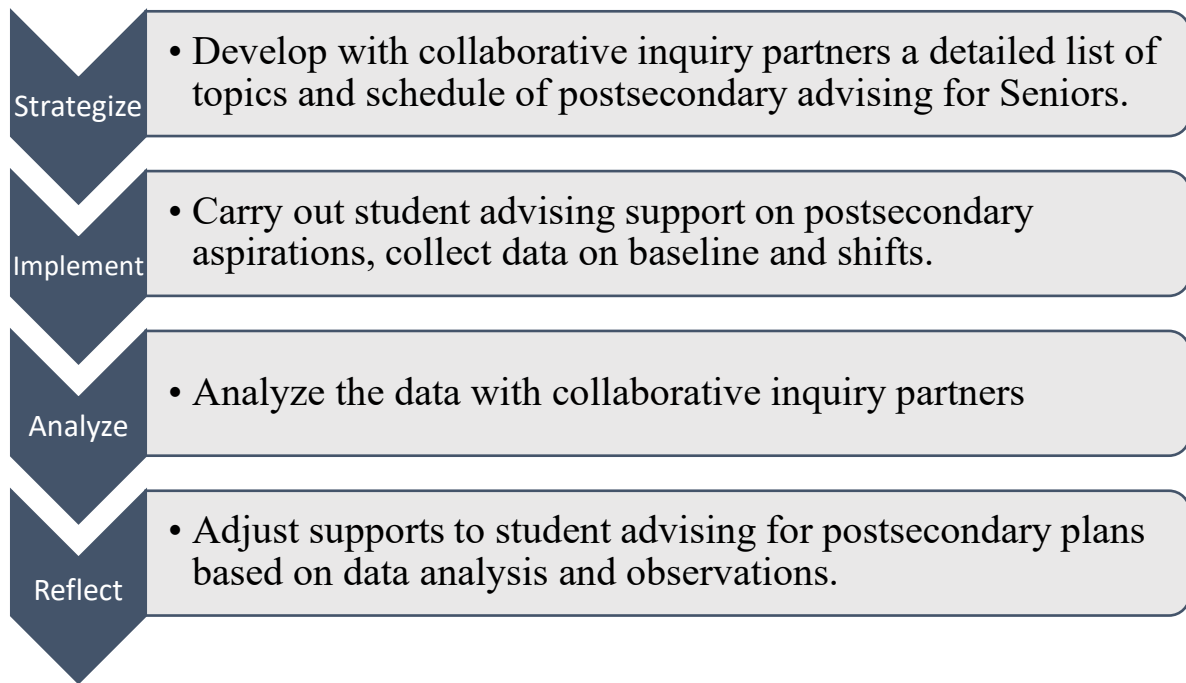


Figure 3. Model of inquiry design framework

The Pleasant Grove staff has been intentional in supporting students' college and career pathways. For three years, ninth grade students have been required to take a Career Management class within the Career and Technical Education department. This course supports a school-wide focus on students creating their Career Development Plans. The school has expanded its partnership with the Community College for Dual Enrollment to provide pathways for both college and career training enrollment. Within this context, the focus of the inquiry on seniors to enhance student aspirations for postsecondary plans aligns with efforts in grades 9-11 to promote college and career readiness.

Collaborative Inquiry Partners

A wide variety of school staff support students in developing their postsecondary plans. For this focus of practice, there will be key players to serve as inquiry partners in this effort to surge resources toward supporting student aspirations beyond the barriers these rural students face. These inquiry partners include fellow building-level School Administrators and my Assistant Principal. There are two school counselors that play very important roles in the education and guidance of students and families. Other inquiry partners in the school and student services include our Community College liaison and Career Development Coordinator. Teachers will also support this work both within their classrooms and in an advisory role as homeroom teachers. Within the district office, certain director roles (CTE, Student Services, Curriculum, and Instruction), as well as cabinet-level staff able to align resources (Assistant Superintendent, Superintendent, Chief Academic Officer), will serve as partners in this work. Finally, students and families will be at the center of this work as inquiry partners and as active participants.

Table 2

Collaborative Inquiry Partners by Title and Role

Collaborative Inquiry Partners	
Title	Role
Principal	Lead Investigator, Building Supervisor
Assistant Principal	Lead Support Administrator
Counselors	Student Services Provider
Career Development Coordinator (CDC)	Career and Technical Education Lead
Advisory Teachers	Teacher leading Senior Homeroom in Advisory Lessons

Ethical Considerations

The research process must be bound by the ethics outlined by federal regulations. Through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI), I have completed courses that articulate many ethical dimensions as I work with participants and inquiry partners in research on postsecondary plans for high school students. These include broad principles that all research must uphold and many more detailed considerations for both Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval of the study. The IRB is mandated by colleges and universities to approve student research. I will obtain approval from the board to ensure that the ethical standards and institutional policies adequately protect the study and participants.

The inquiry study I will conduct will involve several public school employees as inquiry partners. The core principles of ethics apply, as noted in the Belmont Report, namely, Respect for Persons, Beneficence and Justice. This research study centers on postsecondary plans for students, promoting quality in postsecondary plans, and mitigating barriers. These ethical principles require that I balance the autonomy of the individual in their enrollment, employment, and/or enlistment plans. Advising support intended to benefit students must have mutual beneficence. Finally, I need to ensure that I provide equal support in the spirit of justice for all students in the sample group.

The research study will involve minimal risk, as defined by the University and Medical Center Internal Review Board. Informed consent will be obtained from parents (see Appendix B) and informed assent from students (see Appendix C) to make them aware of any potential risks, including considerations of privacy and confidentiality in the study procedures. Identifiable information will be collected so that each student's postsecondary aspirations can be measured against implementation. Additionally, this information will help track thematic barriers and how

they might intersect with socioeconomic factors. Secure data storage practices are needed, where password-protected OneDrive data storage is supported by district technology protocols. The data will be destroyed after five years. Survey data collection will use Qualtrics, pseudonyms, and other coding to minimize identifiable information.

Focus groups will be used throughout the inquiry procedures. The risk of other group members violating confidentiality must be part of the informed consent practice in these cases. There will also be access to educational records, as this study will take place in a school setting. As the Principal of the school, this access is authorized, but federal regulations, including the Family Educational Right to Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA), need to be considered. Finally, positionality is an ethical consideration. As a researcher and school Principal, I will mitigate my positionality by leveraging staff roles. The classroom teacher who serves as a Homeroom and Advisory teacher is an example of a trusted adult who can support student aspirations in a way that removes my positionality influence. Undue influence may require vetting by the IRB.

Inquiry Procedures

This action research will use a mixed methods convergent parallel design. It will utilize the Improvement Science Dissertation in Practice (ISDiP) Model of Improvement (Crow et. al, 2020). Important procedural elements within the ISDiP model for this research include the iterative nature of Strategize, Implement, Analyze, and Reflect (SIAR), coupled with collaborative and formative data to guide the change cycle (Crow et. al. 2020). Participatory action research is also critical to this inquiry, as the outcome of enhancing student aspirations for postsecondary plans seeks to empower individuals and families to improve their lives (Mertler, 2022). The sample size will encompass the entirety of the senior class at Pleasant Grove HS, and

the timeline for the inquiry will be bounded within the academic senior year from September until June. The academic calendar portion of the senior year will be divided into two distinct phases of inquiry.

Instrumentation

The mixed-methods convergent design involves both quantitative and qualitative data collection. The research timeline will stretch over two phases of the senior year, and data collection will occur with different instrumentation throughout these phases. In phase one, baseline data on student aspirations for their postsecondary plans will be collected through a survey. The survey was adapted from published surveys. The Educational Longitudinal Study from the National Center for Educational Statistics offers several good samples to measure students' Future Plans. This study was conducted in 2002 and had several follow-up surveys. I plan to utilize the portions of these questionnaires that focus on plans and expectations for the future to capture student aspirations. (See Appendix D: Postsecondary Plan Survey)

Phase one baseline data will be analyzed using descriptive statistics. The frequency of postsecondary aspirations plans to enroll or employ will help inform how targeted supports for college and career inputs in phase one can enhance postsecondary plan success. In phase one, other quantitative instruments will include the use of the College Foundation of North Carolina site, completion of Free Application for Financial Student Aid (FAFSA) applications, and Residency Determination Service (RDS). Student feedback on career fairs and networking is also planned for phase one of the inquiry.

Phase one of the inquiry will also include additional qualitative data collected using focus groups as instruments. The focus group will answer the second inquiry question regarding the perceived barriers that students face in their postsecondary aspirations. Focus group participants

will be selected using information collected in phase one to represent a diverse group of students seeking enrollment and employment. Qualitative and quantitative data will be collected in the second phase of the inquiry. Students submit plans for their postsecondary pathways. This is customary as students share scholarship and college acceptances. However, a more holistic survey of the entire sample set of senior students is required. This will be a self-developed tool, and steps will be taken to de-identify and protect confidentiality. An overview of the timeline is shown in Figure 4.

Phases 1 and 2 will consist of a convergent parallel design. Quantitative data will comprise the baseline and majority of the focus for analysis in measuring initial student aspirations for postsecondary plans at the outset of the senior year. Focus groups will be used for qualitative data collection in Phase 1 after students participate in College and Career events in October and November. Phase 2 will be guided by most of this qualitative data collection in the form of focus groups that use purposeful sampling to explore students who tend toward one of three categories (enrollment, employment, or enlistment). Phase 2 will utilize a convergent parallel design, as the final postsecondary plan implementation is collected quantitatively with student feedback and reflections collected qualitatively. These two datasets were mixed to determine an overall interpretation.

Phase 1 used a student survey to capture postsecondary aspirations. Pleasant Grove High School operates a weekly Homeroom Advisory organized by grade level. This presents a regular meeting space for seniors to conduct lessons on the postsecondary planning process. This is also a regular topic for seniors and is within the scope of my job description as a High School Principal, along with others that will be directed to support this (Counselors, Homeroom

teachers, etc.). Therefore, no additional consent was required for students to engage in the work, as it was a natural part of their planning for graduation.

The survey instrument was adapted from the Educational Longitudinal Survey of the National Center for Education Statistics (Appendix D). It will be developed within Qualtrics to support the protection of identifiers and data analysis. Students will be provided the context in advance of the survey by a whole group senior assembly in which the fall semester will be outlined in terms of College and Career options and focus for October and November. Each year, the College Foundation of North Carolina (CFNC) organizes a Countdown to College in October. November is the National Career Month. North Carolina supports this, including through NC Careers, dedicating this as Career Development Month (North Carolina Careers, n.d.). Both have been part of the Pleasant Grove HS Student Services calendar for several years.

Phase 1 will leverage these events to build on the baseline data from the Qualtrics postsecondary-plan survey. During October, Counselors will meet with all seniors in small groups and as individuals. They will support the College Application Week, where students can apply to many colleges in North Carolina and have their application fees waived. Other services include the completion of the FAFSA and RDS. Students will be prompted to create an account on the College Foundation of North Carolina (CFNC) website. As a researcher, I will collaborate with counselors to track quantitative data using this tool. Students will also complete open-ended surveys to support qualitative data collection for enrollment as a postsecondary plan.

During Phase 1, the Career Month of November will implement a Career Fair as a mainstay of information for seniors. This event has been held twice annually at the school since the COVID Pandemic. The participants included more than 30 employers from the area, as well as a few institutions of higher learning (Community Colleges and four-year universities). This

event will also be supported by intentional homeroom lessons in advance of the event to frontload seniors to maximize the benefit of the event. This will include guiding prompts of student aspirations in career fields based on their interests and career trajectories. Students participated in creating personal Career Development Plans during their high school years. These can be guiding documents for students to target employers in the future. Data during these events will include quantitative and qualitative feedback from students based on the lessons and culminating events of the Career Fair.

Ultimately, Phase 1 will focus on the first and second research questions: 1) What are the aspirations for postsecondary student plans at Pleasant Grove High School? 2) What are the perceived barriers to Pleasant Grove students' postsecondary plans? To answer these questions, the baseline of student aspirations will be measured, and perceived barriers will be explored through focus groups.

Quantitative data will be analyzed from Phase 1 and triangulated with qualitative data collection. This methodology will use purposeful sampling by organizing student focus groups to explore aspirations for employment and enrollment. This phase of the inquiry will explore the second research question: What are the perceived barriers to Pleasant Grove's students' aspirations for postsecondary plans?

Two focus groups will be composed of five to seven participants. Each group will comprise seniors who have indicated aspirations toward either employment or enrollment. Students will be provided with informed consent, and the focus groups will be recorded for transcription. Focus groups will be facilitated by a counselor and myself as the lead researcher. Qualitative analysis was conducted using an inductive coding method. This will lead to a thematic analysis of student aspirations that will inform the planning of phase 3 work.

Phase 2 of the research design marks the midpoint of the academic year. Students will submit quantitative data to counselors in terms of initial applications submitted to four-year universities and any related career applications (job or vocational training). Financial aid is another category of quantitative data that will continue to be informed in Phase 2. This includes a continuation of phase 1 data for FAFSA completion and the rolling scholarship applications that are common at this time of year.

In Phase 2, the qualitative and quantitative data analyses will be convergent. The SIAR model will be employed to inform additional student advising support based on convergent data analysis in Phase 2 (Mertler, 2022). In this model, the reflection stage serves as the basis for input into Stage 1 planning.

Phase 2 of the research design will serve to implement final student support for postsecondary aspirations and capture outcome data on postsecondary plans as well as the impact of student support throughout the year. This will include quantitative data on students implementation of their postsecondary aspirations (i.e., commitments to college or other enrollment, enlistments, or secured employment). Importantly, there will be feedback on the student advising program and its impact on their aspirations. This will be captured in surveys using Likert scale data and open-ended responses for both quantitative and qualitative data. The matrix in Table 3 illustrates the phases and mixed methods of inquiry, including guiding questions and plans to collect data over the scope of the senior year decision-making timeline.

SIAR Phase 1

Phase 1 will constitute baseline data collection on student aspirations in September and include College and Career advising foci in October and November. Phase 1 will continue through January as focus groups support qualitative data collection on students perceived barriers

Table 3

Timeline of Phases of Inquiry

Overview of Phases of Inquiry – Supporting / Promoting Student Aspirations for Postsecondary Plans			
<u>Oct – Dec</u>	<u>January</u>	<u>February – March</u>	<u>April – June</u>
College and Career Programming	Baseline Data Collection (Surveys, Focus Groups)	Targeted Student Supports	Post Secondary Data Plan Collection, Member Check

to their postsecondary aspirations. Quantitative data from surveys in this initial phase will be used to gauge early aspirations and early impacts of student services informational programming.

Strategize

Initial planning with a core team of collaborative partners established a timeline of events for the first phase of the inquiry process. This core team will consist of at least five members, including the Principal, the Assistant Principal, two School Counselors, and the Career Development Coordinator. The planning process will outline the initial senior class meeting, follow-up advisory meetings in homerooms, and survey administration in phase one, which will serve as a baseline for individual student aspirations. During phase one, events will be planned in October and November around College and Career information. These plans will include ways to collect data from these activities that will measure student learning. These resemble the best practice of using exit tickets after a classroom lesson.

An important step in concluding phase one will be purposeful sampling of focus groups. Focus groups will consist of five to seven students and will be grouped primarily into those planning to enroll and those planning to enter the workforce directly. Structured focus group protocols will be reviewed and adjusted with Counselors and Career Development Coordinator (CDC) as collaborative inquiry partners.

Implement

The inquiry phase has several action items. These include an initial senior meeting to introduce the goal of promoting student postsecondary aspirations and identify actions within the first phase activities. I will lead this meeting and collaborate with the Counselors and CDC to present portions of the session relevant to college and careers. Meetings will also be scheduled with Homeroom Advisory teachers to support this initial meeting with additional lessons. The

Homeroom Advisory teacher will also lead the initial baseline survey on postsecondary aspirations. They will need to be trained to present and execute the survey administration. Events will be conducted in October to support College Information, such as postsecondary enrollment, and in November to support our Career Fair and postsecondary employment. These will include additional data collected from students to gauge the impact of student advisory activities in support of their aspirations for postsecondary plans.

Analyze

Data analysis in this phase included a baseline survey to measure students' aspirations for postsecondary plans. The survey will be administered via Qualtrics to enhance quantitative data analysis. This will provide holistic and detailed measures of students' plans for enrollment and their immediate and long-term employment goals. These datasets can be explored convergently with additional data gathered from events for College and Career information.

The qualitative data from the focus groups collected at the end of phase one will be critical for analyzing and guiding the inquiry in phase two. Data analysis of phase one involved coding the transcripts of the focus groups to develop categories and themes. The driving inquiry question will be to identify “What are perceived barriers to Pleasant Grove’s students’ postsecondary plans?” The categories and themes gathered from the focus groups will support the strategy in phase two to develop targeted advising support to advance student aspirations and mitigate the barriers to their postsecondary plans. Focus group questions are in Appendix E.

Reflect

The SIAR cycle is intended to be iterative and malleable to the collaborative and informative process of inquiry. This means that the information gathered in phase one and the analyses of the focus groups will be critical to the development of targeted student advising

support in Phase 2. The first two research questions will be subject to reflection in phase one:
What are the aspirations and perceived barriers for student postsecondary plans at PGHS?

SIAR Phase 2

Phase 2 will span the second semester, from March to June. This phase will leverage data collection from phase one to plan and implement targeted student support designed to promote postsecondary aspirations beyond perceived barriers. This will be implemented in targeted student support activities to support and enhance student aspirations for post-secondary planning. There will also be elements of quantitative data collection through observation of student progress toward their postsecondary aspirations, year-end collection of student progress, and qualitative data through member-checking with students in the study. Member checking will occur closer to the year-end reflection and unpacking of the final inquiry question.

Strategize

The planning portion for phase two will involve the same collaborative inquiry partners (Principal, Assistant Principal, Counselors, and CDC). This leadership group will use the data collected in phase one to articulate the perceived barriers to student aspirations and strategize appropriate student support to mitigate these barriers. The Homeroom Advisory teachers will support some of these activities as well as utilize observation of student progress to report data informally on the impact of activities. Additional strategy planning will include the collection of year-end student postsecondary plans so that this data can support the measurement of impact from phase one baseline data.

Implement

Phase 2 implementation and action will primarily align the appropriate support resources to engage seniors and families to mitigate perceived postsecondary barriers. There will also be

additional targeted student advising activities to support students in their progress toward implementing their post-secondary plans. This will include meeting with students individually and in small groups, as well as through the Homeroom Advisory program. Student support may also include further work with families and the utilization of resources introduced in phase one. These may include the College Foundation of NC, FAFSA, and other financial aid resources, partnerships with community colleges, and work with local employment agencies and service branches.

Analyze

Student data collection will involve ongoing formative assessments of student progress toward their postsecondary plans. This will occur through observation by Homeroom Advisory teachers as well as lead inquiry partners. Additional data will be reviewed through student feedback within each targeted student support. This will resemble similar practices from phase one, likened to the best practice of exit tickets used to measure student acquisition of material in a classroom lesson.

The plans for phase two include the collection of year-end information via surveys and additional student member check-in practices to further verify the conclusions from the inquiry. This analysis explores students' experiences in the advising process to support their postsecondary plans. These analyses will support research question three; What impact did student advising support have on promoting aspirations and addressing perceived barriers to student postsecondary plans at Pleasant Grove High School?

Reflect

The information gathered in phases one and two can be aggregated against the data collected at the end of the inquiry cycles. Descriptive statistics can be used to identify trends in

the senior class postsecondary plans. Coding and categorizing the focus group transcripts will also support the explanations of student decisions. The third inquiry question was analyzed in this phase. “How do these data sets inform common and thematic obstacles and solutions to rural postsecondary plan aspirations and implementation on a wider scale?”

This phase sought to identify ways to support enhanced postsecondary student aspirations in rural schools. The reflection and actions from phase three will be to analyze the development of students’ postsecondary aspirations within the inquiry. A more refined year-long timeline of the senior year can support improved outcomes in the coming academic year.

Inquiry Design Rigor

Several steps will be taken to help ensure the quality and rigor of the methodological design of this exploratory sequential, mixed-method inquiry grounded in IS. First, the design will utilize numerous techniques that provide evidence of rigor within the scope of educator-led research. These include triangulation, repetition of cycles, peer and participant debriefing, and member checking (Mertler, 2022).

There will be some triangulation of qualitative measures. Triangulation involves relating multiple data sources to improve trustworthiness (Bogden & Biklen, 2007; Glesne, 2006). The baseline surveys and additional data collected in phase one will provide frameworks for purposeful sampling. Additionally, informing the focus group composition will be quantitative data in terms of postsecondary enrollment action steps (i.e., FAFSA, RDS, applications) or employment action steps (resume written/submitted, job applications, networking action steps). When members of the focus group are asked exploratory questions about the steps they take and confirm those steps, they will enhance the validity of the data collection. This will also help to

understand the layers of issues impacting postsecondary aspirations at a deeper level (Mertler, 2022).

Additional steps to ensure interpretive validity included video transcription. Peer debriefing with counselors within the building will also support data collection and analysis. Finally, the length of time spent in the field study will support its validity (Mertler, 2022). Most of the senior year will be spent studying the journey toward identifying, enhancing, and supporting student aspirations for postsecondary planning.

The quantitative research tools used in this study included questionnaires. To address validity, the Educational Longitudinal Study (ELS) was leveraged. The questionnaire that I will use will be adapted from a series of survey items used in the ELS.

This supports the validity of the data. Validity is a measure of whether the data indeed measure what we intended to measure (Mertler, 2022). The ELS focuses on students' trajectories from the beginning of high school to postsecondary education and the workforce (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). Other quantitative research will be conducted using CFNC. This website will allow the collection of student information in terms of FAFSA applications completed, RDS completed, and college applications submitted. This site also allows for comparisons across years and other students in graduation cohorts, which will increase data analytics.

Assumptions

This inquiry focuses on enhancing student aspirations for postsecondary plans at Pleasant Grove High School. I will assume that students and families will engage in the postsecondary planning process. This assumption also includes that families, students, teachers, and support staff see value in aspiring for high-quality postsecondary plans.

Table 4

Matrix of Inquiry Guiding Questions with Planned Data Collection and Analysis

Inquiry Guiding Questions	Method	Data Source or Instrument	Phase of Inquiry	Data Analysis
1) What are the aspirations for postsecondary student plans at Pleasant Grove High School?	Survey	Qualtrics Survey adapted from Published NCES	1	Quantitative
	Small Group Counseling (College)	CFNC site, Student Feedback Related to Career Information Sessions College	1	Quantitative / Qualitative
	Small Group (Career Fair)	Student Feedback Related to Career Information Sessions	1	Quantitative / Qualitative
2) What are the perceived barriers to Pleasant Grove students' postsecondary plans?	Focus Groups	Semi-Structured Questions	1	Qualitative
	Student Submission	Applications for Enrollment & Employment	1-2	Quantitative
3) What impact did student advising support have on promoting aspirations and addressing perceived barriers to student postsecondary plans at Pleasant Grove High School?	Survey	Member Check Final Postsecondary Plan Outcomes	2	Quantitative / Qualitative

An additional assumption is that the definitions of high-quality will need to be clarified and can be an assumption; do all students and families seek a higher quality of life and see that a postsecondary plan can help secure this outcome? Do all parties involved share similar definitions of quality postsecondary plans? For some, graduating high school could be the achievement goal, and there is no shared recognition that another plan is worthwhile. Another assumption is that students and families will answer honestly when assessing the perceived barriers to their aspirations. It is assumed that they will behave responsibly in striving toward their goals. This includes, for example, completing the FAFSA, being honest with self-inventories, completing applications (enrollment or employment), and following through on final commitments.

Delimitations

This study will be delimited to the class of senior students that enter their fourth year in the fall of 2024 and graduate in June 2025 at Pleasant Grove High School. The class will have approximately 117 students, evenly split between males (58) and females (59). The racial demographics of this class are 44 White, 42 Black, 25 Hispanic, and 6 Two or More Race Categories. A deeper review of this group's socioeconomic status may prove to be difficult to track as there are confidentiality limits on reporting to the individual level, and self-reported data may be subject to personal limits for privacy.

The timeline scope will be to measure impacts in the senior year decision-making and advising process, and so this timeline delimitation also obstructs certain longer-term barriers to postsecondary plans.

Limitations

The limitations of this study include a range of factors that are identified as real and/or perceived barriers that cannot be overcome through school resources. These may be called macro-barriers. A macro barrier refers to a wide range of factors that limit the postsecondary planning process, such as wider economic and/or health issues. There is also a wider distribution of resources that may limit post-secondary options. The range of limited resources is broad. College preparatory courses (teachers, course offerings such as AP, upper Math/Science), family resources, and employment opportunities in the region would limit students' postsecondary aspirations. These limitations are macro barriers for this inquiry, as the scope of the academic calendar timeline constituting the senior year of high school limits addressing some long-term barriers.

Another limitation is the personal locus of control. This may limit the ability of school staff to enact changes in a student's or family's mindset. One example previously noted includes pertinent information and decision-making that is immeasurable because of personal privacy. Families may have boundaries on sharing the reasons for their decisions regarding postsecondary planning. These could include confidentiality on financial matters or other cultural concerns, such as being judged by others.

Role of the Scholarly Practitioner

I serve as the Principal of Pleasant Grove High School. Pleasant Grove is located in a rural county and region of the state. I came to this role after serving the bulk of my career in an urban setting as a teacher and school administrator. I have also served the large majority of my career in high schools. This has led me to focus on student aspiration. I also see the context of serving in a rural district as one in which student aspirations may be perceived as different from

their non-rural peers. I want to explore this topic and focus on enhancing postsecondary aspirations and plans.

As the Principal of the building and a scholarly practitioner, I lead the management of the school's learning environment and serve as a steward for all students' progress toward successful graduation. It is logical to describe successful graduation as including the development and implementation of a high-quality postsecondary plan. I am also the supervisor of all the staff. As this problem of practice focuses on supporting the growth of student aspirations for postsecondary plans, I will direct human resources strategically toward this outcome. This will include close working relationships with the student services department (Counselors, Career Development Coordinator, Community College liaison). This will also include strategic partnerships with homeroom advisory teachers to conduct lessons to achieve this outcome.

As a scholarly practitioner and principal of a high school, I am invested in supporting students aspirations for postsecondary plans. I also highly value the fact that all families should be respected, including their personal autonomy. This is important because I refrain from my own presuppositions regarding what is deemed a high-quality postsecondary plan. As a scholarly practitioner, I will need to keep this in check for myself, as well as the inquiry partners and student support plans that are part of the action research.

Summary

The inquiry design for this focus of practice follows the important senior academic year to enhance and support student aspirations for postsecondary plans. The data will serve to inform the baseline aspirations and progress over the year. Additionally, exploring student perceptions of barriers will serve to inform targeted support to mitigate these so that student aspirations and implementation of postsecondary plans can be enhanced. Results from Seniors as they prepare to

graduate and confirm their postsecondary plans will be measured against baseline data collected in the fall. Additional unpacking of these results will involve member checking to establish the impact of student advising support in advancing postsecondary aspirations and overcoming barriers.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This inquiry aimed to enhance the aspirations and development of postsecondary plans for students in a rural NC high school. Postsecondary plans are outcomes that can support the predicted quality of life. Postsecondary education and high-quality employment can be promoted by directing school resources toward supporting student aspirations. Identifying baseline postsecondary aspirations and perceived barriers can inform how schools can promote students' self-efficacy and goal achievement.

Rural students face challenges that their non-rural peers do not face in postsecondary education and employment. These include economic challenges, such as high levels of income disparity, population decline, and shifting labor markets. Additionally, rural student enrollment in postsecondary education can be inhibited by lower educational attainment by parents, geographic isolation from universities and community colleges, and budgetary constraints that limit course offerings or extracurricular support for postsecondary aspirations (Niccolai et al., 2022).

Demographics

The research inquiry for this DiP was conducted at Pleasant Grove High School (PGHS). PGHS is a rural school in Macon County, NC. The total enrollment of PGHS in the school year 2024-2025 was approximately 415 students. The research was conducted with a senior class scheduled to graduate in June 2025. The Senior cohort comprised 109 graduates. The cohort's graduation rate was 90%.

The initial survey was administered in January of the senior year. This was administered after reviewing the research project and obtaining consent from the participants. As part of this problem of practice, to promote student aspirations in a rural high school, baseline data were

collected through a Qualtrics survey adapted from a longitudinal study by the National Center for Education Statistics (citation for the survey instrument or a report on results).

Data Collection

The Senior cohort provided data to inform the focus of this inquiry. The quantitative data in the initial survey distribution comprised 65 responses (68% response rate). The initial survey did not capture six students who attended the local community college for dual enrollment classes. It also did not capture the nine students who were early graduates of this cohort. Thus, the 65 responses accounted for 73% of the graduates who were in regular attendance at PGHS in January 2025. Most of these dual enrollment students were captured in the Senior Exit Survey. The remaining cohort members were either absent or did not participate in the initial survey. The demographics of this cohort were as follows: 51% male and 49% female. The racial demographics of the school were 43% Black, 37% White, 18% Hispanic, and 2% other. The demographics of the respondents closely mirrored the school and cohort: 37% Black, 31% White, 17% Hispanic, 2% other, and 11% did not disclose their identity.

Results

Inquiry Question 1: Aspirations for Student Postsecondary Plans at PGHS

The first research question sought to identify the aspirations of students at Pleasant Grove High School. These aspirations are categorized in three ways: plans for enrollment, plans for direct entry into the workforce, or plans to enlist in the military. Most students aspire to pursue post-secondary enrollment, either at a university or a community college, while smaller numbers indicate plans to enter the workforce directly or enlist in a branch of the military service. Many students demonstrate uncertainty or hold vague ideas about their postsecondary futures.

These results were supported by both quantitative and qualitative data. Each year, seniors at Pleasant Grove participate in grade-level assemblies that include thematic programs focused on postsecondary planning. In a Senior class assembly held at the beginning of the second semester (January), I provided a direct address around postsecondary plans as an introduction to the inquiry. This assembly included the administration of a survey to gather information about the participants' plans.

The survey results revealed that approximately 75% of students aspire to attend either a university or a community college. Nearly half (47%) of the respondents hoped to earn a bachelor's degree or higher. University attendance, or beyond, emerges as a more common aspiration than community college attendance. These findings are shown in Figure 4.

These results for student aspirations are similar to the results for parental educational expectations (See Figure 5). Students' responses were categorized as Mother and Father expectations separately. A significantly higher number of respondents cited their mothers' expectations (64) than their fathers (36). A similar proportion of mothers and fathers expected students to complete a 4-year degree as 57% of mothers and 63% of fathers were identified with the university (or beyond) pathway. Community College was identified as an expectation by 32% of mothers and 25% of fathers. Only 10% of both mothers and fathers identified High School graduation or GED as their only expectation. Notably, an equal number (10%) of respondents did not know their parental educational expectations.

Students also identified influencers in their high school experience as most often expecting to attend college. School Counselors were perceived to expect college the most, followed by favorite teachers, close relatives, and finally friends and coaches. Importantly, 85% of students reported receiving postsecondary planning information from their guidance

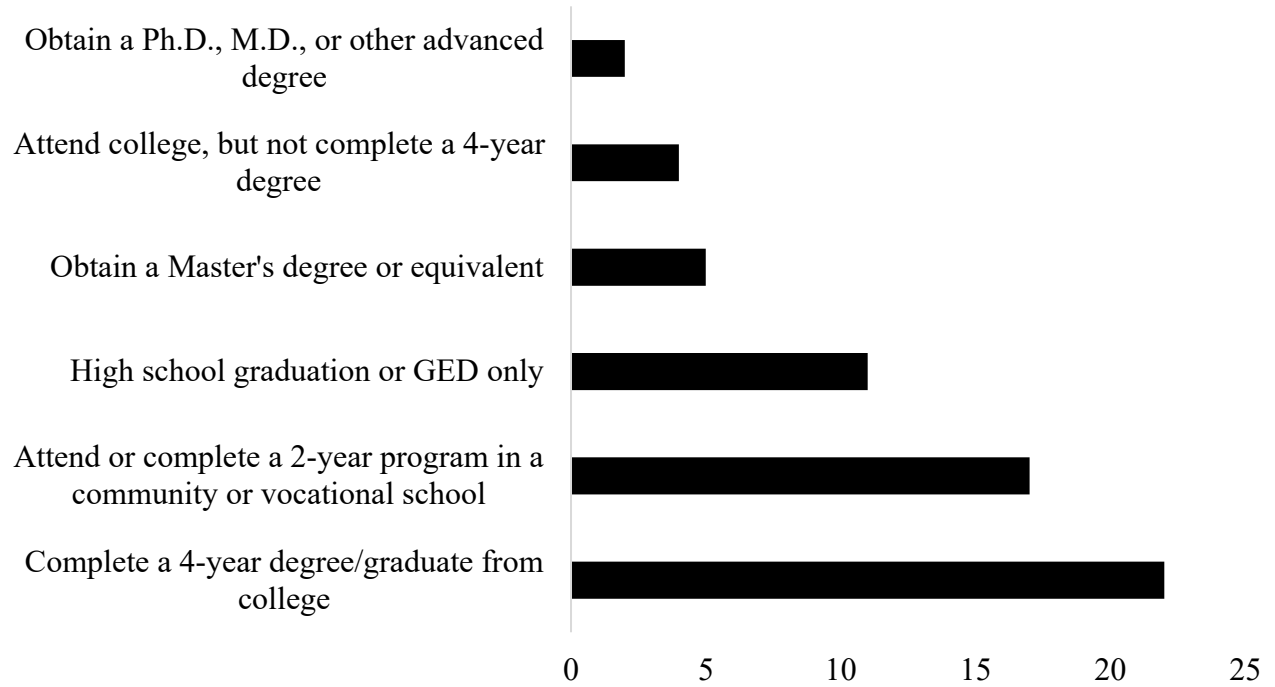


Figure 4. Student educational aspirations (n=61).

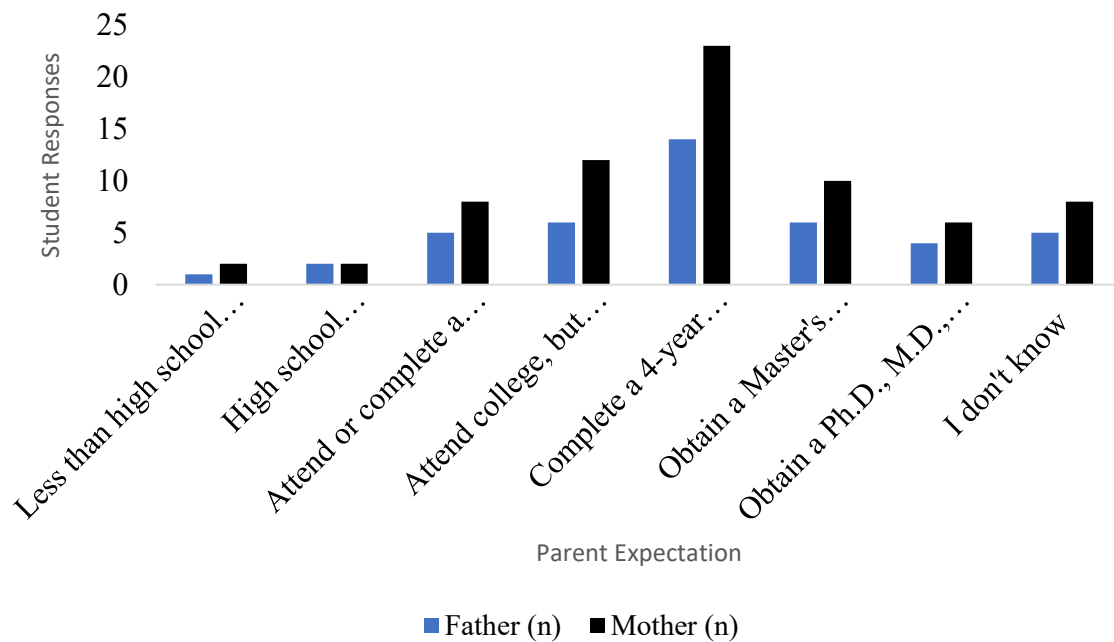


Figure 5. Parental educational expectations (n=43 responses [father], 71 responses [mother]).

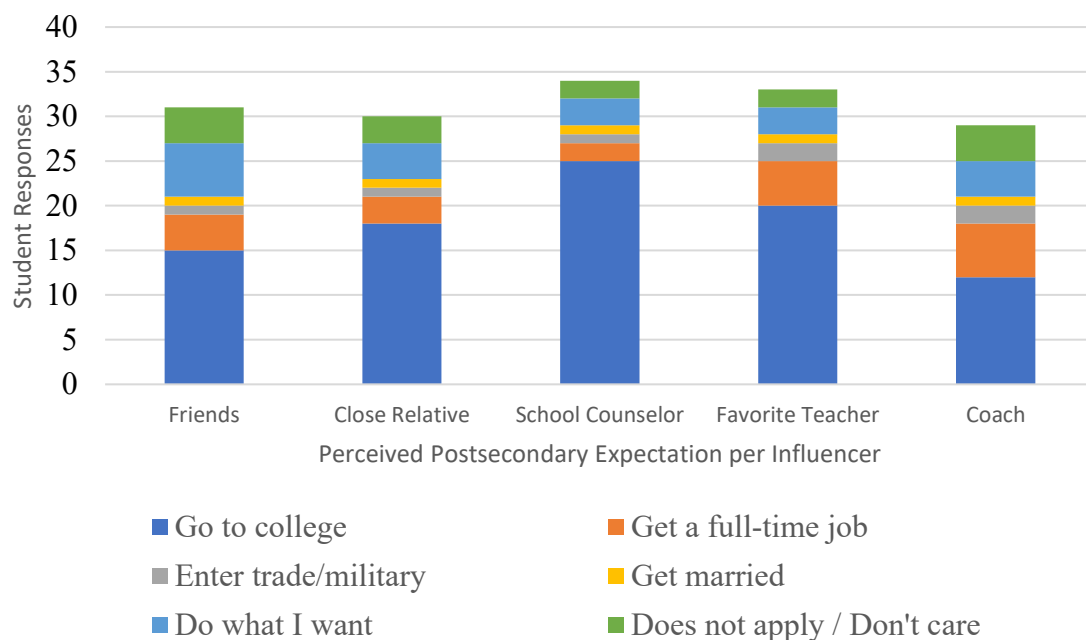


Figure 6. Perceived expectations after high school by influencer.

counselors, underscoring the central role of student services in fostering aspirations among students (See Figure 6).

A significant gap was observed between students' aspirations for community colleges and their awareness of vocational or technical training pathways. Sixteen students explicitly identified trade or technical schools as their goal, while thirty students aimed for occupations that required technical school credentials. Many focused only on academic transfer degrees (e.g., Associate of Arts or Associate of Science), overlooking the availability of technical credentials that enhance employment opportunities for these students.

The survey results also indicated that while students had some sense of immediate postsecondary plans, fewer had clarity about specific occupations (see Figure 7). More than half were uncertain when asked about the job they expected to pursue after high school. Of the 25 students who responded (as many noted "don't know" or "not applicable"), occupational interests included healthcare (7), skilled trades (9), service industry (4), law enforcement (2), and education (2). In contrast, when asked about occupations at age 30, responses reflected greater clarity as respondents decreased these "uncertain" identifiers. Approximately 50 students responded across the following occupational categories: 28% identified healthcare, 18% skilled trades, 12% professional fields, and 12% business (Figure 8).

Another notable finding is that 24% of seniors plan to enter the workforce directly, despite only 19.7% reporting that high school graduation would mark the end of their education. In addition, 5% of students expressed their intention to join the military or another service branch.

Qualitative findings from the focus groups further confirm the importance of educators, especially teachers and counselors, in shaping student aspirations. Students emphasized that

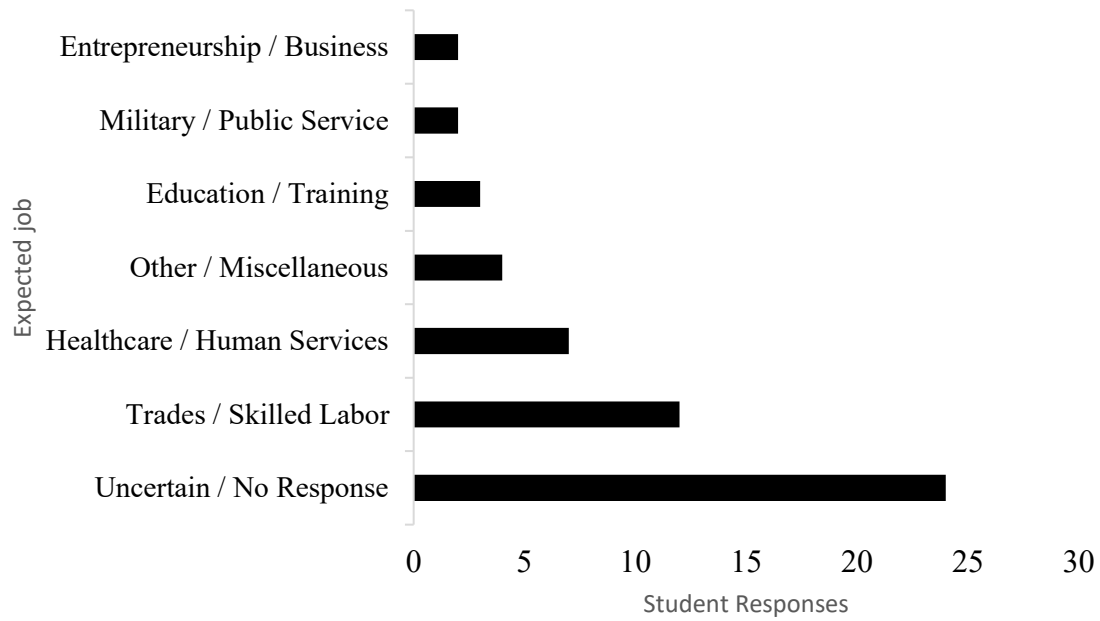


Figure 7. Planned job or occupation after high school (n=54).

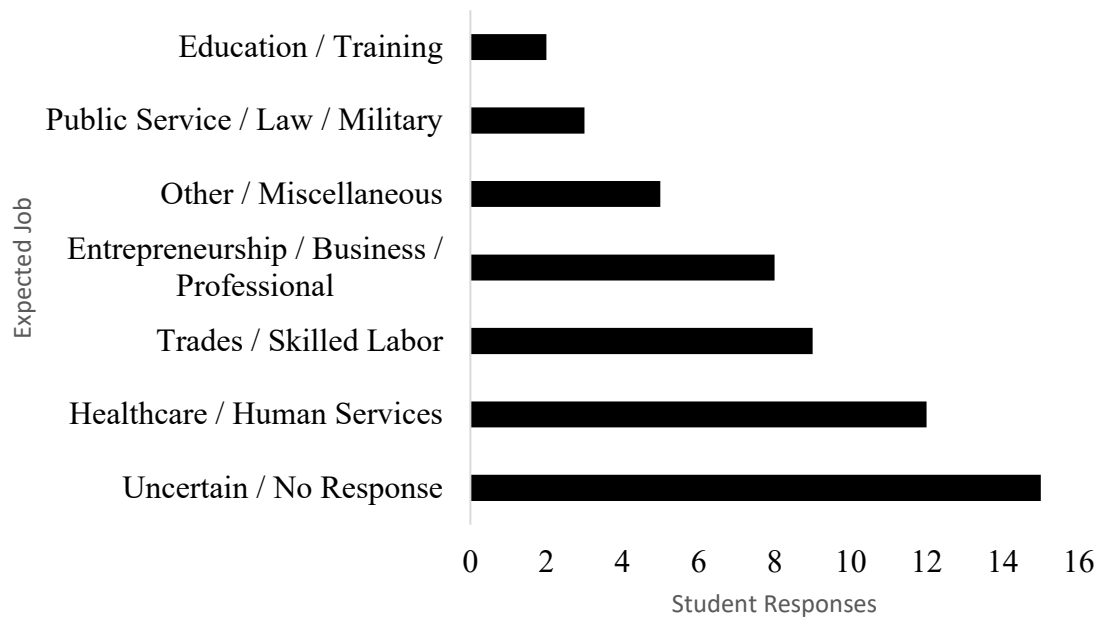


Figure 8. Expected job or occupation at age 30 (n=54).

consistent encouragement and reminders from staff reinforced the message that postsecondary planning matters.

Students communicated “most teachers, maybe 75% of them, always encourage you to go to college, your counselors encourage you to go to college.” Conversely, inconsistent or discouraging communication undermined motivation. One student stated that “Some teachers are like, ‘If you can’t deal with this, you’re not going to be able to deal with college’ ... it doesn’t make you want to go to college.” Together, these findings highlight that while aspirations are present, students require ongoing structured support to refine and sustain them.

Inquiry Question #2: Perceived Barriers to Pleasant Grove Students’ Postsecondary Plans

The second research inquiry question was what the perceived barriers to students’ postsecondary plans were at PGHS. This question compares postsecondary aspirations and plan implementation. This is supported by a comparison of the baseline and senior exit surveys. Additional context for barrier examination is provided by qualitative analysis and the resource landscape in rural Macon County. I will present the perceived barriers to seniors’ postsecondary plans at Pleasant Grove High School, first in terms of barriers to educational enrollment and then barriers to obtaining high-quality employment.

The number of students who reported that they did not plan to attend school after high school was small ($n = 8$). However, their most often cited reasons for not continuing education after high school were that school was not important or they would rather work and make money. Students next most frequently cited the need to support family, and in equal numbers of responses, they could not afford to go to school, did not have high enough grades, or did not need more education for their career (see Figure 9). These results indicate that barriers to

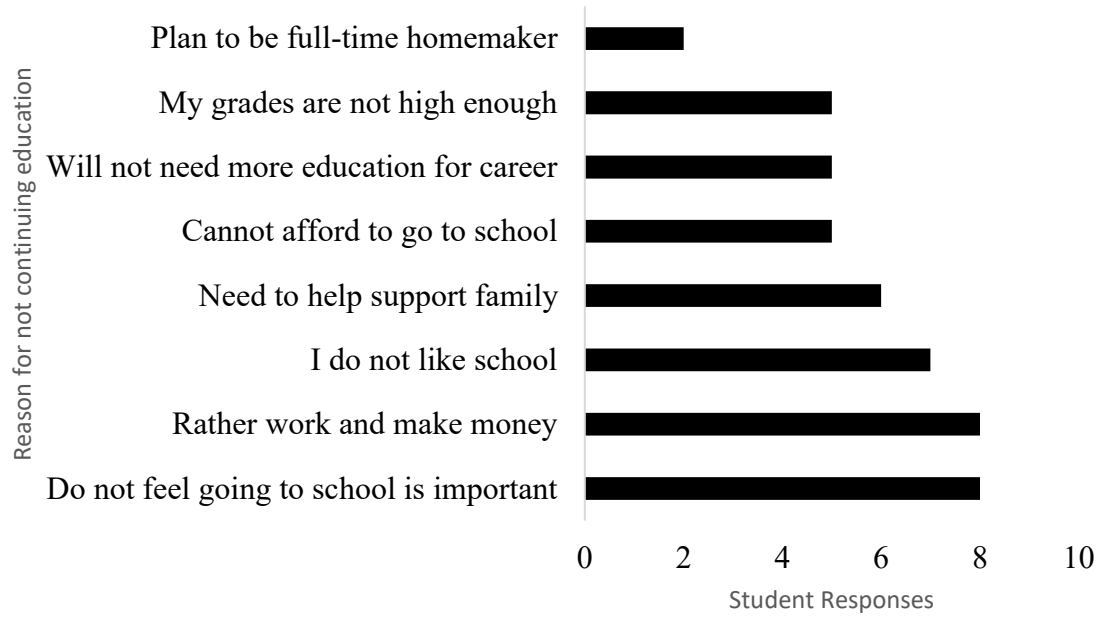


Figure 9. Reasons for not continuing education beyond high school (n= 46 total responses).

postsecondary education include economic pressure and low value for education from self and parents.

Barriers for students can be seen in their sense of self-efficacy as they frequently cite low expectations of themselves, of themselves from their peers, or from their families as limiting factors. Parental educational expectations cited in the quantitative analysis of student aspirations showed that mothers, in particular, held high aspirational hopes. Qualitative data from the focus group helped to further examine these parental and peer expectations and their impact on self-efficacy. One student in the focus group gave examples of a boyfriend girlfriend relationship and how lower aspirations in either party can demonstrate how “the decisions of other affect you.” The student even stated that one party in the relationship “dropped their college expectations and then wanted the other to do so.” This is a strong example of how peer influence negatively impacts student aspirations for postsecondary plans.

The thematic analysis of the focus group identified that teachers, family, and larger systems all impact students’ beliefs and motivation for postsecondary success. For example, one student stated in the focus group that teachers “Then treating you this way already doesn’t give you motivation.” Other students expressed that this relationship could sometimes inhibit their desire to enroll beyond high school. This sentiment is captured in another student quote: “There’s some people that... will just be harsh for no reason and they’ll blame it on preparing you for real life in the future.” These statements also align with the perceived barrier of a lack of academic preparation for college enrollment. Students’ perceptions of teacher treatment in the classroom are compounded by students’ perceptions of academic readiness. One student interested in the nursing field recognized that “my field is super challenging and not only that it's supercompetitive... (I am) super nervous because I feel like I'm fairly good at STEM courses and

whatnot, and you know, I'm pretty good at math.” Her feeling of anxiety regarding her aspirational readiness may not be uncommon for high school seniors. However, the same student stated that college is a whole new environment. This mindset, understood in the context of lower parental educational attainment, peer influence, and the urban normative nature of universities, helps us understand the unique barriers that rural students face.

Students identified in the focus group that system pressures could also present barriers to the desire to enroll in postsecondary education. Students stated that “Most teachers encourage you to go to college... but sometimes it feels like pressure.” Family systems also provided encouragement, although sometimes imbalanced. In the qualitative data family provision of encouragement was exemplified with the statements that “The most support comes from your family... they’ll give you guidance.” This perception of postsecondary plans should be considered alongside the quantitative data collected on parental postsecondary expectations. Fathers were cited by students 40% less often than mothers for parental educational expectations (see Figure 7). The need to support their families was the fourth most-cited reason for students deciding not to enroll after high school. The quantitative survey results show that parents’ expectations generally align with aspirations for postsecondary enrollment. However, when asked what they believed their peers thought they should do, students reported lower levels of anticipated enrollment. A substantial portion of students also selected “I don’t know,” suggesting that a lack of communication about postsecondary pathways may itself serve as a barrier. These data inform systemic pressures within family and community dynamics.

Financial challenges were identified as barriers. Students most frequently cited (tied with education as not important) that they would rather work and make money as the reason for not continuing education beyond high school. Additionally, the frequently cited reason that they

needed to support their families and could not afford to go to school demonstrates the economic pressures inhibiting postsecondary plans for education (Figure 9). These financial pressures often lead students to consider part-time employment alongside enrollment or, in some cases, to substitute employment for further education altogether. An exit survey collected prior to graduation identified that 24% of respondents (n = 15 of 62) cited college costs as a barrier (see Figure 9).

The results of the senior exit survey revealed that over half of the students (52%) intended to enroll in a community or technical college immediately after graduation. Approximately one-quarter (24%) planned to enter the workforce directly, while 19% expressed intentions to attend a four-year university or private college. Only a small proportion (5%) planned to enlist in the military. These findings suggest that while postsecondary enrollment remains a primary goal, most students favor accessible, cost-effective local options over traditional four-year pathways. This reflects both the rural context of the school and the economic and motivational barriers previously identified in the survey data (Figure 10).

Students pursuing employment as a primary postsecondary pathway often lack awareness of the training required for high-quality career opportunities. This was compounded by the limited availability of such employment within the local area. Both the survey data and focus group discussions suggest that family expectations and peer influences reinforce these limitations.

The focus group responses revealed considerable anxiety regarding the costs associated with higher education, including tuition, scholarship searches, and financial aid. In discussion of

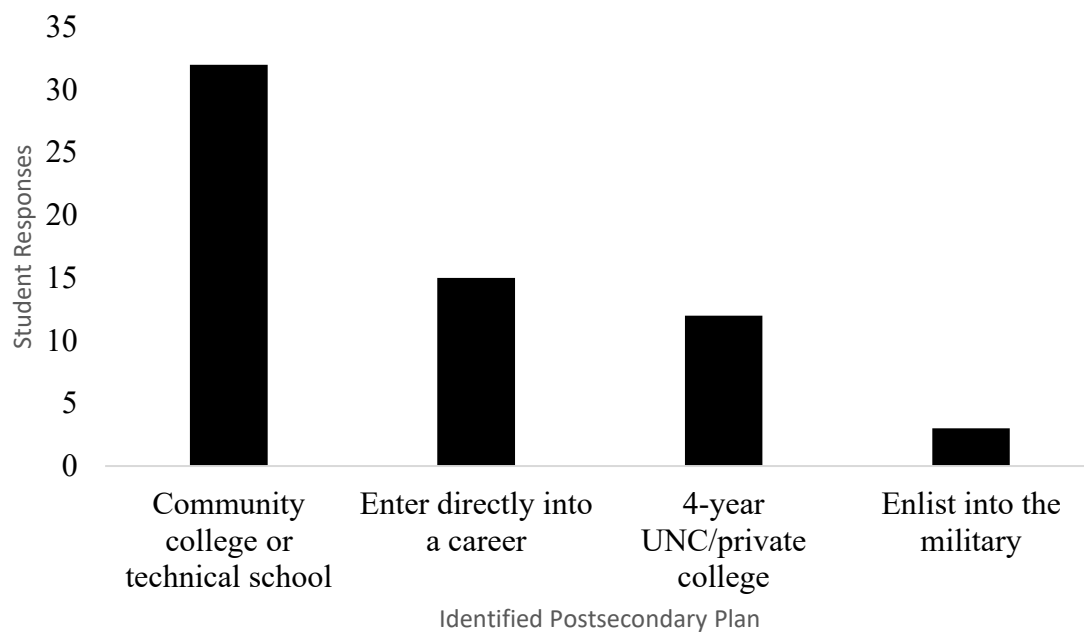


Figure 10: Postsecondary Plans for Seniors at Exit Survey (n=62)

the costs of college, students in the focus group stated that they “were definitely very reliant on scholarships.”

They had other considerations of college costs and advantages to the local opportunities; “I’m specifically doing in state because out of state is crazy,” and even more dire one student stated “ I cannot stress enough that if I don’t get scholarships, I cannot go to college.” Students in this group also recognized the difficulty of understanding the scholarship process. One way to circumvent this challenge is evident in the unique arrangement with the local Community College. Specifically, this was referenced as students identified the unique local Community College program’s arrangement to provide no-cost tuition to residents of the County.

Many students expressed the need to continue working to afford their schooling. For some, this made immediate employment appear more practical than pursuing postsecondary education. Others noted concerns about “fitting in” within a university environment, reflecting a barrier to exposure. Students whose parents had not pursued higher education reported lower comfort levels in navigating postsecondary systems, further limiting their family support.

Survey data also highlighted a group of students who considered alternatives such as trade schools, direct employment, or life choices unrelated to formal education (e.g., marriage, pursuing happiness in other ways). A recurring theme was skepticism about the return on investment for college, particularly given the availability of local jobs that do not require a bachelor’s degree and pay well. This perception, combined with parental educational attainment and regional employment patterns, shapes how students balance their choices between education and immediate work.

Inquiry Question #3: Impact of Student Advising Support on Promoting Aspirations and Addressing Perceived Barriers

The third research inquiry question was: What impact did student advising support at Pleasant Grove High School have on shaping aspirations and mitigating barriers to postsecondary planning? The school has intentionally designed structures to address these goals, including career development plans, homeroom advising, and the promotion of career and college pathways. Findings from this study, derived from surveys, focus groups, and anecdotal evidence, indicate that advising provides both individualized guidance and systemic structures that directly influence students' readiness for life after high school.

Advising support creates consistent opportunities for students to explore postsecondary options. Students were introduced to college and scholarship opportunities through targeted field trips, in-school workshops, and one-on-one sessions with counselors. These experiences provided not only logistical help, such as assistance with applications, but also symbolic reinforcement that higher education was possible and encouraged. Students identified counselors as trusted sources of information, a finding consistent with the quantitative survey data showing that 85% of students relied on their school counselors for guidance. This high level of reliance highlights the critical role of student services staff in supporting student aspirations within rural school settings. For students considering employment immediately after high school, advising provides exposure to pathways that could lead to more stable and higher-paying positions. Initiatives included apprenticeship programs, annual career fairs, and structured networking events with local companies. Partnerships with the school and local community college to bring a welding class to the school exemplify longer-term efforts to meet the training and credential needs for high-quality employment. These opportunities helped broaden students' understanding of employment beyond entry-level work and reinforced the importance of credentialing and

training. Advising also facilitated contact with service branch recruiters, thereby supporting students interested in military enlistment as a legitimate post-secondary option.

However, several challenges have emerged. One difficulty was the limited availability of high-quality employment opportunities that could be secured within the senior year. This limitation underscores the need for multi-year advising rather than short-term interventions. In response, the school adjusted its approach by building partnerships that emphasized the need for earlier preparation. For instance, the district-level initiative “Beau Pros” connects juniors with area employers to provide workplace exposure and mentorship before their senior year. At the school level, innovative partnerships with local community colleges have allowed welding courses to be offered onsite, enabling students to graduate with industry-recognized credentials and significantly enhancing their employability.

These examples demonstrate that advising at Pleasant Grove not only addressed immediate needs but also evolved to anticipate structural barriers to student success. The combination of individualized guidance, systemic programming, and long-term planning reflects a comprehensive model of academic advising. Importantly, this model is responsive to rural contexts, where access to postsecondary resources may be more limited than in suburban or urban settings. School Administration, Staff, and Counseling served as a bridge, providing students with the information, confidence, and connections needed to pursue their aspirations despite financial, cultural, or logistical barriers.

Overall, student advising support had a meaningful and multifaceted effect. It elevated aspirations by normalizing postsecondary planning, providing concrete strategies to overcome financial and logistical challenges, and establishing partnerships that extended opportunities beyond school walls. By integrating academic planning with career preparation and community

partnerships, advising efforts at Pleasant Grove not only promoted postsecondary aspirations but also created sustainable structures to address the barriers students face in a rural high school context.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings of a convergent mixed-methods analysis examining student postsecondary aspirations, perceived barriers, and the impact of advising supports at a rural North Carolina high school. Results indicated that while most students expressed aspirations to pursue postsecondary education, particularly four-year degrees, many demonstrated limited clarity regarding specific career pathways and long-term goals. Perceived barriers clustered around financial pressures, questions about the relevance of education, and concerns related to academic readiness and self-efficacy. Both quantitative and qualitative findings highlighted the influence of family expectations, peer networks, and local economic conditions on student decision-making. A shift between baseline aspirations and exit plans revealed increased intent toward community college enrollment and workforce entry, suggesting that contextual and financial realities shaped final outcomes more strongly than initial aspirations. Advising structures, including counseling, career development initiatives, and community partnerships, played a critical role in expanding student awareness and supporting postsecondary planning. Overall, the integrated findings demonstrate that while aspirations are present, they must be supported by intentional systems, exposure, and guidance to translate into aligned postsecondary outcomes. These results provide a foundation for the interpretation and implications discussed in Chapter 5.

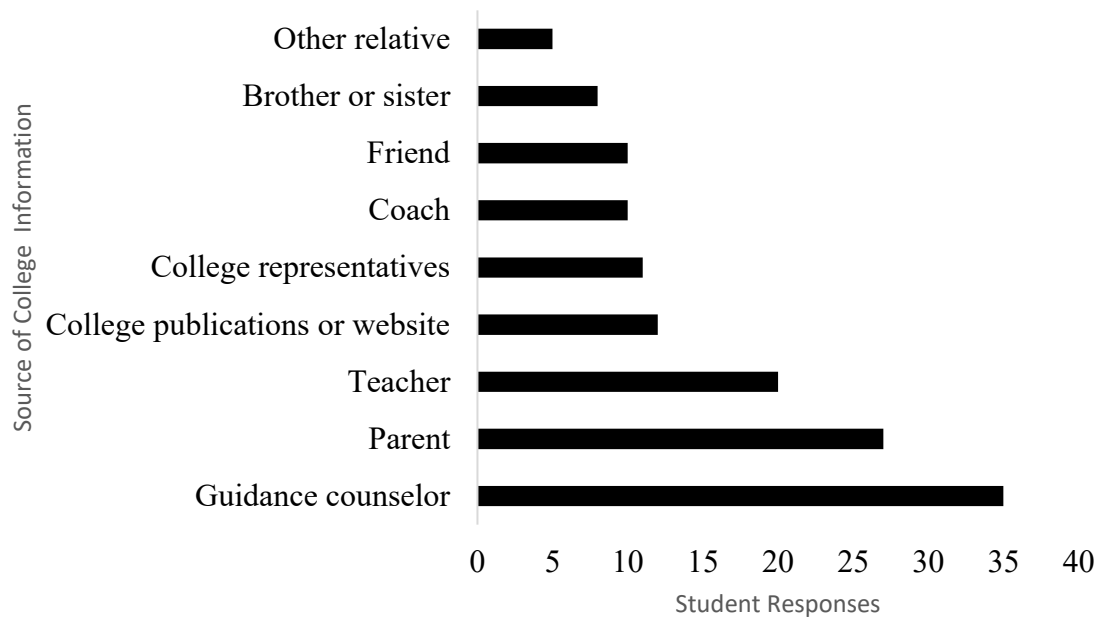


Figure 11. Sources of Information About College Entrance (n=138 total responses).

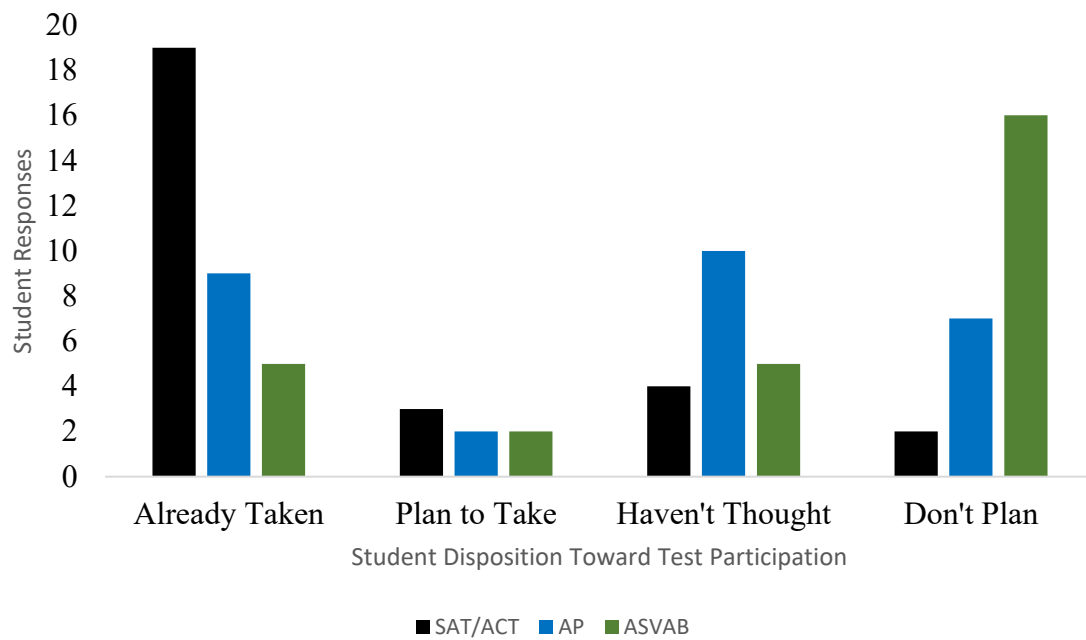


Figure 12: Test Participation Plans (n=28)

Table 5

Themes Related to Barriers to Postsecondary Goals

Theme	Description	Representative Quote
1. Academic rigor and fear of not measuring up	Students view challenging courses as major barriers. They worry about learning “slower” than peers and about the high-stakes nature of programs like nursing, surveying, and computer science.	“Certain classes might be difficult... they might be afraid of learning slower than others, or like they won’t get it at all.”
2. Financial constraints and cost of education	The cost of tuition, loans, and living expenses strongly shapes whether, where, and how students enroll. Many believe college is only possible with substantial scholarships or grants.	“If you don’t have the money for it... you’re going to struggle and you’re going to give up.”
3. Place-based constraints and need to stay local	Because of financial and family realities, many students must remain in or near the county, which narrows their postsecondary options.	“Not many people can afford to go towards Raleigh... they need to stay around here.”
5. Navigational barriers and limited college knowledge	Students struggle with the ‘how’ of college: applications, selecting the right track, residency determination, and accessing scholarships.	“At first I was really lost... I had to get my brother to help me. I had to email Miss Avery so she could help me.”

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, & RECOMMENDATIONS

Educational outcomes in the United States vary significantly by location, reflecting differences in community context, access to resources, and postsecondary opportunities. Student outcomes can be measured in various ways, including test scores and graduation rates. Although more difficult to measure, quality college or career preparation is also an outcome expectation for high school graduates. Student postsecondary plan aspirations differ across the diverse communities that constitute public schools in the United States. One factor in this variation is the unique role of the place and the dynamics of different communities.

Layered on these concepts is the reality that the demographic contexts of rural communities and related resources are dynamic. The National Rural Education Association (NREA) Research Agenda 2022-2027 focuses on rural community access to postsecondary success and is centered on spatial equity (Hartman et. al, 2022). Spatial equity refers to the fairness of the distribution of outcomes across challenges driven by the concept of place. A core category within the NREA framework that impacts spatial equity is the college and career trajectory. This category recognizes the need for research on both college and career pathways for rural students, including expectations and aspirations, access to information and academic offerings, and transition to postsecondary pathways.

North Carolina serves the second largest number of rural students in the United States (Showalter et al., 2023). There is a history of spatial equity challenges in the state, as exemplified by the Leandro Case. This case held that wealth disparities were central to the state's failure "to enable the student to successfully engage in postsecondary education or vocational training" and "enable the student to compete on an equal basis with others in further formal education or gainful employment" (Grant, 2023, p. 5).

The purpose of this DiP was to enhance the development of rural students' postsecondary aspirations. Rural students face unique obstacles in their postsecondary aspirations and plans. This inquiry will help identify the assets that support rural students in their postsecondary aspirations. Rural assets include close community ties between schools and families and collaboration between local resources in higher education in the county and region of the state. Family knowledge building of institution-specific scholarship opportunities and collaboration between local and regional postsecondary education institutions are important for building capacity to enhance postsecondary aspirations (Cain, 2023). These were both high-leverage opportunities for DiP implementation at PGHS. The intended result of this inquiry is to consider student advising practices that can enhance enrollment, enlistment, and employment opportunities for rural students.

Summary of the Findings

The aspirations of students at Pleasant Grove High School closely align with the pathways observed among high school seniors. According to the 2025 North Carolina's State of Educational Attainment Report published by MyFutureNC, 75% of students' postsecondary intentions are enrollment, 19% employment, and less than 5% enlistment (MyFutureNC, 2025). At PGHS, most students also aspire to postsecondary enrollment, either at a university or a community college, while smaller numbers indicate plans to enter the workforce directly or enlist in a branch of the military service. However, many students demonstrate uncertainty or have vague ideas about their postsecondary futures.

Survey results to establish baseline aspirations indicated that 47% of respondents intended to obtain a bachelor's degree or beyond, while 27% aspired to attend a Community College. This aspirational value collected in January is higher than the Senior Exit Survey,

indicating the implementation of postsecondary plans. In a June exit survey, 51% of respondents stated that they planned to attend Community College, and 19% planned to attend a 4-year University. These findings show a disparity between baseline aspirations and their implementation. This data may also indicate that student aspirations for university tracks at PGHS have been promoted over the course of high school and that certain barriers and assets shape initial postsecondary outcomes.

These educational aspirations are closely aligned between parents and students. Parent expectations for post-secondary enrollment exceed student expectations, as 57% of mothers and 63% of fathers identified the university (or beyond) pathway for their students. Community College as a postsecondary enrollment expectation of the parent was identified by 32% of mothers and 25% of fathers.

In addition to expectations from parents, school staff (teachers, counselors, and school administrators) also hold high expectations for student aspirations for post-secondary enrollment. Students estimated anecdotally in focus groups that “most teachers, maybe 75% of them, always encourage you to go to college, your counselors encourage you to go to college.” The baseline survey findings also demonstrated that School Counselors were a trusted source and strong advocates for college. Student responses identified counselors as the primary sources of information about college entrance, and college entry was the leading perceived expectation of their counselors. These findings support the notion that a strong student advising program at the PGHS promoted student aspirations for post-secondary enrollment.

A lower sense of self-efficacy was a leading barrier to students’ post-secondary aspirations. This is evident in terms of students’ own perspectives as well as those of their peers. A baseline survey response to capture students long-term aspirations identified that the largest

response for expected occupation at age thirty was uncertain or no response (27%). Because students do not clearly see long-term employment aspirations, they do not have clear postsecondary enrollment goals. This barrier is reinforced by low levels of parental educational attainment. Lower levels of parental college attendance also led to parents limited ability to navigate the postsecondary enrollment landscape.

Another common barrier is economic pressure. Economic pressures include the real and perceived need to earn money for oneself or one's family. Another barrier to high-quality employment was the limited economic opportunities within the rural community. One large local timber production employer attended the school's career fair. They discussed entry-level positions starting at \$17 a benefits package and advancement opportunities toward \$26 an hour. Although at least eight seniors who were interested in employment after high school shared in this discussion, none had secured employment with this company by graduation. Other attempts to partner with the largest mining company in the county have met with little success. Almost one-third (30%) of students who identified a reason for not continuing education after high school indicated that they would rather work and make money or that they needed to help support their family.

It was evident that the rural community enjoyed certain assets that enhanced the role of student advising. School officials (teachers, counselors, and administrators) had a high degree of influence on students' perceptions. Parents also tend to demonstrate a high degree of trust in school officials. While local employment networks were sometimes limited, they also appeared to have some commitment to employing local human resource talent. Other local networks that proved to be an asset included faith-based communities, athletic teams, and extended families.

Interpretation of the Findings

The findings of this study support and extend the work of Lent and Brown in their Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT). SCCT conceptualizes that career development is an interactive process shaped by self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). Students do not develop postsecondary aspirations in isolation; rather, these aspirations emerge from continuous social interaction. Those involved in this focus of practice helped identify the multifaceted layers that shape their aspirations.

This inquiry also helped identify the added contextual facets and pressures that shape both student aspirations and the implementation of post-secondary plans. Rural settings have unique assets and barriers. This includes the economic landscape and community connectivity. The rural community in this study was fortunate to have a very strong connection to a nearby Community College. This study identified that student perceptions of post-secondary university educational institutions can be characterized as urban normative, even though there was a major university within 40 miles of the high school.

University attendance, or beyond, emerges as a more common aspiration than community college attendance. The survey results revealed that approximately 75% of students aspire to attend either a university or a community college. Nearly half (47%) of the respondents hoped to earn a bachelor's degree. However, post-secondary enrollment is more prevalent at community colleges. This trend is influenced by the county's strong resources for the top-ranked Community College in the state. According to the NC Educational Attainment report, postsecondary enrollment for this county's residents aligns with this trend. Community College enrollees in the county outnumber state university enrollees by a 3:1 ratio. This contrasts with the statewide

trend, where university and community college enrollment is basically equal (myFutureNC, 2025).

The central role of community colleges in PGHS postsecondary aspirations also connects the SCCT tenet of environmental influences with postsecondary outcomes. This is evident from the resource base (the Community College and major nearby university) and the proximal influences or different groups that influence student aspirations. These groups include school staff, families, and peers.

The many students who aspired to a skilled trade or to enter the workforce directly also exemplified elements of SCCT. This includes family expectations or needs to support the family and the influence of limited parental educational attainment. Environmental factors, such as the labor fields common to rural communities, also influence students' aspirations towards workforce pathways. Students' exposure to the trades and industries in their geographic area as common pathways within their peers or family networks also impacts their outcome expectations and self-efficacy toward alternative post-secondary plans.

The study's findings regarding employment articulate the relationship between unique pressures in this rural setting and postsecondary aspirations. As reported in the senior exit survey in June, 24% of seniors planned to enter the workforce directly after high school. Only 19% reported that high school graduation would mark the end of their education in the baseline survey conducted in January. This gap suggests that some students may respond to immediate economic pressures or limited postsecondary support structures. Similar conclusions were found in a rural study of Appalachian students. These findings align with the idea that economic pressures are evident in students with low socioeconomic status, who also commonly reported aspirations for

full-time employment. Additionally, these students lack information, guidance, and financial resources to pursue education (Ali & McWhirter, 2006).

My study utilized a survey administered in January of students' senior year, after they had developed some degree of clarity regarding their postsecondary plans. Data quality was enhanced by the stability of the school's leadership and counseling staff, which fostered trust between students and the Student Services Team. The fall semester includes a school-wide college application campaign and career programming led by student services and other stakeholders.

A significant gap was observed between students' aspirations for community colleges and their awareness of vocational or technical training pathways. Sixteen students explicitly identified trade or technical schools as a goal, while thirty students aimed for an occupation that requires technical school credentials, suggesting a misunderstanding of the range of programs community colleges offer. However, this rural setting benefits from a strong connection to the community college. Research supports that rural community life is highly interdependent, such that leaving the community can be a challenge to other educational aspirations (Morton et. al, 2018). Community colleges also represent an important bridge between high school and continued learning in post-secondary life. Most rural students (65%) who enroll in postsecondary education attend a two-year institution, and a quarter (24%) of students who enroll in postsecondary institutions first attend two-year schools before transferring to four-year schools (Byun et al., 2017). Exposure to community college resources is a significant step that schools can take to enhance the quality of students' postsecondary aspirations.

Limitations of the Study

There are several elements of this inquiry that are limitations of the study. Because the study was conducted at a single high school site, generalizability is limited. Even though this was a study in a rural area, each rural area throughout the state and country has its own unique dynamics. These dynamics would differ in socioeconomic status as well as resource and employment or labor opportunities.

Another limitation of this study was that the students self-reported. This does provide for the potential for response bias, and there were also a number of incomplete responses. In addition to the fact that this study relied on self-reporting, there are many examples of potential positionality bias or influence. Not only was the principal a primary leader of this study, but counselors and teachers could have exerted positionality simply because the study was conducted within the school setting.

This study was also conducted in a time-bound manner in the second half of the senior year. Opportunities to have a more longitudinal design over the four years of high school could potentially identify many more nuances in both the aspirations and barriers that students face in their journey of career development. In addition, the depth of qualitative responses was limited by the time-bound nature of the study. Although a focus group provided open-ended questions and member checking was part of the study, a longer case study of the students involved could provide further depth to the qualitative data.

Implications of the Findings for Practice

The results of this study reinforce the importance of providing student advising support to promote high-quality post-secondary aspirations for rural students. Survey results indicated that 85% of students reported that Counselors were a trusted source. An important conclusion that

this study reinforces is that schools play a critical role in both student and family trust, which can mitigate some spatial inequities. Focusing on career development interventions and building student self-efficacy can promote student aspirations for high-quality post-secondary plans. Policymakers should prioritize investments in rural post-secondary pathways and the supports that can promote successful attainment of these pathways. This includes integrating rural workforce realities and postsecondary educational institutions as part of an asset lens landscape for rural students.

Implications of the Findings for Equity

The findings of this study underscore several key issues of equity. These include economic pressure and cultural discomfort, which curtail post-secondary enrollment aspirations. However, the findings of this study also indicate that access to community colleges and regional university resources, as well as the prominent role of counselors, teachers, and administrators, could be factors that mitigate spatial inequity. Many of these findings align with the National Rural Education Association's (NREA) 2022–2027 Research Agenda, particularly related to spatial equity and postsecondary opportunities. NREA frames its research agenda on the concept of spatial equity, or the fairness of outcomes as related to place. Within this DiP, the aim to promote improved aspirations for postsecondary plans took aim at several factors within the college and career readiness category. These include uncertainty about postsecondary expectations, limited exposure to diverse career pathways, and uneven access to high-quality preparatory coursework. Some of this is attributed to geographic isolation, which restricts the availability of high-quality teaching and specialized programs.

The study's findings regarding outcome expectations also have important implications for equity. Outcome expectations from proximal influences (peers and parents) and self-efficacy

were all impacted by some of the demographic features of this rural setting. For example, lower parental educational attainment demonstrated a need to offset this barrier in college guidance. These findings point to the role of proximal factors, including social and cultural expectations, in shaping student aspirations. This conclusion supports an equity theme from the NREA, underscoring how power, representation, and deficit narratives operate within rural educational spaces. Although higher education is encouraged by many in this rural setting, others may face economic hardship or have aspirations anchored in local labor markets and receive mixed or unclear expectations from adults and peers.

An important element to the valuable finding that Counselors play such an important role is that a consideration of counselor staffing in schools is critical to the success of student advising. I propose that an expansive definition of the term counselor helps to mitigate the resource scarcity of these staff and also provide more robust advising. The Career Development Coordinator can be a valuable resource, as well as Coaches, Teachers, Administrators, and other extracurricular advisors.

The implications extend beyond school-based practices to the systemic and policy levels, as emphasized by the NREA. Equitable post-secondary preparation for rural students depends on addressing structural barriers, such as funding formula inequities, the recruitment of diverse and specialized educators, and policies that expand college and career pathways regardless of geographic isolation.

Recommendations for Practice

Arguably, post-secondary plans for high school graduates are one of the most important indicators of a quality high school. Recommendations for practice include strengthening the student advising structure with the express intent of promoting student aspirations for post-

secondary plans. More explicit considerations within student advising structures include the following:

- A. Deepening the knowledge of student disposition in terms of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and proximal influences towards post-secondary plans;
- B. Critically analyzing the resource structures within the community; namely access to post-secondary university and community college resources as well as high quality employment opportunities and skill credentialing;
- C. Exposing students early in their high school career to post-secondary career and college opportunities within the county, region, and state; and
- D. Providing student and family guidance in navigating the financial landscape for post-secondary plans.

A central recommendation of this study is the need to strengthen postsecondary advising structures within rural high schools to promote students' postsecondary aspirations. These efforts must be paired with intentional strategies to build students' self-efficacy. Students reported a wide range of self-efficacy as predicted by their aspirations for postsecondary enrollment or employment. Students in the focus groups remarked that they had a high degree of anxiety about going away to college. This can be a distinct feature of rural communities, as their highly independent nature can make the choice of leaving the community for college, employment, or other reasons, more difficult (Elder, King, & Conger, 1996).

Students also reported a wide spectrum of parental and peer expectations for their academic performance. These influences must be incorporated into the student advising process to promote student aspirations. An important idea within the Social Cognitive Career Theory is that proximal influences directly affect student self-efficacy. This includes perceived barriers and

support. Rural students may lack diverse career role models and concrete information from social networks on postsecondary options (Gibbons et. al, 2020). By fostering environments that intentionally reinforce students' belief in their capacity to achieve future goals, rural schools can help mitigate uncertainty and support students in forming aspirational and attainable postsecondary plans.

A concrete recommendation for student advising to mitigate some of these postsecondary aspirational limits in student self-efficacy and proximal influences is to increase the longevity of attention to career development plans. This aligns with North Carolina's efforts to articulate that self-assessment, exploration, alignment of academic pathways, and postsecondary portfolios be created and cultivated from the seventh grade and throughout high school (Career Development Plan Act, 2023). Alignment across middle and high school student advising to target and develop durable skills that support college and career readiness will increase students' aspirations for postsecondary pathways. This also aligns with the expansive definition of the counselor as staff member.

While this recommendation for practice on career development plans at an early age supports both college and career trajectories, it also speaks to the need to provide rigorous academic challenges in student advising plans. This can include access to advanced placement, coursework, dual enrollment, and advanced CTE coursework.

Each rural community has its own set of assets that can support students' postsecondary aspirations. In the specific setting at PGHS, there is a strong Community College that provides access for students within the county to matriculate with substantial economic aid. This is true in the larger region, as the state public university system is robust. Some regional university options also have strong student aid packages, such as the NC Promise program. Finally, there are also

strong employment opportunities in the Trades and Industry and Healthcare fields, where training at the Community College or University level can greatly increase employability. High school student advising systems must operate with intentional practice to leverage this type of local resource analysis and align partnerships to promote students' postsecondary aspirations. Recommendations for practice in the specific domain of community resource mapping include the need to apply relevant frameworks for this work. This can include analysis of the particular existing capital within a community and aligning these to desired outcomes.

In a rural context where access to specialized college and career staff is often limited, advising must be approached as a school-wide responsibility. These findings support the recommendation for strengthened partnerships between schools and communities. Students reported strong trust relationships from many sources, including counselors, families, and teachers. This indicates that a unified student service approach to career guidance involving counselors, teachers, and families can improve students' aspirations. At the school level, leadership from the administrative level is required to align staff with targeted messaging and support. This includes counselors, teachers, coaches, students, parents, and extended family members. Support includes alignment of college preparation, navigation of scholarships and financial aid, knowledge and access to trade and community college credentials, and networking with local employers.

Stronger advising systems in rural schools must intentionally expand exposure to college, career, and workforce pathways to counteract the geographic isolation that often limits students' experiential learning opportunities in these areas. These efforts need to attend to student self-efficacy beliefs and offer postsecondary networks tailored to local and regional resources. Student advising should include family and peer networks as proximal influences and align

postsecondary advising efforts over all the years of high school and even earlier. By increasing students' opportunities to interact directly with professionals, post-secondary institutions, and career pathways that they may not otherwise access, schools can reduce spatial inequities and improve the alignment between student aspirations and attainable post-secondary routes.

Recommendations for Future Study

Future research should examine students' postsecondary aspirations using a longitudinal design that follows cohorts across all four years of high school and beyond. Such a study would allow researchers to analyze how aspirations, self-efficacy, and perceived adult expectations evolve over time. Additionally, researchers may explore how factors specific to a rural setting, such as transportation, geographic isolation, and access to high-quality staff, mitigate postsecondary planning. My study found that many students aspired to university-level postsecondary enrollment and ended their senior year with plans to attend the local community college. Future studies could follow students into their postsecondary enrollment and determine factors such as university transfer, completion of degree and credential pathways, and quality of employment. This would help articulate how the initial aspirations of the respondents in my study evolved beyond graduation. Another tentative finding that could be further established is that the impact of advising may shift students from University aspirations toward Community College enrollment. Further study could deepen the validity of this assertion, and establish the longer term impact of Community College as a bridge to further postsecondary education.

Comparative studies across rural, suburban, and urban contexts would further illuminate the issues of spatial equity highlighted in this study. Common headwinds for rural communities may include lower educational attainment by parents, geographic isolation from universities and community colleges, and budgetary constraints that limit course offerings or extracurricular

support for postsecondary aspirations (Niccolai et al., 2022) However, each rural community is unique. For example, PGHS has access to the number one community college in the state and is near a large regional state school. The work to support student aspirations at each high school must involve a precise analysis of local resources and prescribe student advice in that particular context.

Finally, expanding the research to include students' outcomes after high school, such as college enrollment, credential attainment, and workforce entry, would provide a more complete picture of how aspirations translate into long-term trajectories. This recommendation would help measure the extent to which students were successful in persevering in post-secondary education or in attaining high-quality employment. This data could then provide a backward design for student success in high school years.

Conclusions

Schools must aim to support students to ensure that they graduate with the skills and vision for a postsecondary plan. Student advising helps to articulate and promote options and remove barriers. Each school setting is differentiated according to the community it serves. Therefore, the conclusions of this study are not intended to be generalizable. However, by understanding one specific place and telling stories of success, a model can be identified that can promote student aspirations.

Students in rural communities face concerns that are not dissimilar to their non-rural peers in many postsecondary aspirations. Like many students in the country, financial obstacles are significant. These can be mitigated to a degree with scholarships and FAFSA guidance. However, there are often very advantageous resources available that are lower-cost higher-

education options. These are sometimes alternatives to universities and were found to be locally relevant programs at the county or state levels (NC Promise and Beaufort Promise).

Aligned with the tenets of SCCT, student self-efficacy beliefs identified in self-expectations were important for postsecondary aspirations. This is also important for other proximal influences such as family, peers, and school staff. Most malleable and important to the work of using student advising are the role of school staff. School staff can influence students' mindset and outcome expectations. Schools can also provide strategies for mitigating barriers, such as intentional exposure and partnerships. This includes dual enrollment, AP programming, and exposure to post-secondary community colleges and universities. This could also include partnerships for apprenticeships, which would expose students to trade and employment. Encouragement of our students and intentional strategies can support our work in shaping who they become, promoting their confidence, curiosity, sense of belonging, and belief in their own capabilities.

Scholarly Practitioner Reflection

The scholarly journey to execute this focus of practice has been both arduous and rewarding. The lessons have been both microscopic and macroscopic, from the acute nuances that shape individuals to the systemic interplay of culture and resources. My role as a school administrator and professional public educator has evolved, and I hope to improve the services and outcomes for my students and families.

The years-long work to identify, research, develop, and implement inquiry actions designed to promote student aspirations for post-secondary plans has placed my twenty-five-year experience in greater contextual detail. I have taught and served as an Assistant Principal in three schools in a large urban district and led as a principal in a small rural high school and a larger

semi-rural high school. Each community has distinct characteristics. One key reflection from this work is that the best way to serve students is to successfully grapple with the minutiae of the community you serve. A high school principal must be able to delve into the surrounding community and identify both barriers to student success and assets to mitigate these.

This task can be accomplished best through an asset lens. Leaders must be able to visualize the strengths of community resources that can fill gaps for students. Each community I have served has benefited from a unique set of resources. This work has helped me sharpen my ability to identify how resource systems can interact across various cultures. Parents, higher education, employers, faith-based communities, and school staff represent different avenues for advancing students' post-secondary opportunities. In other words, I have learned how to leverage my assets to overcome challenges.

The rigor of this improvement science process has taught me about resilience. I have strengthened my personal resilience and my ability to cultivate resilience in those around me. The academic and professional workload over this time in my career has required great iterations of thought in writing, reading, synthesis, and evaluation. I have had to truly embrace the practice of continuous improvement in my work. I have also developed collaborative practices with the internal staff. This includes school-based staff, as well as those at the Central Office and other educational institutions. I also take great pride in the ways that this work has helped me support students in navigating the challenges of postsecondary planning with confidence. I hope to carry forward this scholarly practice in my professional work with greater acuity each year.

REFERENCES

- American College Testing (ACT). (2014). *ACT composite test scores by student background and school location. Information Brief 2014-2017*.
<https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/Info-Brief-2014-17.pdf>
- Ali, S. R., & McWhirter, E. H. (2006). Rural Appalachian youth's vocational/educational postsecondary aspirations: Applying social cognitive career theory. *Journal of Career Development, 33*(2), 87-111. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894845306293347>.
- Arend, M. (2023). *Durable skills are today's human resource currency*. *Site Selection Magazine, 68*(4), 34-37. <https://siteselection.com/issues/2023/july/durable-skills-are-todays-human-resources-currency.cfm>
- Agger, C., Meece, J., & Byun, S.Y. (2018). The influences of family and place on rural adolescents' educational aspirations and postsecondary enrollment. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 47*(12), 2554-2568.
- Bandura, A. (1991). Human agency: The rhetoric and the reality. *American Psychologist, 46*, 586-598
- Bogden, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2007). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods* (5th ed.). Allyn & Bacon.
- Butler, J., Wildermuth, G. A., Thiede, B. C., & Brown, D. L. (2020). Population change and income inequality in rural America. *Population Research and Policy Review, 39*(5), 889-911. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11113-020-09606-7>
- Brown, S. D., & Lent, R. W. (2023). Social cognitive career theory. In W. B. Walsh, L. Y. Flores, P. J. Hartung, & F. T. L. Leong (Eds.), *Career Psychology: Models, Concepts,*

- and Counseling for Meaningful Employment* (pp. 37–58). American Psychological Association. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2w8kc01.7>
- Byun, S.Y., Meece, J. L., Agger, C. A. (2017). Predictors of college attendance patterns of rural youth. *Research in Higher Education*, 58(8), 817-842. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-017-9449-z>
- Byun, S. Y., Meece, J. L., & Irvin, M. J. (2012). Rural–nonrural disparities in postsecondary educational attainment revisited. *American Educational Research Journal*, 49(3), 412–437. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831211416344>
- Cain, E. J., & Class, S. (2023). Exploring the college enrollment of students from rural areas: Considerations for scholarly practitioners. *Georgia Journal of College Student Affairs*, 39(1), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.20429/gcpa.2023.390101>.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2023). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (6th ed.). Sage.
- Crow, R., Perry, J.A., Zambo, D. (2020). *The improvement science dissertation in practice*. Myers Education Press.
- Crow, R., Hinnant-Crawford, B. N., & Spaulding, D. T. (Eds.). (2019). *The educational leader's guide to improvement science: Data, design and cases for reflection*. Myers Education Press.
- Gibbons, M. M., Taylor, A. L., Brown, E., Daniels, S. K., Hardin, E. E., & Manring, S. (2020). Assessing postsecondary barriers for rural Appalachian high school students. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 28(1), 165-181. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1069072719845329>
- Glesne, C. (2006). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction* (3rd ed.). Longman.

- Grant, T. J. (2023). Lost in implementation: A case study of North Carolina's inaction on Leandro (Order No. 30486693). <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/lost-implementation-case-study-north-carolinas/docview/2833443017/se-2>
- Hartman, S. L., Roberts, J. K., Schmitt-Wilson, S., McHenry-Sorber, E., Buffington, P. J., & Biddle, C. (2022). National Rural Education Association Research Agenda–2022-2027: A closer look at the research priorities. *The Rural Educator*, 43(3), 59-66. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/national-rural-education-association-research/docview/2719044465/se-2>
- Hill, J. & Turney, J.S. (2016). National Rural Education Association (NREA) research agenda – 2016-2021. *The Rural Educator*, 37(3), v-vii. <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v37i3.236>
- Internal Revenue Service. (2024, August 20). *Identifying full-time employees*. <https://www.irs.gov/affordable-care-act/employers/identifying-full-time-employees>
- Lent, R. W., Brown, S. D., & Hackett, G. (1994). Toward a unifying social cognitive theory of career and academic interest, choice, and performance. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 45(1), 79-122. <https://doi.org/10.1006/jvbe.1994.1027>
- McHenry-Sorber, E., Biddle, C., Buffington, P. J., Hartman, S. L., Roberts, J. K., & Schmitt-Wilson, S. (2023). The NREA rural research agenda 2022-2027: An examination of the research process and findings. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 98(4), 448-465. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2023.2238527>
- Mertler, C. A. (2022). *Introduction to educational research* (3rd Ed.). Sage.
- Miller, C. (2023, October 23) New SAT data highlights the deep inequality at the heart of American education. *The New York Times*. October 23, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/10/23/upshot/sat-inequality.html>

- Morton, T. R., Ramirez, N. A., Meece, J. L., Demetriou, C., & Panter, A. T. (2018). Perceived barriers, anxieties, and fears in prospective college students from rural high schools. *The High School Journal*, 101(3), 155–176. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/90024241>
- MyFutureNC (2025) *North Carolina's State of Educational Attainment Report*. Original Report 8-9-22, Updated Report 2.20.25 Accessed 12-10.25 <https://www.myfuturenc.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/2025-myFutureNC-Educational-Attainment-Report-020325.pdf>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). *Education Longitudinal Survey of 2002*. Retrieved May 4, 2024, from <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/els2002/>
- A national rural postsecondary research agenda: Reflections from the working group. (2021). *The Rural Educator*, 42(3), 74-76. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/national-rural-postsecondary-research-agenda/docview/2618170957/se-2>
- Niccolai, A. R., Damaske, S., & Park, J. (2022). We Won't be able to find jobs here: How growing up in rural America shapes decisions about work. Russell Sage Foundation *Journal of the Social Sciences*, 8(4), 87-104. <https://doi.org/10.7758/RSF.2022.8.4.04>
- Nichols, S., & Stahl, G. (2019). Intersectionality in higher education research: a systematic literature review. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 38(6), 1255–1268. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2019.1638348>
- North Carolina Careers (2024). *Career Development Month*. Retrieved March 5, 2024, from <https://nccareers.org/career-development-month>
- North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI). (2022-23). *Background brief: 2022-23 accountability framework*. <https://www.dpi.nc.gov/2022-23-accountability-framework-background-brief/download?attachment>

North Carolina General Assembly (2023), Career Development Plans. General Statutes, Section 1(a) Article 10 Chapter 115C.

<https://www.ncleg.gov/Sessions/2023/Bills/Senate/PDF/S193v1.pdf>

Oddo, V. M., Zhuang, C. C., Andrea, S. B., Eisenberg-Guyot, J., Peckham, T., Jacoby, D., & Hajat, A. (2021). Changes in precarious employment in the United States: A longitudinal analysis. *Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment & Health*, 47(3), 171-180.

<https://doi.org/10.5271/sjweh.3939>

Packard, William K., (1998). Sound, basic education: North Carolina adopts an adequacy standard in *Leandro v. State*, *N.C. Law Review* 76(4), 1481-1518.

<https://scholarship.law.unc.edu/nclr/vol76/iss4/8>

Showalter, D., Hartman, S. L., Eppley, K., Johnson, J., & Klein, R. (2023). *Why rural matters 2023: Centering equity and opportunity*. National Rural Education Association.

Thiede, B. C., Butler, J. L. W., Brown, D. L., & Jensen, L. (2020). Income inequality across the rural-urban continuum in the United States, 1970–2016. *Rural Sociology*, 85(4), 899-937.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/ruso.12354>

Tieken, M. C., & Auldridge-Reveles, T. R. (2019). Rethinking the school closure research: School closure as spatial injustice. *Review of Educational Research*, 89(6), 917-953.

<https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654319877151>

Tippett, R. & Stanford, J. (2019). *North Carolina's leaky educational pipeline & pathways to 60% postsecondary attainment*. Carolina Demography, Carolina Population Center. UNC Chapel Hill.

United States Census Bureau, Quickfacts Population Per Square Mile (Beaufort County),
retrieved February 2, 2024.

<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/beaufortcountynorthcarolina/POP060210>

United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service (USDA), Data Products,
County-level Data Sets, retrieved 11-1-23. [https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-](https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/county-level-data-sets/)
[products/county-level-data-sets/](https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/county-level-data-sets/)

Wang, D., Liu, X., & Deng, H. (2022). The perspectives of social cognitive career theory
approach in current times. *Frontiers in Psychology, 13*, 1023994.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1023994>

Wells, R. S., Manly, C. A., Kommers, S., & Kimball, E. (2019). Narrowed gaps and persistent
challenges: Examining rural-nonrural disparities in postsecondary outcomes over time.
American Journal of Education, 126(1), 1-31.

<http://dx.doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1086/705498>

APPENDIX A : INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board
Willis Building · Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office **252-744-2914** · Fax **252-744-2284** · rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/

Notification of Initial Approval: Expedited

From: Social/Behavioral IRB

To: [Justin Holt](#)

CC: [Jerry Johnson](#)

Date: 12/16/2024

Re: [UMCIRB 24-002219](#)

Promoting Student Aspirations for Postsecondary Plans in a Rural NC High School

I am pleased to inform you that your Expedited Application was approved. Approval of the study and any consent form(s) occurred on 12/16/2024. The research study is eligible for review under expedited category # 6, 7. The Chairperson (or designee) deemed this study no more than minimal risk.

As the Principal Investigator you are explicitly responsible for the conduct of all aspects of this study and must adhere to all reporting requirements for the study. Your responsibilities include but are not limited to:

1. Ensuring changes to the approved research (including the UMCIRB approved consent document) are initiated only after UMCIRB review and approval except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All changes (e.g. a change in procedure, number of participants, personnel, study locations, new recruitment materials, study instruments, etc.) must be prospectively reviewed and approved by the UMCIRB before they are implemented;
2. Where informed consent has not been waived by the UMCIRB, ensuring that only valid versions of the UMCIRB approved, date-stamped informed consent document(s) are used for obtaining informed consent (consent documents with the IRB approval date stamp are found under the Documents tab in the ePIRATE study workspace);
3. Promptly reporting to the UMCIRB all unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others;
4. Submission of a final report application to the UMCIRB prior to the expected end date provided in the IRB application in order to document human research activity has ended and to provide a timepoint in which to base document retention; and
5. Submission of an amendment to extend the expected end date if the study is not expected to be completed by that date. The amendment should be submitted 30 days prior to the UMCIRB approved expected end date or as soon as the Investigator is aware that the study will not be completed by that date.

The approval includes the following items:

Name	Description
Appendix D (Baseline Survey).docx	Surveys and Questionnaires
Appendix E, Focus Group Questions.docx	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
Assent	Consent Forms
Parental Consent	Consent Forms
Proposal, Justin Holt	Study Protocol or Grant Application
Study Consent Form.docx	Consent Forms

For research studies where a waiver or alteration of HIPAA Authorization has been approved, the IRB states that each of the waiver criteria in 45 CFR 164.512(i)(1)(i)(A) and (2)(i) through (v) have been met. Additionally, the elements of PHI to be collected as described in items 1 and 2 of the Application for Waiver of Authorization have been determined to be the minimal necessary for the specified research.

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

IRB00000705 East Carolina U IRB #1 (Biomedical) IORG0000418
IRB00003781 East Carolina U IRB #2 (Behavioral/SS) IORG0000418

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Information to consider before taking part in research that has no more than minimal risk.

Title of Research Study: Promoting Postsecondary Plans at Pleasant Grove HS

Principal Investigator: Justin Holt

Institution, Department or Division: Department of Educational Leadership, College of Education, East Carolina University

Address: 5300 Hwy 33 East

Telephone #: 704-701-9420

Researchers at East Carolina University (ECU) study issues related to society, health problems, environmental problems, behavior problems and the human condition. To do this, we need the help of volunteers who are willing to take part in research.

Why am I being invited to take part in this research?

The purpose of this research is to improve student postsecondary plans. Additionally, perceived obstacles will be identified, and student service support will assist in tackling the postsecondary obstacles. You are being invited to take part in this research because you are in the Senior class at Pleasant Grove High School. The decision to take part in this research is yours to make. By doing this research, we hope to learn how we can best support high school seniors and their families in attaining a high quality postsecondary plan.

If you volunteer to take part in this research, you will be one of about 100 people to do so.

Are there reasons I should not take part in this research?

This study will support your decision making and aspirations for plans after graduation.

What other choices do I have if I do not take part in this research?

You can choose not to participate. There will be no repercussions for doing so.

Where is the research going to take place and how long will it last?

The research will be conducted at Pleasant Grove High School. You will need to come to the school and any support activities arranged during the study. The total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer for this study is TBD over the next nine months of your Senior schoolyear.

What will I be asked to do?

You will be asked to do the following:

- Provide honest feedback about your postsecondary plans.

- Participate in information nights on college, career, and service branch enlistment opportunities (as desired).
- Participate in surveys, questionnaires, and/or focus groups as the study progresses.
- Provide information on scholarship, career opportunities, networking, and or service recruitment experiences.
- Share outcomes in your postsecondary plans and aspirations.

What might I experience if I take part in the research?

We don't know of any risks (the chance of harm) associated with this research. Any risks that may occur with this research are no more than what you would experience in everyday life. We don't know if you will benefit from taking part in this study. There may not be any personal benefit to you, but the information gained by doing this research may help others in the future.

Will I be paid for taking part in this research?

Unfortunately, we will not be able to pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study.

Will it cost me to take part in this research?

It will not cost you any money to be part of the research.

Who will know that I took part in this research and learn personal information about me?

ECU and the people and organizations listed below may know that you took part in this research and may see information about you that is normally kept private. With your permission, these people may use your private information to do this research:

- The investigator(s) conducting this study.
- The University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) and its staff have responsibility for overseeing your welfare during this research and may need to see research records that identify you.

How will you keep the information you collect about me secure? How long will you keep it?

Efforts will be made to ensure your privacy and confidentiality. Identifiers of information will be minimized, and any data collected will be secured within password protected Information Technology structures.

What if I decide I don't want to continue in this research?

You can stop at any time after it has already started. There will be no consequences if you stop, and you will not be criticized.

Who should I contact if I have questions?

The people conducting this study will be able to answer any questions concerning this research, now or in the future. You may contact the Principal Investigator at 252-940-1881 (weekdays, between 8:00 am – 4:00 pm).

If you have questions about your rights as someone taking part in research, you may call the University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at phone number 252-744-2914 (days, 8:00 am-5:00 pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, you may contact the Director for Human Research Protections, at 252-744-2914.

I have decided I want to take part in this research. What should I do now?

The person obtaining informed consent will ask you to read the following and if you agree, you should sign this form:

- I have read (or had read to me) all of the above information.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions about things in this research I did not understand and have received satisfactory answers.
- I know that I can stop taking part in this study at any time.
- By signing this informed consent form, I am not giving up any of my rights.
- I have been given a copy of this consent document, and it is mine to keep.

Participant's Name (PRINT)

Signature

Date

Person Obtaining Informed Consent: I have conducted the initial informed consent process. I have orally reviewed the contents of the consent document with the person who has signed above and answered all of the person's questions about the research.

Person Obtaining Consent (PRINT)

Signature

Date

APPENDIX C: INFORMED ASSENT FORM



Assent Form **Things You Should Know Before You** **Agree to Take Part in this Research**

UMCIRB Study #24-002219

Title of Study: Promoting Student Aspirations for Postsecondary Plans in a Rural NC High School

Person in charge of study: Justin Holt
Where they work: Southside High School

Study contact phone number: 252-940-1881
Study contact E-mail Address: jholt@beaufort.k12.nc.us

People at ECU study ways to make people's lives better. These studies are called research. This research is trying to find out if student aspirations for postsecondary plans can be enhanced with school support.

Your parent(s) needs to give permission for you to be in this research. You do not have to be in this research if you don't want to, even if your parent(s) has already given permission.

You may stop being in the study at any time. If you decide to stop, no one will be angry or upset with you

Why are we doing this research study?

The reason for doing this research is to to learn how we can best support high school seniors and their families in attaining a high quality postsecondary plan.

Why are you being asked to be in this research study?

We are asking you to take part in this research because you are in the Senior class at Southside High School. Our school's mission is to help student's learn, achieve, and succeed.

How many people will take part in this study?

If you decide to be in this research, you will be one of about 100 people taking part in it.

What will happen during this study?

You will be asked to do the following:

- Provide honest feedback about your postsecondary plans.
- Participate in surveys, questionnaires, and/or focus groups as the study progresses. The focus groups will last no more than one hour.
- Share outcomes in your postsecondary plans and aspirations.
- Select students will be asked to participate in a focus group to identify barriers to postsecondary plans. This focus group will be audio recorded for transcription purposes. Only school staff supporting the research will have access to the audio and transcription.
- The data collected will be stored for a minimum of three years post study completion. It will be stored in a password protected manner and will then be deleted.
- *Focus group participants will have the opportunity to opt in or out of the activity.*

Check the line that best matches your choice:

- ☐ OK to record me during the study
☐ Not OK to record me during the study

This study will take place at Southside High School and will last in activity increments that include a 20 minute survey, a focus group that lasts no more than one hour. There may be other activities focused on supporting students in planning for their postsecondary goals.

Who will be told the things we learn about you in this study?

ECU and the people and organizations listed below may know that you took part in this research and may see information about you that is normally kept private. Other school staff may include your Counselors, our Career Development Coordinator, or your Homeroom/Advisory teacher.

What are the good things that might happen?

Sometimes good things happen to people who take part in research. These are called “benefits.” There is a chance you will benefit from being in this research. The benefits to you of being in this study may be increasing the quality of your postsecondary plans the likelihood of implementing your postsecondary plan.

What are the bad things that might happen?

There are no known risks, related to enrollment in the research study.

Will you get any money or gifts for being in this research study?

You will not receive any money or gifts for being in this research study.

Who should you ask if you have any questions?

If you have questions about the research, you should ask the people listed on the first page of this form. If you have other questions about your rights while you are in this research study you may call the Institutional Review Board at 252-744-2914.

If you decide to take part in this research, you should sign your name below. It means that you agree to take part in this research study.

Sign your name here if you want to be in the study

Date

Print your name here if you want to be in the study

Signature of Person Obtaining Assent

Date

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Assent

APPENDIX D: POSTSECONDARY PLAN SURVEY

Source: Educational Longitudinal Survey (NCES)

Postsecondary Plan Survey

1. How important is each of the following to you in your life?

(MARK ONE RESPONSE ON EACH LINE)

	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important
a. Being successful in my line of work			
b. Finding the right person to marry and having a happy family life			
c. Having lots of money			
d. Having strong friendships			
e. Being able to find steady work			
f. Helping other people in my community			
g. Being able to give my children better opportunities than I've had			
h. Living close to parents and relatives			
i. Getting away from this area of the country			
j. Working to correct social and economic inequalities			
k. Having children			
l. Having leisure time to enjoy my own interests			
m. Becoming an expert in my field of work			
n. Getting a good education			
o. Getting a good education			

2. Have you taken or are you planning to take any of the following tests?

(MARK ONE RESPONSE ON EACH LINE)

	I have already taken this test	I haven't thought about it	No, I don't plan to	Yes, this school year
a. College Board Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) or American College Testing Service (ACT)				
b. Advanced Placement (AP) test				
c. Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB)				

3. As things stand now, how far in school do you think you will get?

(MARK ONE RESPONSE)

Less than high school graduation		SKIP TO QUESTION 9
High school graduation or GED only		
Attend or complete a 2-year school course in a community or vocational school		GO TO QUESTION 4
Attend college, but not complete a 4-year degree		
Graduate from college		
Obtain a Master's degree or equivalent		
Obtain a Ph.D., M.D., or other advanced degree		
Don't know		

4. Do you plan to continue your education right after high school or at some time in the future?

(MARK ONE RESPONSE)

Yes, right after high school	
Yes, after staying out of school for one year	
Yes, after staying out of school for over a year	
Yes, but I don't know when	
No, I don't plan to continue my education after high school	
I don't know if I will continue my education after high school	

5. Which of the following do you plan to attend?

(MARK ONE RESPONSE)

Four-year college or university	
Two-year community college	
Vocational, technical or trade school	

6. Where have you gone for information about the entrance requirements of various colleges?

(MARK ALL THAT APPLY)

Guidance counselor	
Teacher	
Coach	
Parent	
Friend	
Brother or sister	
Other relative	

College publications or websites	
College representatives	
None of the above	

7. Would you like to participate in athletics (not intramurals) at the collegiate level?

Yes		GO TO QUESTION 8
No		SKIP TO QUESTION 10

8. Do you hope to receive an athletic scholarship to pay for all or part of your college expenses?

Yes		SKIP TO QUESTION 10
No		

9. Which of the following are reasons why you have decided NOT to continue your education past high school?

(MARK ONE RESPONSE ON EACH LINE)

	Yes	No
a. I do not like school		
b. My grades are not high enough		
c. I will not need more education for the career I want		
d. I cannot afford to go on to school		
e. I'd rather work and make money than go to school		
f. I plan to be a full-time homemaker		
g. I do not feel that going to school is important		
h. I need to help support my family		

10. Write in the name of the job or occupation that you expect or plan to have right after high school.

I don't plan to work right after high school	
I don't know	

11. Write in the name of the job or occupation that you expect or plan to have at age 30.

I don't plan to work when I'm 30	
I don't know	

WHEN WE SAY PARENT(S), MOTHER, OR FATHER, ANSWER FOR THE PARENT, GUARDIAN, OR STEPPARENT WITH WHOM YOU LIVE MOST OF THE TIME.

12. How far in school do you think your mother and father want you to go?

(MARK ONE RESPONSE IN EACH COLUMN)

	Mother	Father
Less than high school graduation		
High school graduation or GED only		
Attend or complete a 2-year school course in a community or vocational school		
Attend college, but not complete a 4-year degree		

Complete a 4-year degree Graduate from college		
Obtain a Master's degree or equivalent		
Obtain a Ph.D., M.D., or other advanced degree		
Don't know		
Does not apply		

13. What do the following people think is the most important thing for you to do right after high school?

(MARK ONE RESPONSE ON EACH LINE)

	Does not apply	Go to college	Get a full-time job	Enter a trade school or an apprenticeship	Enter military service	Get married	They think I should do what I want	They don't care	I don't know
a. Your mother									
b. Your father									
c. Your friends									
d. A close relative									
e. School counselor									

f. Your favorite teacher									
g. Coach									

14. How far in school did your parents go? Indicate your mother's and father's highest level of education.

(MARK ONE RESPONSE IN EACH COLUMN)

	Mother (or female guardian)	Father (or male guardian)
Did not finish high school		
Graduated from high school or equivalent (GED)		
Graduated from high school and attended a two-year school (such as a vocational or technical school, a junior college, or a community college), but did not complete a degree		
Graduated from a two-year school (such as a vocational or technical school, junior college, or a community college)		
Graduated from high school and went to college, but did not complete a four-year degree		
Graduated from college		
Completed a Master's degree or equivalent		
Completed a Ph.D., M.D., or other advanced professional degree		
Don't Know		
Does Not Apply		

APPENDIX E : FOCUS GROUP GUIDED QUESTIONS

1. What are your personal goals or plans after high school?
2. What challenges or barriers do you think make it harder for students in this area to achieve their post-secondary goals?
3. What role, if any, does family support play in your decision-making for life after high school?
4. Do you feel well-prepared for college, trade school, or entering the workforce? What could have helped you feel more prepared?
5. How do finances or the cost of education affect your plans for after high school?
6. What resources or guidance would you like to see more of at school to help with your post-secondary plans?
7. What are some examples of support or encouragement you've received (or wish you had received) from teachers, counselors, or mentors in helping shape your post-secondary plans?