

EXAMINING THE COLLEGE CHOICE OF BLACK STUDENTS ENROLLED AT A  
RURAL COLLEGE

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## **ABSTRACT**

Mountain View College is a rural 2-year and 4-year degree granting school in the state of West Virginia that is plagued by declining enrollment, unstable financial assets, and minimum resources. In addition, the college exists in a community plagued by high rates of poverty and minimal racial diversity. Such traits mirror the challenges other rural colleges in the United States are currently encountering. Despite such challenges, the college continues to attract a steady number of Black students to its campus. Current studies indicate that Black students, under the guidance of their parents, are more likely to apply to and enroll in selective schools with stable social and academic environments. Therefore, this unique reversal in traditional enrollment trends among Black students deserves greater scrutiny.

Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants. In total, six participants consisting of four Mountain View College personnel and two Black Mountain View College alumni were recruited and interviewed for this study. Both sets of participants completed a survey seeking socio-demographic information and also required participants select a series of attributes (academics, affordability, location, etc.) they believed influenced Black prospects' decision to enroll at Mountain View College. Following the completion of individual surveys, each participant engaged in one-on-one virtual interviews. Interviews allowed participants to provide greater insight into their initial survey responses. Findings indicated that four major themes were apparent. Safety, affordability, athletics, and the community as a post-graduate safe haven were representative of these themes. They also represented the positive characteristics that attracted Black prospects to a rural school like Mountain View College.

## **DEDICATION**

I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me! (Philippians 4:13) This has been an eight-year roller coaster consisting of fear and self-doubt. Only God knows the countless times I was tempted to quit but He had a greater plan for me. To my mom, Jody and my little brother Dakota (aka Dax): you are my rock! You both encouraged me when I felt I had nothing else to give and have embarked on this journey with me since day one. I love you both with all my heart! I know my late grandmother Nancy L. Diggs is rejoicing right now with my great-grandmother Edith Mack at her side. I also dedicate this to my late uncle Willie C. Mack who affectionately called me “Temple” and provided unwavering support.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In this era, fierce competition exists between institutions of higher education to recruit the best and brightest students. This has placed intense pressure on college admissions officers to maintain (and in many cases exceed) enrollment expectations. In 2017, 34 percent of college admissions directors surveyed stated that they met their new student enrollment targets, a statistic that is an 8-point drop from the 42 percent goal achieved in 2015 (Jaschik, 2017). Despite this trend, colleges hold high expectations that their admissions offices will succeed in the attainment of enrollment goals, forcing respective admissions leaders to either abandon or significantly modify new student enrollment targets. The shift is apparent between public colleges and private colleges; public colleges <sup>1</sup> tend to direct more resources toward the recruitment of minority students while private colleges tend to shift their focus in enticing high performing students to attend their schools (Jaschik, 2017).

These trends are significant because over the past several decades, many institutions in certain sectors of higher education have experienced declines in fiscal stability. Although tuition dependent schools are most vulnerable, research reveals that even large, public institutions are not immune to systemic fiscal and enrollment challenges (Carter, 2018; Gardner, 2019; Levy, 2017; Mills, 2014; Selingo, 2013; Thorp & Recker, 2018). Continued instability could lead to nearly a third of small colleges permanently closing their doors over the next decade (Seltzer, 2017; Simon, 2017). Therefore, colleges and universities must enact meaningful strategies to revise stagnant recruitment plans. Failure to evolve could have dramatic consequences on enrollment.

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<sup>1</sup> The terms “college”, “school”, and “university” are used interchangeably to refer to higher education.



With this in mind, this section will engage in an active overview of the challenges facing ailing schools, particularly institutions that are contending with fiscal issues and are considered less selective in terms of undergraduate admissions acceptance rate. Moreover, this section will serve as a baseline discussion of the motivations of Black students who enroll at such institutions of higher education.

### **High School Graduation Trends**

Over the past 20 years, the population of high school graduates in the United States has experienced unprecedented growth (Lederman, 2017; National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). This has fueled greater investments of resources by college and university recruitment offices to actively attract the most talented first-year students. By 2025, certain regions across the country will experience a boost in the number of high school graduates. Yet, other areas in the country will witness stalled growth among high school graduates (Grawe, 2018). According to The National Center for Education Statistics (2017), the number of high school graduates is projected to:

- Decrease 3 percent between 2012 - 13 and 2025 - 26 in the Northeast
- Increase 1 percent between 2012 - 13 and 2025 - 26 in the Midwest
- Increase 14 percent between 2012 - 13 and 2025 - 26 in the South
- Increase 7 percent between 2012 - 13 and 2025 - 26 in the West

Indeed, these projections demonstrate a dramatic shift that can impact college enrollment in regions like the Northeast and Midwest- areas experiencing either a decline in the population of high school graduates or stagnant growth. Dire growth in these regions can undoubtedly place undue pressure on local colleges already struggling to sustain enrollment

## **Traditional College Choice Processes**

Prospective college students apply a cost-benefit analysis to their college choice process (Bradshaw et al., 2001; Hamrick & Hossler, 1996). In other words, high school students “minimize perceived costs and maximize potential benefits in their college choice” (Bradshaw et al., 2001, p. 16). Costs include, but are not limited to, tuition, fees, and books; benefits entail rewards “resulting from degree attainment but also perceived social fit with the college, its location, or its special academic programs” (Hamrick & Hossler, 1996, p. 181). To be more specific, students attending institutions of higher education are more likely to increase their lifetime earnings, be covered by employer provide health insurance, and increase their likelihood of enhancing their social mobility (Ma et al., 2016). The perceived benefits are often associated with the defined reputation and prestige of an institution (Pampaloni, 2010). In essence, students are apt to select a college that can properly mitigate their costs and expand the benefits attributed to the attainment of post-secondary education.

One crucial factor associated with the cost-benefit analysis of a college education is affordability. Often with the aid of their parents, college-bound students carefully consider tuition as well as financial aid. Students do not want to incur unnecessary debt and are attracted to schools that offer generous financial aid packages (Klein & Washburn, 2012). To be more specific, students carefully consider the net price they pay after the application of scholarships and other sources of financial aid (Powell & Kerr, 2020). Affordability is also an important factor for high achieving students who are less willing to absorb debt at the undergraduate level, but are willing to make financial sacrifices at the graduate level (Bradshaw et al., 2001). This aspect is carefully reviewed with the guidance of parents and in some instances, the influence of peers (Alvarado &

An, 2015; Chapman et al., 2018; Goings & Sewell, 2019; Perna, 2000). Geography also correlates with perceived cost. While many students may have a desire to attend out of state schools, the burden of paying increased tuition, room and board, and other fees as an out of state student may serve as a deterrence and prompt students to select more affordable college options in close proximity to their home (Lopez-Turley, 2009). This is especially true for students from low-income households who are more likely to enroll in college if they live in close proximity to post-secondary institutions (Lopez-Turley, 2009).

There are multiple factors that influence students' choice of an institution to attend. These include: geography, access to student clubs, organizations, activities campus size, and perceptions of the campus as a welcoming environment. All of these and other factors are considered by prospective students to create matches with potential institutions (Braddock & Hua, 2006; Klein & Washburn, 2012; Lopez-Turley, 2009). As will be discussed in subsequent sections, perceptions of the campus environment are crucial factor Black students and their parents carefully evaluate.

### **Parental Engagement and Black Student College Choice**

In the modern era, prospective students use social media outlets like Facebook and Instagram along with internet search tools such as Google and Yahoo to research potential colleges and universities (Gyapong & Smith, 2012; Han, 2014). The same mediums are used by Black high school students to narrow the scope of potential post-secondary institutions. In addition, parent perspective is a key contributor in the selection process used by Black students. Chapman et al. (2018) posit that researchers "have less knowledge about the interactions between African American students and parents and

what African American parents value in institutions of higher education” (p. 32). And while parental influence is a significant factor for prospective college students representing all racial groups, the influence set forth by Black parents is distinct in that it reflects “racialized experiences and identities as African Americans living in the USA” (p. 32). Black parental influence, according to An (2010) is one reason why Black students are more likely to apply to selective colleges.

With this in mind, Black students from both affluent and less affluent backgrounds are likely to pursue selective colleges that offer an academically rigorous environment as well as a safe space for students of color to thrive (Chapman et al., 2018; Goings & Sewell, 2019; Teranishi & Briscoe, 2008). Recent legal challenges to affirmative action such as the notable case of *Fisher v. University of Texas* have served as the impetus to potentially reverse decades of progress made in providing greater access to post-secondary education to minorities. *Fisher* directly challenged the legality of *Grotter v. Bollinger*—a case in which the courts upheld the use of race as a factor in admissions. Although *Fisher* did not achieve its goal of overturning the precedent established in *Grotter*, it did set potential foundations for future legal challenges against affirmative action. Such uncertainty surrounding the application of affirmative action has prompted Black families to carefully critique the social structures of post-secondary institutions to ensure that their children will be able to thrive socially and academically without barriers related to racist constructs.

Indeed, these critiques are legitimate and warrant further consideration. While the United States Supreme Court’s rejection of *Fisher’s* argument served as a victory for proponents of affirmative action, there are still viable concerns associated with the active

recruitment of minority students into higher education. Recent cases like *Fisher* have posed a significant threat to the sanctity of admissions procedures that rely on race. Out of fear for legal ramifications, many colleges and universities no longer disclose how race is applied to their respective admissions processes.

The implications of *Fisher* have also reverberated in several states, most notably California, Texas, and Washington which have each created anti-affirmative action legislation. These anti-affirmative action leanings have stymied the ability of many colleges to use race-based admissions to improve the proportion of minority students (American Speech Language Hearing Association, 2017). Moreover, such legislation could potentially impact minority student enrollment by redistributing students from more selective institutions to less selective institutions (Fryar & Hawes, 2012).

Yet, it is also suggested that anti-affirmative action policies do not deter high achieving minority students from applying to selective schools. For example, recent anti-affirmative action legislation in Texas encouraged high achieving minority students to apply to selective schools *outside* of Texas (An, 2010). These contradictions indicate that more insight is needed to determine how anti-affirmative action initiatives factor into either the growth or regression of minority student enrollment.

### **The Current State of College Admissions**

The shift in the population of high school graduates nationwide as well as consequential legal precedents set in *Fisher* create the perfect storm for shifts in college enrollment patterns. But the pressures admissions offices face are only the tip of the iceberg plaguing higher education. While many large, public colleges and universities continue to thrive, small private colleges are closing at an alarming rate. One bold

prediction posits that “as many as half of the country’s colleges and universities will find themselves bankrupt or shuttered within 10 years” (Seltzer, 2017, p. 2). Further fortifying this prediction is the outlook shared by a Moody’s Investors Service report published in 2015 (Seltzer, 2017; Simon, 2017) suggesting that closures among small private colleges will triple and mergers will double.

Internal and external factors have contributed to the decline in student enrollment at small private colleges. One significant factor is debt, with many colleges spending copious amounts of money on facilities and campus upgrades to keep up with competitor institutions. This “borrowing spree” has placed many colleges in a financial predicament leading to the amount of debt doubling. In addition, net tuition revenue (amount of tuition revenue remaining after grant aid is subtracted) remains relatively flat (Selingo, 2013). Factoring in the decline in state aid to colleges and universities nationwide creates the final nail in the financial coffin for higher education (Selingo, 2013).

Small colleges, particularly those with less generous budgets and endowments, are most likely to be more sensitive to financial challenges than larger colleges and universities. Typically, small colleges are heavily dependent on tuition revenue to cover overhead and administrative expenses. And because these colleges have small endowments, providing financial aid by means of grants and scholarships places added strain on resources that are stretched beyond measure (Simon, 2017). Tuition discounts are a primary example of this phenomenon. In order to edge the competition for freshman, some schools are offering tuition discounts in excess of 50 percent. This generosity may greatly reduce net tuition income- financial resources that are needed to sustain a school’s operations (Valbrun, 2019). While fiscal pressures have placed small,

private colleges under a microscope, some state systems of higher education are also facing significant fiscal and enrollment pressures. In fact, some public institutions are contending with a multitude of concerns including declines in the number of high school graduates, mounting fiscal pressures, and intense competition between other state college systems (Carter, 2018; Levy, 2017; Thorp & Recker, 2018).

### *The Weakening of State Higher Education Systems*

Northeastern states have the unfortunate distinction of exhibiting declines in high school graduates, leading to valid concerns about the stability of their respective systems. It is projected that by 2029, Maine, Vermont, and New Hampshire could lose 23 percent of its college students (Carter, 2018). Pennsylvania is another state system facing declines in enrollment and tepid financial support of state colleges. Enrollment at the state system's colleges has declined 12 percent since enrollment peaked in 2010. Struggling Pennsylvania colleges like Mansfield University, Clarion University, and Cheyney University (a historically black college) have seen drops in enrollment (Levy, 2017).

In state competition is a significant factor fueling drops in enrollment within the state system of higher education. Nationally recognized powerhouses such as Temple University, The University of Pittsburgh, and The Pennsylvania State University are using their influence and tremendous resources to attract large volumes of incoming freshmen. This has ultimately resulted in more rural and smaller schools like Clarion University and Mansfield University facing an uphill battle to attract students (Levy, 2017). As Mills (2014) demonstrates in his case study of a two-year college in rural Kansas struggling to remedy declining enrollment, rural colleges “are under siege” (p. 639).

These trends are also apparent in other parts of the country. An exploration of the state of Illinois' struggles serves as a revelation for other states facing similar constraints. The Illinois higher education system is contending with significant competition from out of state schools. Illinois based high school graduates are opting to leave their home state due to better opportunities at other schools as well as greater financial aid packages offered by out of state schools. The draw of better opportunities out of state has decimated enrollment among the state's colleges, leading to a deficit of 19,000 students in 2016 (Thorp & Recker, 2018).

Fledgling enrollment and financial pressures are not the only stressors plaguing colleges both small and large. Gardner (2019) highlighted the rise of the "mega university" which is a term used to describe nonprofit institutions with large online enrollments. Prominent examples of mega universities are Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU), Grand Canyon University, Liberty University, and Western Governors University (WGU). Much of their success lies in the targeted recruitment of non-traditional and/or adult students. These student populations are significant to the growth of mega universities because these students are seeking affordable and convenient courses designed to fit their lifestyles and enhance their job skills (Gardner, 2019). The convenience schools like WGU and SNHU offer has privileged these juggernauts with an average population of 80,000 online students. These staggering statistics are equivalent to the student populations of the top 14 universities in the annual *U.S. News & World Report* rankings combined.

### ***Solutions to Enrollment Challenges***

Despite the enrollment and fiscal pressures facing colleges small and large, the future is not as bleak as it appears. The high school graduate population is projected to



become more racially diverse by 2025, particularly among Blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans (The National Center for Education, 2017). This coincides with statistics showing that college enrollment among Black students and Latino students has increased 37 percent and 36 percent respectively over the last two decades (Cook, 2014). With the White high school graduate population projected to decline by 9 percent in the next decade, it is crucial for colleges to invest resources to support the recruitment of students from racially diverse backgrounds. After all, these students may serve to assist colleges in sustaining a competitive edge.

The complexities surrounding college selection are not just limited to Black high school graduates. Higher education has begun to take notice of a once ignored but increasingly prominent population—that of the rural student. Rural students have attracted the attention of admissions offices at a variety of colleges small and large for one main reason: steady declines in enrollment. Post-secondary institutions throughout the country are having difficulty attracting high school students, especially in areas like the Northeast that have witnessed declines in the number of high school graduates (The National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). This, coupled with intense competition from “mega universities” like Western Governors University (Gardner, 2019), has forced admissions offices to reconfigure recruitment strategies to target rural students.

### ***Rural Students and Rural Colleges***

Rural students are an intriguing population. While they tend to have high graduation rates and competitive standardized test scores, the college attendance rate among rural students is a dismal 59 percent (Gettinger, 2019; Marcus, 2018; Nadworny & Marcus, 2018). In contrast, the college attendance rate is 62 percent and 67 percent

among urban and suburban high school graduates (Marcus, 2018; Nadworny & Marcus, 2018). Even if rural students enroll in college, their success is not guaranteed. Financial pressures, stereotyping, and culture shock are a slew of factors that contribute to rural students either dropping out of college or forgoing college altogether (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Krupnick, 2018; Marcus, 2018; Nadworny & Marcus, 2018).

Institutions of higher education are beginning to take notice and are gradually expanding resources designed to support rural college students. Examples can be found in Georgia where the state's flagship institution, the University of Georgia, plans to provide scholarships for approximately 24 rural students per year (Marcus, 2018). This initiative, the ALL Georgia Program, is intended to mitigate the dropout and graduation rates among rural students which is at least 10 percent lower than their counterparts. Not only does the ALL Georgia Program provide \$7,000 in scholarships to select rural students, it also provides rural students with academic advising as well as time management and study habit skills.

In addition to providing financial incentives for rural students to attend college, admissions outreach must improve. Because rural students tend to have lower household incomes as compared to their peers from other settings, colleges view them as less profitable because they require more financial aid assistance (Gettinger, 2019). Geography is also a reason that rural students tend to be ignored. Gettinger (2019) cited a study conducted by researchers at University of California, Los Angeles and the University of Arizona which found that high schools in affluent areas receive more attention from college recruiters than less affluent areas. The same study also noted that recruiters from private colleges are more likely to focus on private high schools. Because

schools located in rural areas often have limited financial resources, recruiters are less likely to spend time actively recruiting students from these schools.

### **A Closer Look at West Virginia Higher Education Enrollment**

Although there are challenges related to the recruitment of both minority and rural students, the benefits of targeting each group are insurmountable. Investing in the recruitment of these types of students has the potential of boosting the enrollment of struggling colleges and universities across the country. Of greater significance is how improved student recruitment strategies can impact a fledgling state system like that of West Virginia. Similar to other state college systems such as Maine, Pennsylvania, and Georgia, West Virginia is a rural state facing stagnant college enrollment and mounting costs (Carter, 2018; Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Dronsfield, 2018; Hicks, 2017; Mays, 2012).

From 2012 to 2016, undergraduate enrollment decreased 5.9 percent statewide (Dronsfield, 2018). West Virginia's waning enrollment can be linked to several state-specific developments. First, the idea of attending college may not be viewed as a priority among rural West Virginians. As Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) observed, parents and educators "in many rural areas still argue about the value of physical, laboring work versus technical and professional careers" (p. 1). The West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission found that just over 19 percent of the state's low-income students attend college; rural counties in the state only send as few as 30 percent of their students to college (West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission, 2009). Additionally, the state is hindered by student loan default which is among the highest in the country (Kennedy, 2015). Coupled with high rates of poverty and limited white-collar jobs, college is not within reach for many West Virginians (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004).

Despite these specific challenges, West Virginia has experienced a slight increase in enrollment rates with the number of freshmen enrolled statewide increasing by 3.7 percent in 2016 (Kennedy, 2016). However, overall college enrollment statewide increased by a paltry 0.3 percent during the same period (Kennedy, 2017). But minority enrollment at colleges and universities statewide increased by 16.7 percent from 2012. Unfortunately, there is limited research that provides insight into the specific factors attributed to the increase in minority enrollment at West Virginia colleges and universities. To address this gap in the literature, this study was designed to study Black student enrollment at a small rural college in West Virginia to determine the social, academic, and financial factors responsible for this surge.

#### ***Case Study: Mountain View College***

Mountain View College (pseudonym), a small rural college located in West Virginia, is a prime example as to how declining enrollment and crippling financial challenges can push an institution to its breaking point. Since its founding, the school has evolved into a two- and four-year degree granting institution that offers majors in the liberal arts, criminal justice, land resources, and business among others. As of fall 2019, Mountain View College enrolled 1,578 students. Approximately 56 percent of full-time students resided on-campus. In addition, 46 percent of full-time students were female and 54 percent were male. Enrollment at the college is also projecting downward. During the fall 2013 semester, the college enrolled 1,850 students; only 1,578 enrolled in fall 2019

The college's enrollment by race/ethnicity has not dramatically shifted. During the fall 2013 term, 82 percent of students were White, 13 percent were Black, and 1 percent were Hispanic. Within a six-year span, the percentage of White students at Mountain View fell to 79 percent (fall 2019); the percentage of Black students fell to 12

percent. In the meantime, the Hispanic student population rose by 1 percent (fall 2019). The 3 percent decline in the White student population at Mountain View College is reflective of a statewide decline in White student enrollment. The neutral change in the minority student population suggests enrollment among this group may remain stable.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Nationwide, post-secondary institutions anticipate significant fluctuations in the number of first-time, first-year students entering college. While the number of White high school graduates is projected to decline over the next decade, the number of minority high school graduates is expected to experience double-digit growth over this same period. These projections have forced colleges across the country to restate their commitment to diversity by investing more resources to actively recruit minority students. However, not all schools have the available time, financial, technological, and human resources to make such an investment. Post-secondary institutions under the direction of the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission (WVHEPC) are indicative of this challenge.

As a whole, the State of West Virginia has high rates of poverty (ranked 7<sup>th</sup> nationwide), low numbers of degree holding residents, and a tumultuous state higher education system that is experiencing financial challenges (West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission, 2009). Mountain View College is a rural 2-year and 4-year degree granting school in the state that mirrors various challenges including declining enrollment, tuition rate increases, and unstable financial assets. More significant is the fact that Mountain View has seen a slight decline in its White student population with some stability among its minority student population. Yet, despite such

challenges, the college continues to attract a steady number of Black students to its campus. Current studies indicate that Black students, under the guidance of their parents, are more likely to apply to and enroll in selective schools with stable social and academic environments. Therefore, this unique reversal in traditional enrollment trends among Black students deserves greater scrutiny.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study was designed to gauge an understanding of the college selection process of Black students currently enrolled at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) located in rural West Virginia. More specifically, this study aimed to determine the factors (social, financial, geographical, etc.) that prompted Black students to apply for admission to and enroll at Mountain State College. Additionally, perspectives from the college's staff and administration were collected to contribute a layer of insight that may substantiate students' reasoning. Finally, the study sought to determine whether Black students enrolled at rural colleges represent a new trend in traditional college selection patterns among minority students.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions guiding this study are:

- What are the perceptions of administrators and staff members about current admissions practices used to recruit prospective minority students?
- What are the main factors that prompted Black students to apply for admission to *and* enroll at a rural institution like Mountain view College?
  - What role, if any, has undermatching played in the college selection process of students enrolled at Mountain State College?

- What are the perceived future benefits (social, workforce, etc.) of attending a school like Mountain View College?

### **Significance of the Study**

The research is clear: Black students from both low and high socioeconomic backgrounds benefit academically, socially, and financially from attending selective colleges and universities (An, 2010). Yet the enrollment of Black students at a less selective school like Mountain View College appears to be an anomaly that contradicts past studies. Therefore, this study is significant because it presents an intimate examination of non-traditional patterns of college selection and enrollment among Black students. More specifically, the study is set in the context of a rural, public college. The importance cannot be ignored: shedding light on non-traditional patterns of enrollment may prompt admissions offices at rural schools to revise their recruitment practices. Past studies have focused on enrollment challenges of colleges and universities in urban and more populous areas. And within the same context, such studies have primarily focused on the selection processes of minority and Black students enrolling in *selective* schools. With that in mind, this study presents challenges unique to recruiting minority students within the context of a rural college that does not have the prestige and resources typical of more popular schools. Lastly, this study aimed to collect insight from Black students currently enrolled at a rural college to determine if their college choice factors align with or contrast from the prevailing patterns among Black and minority students.

### **Summary**

Black students enrolled at rural schools like Mountain View College represent a unique outlier from traditional enrollment studies that posit that these students are more

likely to enroll at selective schools in geographically favorable areas. Interestingly, these students are enrolled in an institution that is experiencing ongoing fiscal pressures, declining enrollment, and is located in what may be perceived as an unfavorable geographic location. Chapter 2 will add context to these preliminary trends by delving into two college choice models: Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Three Phase Model of College Choice and Freeman's (2005) Model of Predetermination. These models served as the theoretical framework for this study and will also set the tone to discuss college choice patterns among Black students. In addition, Chapter 2 provides context on rural college student enrollment and ongoing challenges facing colleges located in rural settings. Some of these factors will undoubtedly reveal intriguing social, academic, and financial aspects influencing college choice among Black students.



## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to engage the perspectives of Black college students currently enrolled at the time the data were collected at a small rural college to determine what factors influenced their selection at this institution. Therefore, the main goal of this research was to determine what underlying factors prompted Black students to enroll at a college that is categorized as less selective and competitive than other schools. The following questions are designed to obtain greater perspective from students:

- What are the main factors that prompted Black students to apply for admission to *and* enroll at a rural school like Mountain View College?
- What are the perceptions administrators and staff members have of current admissions practices used to recruit minority students?
  - What role, if any, has undermatching played in the college selection process of students enrolled at Mountain View College?
- What are perceived future benefits (social, workforce, etc.) of attending a school like Mountain View College?

Additionally, these questions serve as the basis to synthesize research on current college choice trends discussed in the literature review. Furthermore, these questions serve as a baseline to discuss politics and post-secondary fiscal issues that serve as indirect factors shaping the scope of college choice patterns for prospective Black college students.

Current political and economic pressures have forced colleges nationwide to adjust their enrollment recruitment tactics. Further complicating enrollment goals are the projected downward shifts in the number of high school graduates. The Northeast and

Midwest regions of the United States are projected to experience reduced high school graduation rates; the Southern and Western regions are expected to have unprecedented growth among traditional-aged undergraduate students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Despite these geographic disparities, post-secondary enrollment is expected to increase 15 percent or by 23.3 million students overall (Lederman, 2017).

A key student population that post-secondary institutions must focus on is that of the minority student. While the White post-secondary student population is expected to rise by three percent within the next seven years, the post-secondary Latino (32 percent), Black (22 percent), Asian-Pacific Islander (16 percent), and multi-racial (37 percent) student populations will experience double-digit growth (Lederman, 2017). Such growth is indicative of the evolving racial and cultural climate in the United States as well as current and expected demographic shifts. It also presents post-secondary institutions with a diverse pool of prospective students that may come to symbolize a new era in college admissions.

Indeed, post-secondary institutions located in densely populated and diverse geographic areas stand to benefit from a diverse applicant pool as compared to institutions in rural settings. These institutions are more likely to have the prestige, funding, and resources to actively recruit a large number of admission applicants from underrepresented racial/ethnic minority groups. Small rural colleges, however, face challenges that make them highly susceptible to negative shifts in enrollment. These institutions are geographically isolated from major cities, recruit students from a limited radius, offer a smaller quantity of two- and four-year degrees from a select number of

fields, and are less racially diverse (Eddy, 2012; Glover, Waller, & Justice, 2010; Miller & Tuttle, 2006; Mills, 2014; Thornton & Friedel, 2016).

Rural public colleges in West Virginia are reflective of these features and are currently confronting significant declines in enrollment. Data from the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission demonstrate a concerning trend: from 2012 to 2016, the statewide four-year public college undergraduate enrollment decreased 5.9 percent and as of fall 2016, statewide four-year public college enrollment declined by 0.2 percent (Dronsfield, 2018). Comparatively, college enrollment nationally has grown a dismal 0.2 percent in the fall 2016 and spring 2017 semesters (Hicks, 2017).

Despite the decline in enrollment that has existed statewide over the past five years, West Virginia Higher Education has seen positive trajectories in other enrollment metrics. The 2015-2016 period saw a 3.7 percent increase in first-year enrollment (Kennedy, 2016). Public colleges statewide also saw their retention rates reach 70.7 percent—the highest it has been in the past five years (Kennedy, 2016). But one area of growth that requires special attention involves the enrollment of students from underrepresented minority groups. The number of underrepresented minority students grew by 16.7 percent—a record number for West Virginia public colleges (Dronsfield, 2018).

The positive trajectories highlighted perhaps reflect the cost savings students reap from enrolling in West Virginia's public colleges. In state tuition and fees are considerably lower than in other states, and students have access to an array of generous grants and scholarships (Kennedy, 2015). But these claims lack merit because West Virginia is neither ranked in the top 10 list of states with affordable in state tuition nor

does it have any colleges ranked as most affordable (Grant, 2017; Johnson, 2018; Value Colleges, 2019). This misconception is one of many issues plaguing West Virginia's post-secondary institutions.

The economic importance of improving statewide college enrollment also deserves attention. By 2020, nearly 50 percent of jobs in West Virginia will require some form of post-secondary training or a college degree (Kennedy, 2015). As of 2017, fewer than 12 percent of residents over the age of 25 have a bachelor's degree, making West Virginia one of the least educated states in the country based on this metric (Cohn, 2017). Dismal figures plague the conscience of West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission Chancellor Dr. Paul Hill: "Now, more than ever, West Virginia needs a strong higher education system producing skilled, knowledgeable graduates. The future of our state depends on it" (Kennedy, 2017, p. 3).

The plight of public colleges within the West Virginia system is reflective of national enrollment trends. While 70 percent of colleges have reported surges in applicants in ten out of the last fifteen years, the yield rate (the percentage of accepted students who enroll) has declined precipitously. Compared to fall 2002 which saw an average yield rate of 48.7 percent, fall 2013 witnessed a 35.9 percent rate. Such declines, as Hoover (2015) posits, can be attributed to last minute discussions between admission applicants and their families about affordability.

Another significant element impacting college enrollment is the gradual decline in the number of high school graduates that would otherwise contribute to freshmen admission rates. The National Center for Education Statistics' (2017) report, Projections

of Education Statistics to 2025, reflects this trend. According to the report, the number of projected high school graduates in the United States is projected to:

- Decrease 3 percent between 2012 - 13 and 2025 - 26 in the Northeast
- Increase 1 percent between 2012 - 13 and 2025 - 26 in the Midwest
- Increase 14 percent between 2012 - 13 and 2025 - 26 in the South
- Increase 7 percent between 2012 - 13 and 2025 - 26 in the West

The instability in the quantity of high school graduates has forced admissions administrators to invest their resources into transfer students—a group that has rapidly grown. Forty-four percent of reporting four-year colleges indicated a 37.6 percent increase in transfer enrollments. This statistic is further sustained by the shared belief that transfer students are the wave of the future. At the time this article (Hoover, 2015) was published, 58 percent of participating four-year colleges indicated that transfer student recruitment will become a priority over the next three years. Additionally, 80 percent of participants shared that their admissions offices have personnel that exclusively work with prospective transfer students. Another pattern that has prompted college admissions offices to redirect their resources has been the uptick in international students. Over the past 40 years, the number of students enrolled in colleges outside their home countries ballooned from 800,000 to 4.5 million; this total is projected to increase seven million by 2025. Indeed, international students have become a vital population for colleges to aggressively recruit from.

Interestingly, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*'s overview of enrollment trends did not make any mention of patterns among underrepresented minority applicants. This is significant because college applications over the next decade will reflect a highly

racially diverse pool. According to The National Center for Education Statistics (2017), the number of public high school graduates is projected to:

- Decrease 9 percent between 2012 – 13 and 2025 – 26 (1,791,000 versus 1,635,000) for students who are White;
- Be 3 percent higher in 2025 – 26 than in 2012 – 13 (474,000 versus 462,000) for students who are Black;
- Increase 44 percent between 2012 – 13 and 2025 – 26 (640,000 versus 921,000) for students who are Hispanic;
- Increase 28 percent between 2012 – 13 and 2025 – 26 (179,000 versus 229,000) for students who are Asian/Pacific Islander;
- Decrease 18 percent between 2012 – 13 and 2025 – 26 (31,000 versus 25,000) for students who are American Indian/Alaska Native and;
- Increase 35 percent between 2012 – 13 and 2025 – 26 (66,000 versus 88,000) for students who are of two or more races.

*U.S. News & World Report*'s insight into what it deems the “college admissions bubble” sustains these findings (Cook, 2014). Due to greater acceptance of racial diversity over the past several decades, the college landscape has borne witness to double-digit growth among racial groups. Over two decades (1980 – 2012), Hispanic and Black students have had the largest growth. The college enrollment percentage among Black students grew from 19 percent in 1980 to 37 percent in 2012; the Hispanic enrollment grew from 16 percent in 1980 to 36 percent in 2012 (Cook, 2014).

In addition to elaborating on racial trends among incoming college students, the *U.S. News & World Report* article profiles some challenges plaguing college admissions,

including prestige and cost (Cook, 2014). Since undergraduate degrees are more commonplace than they were decades ago, colleges must now wade the competitive waters to distinguish themselves. Hence, post-secondary institutions must now find ways to obtain elite status. Richard Vedder (as cited by Cook, 2014) aptly puts it this way: “The special people today are those who went to the elite private schools or the very top public flagship universities” (pp. 10-11). This sentiment reflects parents’ belief that obtaining an education from an elite school will translate into socioeconomic stability for their children.

But the financial burden associated with a college education continues to plague college admissions. The student loan crisis coupled with limited job opportunities have led many prospects to ponder whether such risks are worth it. As affirmed by Vedder (as cited by Cook, 2014), “college graduates aren’t getting jobs, aren’t getting good jobs. For those students the burden of college, which they have already paid for in most cases with student loans, is still with them, yet the benefits of going to college don’t appear to be terribly real” (p. 7). Vedder posits that the stigma surrounding the financial burden associated with college enrollment will negatively impact state colleges, small liberal arts colleges, and historically black colleges. Many institutions that fall into these categories are not elite yet assess tuition and fees on par with elite schools. This reflects the common return-on-investment mindset shared by students and parents alike (Zewald, 2017). Indeed, these factors contribute to declines in enrollment.

The pursuit of prestige is not the only challenge overshadowing the college landscape. The overall decline in undergraduate enrollments cannot be ignored. In 2016, about 29 percent of public universities and 41 percent of private universities were

meeting enrollment goals. This is further hampered by the significant growth of the “mega university”- a term used to identify online based schools such as Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) and Western Governors University (WGU) which boast a combined enrollment in excess of 180,000 students (Gardner, 2019). To put into perspective, Western Governors’ enrollment of 88,585 undergraduates is equivalent to the enrollment of the nation’s top 14 universities *combined*.

These once obscure schools have become college juggernauts because they “reflect what Americans seek in a college degree: something practical, convenient, and inexpensive” (Gardner, 2019, p. 3). This is a glaring weakness traditional colleges and universities are having difficulty overcoming. Vedder (as cited by Cook, 2014) exposed this issue with the discussion of the ongoing student loan debt crisis. Students are less likely to be willing to take on student debt for a degree that may not assist in helping them land a good paying job. This parallels the shift in student demographics discussed by Zewald (2019). Traditional age students (18-to-22 years old) were once the majority but have now been supplanted by a non-traditional age group that is more mature, financially independent, and is enrolling in college with at least 30 credits from another institution.

The surge in the non-traditional student population can be attributed to advancements in technology. Due to the availability of high-speed internet, enrollment at online-based mega universities like Liberty University skyrocketed. Online-based schools offer a level of convenience that allows adult learners with busy work schedules and families to thrive. The success of online juggernauts such as Liberty and Western Governors Universities has prompted other schools to enter into this new market. A



prominent example involves Purdue University and its purchase of the fledgling for-profit company Kaplan University. It rebranded Kaplan's 14 campus and online venue as Purdue University Global (Gardner, 2019).

Without a doubt, the "mega university" has altered the higher education landscape. Western Governors University and Liberty Universities have entrenched themselves as household names making it difficult for new competition to enter into the online education arena. Their presence has also overshadowed the growth of small colleges that are struggling to remain relevant. In 2015, an analysis by Moody's (Seltzer, 2017; Simon, 2017) predicted that "the number of small college closures is likely to triple in the next three years. And the number of small schools with a three-year growth rate of less than 2 percent jumped from 10 percent to 50 percent between 2006 and 2014" (Simon, 2017, p. 1).

Growth is further reduced because of fiscal pressures related to staggering debt. Six years ago, Moody's downgraded the credit ratings of 22 colleges due to a heavy collection of debt (Selingo, 2013). Smaller colleges are especially vulnerable because they are tuition driven, have paltry endowments, and face increased competition from larger schools that have greater resources (Simon, 2017). One factor contributing to unstable finances for many small colleges is discounted tuition. Selingo (2017) cites Drew University as an example of an institution financially crippled by such a practice. The university had discounted its \$42,000 sticker price by at least 50 percent resulting in loss of net tuition revenue (money left over after grant aid is subtracted). But Drew University is not an anomaly; net tuition revenue has fallen flat at about 73 percent of colleges.

In addition to declines in net tuition revenue, declines in state aid have also crippled the financial stability of small colleges. Over three decades, the amount of state aid has shifted from about 75 percent to less than 50 percent (Selingo, 2013). Schools have been forced to rely heavily on tuition revenue to cover overhead costs. This has placed more strain on the American middle class whose overall wealth has remained tepid since the 1990s. With less financial resources available, middle class families are migrating away from small private colleges in favor of larger public universities. This shift has been advanced by the perception that large public universities have more generous financial aid packages (Seltzer, 2017).

Overall, this literature review critiques studies relevant to college choice. Specifically, two college choice models will be discussed: Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Three Phase Model of College Choice and Freeman's (2005) Model of Predetermination. These models serve as a theoretical framework to assist in outlining the college choice process of Black students. The next section of the literature review will focus on the college choice and enrollment decision patterns among Black high school students. The review will then delve into a brief overview of college enrollment among rural students before concluding with a discussion of the current enrollment and fiscal challenges impacting rural college campuses.

The review will focus on the trajectory of enrollment over a ten-year period with special attention paid to enrollment by race. The review will also outline the mitigating factors contributing to the enrollment of Black students at less selective schools. Such factors will be discussed in the overview of the college choice processes specific to prospective Black college students. This discussion provides greater clarity as to why a

rural state like West Virginia has witnessed a record increase in the enrollment of underrepresented minorities attending its public colleges- approximately 16.7 percent from 2012 to 2016 (Dronsfield, 2018). Moreover, this overview may provide better insight into the reasons Black students elected to enroll at the college central to the researcher's case study: Mountain View College.

### **Conceptual Framework: Three Phases of College Choice and Predetermination**

College choice is defined as the process by which “students decide whether and where to go to college” (Lowry, 2017, p. 19). This definition does not place due emphasis on the complexity of the college choice process which is nuanced and therefore requires further examination. Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Three Phase Model of College Choice provides the necessary clarity to examine the steps prospective college students take to navigate the process. Predisposition is the first stage of the model and is defined as factors in a student's background (parents' education, academic ability, etc.) that determine initial interest in pursuing post-secondary education. The search phase is step two of the Three Phase Model of College Choice model. During this phase, students begin to narrow their post-secondary options by reviewing information from different sources. Lastly, the choice phase concludes the college choice model. Students engaged in this final step carefully weigh the costs (financial) and benefits (academic, social, etc.) of attending a particular institution (Bateman & Kennedy, 1999; Fryar & Hawes, 2012; Klein & Washburn, 2012).

The Three Phase Model of College Choice model is fitting because it adds depth to college choice models that relied on an econometric approach. Econometric models posit that decisions are based on a “comparison between the present value of perceived

lifetime benefits and the present value of perceived lifetime costs” (Perna, 2000, p. 118). To elaborate, econometric models delve into short-term consumption benefits which are often associated with involvement in extracurricular activities, enhancement of social status, and enjoyment of the learning experience. In the long term, the college experience can provide students with future benefits such as higher lifetime earnings, more fulfilling work, and lower probability of unemployment (Ma et al., 2016).

Although econometric models serve as a baseline to study the variables affecting the college choice process, Hossler and his associate find this model problematic. They suggest that “While the econometric models offer the notion of maximum utility of the perceived benefits of one choice alternative over another, assumptions and linking concepts among variables are...lacking” (Hamrick & Hossler, 1996, p. 119). The Three Phase Model of College Choice model remedies this void by integrating economic models with concepts related to status attainment. Whereas economic models focus on cost-benefits associated with college choice, status attainment models rely on behavioral variables like environment, family circumstances, and peers (Hamrick & Hossler, 1996). By merging both concepts, Hossler and Gallagher’s framework proves advantageous for any researcher seeking to “choose variables from either domain and concentrate on the sociological aspect of college choice as a process while maintaining the decision-making perspective of economics” (p. 182).

While Hossler and Gallagher’s insight into the college selection processes used by students is helpful, it has limitations. Goings and Sewell (2019) critiqued the Three Phase Model of College Choice model for failing to make distinctions in the college choice process by race, specifically among Black college students. Similarly, Lowry (2017)

makes the same argument against the model but finds that Hossler and Gallagher also fail to recognize that “parental education may play a different role in college choice for African American’s than it does for White Americans” (p. 21). Bateman and Kennedy (1999) share Lowry’s sentiment by arguing that Hossler and Gallagher apply a traditional family structure to their approach without considering the impact of single parent households.

This void can be filled with Freeman’s (2005) Model of Predetermination. In this model, Freeman expands upon the predisposition phase in the Three Phase Model of College Choice model. She purposely uses the term “predetermination” as a substitute for predisposition because “environmental circumstances have often have much to do with whether students will choose higher education. In that sense, the decision is often predetermined by the circumstances outside of the students’ control” (pp. 111-112). Freeman integrates elements such as family, kinship, and school circumstances into her framework for understanding the college choice process for Black students. This serves to fill the gap exposed by the Three Phase Model of College Choice model that tends to generalize the college choice process. Indeed, the concepts presented by Hossler and Gallagher and Freeman work in tandem to assist in understanding the complex college choice process from the perspective of Black students.

### ***Rural Students as the Answer to Admissions Woes***

A population that has been largely ignored by researchers and college admissions teams alike has been the rural student. Means et al. (2016) find this concerning:

Few studies have examined the college choice process of rural youth and the barriers they face accessing post-secondary education. This is alarming when we consider that during the 2010-2011 academic year, over half of school districts were rural and approximately one quarter of all public school students were enrolled in rural schools (pp. 543-544).

While research on the college choice processes of rural students is limited, studies and news briefs that have focused on this subset of the student population share Mean's sentiment that rural students are largely ignored and tend to be taken for granted (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Gettinger, 2019; Krupnick, 2018; Marcus, 2018; Nadworny & Marcus, 2018).

In their study of rural African American high school students, Means et al. (2016) utilized a qualitative case study to determine how a rural context influences students' career aspirations and college choice processes. Means et al. used a team of seven interviewers to conduct interviews with 26 juniors enrolled at Central High School—a predominantly African American school located in a rural community within a Southeastern state. Interviews were designed to extract participants' perspectives of how growing up in a rural community influenced their college and career aspirations. Means et al. found that the majority of participants felt that their rural communities did not provide long-term economic benefits. This sentiment can be attributed to the many low paying fast food and retail jobs that dominate the rural community.

Participants in the study also expressed concerns about leaving their rural communities to pursue a college degree due to a strong desire to stay close to family. However, these concerns were tempered by encouragement from a close-knit network of family, teachers, and community members who wanted participants to pursue a college degree. In similar manner to findings made by researchers studying the college choice process of Black students from low-income households (An, 2010; Bateman & Kennedy, 1999; Chapman et al., 2018; Goings & Sewell, 2019), rural Black high school students

did not have great access to the financial, social, and academic resources needed to apply to college.

The participants in this study did express gratitude for two school staff members who, despite busy schedules, were able to assist them with submitting test scores and transcripts for college consideration. These academic resources also provided students with access to support services like Upward Bound and Talent Search. Such resources did provide a slight increase in participants' social capital but did not fill all voids. Anxiety limited financial resources, and lack of academic preparedness culminated in participants questioning their college readiness. Despite this concern, Means et al. (2016) observed that participants were very much interested in enrolling in college. The majority of participants expressed interest in enrolling in a college close to their communities; only a few participants expressed interest in enrolling in an out of state school.

In contrast, Chenoweth and Galliher's (2004) research on the college aspirations of rural White West Virginia high school seniors provides greater context as to how academic, familial, and social factors impact college aspirations by gender. Their study involved 242 high school seniors (115 males, 127 females) from the most rural counties (populations under 12,000) of West Virginia. Participants were majority White (approximately 96 percent) students with a small percentage who identified as racial minorities. A survey was disseminated to participants to collect general demographic data, feedback on plans to attend college, and the familial, academic, and information regarding financial influences behind such decision-making.

The results from the survey revealed the implications of parental engagement and educational attainment as well as the influence of Appalachian culture on students'

college prospects. Chenoweth and Galliher found that there was a strong correlation between fathers' college attendance and males' plans to attend college. In greater context, the higher the fathers' educational attainment, the greater likelihood males would attend college. Fathers' occupations also correlated with males' college aspirations. Males who indicated that they had no plans to attend college were more likely to have fathers who were unemployed, unskilled, or semiskilled.

Female participants, on the other hand, were more influenced by high school curriculum and perceived intelligence compared to peers. These influences greatly factored into their decision to attend college. Interestingly, the labor market in West Virginia is skewed towards labor-intensive opportunities such as coal mining and manufacturing- jobs that are male dominated. The limited career opportunities within Appalachia also prompted female high school students to pursue college as a way to obtain financial independence. Gender differences regarding career and college paths suggest that Appalachian culture may value labor over education.

As Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) along with Means et al. (2016) have discussed, rural students are greatly influenced by cultural attitudes about college, community and familial ties, and financial obligations. Failure to recognize these unique circumstances for rural students has contributed to some surprising twists of fate for a variety of colleges and universities. Already contending with declining enrollment, post-secondary institutions across the country were stunned by the swift change in politics during the 2016 presidential election that echoed a re-emergence in conservative ideas promoted largely from a rural base. In addition to enrollment challenges, the shift from liberal to conservative politics has convinced some post-secondary institutions to devise



strategies to recruit rural students (Gettinger, 2019; Marcus, 2018; Nadworny & Marcus, 2018). It has also prompted them to recognize that “these students need at least as much help navigating the college experience as low-income, first-generation racial and ethnic minorities from inner cities” (Nadworny & Marcus, 2018, p. 2).

Statistics show rural students attain high school graduation rates and standardized test scores on par with their suburban counterparts (Marcus, 2018). Despite this, only 59 percent of rural students directly enroll in college (Gettinger, 2019; Nadworny & Marcus, 2018). Even more alarming is the college going rate for non-White rural students—a rate that stands at about 53 percent (Krupnick, 2018). This is on par with the college going rate for non-White urban minorities (Krupnick, 2018). For greater perspective, the national average is 69 percent; college-going rates for urban and suburban high school graduates is 62 percent and 67 percent respectively and once rural students enroll in college, they are more likely to drop out (Gettinger, 2019; Krupnick, 2018; Nadworny & Marcus, 2018).

A culmination of factors contributes to the low college going rate for rural students and specifically non-White rural students. One factor is the significant growth in students whose primary language is a language other than English. While this group of students has grown by 18 percent overall, states with large rural areas such as South Carolina and Kentucky have seen this population grow by 610 percent (Krupnick, 2018). Rural high schools often have less resources such as access to reliable internet and a stable teacher base (Krupnick, 2018; Means et al., 2016). The dramatic growth in non-English speaking students places great strain on these limited resources.

In addition to the language barrier, there is a skewed perception that obtaining a high school diploma is more beneficial than obtaining a college degree. One reason for this view can be linked to parental educational attainment. Many rural students are the first in their family to attend college. In fact, fewer than one in five rural adults aged 25 and older have a college degree (Marcus, 2018). And from a cultural context, rural students may come from families that are accustomed to working agricultural, mining, and manufacturing jobs—occupations that traditionally do not require a college education. Many rural families view these occupations as “a way of life” that makes obtaining a college degree unnecessary and a non-priority. Lackluster recruiting efforts from colleges also create the perfect storm for declining interest among rural students. Distance is the biggest barrier preventing rural students and college recruiters from meeting directly. For example, a college recruiter may have to visit 10 high schools in a rural area to meet with and generate interest among an adequate number of students. In contrast, that same recruiter can meet about 1,500 students at once in some urban high schools (Gettinger, 2019).

Once rural students overcome these social and familial complexities and enroll in college, the experience of being on a campus can be stressful. Rural students often feel social, cultural, economic isolation from their peers (Cox et al., 2014; Gettinger, 2019; Marcus, 2018; Nadworny & Marcus, 2018). This is fueled by preconceived notions that rural students are highly conservative and are not that smart. As one rural student highlighted, his peers “always seem to think I’m Republican. And poor. And a farmer” (Marcus, 2018, p. 10). In addition to overcoming these stereotypes, rural students are often overwhelmed by financial aid processes. If they are the first in their family to attend

college, their parents may not have the knowledge of the college selection and financial aid processes to assist their college bound children. Lastly, rural students are largely ignored in the academic setting by faculty members. Greater emphasis has been placed on retaining minority students from urban areas. This has resulted in rural students slipping through the cracks. These frustrations can lead ultimately to rural students dropping out of college.

In order to remedy these frustrations, some colleges have recognized the need to provide rural students with the proper financial and academic resources to help them thrive. Schools like the University of Michigan have developed a mentorship program for first-generation college students that boasts about a third of participants as students from rural areas. The University of Georgia and Pennsylvania State Higher Education system institutions have also placed emphasis on implementing mentorship programs and enhancing financial support to students from rural areas. Georgia's newly established ALL Georgia Program will provide \$7,000 scholarships to each rural student enrolled. In rural Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania, Lycoming College will use proceeds from a \$1 million grant to establish scholarships for residents of the county (Marcus, 2018). These programs are intended to work as incentives to recruit and retain rural students.

This overview of rural students enrolling at post-secondary institution is important to this body of work because it demonstrates an overlap with studies of prospective Black students who are either first-generation college students or are from low-income households. Both subsets of the prospective student population navigate the college selection process without proper guidance from parents (An, 2010; Chapman et al., 2018; Gettinger, 2019; Goings & Sewell, 2019; Krupnick, 2018; Means et al., 2016; Perna,

2000). Without a doubt, parents want their children to succeed at college; however, they lack insight into the enrollment processes. Both types of students also contend with limited academic and financial resources at the high school and post-secondary levels.

Black students who are first generation college students and/or low-income face an additional barrier: their race. Systemic racial discrimination coexists with limited cultural and human capital to create unfavorable conditions for Black college students (Alvarado & An, 2015; Engberg & Wolniak; 2009; Goings & Sewell, 2019; Means et al, 2016; Perna, 2000). While the current literature concerning rural students is limited, voids surrounding the motivations for Black students enrolling at rural students are very noticeable. Therefore, the next series of items intend to lay the groundwork to discuss the factors that guide Black students in the college selection process.

### **Overview of Traditional College Choice Processes**

Prospective college students apply a cost-benefit analysis to their college choice process (Bradshaw et al., 2001; Hamrick & Hossler, 1996). In other words, prospective students “minimize perceived costs and maximize potential benefits in their college choice” (Bradshaw et al., 2001, p. 16). Costs can consist of tuition, books, fees; benefits entail rewards “resulting from degree attainment but also perceived social fit with the college, its location, or its special academic programs” (Hamrick & Hossler, 1996, p. 181). To be more specific, students attending institutions of higher education are more likely to increase their lifetime earnings, be covered by employer provide health insurance, and increase their likelihood of enhancing their social mobility (Ma et al., 2016). The perceived benefits are often affiliated with the defined image of a college (Pampaloni, 2010). In essence, students are apt to select a college that can properly

mitigate their costs and expand the benefits associated with post-secondary degree attainment.

One crucial factor associated with the cost-benefit analysis is affordability. Often with the aid of their parents, college bound students carefully consider tuition as well as financial aid. Students do not want to incur unnecessary debt and are attracted to schools that offer generous financial aid packages (Klein & Washburn, 2012). Affordability is also an important factor for high achieving students who are less willing to absorb debt at the undergraduate level but are willing to make financial sacrifices at the graduate level (Bradshaw et al., 2001). This aspect is carefully reviewed with the guidance of parents and in some instances, the influence of peers (Alvarado & An, 2015; Chapman et al., 2018; Goings & Sewell, 2019; Perna, 2000).

Geography also correlates with perceived cost. While many students may have a desire to attend out of state schools, the burden of paying increased tuition, room and board, and other fees as an out of state student may serve as a deterrence and prompt students to select more affordable college options in proximity to their home (Lopez-Turely, 2009). This is especially true for students from low-income households who are less likely to enroll college even if they live in close proximity to post-secondary institutions. While attending a college in close proximity to home is a financially viable option, students from low-income households may not be able to cope with rising tuition, board, and other associated costs of attending college (Lopez-Turley, 2009). In addition to geography, access to clubs and activities, campus size, and perceptions of the campus as welcoming are other factors utilized by students to create matches with prospective schools (Braddock & Hua, 2006; Klein & Washburn, 2012; Lopez-Turley, 2009). As will

be discussed in future sections, perceptions of the campus environment are a crucial factor for Black students and their parents carefully evaluate.

### ***The College Choice Process of Black Students***

Like their counterparts, prospective Black college students rely on a variety of resources such as parental involvement, peers, online resources, and direct marketing from prospective institutions to narrow the number of institutions in which they are interested in enrolling (Braddock & Hua, 2006; Gyapong & Smith, 2012). Existing research is fairly ambiguous in determining what variables initiate and solidify the processes of Black students from low and high socioeconomic backgrounds. Ambiguity is also apparent among studies examining Black student college enrollment. For example, one study found that Black students were less likely to enroll in their first-choice institution (Maxey et al., 1995; Perna, 2000); yet other studies proved that Black students were more likely to enroll in college than their White counterparts (Engberg & Wolniak, 2009; Perna, 2000). To remedy this confusion, it is important to examine the roles that parental involvement, academic ability, and social capital play in the college selection process among Black students. It is also crucial to examine the core economic and social factors Black students seek in their ideal college.

### ***Parental Engagement and Black Student Choice***

Parental engagement as a factor in the decision making of Black students cannot be understated. As Chapman et al. (2018) argue, researchers “have limited information about the interactions between African American students and parents during this process, and about what African American parents value in institutions of higher education” (p. 31). This void was discovered during the researchers’ interviews with 74

African American students (56 female and 18 male) from the fall 2015 cohort who declined University of California admission offers and elected to enroll at institutions that are not a part of the University of California system. In addition, interviews (by phone) and a focus group were conducted with six parents (all female) who had a child participate in the study.

Based on interviews with both sets of parents, Chapman et al. (2018) found that parents generally set the tone for students' college decision making by utilizing internal and external networks of resources, scheduling college visits, and using their personal experiences to assist in the complex process. More importantly, parental education tends to correlate with engagement (Perna, 2000). Without a doubt, college educated Black parents are better able to assist their children with the selection process. Chapman et al. (2018) found that college educated Black parents “pressed college early and frequently as a requirement, *not* a suggestion” (p. 37). This tone was set during the early stages of their child's development—a stage that coincides with the predisposition phase discussed by Hossler and Gallagher (1987). The active engagement of Black parents in the college choice processes of their students contradicts general research that argues that parents play a supportive but minimal role (Bradshaw et al., 2001). For many Black parents, college education is not only seen as a means to become financially stable but as a way to combat racism. Black parents are cognizant of the social and economic barriers associated with being Black in America. But in particular, they feel that without a college degree these barriers can make their children even more vulnerable to racial prejudices.

With this in mind, Black parents want the ideal college campus to be a welcoming safe space for their children. Negative outcomes of attending a predominantly White

campus were articulated by Teranishi and Briscoe (2008) who conducted interviews with 36 Black junior and senior high school students (as well as six counselors) at a predominantly Black school in Los Angeles, California. The goal of this study was to address a void involving limitations determining “why and how race influences student choice” (p. 17). It was discovered that Black students often feel marginalized on White campuses, which often has a deleterious effect on success. Therefore, colleges that have a racially diverse student population along with positive campus supports are reflective of safe environments for Black students. The establishment of kinship networks is an integral part in ensuring that a campus is a good fit for Black students. Kinship networks often consist of relatives, friends, colleagues, and fraternity/sorority members who act as a resource for both parents and students during the initial predisposition or search phase. Operating as “villages”, these kinship networks are essentially trusted adults who can “look in on” students (Chapman et al., 2018). This is associated with Freeman’s (2005) Model of Predetermination which places heavy emphasis on the kinship networks as influences in the first phase of the college choice process for Black students (Alvarado & An., 2015).

Indeed, parental education is a highly impactful factor in the phases of the college selection process (Hamrick & Hossler, 1996; Lowry, 2017). But when it is correlated with socioeconomic status, the selection process can prove to be much more complex for Black students who are either first generation college students or are from low-income households. Black students from these backgrounds are more likely to enroll in less selective colleges and two-year schools than their counterparts from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition, their parents are more likely to be less engaged



and informed concerning the college selection process (An, 2010; Bateman & Kennedy, 1999; Chapman et al., 2018; Goings & Sewell, 2019).

Yet, these negative perceptions do not present an accurate portrayal of parents who are either from low-income backgrounds or lack a college degree. Like college educated Black parents, Black parents without a college degree heavily stress the importance of obtaining a college degree (Chapman et al., 2018; Goings & Sewell, 2019). The distinction between both sets of parents is the level of direct engagement. College educated Black parents tend to have greater access to financial aid resources and research materials related to the college search process. In addition, they know how to utilize their network of family, friends, and colleagues as points of contact throughout the process. Because of their tremendous access to resources, educated Black parents tend to have more direct involvement in the college choice process. This direct engagement is parlayed into assisting with configuring college costs and organizing campus visits.

The limited engagement demonstrated by Black parents who do not have a college degree and/or from low-income households reflects the limited access to the necessary social and cultural capital needed to assist with the college choice process (Engberg & Wolniak, 2009; Goings & Sewell, 2019; Means et al., 2016). This finding is reflected in Going and Sewell's (2019) study involving the college choice process of seventeen gifted Black high school students (7 female, 10 male) enrolled at high schools throughout New York City.

Interviews revealed that most of the participants would be the first in their families to attend college reflecting the limited social and cultural capital parents may have to assist with the college search process. Blacks and Hispanics, in particular, "not

only possess fewer types of capital that promote college enrollment but also attend schools with fewer of the resources that promote college enrollment” (Engberg & Wolniak, 2009, p. 2260). Factors associated with social and cultural capital include household income, parents’ level of education, and access to networks of people. These factors are often out of range for Black students, prompting feelings of frustration and stress. As a result, Black parents from low-income households may be less engaged in the process. This indirect involvement often requires student to navigate the college selection process as well as researching financial resources by themselves (Goings & Sewell, 2019).

Despite the limited engagement from parents, Black students who are from low-income households or are first generation college students found strategies to compensate. They often relied on family members either from within or outside the nucleus who could assist them with the college selection process. These family members could include siblings or cousins who could provide guidance in the form of mentorship or support for developing a college admissions essay. Black students also developed a rapport with school personnel such as a teacher or counselor to leverage assistance. The utilization of these resources is indicative of the predetermination phase outlined by Freeman (2005) which posits that family and kinship are an integral part of the college selection process for Black students. Without a doubt, these findings allowed Goings and Sewell (2019) to address voids in research directed to the college selection processes used by Black gifted students.

Research has also found a strong correlation between family income, structure, and academic achievement (An, 2010). In particular, students from non-traditional family

structures (single parent or stepparent) are more inclined to have “low levels of educational attainment and are more likely to experience academic failure and leave school prematurely than is true of children from two-parent families” (Bateman & Kennedy, 1999, p. 2). Yet, Bateman and Kennedy (1999) uncovered a discrepancy between educational aspirations and attainment. Their quantitative/qualitative study explored the influence of single-parent, female head household structures on the post-secondary pursuits of students. Their findings established that while non-traditional family structures may put students at greater risk for academic challenges, it does not prevent students from maintaining college aspirations similar to their counterparts from two-parent households. As Goings and Sewell (2019) previously demonstrated, high achieving Black students from non-traditional and/or low-income households are determined to enroll in competitive schools that match well with their academic pursuits.

### ***Undermatching and Black Student College Choice***

In general, most college bound students want their ideal post-secondary institution to have a strong academic reputation, welcoming environment, be socially engaging, affordable, and within a reasonable distance from home (Lopez-Turley, 2009; Klein & Washburn, 2012; Means et al., 2016; Pampaloni, 2010). High achieving students are more apt to enroll in colleges that have selective admissions or have highly ranked academic programs (Bradshaw et al., 2001; Goings & Sewell, 2019). When accounting for socioeconomic status, Black students from high income households are more likely to enroll in a selective school; Black students from low-income households are more likely to enroll in less selective schools (Chapman et al., 2018; Lowry, 2017; Perna, 2000).

The intersection of race and household income are poised to create a phenomenon known as academic undermatching which occurs when “students’ academic credentials

permit them access to a college or university that is more selective than the post-secondary alternative they actually choose” (Smith et al., 2012, p. 247). This phenomenon was brought to light by the Consortium on Chicago School Research that was in the process of developing an intervention to provide students enrolled in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) with resources to be better prepared for the college selection process (Sherwin, 2012).

The intervention involved assigning College Match advisers to three Chicago-area high schools that were either predominantly Black or Latino. A high quantity of students at these participant schools were from low-income families (93 percent, 75 percent, and 88 percent respectively). As discussed by Sherwin (2012), an intervention of this magnitude is important because nationally it is estimated that close to half of low-SES students have undermatched to a college (Bastedo & Flaster, 2014). Undermatching is more prominent in Chicago Public Schools where at least two-thirds of the 2005 high school graduating class undermatched (Sherwin, 2012; Smith et al., 2012).

Indeed, low socioeconomic status (SES) is one of the primary indicators of student undermatching (Bastedo & Flaster, 2014; Maxey et al., 1995; Roderick et al., 2011; Sherwin, 2012; Smith et al., 2012). As demonstrated by Sherwin (2012), an overwhelming majority of Chicago public high school students who undermatched are from low-income homes. This draws a close parallel to findings by Maxey et al. (1995). The researchers found that tuition and other costs was the most important factor Black students and families considered in the college choice process. This conclusion was based on a careful examination of survey responses from the 1993-94 ACT Assessment involving 125,298 White students and 12,448 Black students.

Maxey et al. (1995) used the findings from the survey to determine that many Black high school students do not attend their first-choice college. From the sample, 32.8 percent of the 7,510 Black female participants attended their first-choice college; only 29.6 percent of the 4,938 Black male participants opted for their first choice. Black males were also more likely than any other group to attend a college other than their first choice. The information collected from the survey indicated that Black students had a lower median family income range (\$18,000 to \$23,999) than their White counterparts (\$36,000 to \$41,999).

While these figures are two decades old, the implications that have emerged from Maxey et al.'s study resonates with current trends about the rising cost of tuition and the impact on minority families. Rising tuition costs impact minority students at a greater rate. While Black and Hispanic families tend to spend less (\$12,660 vs. \$11,540) than White families (\$13,588) per year on college, the cost burden is significant for racial minorities. On average, college costs can account for nearly 63 percent of Black family income and 53 percent of Hispanic family income. The percentage is 44 percent for White families (Wellman, 2017).

Compounding the exorbitant costs for minority students is the fact that they enroll in for-profit colleges and two-year schools at disproportionately high rates (Lowry, 2017; Smith et al., 2013; Tobolowsky & Bers, 2018; Wellman, 2017). Black students enroll at for-profit schools at double the rate (30 percent) of their overall college enrollment which stands at approximately 14 percent (Wellman, 2017). Even more significant is the percentage of Black students enrolled at community colleges- a figure that stands at 52 percent nationally (Lowry, 2017). In her research on the interplay of community college

choice and undermatching among Black students, Lowry conducted semi-structured interviews with 19 Black students (14 females, 5 males) who were currently enrolled at an urban community college in the southern region of the United States.

Lowry intended to address a void within current studies that often places more emphasis on Black students who undermatch to less selective *4-year* colleges and universities. As Lowry previously established, a sizeable percentage of Black students enroll at community colleges. More importantly, “African American and Hispanic students who enroll at community colleges are less likely to transfer and complete bachelor’s degrees than their Caucasian counterparts” (p. 20). These developments create a strong case for Lowry’s study to serve as a significant component to emerging research on undermatching.

Interviews with students revealed intriguing perspectives regarding familial and cultural influences on their college choice process. Applying Freeman’s (2005) Model of Predetermination, Lowry observed that Black students had a predetermination to attend college. They also expressed that going to college was their only option. This is similar to findings presented by Chapman et al. (2018) who found that college educated Black parents “pressed college early and frequently as a requirement, *not* a suggestion” (p. 37). The students interviewed by Lowry revealed how family served as an impactful influence to enroll at a community college despite being academically qualified to attend a 4-year college. Most participants had family members who previously attended a community college and shared their positive experiences.

The most significant finding that emerged from Lowry’s study was the overwhelming positive experiences all participants had at the community college. Some

participants felt that enrolling in a community college allowed them to take the necessary “baby steps” needed to be prepared for the demands of a 4-year college. Others echoed this sentiment by expressing that the community college atmosphere made them become more responsible and mature. Despite these positive developments, students felt that being undermatched to a community college limited their autonomy and social development. Most students were still residing with their parents while enrolled at college and were eager to obtain the freedom often associated with living on-campus.

The literature demonstrates that undermatching has become a widespread phenomenon disproportionately impacting minorities and students from low-income households. Insufficient academic and financial resources are major factors contributing to the disconnect between demonstrated academic ability and proper college match. Black and/or low-income students who are not properly matched to selective colleges may fail to capitalize on important academic, social, and financial gains. These include the ability to receive generous financial aid, access to academic resources, and higher lifetime career earnings (Bastedo & Flaster, 2014; Lowry, 2017; Tobolowsky & Bers, 2019). Because undermatching is a relatively new concept, greater context into its implications for minorities is needed from a non-linear standpoint to identify other factors (holistic admissions practices, bureaucratization of admissions) that create special circumstances for minorities to undermatch (Bastedo & Flaster, 2014).

### **Challenges to Diversity in College Admissions**

Reductions to higher education budgets are not the only barriers to actively recruiting and sustaining minority students. Anti-affirmative action legislation in California, Texas, and Washington has stymied the ability of many colleges to use race-

based admissions to improve the proportion of minority students (American Speech Language Hearing Association, 2017). *Fisher v. University of Texas* is the most recent example of a direct challenge to race-based admissions. *Fisher* attempted to challenge a portion of The University of Texas' admissions program that takes into account other factors including race and academic achievement. *Fisher* directly challenged *Grutter v. Bollinger* which in 2003 upheld the use of race "as one factor among many to achieve educational diversity" (Liptak, 2016).

In 2016, The United States Supreme Court rejected *Fisher's* challenge to The University of Texas's use of race in its admissions policies. While this serves as a victory of affirmative action, this triumph must be celebrated with caution. The Trump Administration intended to challenge affirmative action policies by using the Justice Department to sue universities over admissions policies deemed to discriminate against White applicants (Savage, 2017). Opponents of this measure argue that challenges to affirmative action serve to undermine the program and "roll back progress for African Americans and Latinos in a variety of areas ranging from education to voting rights" (Khadaroo, 2017).

Due to the threats of legal challenges from the Justice Department and the United States Supreme Court, colleges are now less likely to share how they apply race to their admissions processes. Further complicating matters is the national sentiment which is split: at least 50 percent of Americans are against the application of affirmative action policies. (Khadaroo, 2017). This raises tremendous concerns for proponents of affirmative action who argue that such challenges will compound racial achievement gaps.



While this is a legitimate concern, An's (2010) study on the impact of race, family background, and parental involvement on student college choice revealed an interesting development. His literature review demonstrated that while anti-affirmative action policies in Washington State could have contributed to a decline in the number of minority applications to colleges within that region, it did not deter high achieving minority students from applying to selective schools. For example, recent anti-affirmative action legislation in Texas appears to have encouraged high achieving minority students to apply to selective schools *outside* of Texas (An, 2010). These contradictions indicate that more insight is needed to determine how anti-affirmative action initiatives factor into either the growth or regression of minority student enrollment. It also highlights the resiliency of minority applicants to bypass barriers to attaining their college prospects.

### ***Rural Community Colleges Facing an Uphill Battle to Survive***

It is a known fact that in a highly competitive post-secondary market, small colleges are contending with waning student enrollment, unstable finances, and outdated facilities (Selingo, 2017; Simon, 2017). In particular, small community colleges located in rural regions of the United States are particularly vulnerable to even the slightest decline in student enrollment (Semuels, 2017; Smith, 2019). More importantly, these colleges are burdened with sustaining the economy of the local rural communities they serve which places added pressure on leaders and support staff (Eddy, 2012; Hicks & Jones, 2011; Miller & Tuttle, 2006; Torres et al., 2013). Small rural colleges must contend with these issues while also navigating a barrage of outdated state and local budget allocations that do not adequately sustain overhead costs (Glover et al., 2010;

Mills, 2014; Thornton & Friedel, 2016). These ongoing issues make it difficult for these colleges to thrive in modern day higher education.

Recent studies on this subject focus on the plight of rural community colleges with very limited insight given into the issues facing rural *4-year* schools. Although the focal point of the researcher's case study (Mountain View College) is a 4-year college, it has unique features that align with the current research on rural community colleges. Mountain View is surrounded by a poverty-stricken rural community in Appalachia, has struggled with sustaining student enrollment, and has limited academic and social resources. In addition to granting 4-year degrees, Mountain View College also grants 2-year degrees. The unique characteristics of this rural 4-year college are very similar to those highlighted in studies about rural community colleges. Therefore, the subsequent discussion is relevant to developing a greater understanding of rural schools and their unique circumstances.

### **Characteristics of Rural Serving Community Colleges**

There has been increased scholarly attention to the characteristic of rural serving community colleges as opposed to 4-year rural colleges. As of 2010, there were 952 public 2-year public colleges; 60 percent were identified as rural campuses. This translates to over three million students across the country enrolled and receiving educational services from these institutions (Thornton & Friedel, 2016; Torres et al., 2013). Glover et al. (2010) found that rural community colleges have an average budget of \$16 million; small and medium sized rural colleges have an average budget of \$5.1 million and \$11.6 million, respectively. These colleges are also highly dependent on state aid with at least 40 percent of operating budgets sustained by state allocations. In

addition, the communities in which they exist have high rates of poverty that coincides with rapid population decline. Using government data from 2002, Eddy (2012) reveals that 14.2 percent of rural residents lived in poverty. The poverty rate among rural minorities is more than double this figure. This overlap has a devastating effect on the ability of rural community colleges to receive funding on par to larger colleges in more urbanized regions (Eddy, 2012; Glover et al., 2010; Mills, 2014; Torres et al., 2013).

Funding has been a source of contention for rural community colleges. Hicks and Jones (2011) conducted interviews with three presidents of rural community colleges to obtain greater clarity about the role of funding and the tax base. Rural colleges are unique in that they receive appropriations from their local tax base. Because rural communities have greater rates of poverty and a declining population, “less population means fewer individuals purchasing homes and other property, decreasing the funding generated from the local tax base” (p. 33). This is further complicated by obvious disparities in tuition among rural colleges and their suburban, town, and urban counterparts. Glover et al. (2010) performed a qualitative analysis on the tuition of 1,021 public community colleges in the United States. While their research revealed that suburban community colleges were costlier than their rural counterparts, the researchers emphasized that rural community colleges lacked the technological resources to compete with other colleges.

In addition to ineffective local tax appropriations, rural community colleges are also challenged to demonstrate need through performance-based funding (PBF) models. Thornton and Friedel (2016) revealed that PBF exists in 26 states with varying degrees of success. Most PBF models focus on outcomes related to completion and institutional mission among metrics related to progress. Funding is then calculated in accordance to

how well a college performed on these metrics. Thornton and Friedel conducted semi-structured interviews with four presidents leading rural community colleges under performance-based funding protocols in Texas and North Carolina. The interviews revealed some positive outcomes including greater attention given to improving data collection and accuracy, increased emphasis on performance, and a renewed energy to become more proactive. However, the presidents reflected on disadvantages of PBF which revolved around the inability to meet state mandates due to their size. For example, North Carolina utilizes percentages as benchmarks. This is advantageous for larger schools but not for small rural colleges. It was also revealed that states failed to give timely feedback about next steps. These disadvantages created frustration for the leaders and support staff.

Fiscal challenges imply that rural community colleges often have to “do more with less” (Hicks & Jones, 2011, p. 31) while contending with gross expectations of what they achieve for the surrounding community (Eddy, 2012). Hicks and Jones (2011) conducted interviews with three presidents who lead successful rural community colleges. The colleges were located in the Southeast, Southwest, and Midwest regions of the United States and maintained enrollments between 500 and 1,999 students. Interviews revealed the series of fiscal and staff constraints these leaders must contend with. Due to the rural location of their colleges, it is quite difficult to recruit and retain talented faculty and staff. Rural areas are quite isolated from major metropolitan hubs and have minimal social activities. Tight budgets prevent colleges from making competitive salary offers for staff and faculty.

Indeed, these constraints have forced leaders and their support staff to wear multiple hats. This responsibility is actually viewed as an important competency by the American Association of Community Colleges (Eddy, 2012). In fact, the college presidents interviewed by Eddy in her study of the competencies needed to develop future rural community college leaders considered this a “trial by fire” (p. 28). In other words, college leaders best learned through trial and error while on the job. Hicks and Jones (2011) also revealed how leaders have relatively little room for error. The presidents reinforced the importance of transparency in all their dealings with staff, students, and the local community. Since enrollment challenges are a glaring issue, one misstep can be deleterious for the overall survival of their institutions. As one interviewee stated:

The margin for error in a small, rural community college is much... What would you tell all of these people, the margin for error here is so narrow. We could close this college in a heartbeat as opposed to your margin of error in a large [college]... If you... lose 250 students, in [another large city]. Oh, well, you know, there’s always next semester. If you lose 250 students here [by making a mistake]... you’re going to be letting people go (Hicks & Jones, 2011, p. 35).

This statement is a testament to the tremendous pressures rural community colleges are under to sustain enrollment. Yet, these pressures have prompted these leaders to develop a sense of urgency and parlay that into a student-centered approach. The colleges’ small size allows them to create a family-oriented culture where every student is seen as an integral part of the school. This culture is greatly reverberated throughout the colleges’ administration where all staff is expected to support one another. It also serves as a motivator to recruit and retain students.

Aside from providing their local communities with an educational entity, many small rural community colleges are tasked with sustaining their locales economically. A

news report by Semuels (2017) highlighted the revival of small rural communities once facing economic decline but are now thriving due to the local college. For example, Walla Walla Community College in Washington State was able to revive the local economy by developing an enology and viticulture program in 2000. This program taught students the art of winemaking and was the precursor to a boom in local wineries. The success of this program led to the creation of distribution and hospitality sectors within that region. Not only has Walla Walla Community College created jobs for students and local residents, it has also boasted a competitive salary for graduates. In 2011, the average salary for graduates was \$41,548- twice the average for new hires in the region.

Torres et al. (2013) also observed that rural community colleges play an integral role in economic development. The researchers used a mixed-methods approach to evaluate eight rural colleges engaged in the Rural Community College Initiative (RCCI) which served as a means to assist colleges in becoming economic beacons for their local communities. The study showed that the participating colleges embraced a cultural shift to become more involved in their local communities. This cultural shift involved realigning internal resources to fulfill the academic and economic needs of the community. For example, some colleges expanded their workforce development programs to make them self-sufficient vehicles. Other colleges designated faculty positions as “traveling faculty” to conduct classes within the community.

Realigning resources also provided colleges with greater ownership to become self-sufficient. This is demonstrated by a Tribal college that lost federal funding for a TRIO Student Support Services program. Instead of shuttering the program, the college integrated the program into its budget. The college recognized that 90 percent of its

students were eligible for TRIO services and that closing the program could be catastrophic. Another college met the needs of students with an interest in construction by creating a construction company. Not only did this venture create jobs for students and the local community, it also reduced the population exodus.

The literature has provided greater context on the unique challenges plaguing small rural community colleges. While the literature does not yield insight into the issues affecting small rural *4-year* colleges, it is very helpful in setting the tone for the academic, social, and fiscal challenges that hamper the development of rural colleges in general. Rural colleges are adversely impacted by low local tax and state support. They are also burdened with the task of sustaining enrollment and strengthening the local economy. Although these challenges are stressful, rural community colleges use their size to their advantage. As one dean interviewed by Semuels (2017) posited, “I guess that’s one of the advantages of small community colleges- we’re pretty nimble. As needs change, we can shift our resources and focuses” (p. 4).

It is evident that colleges were able to adjust their internal resources to meet the academic and economic needs of students, the community, and the local workforce. This achievement required buy-in from all administrators and the ability to wear multiple administrative hats. A strong culture of family was also apparent, and this provided additional momentum to embrace students as an integral part of the college family. These characteristics could be attractive for college prospects, particularly incoming Black students considering Mountain View College as their school of choice. Chapter 3 will provide greater insight into Mountain View ’s characteristics as well as the researcher’s

positionality relative to the institution. The next chapter will also disclose the qualitative methods that will be used to interview participants and synthesize data.



### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to determine what factors influenced Black college students' decision to enroll in public rural colleges. The primary focus is understanding the context of Mountain View College. As of Fall 2019, 12 percent of the student population was Black; 79 percent of the student population was White. Mountain View College is located in a rural area of West Virginia and is approximately 15 miles from the nearest interstate highway. Compared to the demographics of the college, West Virginia is 95 percent White and 3.2 percent African American (Orkodashvili, 2010).

Current studies suggest that Black high school graduates, particularly those from more affluent backgrounds, tend to prefer selective colleges. The same studies also suggest that Black high school students from less affluent backgrounds are more likely to select and enroll in less selective colleges (Chapman et al., 2018; Means et al., 2016). For the purposes of this study, the term "less selective" will be used to define a school with an average admittance rate of 50 to 66 percent; the term "highly selective" will be used to describe colleges that admit on average less than 30 percent of applicants (College Data, 2019). With an acceptance rate of 100 percent, Mountain View College fits into the "less selective" category (U.S. News & World Report, 2019).

The main goal of this research is to determine what underlying factors prompted Black students to enroll at a college located in a rural area that is categorized as less selective and competitive than other schools of similar characteristics. It was also important to obtain insight about these factors from participants who self-identified as Mountain View College personnel because their perspectives could either substantiate or

contradict Black students' insights. The following research questions were used to assist in providing greater clarity into this matter:

- What are the perceptions of administrators and staff members about current admissions practices used to recruit minority students?
- What are the main factors that prompted Black students to apply for admission to *and* enroll at a rural school like Mountain View College?
  - What role, if any, has undermatching played in the college choice process of students enrolled at Mountain View College?
- What are perceived future benefits (social, workforce, etc.) of attending a school like Mountain View College?

### **Research Design**

The study is designed to reflect key factors that influenced the decision for Black high school students to enroll in a less-selective rural college and is informed by the review of the literature and models of college choice. Research on the study of college choice processes has suggested that prestige, affordability, social engagement, and geography greatly influence students' decision making (Braddock & Hua, 2006; Bradshaw et al., 2001; Hamrick & Hossler, 1996; Klein & Washburn, 2012; Lopez-Turley, 2009). Black high school graduates, in particular, are more likely to be influenced by their parent(s) insight (Chapman et al., 2018; Hamrick & Hossler, 1996; Lowry, 2017; Perna, 2000). Therefore, the study was designed to engage Black students to determine what roles affordability, prestige, parental involvement, social engagement, and geography played in ultimately deciding to attend this rural college. It was also important to determine whether students are satisfied with their decision making. In addition,

members of the school's administration were asked to reflect on similar factors influencing students' thought decision-making processes Their feedback was analyzed to ascertain whether their opinions either parallel students' perspectives or provide feedback not previously discussed by the student participants.

The Three Phase Model of College Choice (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) was used in conjunction with the Model of Predetermination (Freeman, 2005) to explain the nuances associated with the college choice processes of Black prospects. In applying the main tenets of the Three Phase Model such as predisposition, search, and choice, I was able to gain a general understanding of how the Black alumni interviewed for this study were predisposed to certain financial and social influences that influenced their decision to enroll at Mountain View College. Freeman's (2005) Model of Predetermination was an important concept to utilize because it conceptualized these students' progressions from a racial standpoint. Moreover, her model is intentional in examining the confluence of family, kinship, and school circumstances. I observed that family and kinship were two important tenets from Freeman's model that influenced the Black alumni's decision making and impacted their on-campus experiences. Kinship networks served as important support networks for Black students navigating a White and rural environment.

### **Methodology**

Because the study sought to obtain in-depth feedback from students and administrators within their college setting, a qualitative approach is most appropriate. Creswell (2007) provides an overview of the common threads associated with qualitative research, which includes the focus of the study in a natural setting, the interpretation of participants' meanings, and utilization of the researcher as a key instrument. While I had

every intention of performing the study on-campus grounds or in the students' "natural setting", the recent implementation of COVID-19 protocols discouraged close contact with other persons. Therefore, all interviews were facilitated through the Zoom online video platform.

In addition, participants completed demographic surveys and open-ended interviews. Participants who self-identified as faculty, staff, or administrator completed a survey seeking limited background information such as their job category, number of years employed at Mountain View College, and whether they were alumni(a) of the college. In contrast, participants who self-identified as either a Black student currently enrolled at Mountain View College or as Black alumni(a) completed a survey that focused more on collecting socio-demographic information such as their family household income (at the time of enrollment), parents' highest level of education, and the type of hometown they came from (urban, suburban, rural). The survey required both sets of participants to select a series of attributes (academics, affordability, location, etc.) they believed influenced Black prospects' decision to enroll at Mountain View College.

Data collected from the surveys were used as the basis for the creation of an open-ended interview protocol. The data collected were then interpreted to establish common themes. Finally, I was an important component of the study. Acute observation of participants' behavior and responses as well as engagement with participants were my prominent responsibilities as the researcher. By carefully considering these components, I was able to apply a qualitative method that countered theories failing to "adequately capture the complexity of the problem we are examining" (Creswell, 2007, p. 40).

This was not a large-scale study. Rather, it was designed on a smaller basis focusing on two Black students (alumni) and four administrators. An important criterion for participant eligibility was race. Before the onset of the pandemic, the study intended to recruit student participants who represented any class year as long as they self-identified as members of the African diaspora. The study also intended to recruit Mountain View College personnel who represented various departments such as athletics, student affairs, and residence life. However, the widespread pandemic forced many schools like Mountain View College to prematurely end their semester and send students home for the remainder of the year. This resulted in a diminished pool of both Black students and college personnel to recruit from. To remedy this issue, snowball sampling was implemented to recruit participants. I used my established relationships with key personnel at the school to seek other participants. I also used the social media platform Facebook to openly advertise the study and seek participants. While both methods were useful in recruiting the initial six participants, they failed to yield additional participants. Once I interviewed the initial six participants, I had no other choice but to cease recruitment and interviewing. A questionnaire was disseminated to each participant prior to the individual video interviews with students and Mountain View College personnel.

### **Positionality Statement**

As a young Black female who grew up in a racially diverse urban environment, I may not fit the traditional rural demographic. However, I became quite attuned to the cultural and social nuances of working as a student affairs administrator in a rural and predominantly White space like Mountain View College. Not only did my race and gender make me an anomaly on-campus, it also made me a rarity within the predominantly

White community. Without a doubt, I initially felt that my Blackness would be a concern and lead to racial tensions on and off campus. But to my surprise, the predominantly White on-campus community consisting of students, staff, faculty, and administrators readily embraced me. I was also embraced by the greater West Virginia community. I strongly believe that the White West Virginians I engaged with on and off campus were genuinely curious about my Blackness and origins. They often asked me to describe in detail my experiences growing up in a large urban area.

Establishing these relationships allowed me to build a rapport with various Mountain View College personnel. Moreover, I was able to forge special bonds with the few Black students and Black personnel on-campus. Maintaining a rapport with other Black personnel and Black students like B and CeCe (Black alumni interviewed for this study) enabled me to cultivate my own kinship network of support. Oddly enough, I was also able to establish a kinship network among the White staff and administrators on-campus. White personnel like John, Amy, Barry, and Taylor (interviewed for this study) were crucial in helping me establish a sense of comfort both on-campus and off campus.

The comfort I established with the White personnel (John, Amy, Barry, and Taylor) and the Black students (B and CeCe) served as the basis for the interviews conducted for this research. Because I had established a personal friendship with these participants years before this study was even developed, it was difficult to maintain a neutral stance. Through these friendships, I was somewhat aware of both the positive and negative perspectives they expressed about Mountain View College. Positive insights shared by the group expressed appreciation for the tight knit family-oriented campus environment. Negative insights expressed by the group were critical of Mountain View

College's leadership and its myopic stance. Since I was familiar with some of these insights, I essentially became the "seventh" presence among the group. It is important to note, however, that I did not allow my previous familiarity with these participants lead to assumptions about how they would express their thoughts and feelings. The semi-structured interviews were essential to maintaining my neutrality and allowing the participants to freely speak their minds. It was also helpful that I had a great rapport with the participants which reduced hesitance to give honest reflections.

### *Access to Participants*

As a former employee of Mountain View College, I had access to gatekeepers who assisted me in finding participants for this study. I relied on the school's registrar and support services program directors as main gatekeepers because both administrators have daily interactions with students and also have access to important student data (demographic, academic) that was helpful in guiding this study. It was important for me to utilize my pre-established relationships with the gatekeepers because they assisted me in navigating the administrative directory to find other potential participants who may be knowledgeable of students' enrollment patterns. The college's online fact guides were used as an essential resource to extract data related to students' enrollment choice.

To facilitate interest, I worked with the gatekeepers to help identify students who self-identify as Black/African American and might be interested in the study. I submitted an announcement about this study on Facebook and also posted the announcement on a private Facebook student affairs page. The announcements yielded expressed interest from four Black alumni of Mountain View College. Out of the four Black alumni who expressed interest in being interviewed for this study, two actually participated in the study.

## **Interviewing Strategy**

Merriam (2009) posits that interviewing “is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them” (p. 88). The initial interview format was a focus group which Creswell (2007) posited is useful in situations where time to collect information is scarce and participants share commonalities. At the time, I wanted to utilize this format because it would have allowed me to facilitate two separate focus groups (one for administrators, the other for Black students) on-campus. However, local and statewide COVID-19 mandates prohibited group gatherings. As a result, I shifted the interview design from a focus group to individual interviews conducted using the Zoom video conferencing platform. This redesign proved to be beneficial because it allowed me and the respective participants to have one on one interactions without distractions. Most importantly, this format provided participants with a more private setting to share their most personal thoughts. There was a concern that both student participants and college personnel participants could disclose confidential information and personal opinions that would not be appropriate for a group context.

Both sets of participants were asked six to eight open-ended questions designed to gather specific insight related to responses to questionnaires administered during phase 1. Questions were based on six types suggested by Patton (as cited in Merriam): experience and behavior, opinion, feelings, knowledge, sensory, and background/demographic (p. 96). Patton suggests that “why” questions should be avoided for they may prompt “dead-end” responses. The following are questions that were used during the student interview sessions:



1. Compared to other schools you considered, what made Mountain View College stand out?
2. Before applying to Mountain View College, what did you know about the college in terms of its location, reputation, and academics?
3. What expectations did you have prior to enrolling at Mountain View College?
4. Has Mountain View College met your expectations? Why or why not?
5. If you the opportunity to restart the college selection process, would Mountain View College still be your ultimate selection? Why or why not?
6. Given the rurality and limited diversity at the school and in the surrounding community, what resources did you utilize to adjust?
7. Before arriving at Mountain View College, did you feel you were capable of enrolling in and succeeding at a more selective school? Why or why not?

Similar questions were used during individual interviews with administrators:

1. In your view, what makes Mountain View College a viable option for Black students?
2. In your view, what expectations do you believe Black students enrolling (or enrolled) at the college have?
3. From your perspective, what improvements does the college need to make to provide black students with an exceptional experience?

4. Given the rurality and limited diversity at the school and in the surrounding community, what resources help black students adjust to campus life?
5. Compared to other schools (regionally and/or nationally), what makes Mountain View College a more viable option for students, particularly black students?
6. In your view, why do you think high achieving students, particularly high achieving black students, would opt to forego a more selective and/or academically competitive school?

### **Data Gathering and Interpretation**

In order to effectively collect and record information, it is crucial for a researcher protocol to be created. The protocol utilized a series of open-ended questions that were asked in order. There were times when I had to ask questions in a random order because some of the participants' responses to one set of questions inadvertently answered the next series of questions. Zoom was the video conferencing platform used to record interviews, and it contained a function that allowed me seamlessly record and transcribe each conversation. Although the transcription function was easy to use, it did not provide an accurate interpretation of certain words and phrases. This minor issue required me to perform secondary transcription by hand in which I carefully reviewed segments of participants' recorded interviews and correctly transcribed their reflection.

In order to determine the themes that emerged from this study, I was careful to document any repetitive phrases and terms that appeared throughout the transcriptions. Terms and phrases such as "athletics", "safety", "community", and "affordability" were

the four phrases frequently repeated heard during each interview and served as the framework to develop my four main themes. I was also careful to document the context in which these terms were utilized. For example, the concept of “community” was not only used to define participants’ sense of a physical home but was also used to define the development of relationships. In like manner, the concept of “safety” was given two different definitions by participants. The interpretations associated with this concept was a sense of physical safety as well as a defined network of emotional, social, and academic resources.

### **Limitations**

Because the study focused on a small group of participants (6 total) who identified as either Black students or Mountain View College personnel, the perspectives collected could not serve as a representation of the experiences of *all* students. And while the original intention of this study was to examine the college choice process of Black students enrolled at a rural institution like Mountain State College, the interviews demonstrated that the study evolved to concentrate more on Black students’ *experiences* while enrolled at the college. This evolution is further punctuated by the fact that the two Black male interviewees are alumni of the college. Since they were years removed from being former students at Mountain State, their recollections did not provide much context into the steps they utilized to carefully analyze prospective colleges. Instead, their recollections were more indicative of their on-campus experiences as Black students within a rural and predominantly White campus setting. It is also crucial to consider geography as a limitation related to this research. The participants attended a rural college in West Virginia; therefore, their perspectives cannot be generalized to reflect those of

Black/African American students enrolled at rural schools in other areas of the United States. The next chapter presents in-depth synopsis of each interview and provides greater clarity into the four main emerging themes.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

### Interview Summaries

Over the course of three months, in-depth virtual interviews were conducted with six participants who either self-identified as Mountain View College personnel or as a Black alum of the school. A summary of each interview is presented below and highlights important developments from each conversation. Ultimately, safety, affordability, athletics, and community were four themes that emerged from the interviews. These themes helped define the context of this study and also provided greater insight into both the college choice process and the on-campus outcomes for Black students.

#### *Barry*

Barry<sup>2</sup> is a White student support director at Mountain View College- a small, rural school located in the southern region of the United States. He is an alumnus of Mountain View and upon graduating accepted an entry-level residence life role. Over the course of his 30-year career at the college, Barry has held a variety of roles including a vice president position, director of residence life role, and a stint as the offensive line coach for the college's football team. Barry is local to the community and originally grew up in an area located approximately 40 minutes away from the school. In his opinion, the majority of Black students who enroll at Mountain View learn about the college from friends and family. Barry also believes that the college's affordability, academics, athletics, and reputation were characteristics attractive to Black students. Affordability was the most important factor influencing Black students' decision to enroll at the school.

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<sup>2</sup> The interview with Barry was conducted on June 30, 2020.

During the beginning phase of the interview, Barry expressed that over his 30-year career at Mountain View, he has interacted with countless numbers of Black students who enroll at the college because of athletics. Additionally, the Black students are drawn to the school because of its affordability and unique program offerings:

Well, I know for a lot of the students that I talked to, they can go cheaper to Mountain View than they can go in their own state. So I think affordability is a big issue. And if they're coming for something particular, whether it be athletics or some of the programs that you don't see nationwide like um land forestry and surveying. For a lot of students, it's not offered in their state. And so they can get a special rate by coming here and then taking it back to their state when they graduate.

This parallels findings which suggest that affordability is often a deciding factor for students and their parents (Alvarado & An, 2015; Chapman et al., 2018; Goings & Sewell, 2019; Perna, 2000). Yet, it presents a unique contradiction: it may be more affordable to attend a school *out of state* than in state. The Black students who have enrolled and graduated from Mountain View College throughout Barry's tenure hail from Maryland, Washington, D.C., Virginia, Pennsylvania, and states that border Mountain View's home states. Barry also indicated that several Black student-athletes hail from Florida. Some of the aforementioned states represent regions of the United States plagued by declining student enrollment and reduced state funding (Carter, 2018; Levy, 2017; Mills, 2014). Such instability at local colleges has contributed to an increase in students enrolling at more affordable schools out of state (Thorp & Recker, 2018). In particular, this revelation may also prompt Black students to consider enrollment at out of state schools that offer more generous financial resources.

In regard to the Black student-athletes at Mountain View College, safety was just as important as affordability. Barry observed that for many students, enrolling at the

college is “a way out from where they’re at.” According to Barry, many of the Black student-athletes who enroll at the college are from inner city areas believe that if they enroll at a division school, they are able to “sell themselves” to become a professional athlete. Barry stressed the importance of steering the student-athletes’ focus toward their education and providing them with the resources they need to thrive. Because Mountain View is a less selective school with a rolling application, the school attracts athletes who may otherwise flounder at other schools.

As the director of the college’s student support services programs, Barry has a greater understanding of the percentage of students who are low-income and/or first-generation college students. The statistics at Mountain View are staggering-- 70 percent of students enrolled fall into one or both categories. A significant number of Black student-athletes and Black non-athletes fall into one or both categories as well. As stated previously, many of the Black students, particularly those who are members of the various on-campus sports teams, are seeking a safety net to escape from the violence and poverty associated with their hometowns. Barry reflected on the transition of one particular Black male student-athlete:

We had a young man who came for football and he was from inner city Miami and uh, had a real attitude. And you know in my conversations with him... and he had heard that I was a coach, so he was a little more likely to talk to me. And we talked about his attitude and he said you know where I'm from, “you gotta act like you own the place or you don't survive” and I convinced him this is Mountain View.

This exchange captured the “survival” tactic employed by the Black student-athlete to not only protect himself but to also navigate a new terrain; that of an unfamiliar rural campus. It also captured the “safety net” displayed by Barry- a resource that many

Black students enrolled at Mountain View College utilize. On an average day, about 20-30 students stop by Barry's office to speak to him privately about their personal and academic challenges. Many of the Black female students view Barry as a "father figure"; however, they are still hesitant to discuss certain matters with him because he is White. The same hesitance is displayed by some of the Black males he has interacted with. "A lot of them will tell me you know sir, I love you because you try but you're not black so you can't fully understand what I go through."

Part of the safety net established at Mountain View also forced the school and its predominantly White local community to both confront its racist past and embrace change. Barry recalled a few racially charged moments that occurred over 20 years ago involving interracial dating:

You know, in the past... way back I can tell you 20 to 25 years ago there were people in the community saying you need to recruit more black females and it was because they didn't want the [Black] guys dating the White girls.

Additionally, Barry cited another racially charged incident from the same timeframe in which a White student covered in a white sheet with the letters 'KKK' embossed on the back ran through the men's residence hall throwing flyers. Such racially charged incidents are now overshadowed by a community that is now more accepting. Barry also believes that the school is doing "a little bit more" diversity training with both staff and students. Barry also expressed that within the past three to five years, the college has done a better job recruiting a more racially diverse student body.

Integrity has also been used as a tactic to recruit a more diverse array of students. Since many of the Black students enrolled at Mountain View College originate from large urban cities, the college had to be honest about the availability of local resources.



Barry revealed that admissions is upfront with students about the local community “being a one stop light town” and that the closest mall is at least 45-60 minutes away. But the greatest emphasis is placed on the availability of safety and stability:

So, I think most students know what they're coming to and in a lot of those cases, I think a lot of them look forward to it. The peace and quiet and you know, hey, I got a place to live that I'm going to get three square meals a day.

Combined with the 18:1 student to faculty ratio, the sense of security creates a comfortable haven for the Black students to forge relationships with fellow students and faculty. And since approximately 70 percent of the general student population is low-income and/or first generation, the assurance of “getting three square meals a day” in a safe environment is a great motivator to enroll at the school. The college’s willingness to confront racial incidents represents a step in the right direction. However, it is evident that more progress needs to be made. While reflecting on the improvements Mountain View College must make to enhance the experiences of Black students, Barry cited the very limited diversity within the staff, faculty, and coaching ranks. He also recognized that multicultural programming is non-existent.

These barriers are compounded by two factors: the limited resources available to the college and the inability to attract a diverse pool of job candidates:

You know I think resources, when you're a small rural college, resources are always tight and each year the government you know seems to cut the budget. Where we were state supported for years now... we're barely state assisted. And so, you know, the money's not coming in. So it's hard to create new positions and then because it's been a little harder to get families to move here because we're small rural white.

Barry’s honest reflection of the challenges plaguing Mountain View College is reminiscent of recent studies highlighting similar challenges faced by small rural

colleges. Unlike large, more populous institutions located in metropolitan regions, small colleges located in rural settings do not have a significant tax base from both the local and state government to utilize sustainable funding for basic operating expenses (Glover et al., 2010; Mills, 2014; Thornton & Friedel, 2016). And since these colleges' rural settings may be so isolated from major metropolitan and social hubs, talented faculty and staff are reluctant to accept an offer and move. Restricted budgets also make it difficult for small rural colleges to make competitive offers to finalists for various positions (Hicks & Jones, 2011).

Barry's 30-year career at Mountain View College allowed him to engage with a broad spectrum of Black students. More specifically, Barry's "father figure" moniker made him approachable for the numerous Black student-athletes who engaged with him on a daily basis. Since many of the Black students enrolled at Mountain View are first generation college students and/or from a low-income background, they were drawn to the school due to its affordability. But most importantly, what Barry described as the "peace and quiet" of the surrounding community ensured that the Black students who have a safe environment to call home.

While the majority of Barry's reflection centered on the Black student athletes enrolled at the college, Barry did provide some insight into the possible reasons high achieving Black students would forgo enrollment at a more selective college. Barry believes it is "two things: self-esteem and family. There are a lot of students that are not sure they can make it in a big school." Furthermore, he expressed the lack of encouragement provided by students' families. For example, some parents may say "I've been a mechanic for 20 years and taking care of the family. I don't know why you think

you need to go to college. And so for a lot of them, they just don't get that encouragement.” In essence, some parents may not be able to comprehend why their child would exchange a steady job opportunity like a mechanic for the pursuit of a college degree.

In the midst of both a global pandemic and the nationwide protests against police brutality, Mountain View College does not have a definitive plan to address racial injustice. The college has been preoccupied by numerous committee meetings to select a new president from a list of finalists. Additionally, the pandemic has made it a challenge for administrators like Barry to maintain relationships with the most vulnerable students. These students were forced to return to their home cities and circumstances, some of which they were seeking to escape from when they first enrolled at Mountain View. However, the students’ “passionate determination” combined with the school’s diligence will work in tandem to assist these students. In Barry’s opinion, “there are a lot of big schools that could actually take some lessons from smaller schools.”

### ***B***

B<sup>3</sup> is a Black male alumnus of Mountain View College. B first enrolled at the college in 2012 and graduated in 2017 with a bachelor’s degree in behavioral science. By obtaining his bachelor’s degree, B became the first person in his family to graduate from college. His hometown is a highly populous city in Alabama that he describes as being dangerous and having high levels of crime. This, along with limited finances, prompted B to apply to Mountain View College. Unlike other participants who mostly cited alumni

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<sup>3</sup> The interview with B was conducted on July 13, 2020.

and family/friends as the main means of which Black students hear about the college, B is unique in that he conducted a random Google search to find his best school match:

My knowledge of the resources that were available were very limited. So I guess I, I, yeah, like you said, I Googled affordable and best biology programs, and Mountain View was actually in the top-five. Believe it or not, I was shocked.

When asked to further elaborate on the internet resources used to narrow his college search, B indicated that he used a combination of both Google searches and *U.S. News & World Report* articles to learn more about the school in terms of funding, history, and program specifics. Furthermore, B never visited the campus and did not have any acquaintances or family who attended the college. This represents a stark contrast to how many students, particularly Black students, learn about the college. Interviews with other participants indicated that Black students mostly learn about Mountain View College from alumni and/or family/friends.

Prior to enrolling at Mountain View College, B had considered other schools located in the Southeast such as Alabama A & M University and Miles College. Both colleges were attractive to B because of their rich Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) heritage and opportunities to join a Black fraternity; however, the schools presented a common concern for B: safety. "Miles College was actually in the like one of the worst neighborhoods that you could put a college in Alabama." B had also considered attending Alabama A & M but dismissed this idea upon learning that a family member enrolled at the school had all of her belongings stolen from a dorm. It is evident that safety and security was an important feature that overshadowed the rich HBCU heritage represented at both schools.

As previously alluded to by B, fit and belonging was another characteristic he sought in a college. B strived to fit in at Pensacola Christian College in south Florida but dropped out of the school after two weeks of enrollment. According to B, Pensacola Christian College is “a non-government funded Christian college” that was not a good match for him because it did not provide a good fit for a “black individual coming from an urban area and there was no financial support.” B believes that attending Pensacola Christian College was “a huge mistake.” Other options like Galludet College were more affordable for B and offered a sound interpreter program for students interested in working with members of the deaf community. While B was intrigued by this offering because some of his family members are deaf, he “never followed through with that”.

The search to find a college with affordable tuition and a good fit led B to Mountain View College. He acknowledged that he knew nothing about the college because it was quite hidden and “unless you googled it, you wouldn’t know about it.” This statement represents a stark contrast from research by Lopez-Turley (2009) which found that prospects from low-income households are more likely to consider more affordable options closer to home. Compared to other schools B considered such as Miles College and Alabama A&M University, Mountain View College provided B with personable experiences with professors who knew him on a first name basis. B expressed that “at a big prestigious university, I would say that you’re, you know, you’re considered a number, you know, or another individual.” He also felt that he would have a greater chance to succeed at Mountain View because the school touts a higher graduation rate than a Division I school like Auburn University.

Although the school's campus (with the exception of one Black professor and one gay professor B recalled from his time there) and local community populations was overwhelmingly White, B was able to adjust. He readily admitted to experiencing culture shock:

It was terrifying you know, I didn't know what I was getting myself into and regretted it wholeheartedly. This is my first week I wanted to go back home because I was used to, you know, being in walking distance with everything.

According to B, the closest Wal Mart and shopping areas were at least two hours away. It took him time to adjust and overcome his homesickness which he was determined to conquer. B knew that if he "went home, I wouldn't have, you know... I knew for sure I wouldn't have gone back to school." As discussed earlier, B learned about the school and its offerings through a random Google search. After applying for admission, no one from the school discussed the characteristics of the local community. B recalled how he knew "nothing about the town, nothing at all" and for him this "was probably the most scariest thing he ever experienced."

Despite this initial culture shock, B was able to overcome his homesickness with the help of a local White family. This family openly embraced him and made his four years at Mountain View "really easy." This familial bond has become permanent: B is now married to the family's daughter which resulted in the birth of his first child. In addition to developing a familial bond with a local family, B was able to adapt by befriending students from other racial and cultural backgrounds. B befriended the self-described "nerds who played Dungeons & Dragons" as well as members of the school's football team.

Not only did he witness the racial and cultural diversity on-campus, he also witnessed the unique differences in culture among students from other cities. “[But] believe it or not, me and my best friend were the only two guys from Alabama, so we drew a lot of attention to ourselves”. He realized that although he and the other Black students at the school had similar experiences, the cities they hailed from presented cultural differences in terms of the food that they eat and the dialect they used. These differences did not deter B from embracing the other students and forging friendships. He posited that while Mountain View embraced different cultures, this notion of acceptance was not readily embraced by everyone. B was warned by friends and acquaintances not to visit certain areas of the town such as particular restaurants and bars.

This concern, however, did not negate the overwhelmingly positive experiences B had at Mountain View College. If he had the opportunity to restart the college selection process, B would most likely enroll at Mountain View again. He felt that the friendships he has made during his time at the school contributed to his positive experiences at the school, something he “can’t find anywhere else.” B also felt that his experiences at Mountain View exposed him to different cultures specifically within the African American community. When asked how Mountain View can improve the college experience for Black students, B emphasized that the school needs to offer more courses on African American history and create a Black Student Union. B recalled a time when the school attempted to celebrate Black culture with a “culture week” in which the campus cafeteria attempted to serve “soul food”:

It was one weird experience I had. We tried to do a cultural week at [Mountain View] and they tried to do soul food one day and it was the worst. They disappointed all of the Black students because if you’re like a Black individual you think of soul food as you

know chicken, collard greens, baked mac and cheese, yams- not what they had on the menu. They had some corn, they had some baked fish and a whole bunch of other stuff.

While B and the other Black students gave the school “points for trying,” the soul food offerings used as an attempt to celebrate Black culture were overwhelmingly disappointing. This a primary example of the limited or non-existent input from Black students. According to B, there is a correlation between the limited programming for Black students and the almost non-existent participation from Black students. Since many of the Black students are also student-athletes, their daily schedules are focused on practice and academics which leaves little flexibility to participate in student activities.

B also felt that this inflexibility contributed to limited success upon graduation for many Black student-athletes. B recalled an expose written by the local newspaper about the college’s football team (B believes it was approximately 60 percent Black at the time) which revealed that the team’s overall GPA was a 1.5. The female softball and basketball teams, in contrast, had an overall GPA of 3.25. B believes that this disparity can be attributed to some observations he has made concerning Black female athletes. “I will say that Black females are more understanding when it comes to academics. I don't know why. I don't know how the female mind is wired.”

In addition to citing gender differences related to academic focus, B also felt that Mountain View’s coaching staff was at fault for not preparing their students for academic success. He felt that the coaches were not ensuring their athletes best interest and should have initiated the following dialogue:

Hey, there's a possibility that you may not make it to the NFL, because you're a D II athlete, there's a possibility that you might not play in the NFL, or the Canadian Football League, but hey, let's focus on getting your degree so you can be a football coach.



B's observations implied that Mountain View's student-athletes, which have a high representation of Black students, are not adequately prepared for the next chapter after graduation. In fact, it appears the coaches create the illusion of a successful transition into professional sports. B recalled that during his five years at the college, there was only one student-athlete who transitioned into professional sports (Canadian Football League). Other Black student-athletes graduated with their degrees and became coaches. However, B is still acquainted with many Black student-athletes who either did not graduate from Mountain View or failed to complete their athletic programs. "From what I see on social media, they're not doing anything. They're working at your typical fast-food restaurants and so on and so forth." Overall, academics is not "pushed" for Black student-athletes, and failure to prioritize it can lead to dire financial and career-related consequences.

B's reflection on his experiences at Mountain View College were quite direct and did not yield any hesitation to critique both the highlights and challenges of his five-year tenure at the college. Affordability and safety were the main characteristics that drew B to Mountain View. As a Black man raised in a large urban city, transitioning to a rural and predominantly White community located within the southern region of the United States was difficult. However, B was able to overcome this "culture shock" by embracing both the on-campus and off-campus communities. He was careful to recognize that his identity as a Black male would not always be embraced in the local community.

Despite this challenge, B made a successful transition to the college and graduated with a degree in behavioral science. He is married with a toddler and currently resides in a county located about an hour from Mountain View College. B has been employed at the state's department of health for several years and plans to uproot his

family in the near future. His in-laws are planning to move to Florida and there is a possibility that he and his family will follow suit. “We definitely have it in our bag to, you know, get out of [this state] soon, at least before she [his daughter] starts grade school.” But even with a college degree, B acknowledged that he and his wife, while associated as middle class, would most likely take a step down to lower income status if they moved out of state. When and if he moves, B is taking every precaution possible to sustain his family’s finances.

### *Amy*

Amy<sup>4</sup> is a White administrator assigned to the registrar’s office at Mountain View College. She has been employed at the college for 20 years and is local to the community. Amy is unique in that she was raised in a military family which allowed her to live in multiple regions within the United States and overseas. She initially sought employment at Mountain View College because it was located in close proximity to her family and offered benefits like health insurance and retirement. While Amy believed that the majority of Mountain View College prospects learned about the school from a network of friends, family, and alumnae, she observed that a significant number of Black prospects were enrolled at the school because of recruitment by athletics. Aside from athletics, Amy believed that Black students were drawn to the school because of its affordability and location.

During the beginning of the interview, Amy provided greater insight into the overlap between athletics and the Black prospects:

Coaches [are] reaching out to them. Particular coach from a team, whether it's football, basketball, um, right now we have wrestling or whatever it may be. They're going out and recruiting and

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<sup>4</sup> The interview with Amy was conducted on June 11, 2020.

that's... that's my interpretation. I mean, that's what I feel that most of them are hearing about Mountain View.

Amy estimated that about 10-11 percent of the fall 2019 student population (1800-1900 students) is Black. But she believed that Black students represented at least 90-95 percent of student athletes. The majority of Black students enrolled at Mountain View College originate from Pennsylvania, Washington, D.C, Maryland, and Virginia. Yet, a large quantity of Black students are leaving California for the rural community surrounding the college. According to Amy, these students are commonly athletes currently enrolled at junior colleges (JuCo) throughout California. Many of these athletes cannot get into traditional Division I athletic programs and transfer to Mountain View College because they can earn more playing time. Black students who did not have any affiliation with athletics were typically a spouse or a family member of the Black student-athlete recruited to the college. "We've had [occasions] where we've actually had a student that was married, and they brought the family with them." Amy believed that because the general region is not racially diverse, athletics is most likely the main factor responsible for recruiting Black prospects to Mountain View College.

Regarding the small percentage of Black students who enrolled at the college for reasons not related to athletics, Amy cited affordability, word of mouth, and safety as crucial influences. A significant number of Black students come from Washington, D.C. and are part of a program called D.C. Tag which provides them with financial assistance. By offsetting expenses, Black students find that it is more cost effective to enroll at an out of state school like Mountain View College than enroll at an in state school. This sentiment is also applicable to Black students coming from Florida and Maryland. Amy implied that Mountain View's recent reduction to its out of state tuition

could have been too lucrative for these students to pass up. This echoes the findings presented by Klein and Washburn (2012) which posited that students do not want to incur unnecessary debt and are more likely to enroll at schools that offer generous financial aid packages. In addition to affordability, word of mouth was a powerful recruiting tool:

A lot of, um, black students I've talked to over the years that weren't [aren't] here for athletics. They're here because one of their buddies back home came here for athletics, liked it, had a good experience, and told him about it and they came.

Indeed, Amy's observation indicates that some Black prospects are greatly influenced by peers within their inner circles than other sources, a finding supported by Alvarado and An (2015). The researchers posited that "of course, students pull from many sources for this information (e.g., teachers, counselors, and parents) but often rely on friends due to their accessibility and, critically, their trustworthiness" (p. 151).

But one of the most profound observations Amy made was how important a safe environment was for Black students. Amy has engaged with a number of Black students who were eager to leave home cities because they were plagued by crime, drugs, and gang activity. Because the local community surrounding Mountain View is affordable and small, some Black students elected to remain in the community post-graduation and have not returned home. This is not only due to the availability of better opportunities, but it is also due to the guaranteed safety in an environment far removed from the violence and other negative distractions in their hometowns. Amy recalled a young Black student from Detroit who did not return to the city after graduation because of the violence and crime. "He had a friend of his, with a drive by shooting

and, you know, family members, got caught up... caught up in crime and he just didn't want to go back.”

While Mountain View College affords Black students a safe environment, it also promotes a family-oriented atmosphere. Amy acknowledged that this is quite beneficial for the small segment of Black students who enrolled at Mountain View for academic purposes. “So a lot of students I talk to, that’s what they appreciate the most. They feel like they’re not a number- they’re an actual student. And they like the camaraderie between the faculty and the students.” This camaraderie is reinforced by the college’s 18:1 student-faculty ratio. Amy also noticed a pattern where Black students enrolling at Mountain View are particularly drawn to the school’s popular majors such as criminal justice, business, and health sciences. Other popular majors available at Mountain View College are education and natural resources. While natural resources is not commonly offered at other schools, it is a popular major for students interested in forestry and land surveying careers. These unique offerings attract general prospects to the school.

Mountain View College provides Black prospects and students with several academic and financial benefits. Yet, the college still has areas of growth that need to be addressed. One area of development Amy recognized was helping Black students overcome “culture shock”. “Unfortunately, some of our drawback um... is I believe that a lot of them are coming from very urban areas and we’re very rural.” Amy believed that while many Black students were coming to Mountain View “blindly”, she felt that the recruiters were upfront about the rurality of the area. Amy expressed that

many Black students are “expecting to have similar resources and things to do- activities, places to go so sometimes it’s quite the culture shock for them.”

Such “culture shock” is further compounded by the near non-existent racial diversity within the local community. Amy admitted that the surrounding community is majority White and consists of a few Japanese students and Black graduates. She also referenced the “Southern mentality” which often creates racial biases against Black students. Amy revealed that most of what she hears are not “actually occurrences on the campus- it’s in the community.” A primary example of this incident typically occurs at the local gas station where Black students are subjected to stereotypes. If Black students walk into the local gas station with a backpack on, it is assumed they will shoplift. Amy strongly believed that Black students venturing into the local community “can be treated in such a way that they are automatically a bad person because they are Black.”

Despite these negative interactions, Amy believed that the local community is making strides in providing a better experience for Black students. Amy revealed that the coaches are purposely involving the athletes in community volunteer events. The football team was recently recognized in the local paper for assisting with painting the local recreational center. “I think the more we can do things like that and get them involved in the community, the more the community will be accepting... I think.”

She also believed that the on-campus experience for Black students could be enhanced as well. Amy would like to see “more activities and/or clubs, organizations geared towards that student population.” The college has tried to implement multicultural programming for students but did not have the proper funding or staffing

to sustain it. Amy believed that the student activities office has done a superb job filling this void by facilitating a well-rounded array of programming that promotes Black student engagement. Amy also emphasized that she and the staff “are here to help them. They’re told that all they have to do is ask somebody for assistance.” The college’s small size affords them the ability to create a family-oriented environment- important factors many students consider during their college search (Braddock & Hua, 2006; Hicks & Jones, 2011; Klein & Washburn, 2012; Lopez-Turley, 2009).

While Amy was able to give insight into the community’s response to the presence of Black students, she expressed some uncertainty about the effects of the pandemic. A particular area of concern involves the potential negative impact of the pandemic on college sports. “As of right now, they’re planning... everything’s a go, nothing has changed. As long as everything is a go, I think we’ll be fine. If they decide to, uh, not have football I don’t know that some students will come.” Ambiguity also defined Mountain View College’s pandemic response plan which will consist of either a hybrid (in-person and virtual) model or a fully virtual learning experience. Interestingly, Amy was not concerned about the impact the pandemic will have on the overall student population. “Our numbers look really good as far as retention in getting them retained from this past spring to the next fall.” Amy also shared that there has been an uptick in the number of students who want to engage virtually only. This is most likely due to concerns about potential exposure to the pandemic.

Although some context was provided about the college’s plan to address the impact, less context was given as to how the college plans to discuss the national uproar over police brutality. Amy believed that such discussions may not be a priority because

there are currently no students on-campus. However, the president of Mountain View did issue a statement by email to all faculty, administrators, and staff condemning racial injustice. In addition, a small collective of local residents gathered in a shopping plaza holding signs in support of the “Black Lives Matter” movement. As Amy mentioned during an earlier segment, this could be an indicator that the “Southern Mentality” is evolving to become accepting of diversity and social change.

Based on the insight provided by Amy, Mountain View College offers financial and social resources that could make it a viable option for Black prospective students who are seeking an affordable education in a safe and quiet environment. More specifically, it appears that the college has become an attractive option for Black student athletes who enroll on the promise of receiving greater playing time or are in need of a safe environment. While the rurality and limited activities available in the local community create a sense of “culture shock” for Black student transplants from urban areas, this anxiety is overshadowed by the safety, camaraderie, and support provided by the college staff. Amy observed that the local community is gradually embracing the Black students. This, combined with the safe and nurturing campus atmosphere, has prompted some Black post-graduates to remain in the area.

Some Black students are also enticed to remain in the area to fulfill career paths in law enforcement, business, and health fields. Their academic and career success is often a motivator for other Black prospects in their networks to enroll at Mountain View College. In essence, such positive experiences become effective word-of-mouth recruiting tools to attract prospective Black students to the college. In order to satisfy the cultural needs of Black students, it was suggested that Mountain View College must



develop programming and student groups geared towards this specific population. In the interim, the convergence of the pandemic and national protests against police brutality has created ambiguous policies. It is unknown whether the campus will fully operate as usual. Regardless of the decision, Mountain View College appears to have the resources in place to help all Black students succeed.

### *John*

John<sup>5</sup> is a White professor at Mountain View College. Prior to joining the school's faculty, John held a number of administrative roles at the college including a stint as vice president of enrollment. Overall, John has nearly 25 years of experience at the college. He is an alumnus of Mountain View and is local to the community. Because of his prior affiliation with the school's enrollment office, John felt strongly that admissions was the main means by which Black students heard about the college. In addition, he felt that the school's affordability and athletic programs influenced a majority of Black students to enroll. John was drawn to Mountain View by its family friendly environment. He sees this as an important attribute that makes both the college and the local community embracing for people of various backgrounds:

I think a rural setting adds more to a family atmosphere because people don't seem to [here in town] care about skin color, religious or political beliefs. Nobody seems to really care. Because I've been in other urban places and suburban environments, before I come back to [town] and... they do care. You are, you are classified you're identified by skin color, by hair color, by weight, by religion.

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<sup>5</sup> The interview with John was conducted on July 20, 2020.

This is an important observation because it implies that rural communities are highly family-oriented and may offer a greater sense of belonging for students of color.

According to John, approximately 80 percent of Black students enrolled at Mountain View were recruited by athletic coaches. The coaches are heavily assisted by the admissions team to fulfill this task. A slew of Black student-athletes are recruited from junior colleges in Texas and California. There are also a number of Black student athletes recruited from Division I schools who come to Mountain View College because they will receive more playing time and will receive assistance to prepare for professional careers. A significant percentage of Black students (approximately 20 percent) are either spouses or relatives of the student-athletes. John posited that “nobody wants to come alone” and “most of those young individuals are from urban environments to suburban environments. Very seldom do we see rural to rural recruitment.” Historically, geographical restrictions in rural regions makes it difficult to recruit students from those areas. In contrast, such geographical challenges rarely exist in urban areas (Gettinger, 2019; Marcus, 2018). The remaining percentage of Black students who enroll at Mountain View do not have any athletics related affiliations and were lured by the school’s quiet environment.

John readily admitted that academics and safety were the main factors used to “sell” the school to Black students. In John’s opinion, “not everybody wants to party when they go to college. Some individuals are mature enough to understand that they want a place that gives support academically.” Moreover, these characteristics were important to sell to parents who ultimately influence their child’s selection processes.

Parents were informed that the school was located in one of the safest areas in the state. Additional emphasis was placed on guiding students to achieve their main goal which was to graduate with a degree. Parental engagement is an important dynamic that influences Black student college choice. Not only do Black parents want college environments to be safe spaces for their children, they also want such spaces to help their children achieve academic success (Chapman et al., 2018; Teranishi & Briscoe, 2008).

While the local community is predominantly White, its safe and welcoming atmosphere has led to a small but growing contingency of Black students who elect to stay in the area after graduation. Dwayne and Tommy, Black graduates of the college, are primary examples of this phenomenon. “We've got Dwayne and Tommy that come from St. Petersburg [from Florida] to Cleveland, Ohio. They did not go back. They have stayed in the area.” In addition to safety and the welcoming environment, lucrative job opportunities in the region have enticed Black graduates to remain in the area. The criminal justice field has blossomed in the region and has created opportunities for students to obtain jobs at the local federal prison and the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) in a nearby city. John also mentioned that there has been a small number of Guatemalans moving to the region to work for farmland. A Mexican family has also moved to the area to open a restaurant. John believed that both the college and the local community were paramount to promoting financial growth. “I think if you've got anybody who wants to do something, that wants a chance, this is a good entrepreneurial place.”

While these same motivators entice Black students to enroll at Mountain View College, John believed that the college's affordability, size, and unique program offerings

made it a viable choice. Based on John's observations, the typical small rural colleges "get the B and C students" who are from low-income backgrounds. John estimated that nearly 80 percent of Mountain View students were eligible for Pell grants. Indeed, the majority of students enrolled at the college require tremendous financial support. Costs associated with attending college tend to be much higher for Black families, accounting for 63 percent of their household income (Wellman, 2017). As John casually stated, "we [Mountain View] just don't cost as much."

Size and course offerings have also been correlated to Black student enrollment. Mountain View College's student satisfaction ranks within the top three percentile among other schools in the country. "We made the top 3 percentile in the United States of America because our faculty care. We didn't just go away." John believed that the high satisfaction scores correlate with the faculty's dedication to actively responding to students' needs after hours and engaging with them at various on-campus activities.

And programs such as natural resources, criminal justice, education, and land surveying are popular standouts attracting Black students to Mountain View College. While these majors such as surveying and natural resources may be uncommon at other schools, they nearly guarantee students a job directly after graduation. John reflected on how obtaining a degree in land surveying greatly benefitted one young Black male student:

We graduated a non-athletic... a non-athlete Black student who was the first surveyor in [major city]. Both him and his girlfriend come here (I'll keep the name out of it). But he enrolled into land surveying because [major city] did not have a surveyor license and they didn't have one. So he graduated and he is now back there, and I believe he is employed as the [major city's] surveyor.

In a similar example, John recalled how a Black female criminal justice major graduated from the college and was recruited by the FBI. Both she and the land surveying major became what John deemed the “golden childs” for Black student prospects enrolling for academic purposes. Word of mouth is a popular recruiting tool and the success of Black graduates at Mountain View prompted Black prospects to explore similar majors.

In essence, the college’s course offerings, size, and support from staff and faculty work in tandem to help Black students excel. Such efforts to bolster retention cannot be underestimated, especially for a small rural college like Mountain View. According to John, he along with many school leaders view each and every student as an investment. Faculty and staff invest so much time and energy into students. If a student drops out of college, admissions must continue to recruit “but now you've got to replace the students not here.” John also acknowledged that Mountain View’s size serves as an advantage because it can operate more efficiently to provide emergency financial assistance to students in need. In John’s opinion, larger schools would not be impacted by the loss of a few students. “Do you think they care about those [10] students? Does it break their budget? It’s not even a blip on them!” Hence, Mountain View College and similar schools can only have a small margin of error (Hicks & Jones, 2011).

While John lauded the school’s application of on-campus resources to recruit and retain Black students, he critiqued two areas: on-campus food offerings and the availability of likeminded mentors. “I know that sounds crazy, but they have certain foods from their culture and their communities that they'd like to have- we need to provide that and mentors, like minded mentors.” Concerning mentors, John suggested that they should originate from urban environments and have time to acclimate to

Mountain View College. Mentors meeting these criteria will be more successful in engaging Black students about the safe and supportive environment. John recognized that as a White man who grew up on a farm, he can never know what it is like to be a Black person growing up in an urban environment. However, he strives to understand and to listen. As alluded to earlier, positive experiences such as this can be used as an active recruiting tool. “If you come from Philadelphia and you do well here, when you go home you’re gonna talk about the good experiences you had here and how we prepared you for the job you’re in now.” John referred to this word of mouth as a “grassroots” effort.

Since the pandemic has altered the social, academic, and financial foundations for millions of college students, concerns have been raised as to how students of color from low-income backgrounds will be impacted. John expressed his belief that students from all backgrounds will be impacted. “It’s gonna affect all populations. Our students come to Mountain View College because they do not want to do online classes. We’re going to be forced to start online.” This is a concern because many students do not have the proper resources at home to continue their education online. John shared a recent example of a student who was having difficulties accessing resources at home:

I mean, now I have a young man in Atlanta, Georgia. He doesn't have a computer! I had to work with him when I could and I will refuse to fail him because that's nonsense. He came to Mountain View College to sit in the classroom and all of the sudden now he's at home. He's having problems getting access to printers, access to get into computer Wi Fi and I'm not gonna call him a liar. I'm going to take that at face value and believe that's true.

This example is a reminder that there could be a subset of Mountain View’s student body that are heavily reliant on the physical on-campus resources such as computers, books, and a safe environment. It also demonstrates the importance of

having caring and empathetic support like John who can help students navigate through this complex period. With approximately 80 percent of students being Pell grant eligible, the pandemic has leveled the playing field for all students. From John's perspective, "there is no difference there is absolutely no difference in the hurdles and the blocks and the rocks in the road for a young black student from the inner city as it is for a young White student from [rural area]."

The interview with John highlighted how affordability and athletics converge to attract swaths of Black students to Mountain View College. This consists of both Black student-athletes and non-student athletes who are pursuing different goals. While some Black student-athletes are recruited by the college's coaches under the guise of receiving more playing time, it appears that the majority of both Black student-athletes and Black non athletes are drawn to Mountain View on the promise of receiving an excellent education in a safe environment. Most importantly, many Black students have used the education received from the college to excel in various fields such as criminal justice and land surveying.

Not only does the promise of safety imply physical security, it also implies that there is a sense of social support provided by caring leaders like John who go out of their way to welcome students and respond to students' concerns. The current pandemic has limited on-campus interaction, and this may lead to social and financial implications for many Black students. As John previously recognized, many students see Mountain View as a safe haven but due to the pandemic are now forced to focus on their studies in challenging environments. Some students do not have access to computers, Wi-Fi, or other important essentials that will help them complete their

required coursework. Despite these challenges, both John and his colleagues believe that the students' determination and work ethic will help them overcome these issues.

### *CeCe*

CeCe<sup>6</sup> is a Black male alumnus of Mountain View College who first enrolled at the college in 2012 and graduated in 2016 with a bachelor's degree in criminal justice. Both of his parents hold a bachelor's degree and his family's household income at the time was between \$50,000 - \$74,999. Although CeCe was originally born in New York state, his family later uprooted to a community about two hours away from Mountain View College. His family needed to move in order to be closer to an ailing family member. Because CeCe resided in a community located approximately two hours away from the college, he was already attuned to the local higher education offerings available to him. Most importantly, his older brother had been both employed and graduated from the school. His brother's positive experiences at Mountain View left an indelible influence on CeCe and prompted him to enroll at the school as a criminal justice major.

Since CeCe had some familiarity with Mountain View College, he was already aware that the school had a good and affordable criminal justice program. CeCe could have applied to more competitive schools like the two regional public universities but felt that those types of schools like that would not be a good match because he was sheltered by his parents:

Um, I was a little bit sheltered growing up so I know that going to [regional public university] I probably would have not been as focused on the books. It's a bigger college... bigger, more people. Mountain View is very small.

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<sup>6</sup> The interview was conducted with CeCe on July 30, 2020.



This perspective could be attributed to CeCe's rural upbringing which often coincides with a strong desire to remain near family (Means et al., 2016). In the interim, CeCe also believed that the larger regional universities were much more expensive and would only "view him as a number". The prominence of these large regional universities not only overshadows smaller schools like Mountain View College, it also attracts large swaths of prospects like CeCe's high school friends. In CeCe's opinion, only local prospects enticed by Mountain View's music program would be familiar with the college. Otherwise, few people are aware that Mountain View College exists.

CeCe also benefited from establishing a friendship with John (interviewed previously) who served in an administrative capacity at the school. They were quite familiar with each before CeCe enrolled at the college which CeCe admitted "was kinda cool." CeCe also forged friendships with other staff and faculty at the college and was able to obtain a work study related job in the admissions office where he assisted with conducting campus tours and processing transcripts. His brother also worked on-campus in the President's Office and this allowed CeCe to access other staff members at the school. CeCe's utilization of both his brother and John is evident of the leverage made available to ease his transition into Mountain View (Goings & Sewell, 2019). Such resourcefulness is also a powerful indicator of the predetermination incorporated by Black students like CeCe to rely on their kinship networks (Freeman, 2005).

CeCe also acknowledged that both the on-campus and surrounding communities did not have much racial diversity. He observed that the only source of diversity could be seen in Mountain View's athletics departments which heavily recruited Black student-

athletes for the basketball and football programs. But because he grew up in an area that had a similar racial makeup, CeCe had an easier transition:

Yeah, so I mean it was, it was very different. Um so yeah, I mean you, you can meet a lot of people from different cultures. A lot of White people and they, I mean, you need to be very cool or some of them have really never even met an African American person in real life.

Not only was CeCe accustomed to these racial complexities, his familiarity living in areas defined as “one stoplight towns” prepared him for the limited resources within the college’s local community. For example, the closest shopping center was at least 45 minutes away from the college.

Upon reflecting on his undergraduate experiences, CeCe feels that Mountain View College would still be his top choice. Not only did he benefit from enrolling in a highly regarded criminal justice program, he also built relationships with students and staff alike. For him “it was a really great accomplishment to be a part of [at] the college”. Concerning improvements needed to enhance the experiences of Black students at the college, CeCe believed that while the students could benefit from an on-campus cultural club, overall the college “does a really good job recruiting” and that with its limited resources “they try to make it a home for them as much as they can.”

But CeCe did provide interesting insight into the adjustments Black students from large urban cities like Baltimore and Washington, D.C. struggle with. For example, local gathering spots such as the bar may not feel welcoming:

Um, I think the bar in the pub that they have in town. A lot of people who come from DC and Baltimore can't really relate to it. A lot of locals go there and you may experience different things that you probably never have.

CeCe believed that this sentiment was due to the fact that the Black students coming from large urban areas “never really had a lot of white population.” In other words, they were accustomed to living in areas with significantly larger populations of other Black residents. In contrast, places like the local community bar “just didn't feel at home for them.”

But CeCe’s upbringing in a rural community that had similar racial and cultural dynamics allowed him to embrace Mountain View College as his home. While it is difficult to quantify the number of Black rural students enrolled at the college, CeCe’s observations make it apparent that he is a rarity. In addition to his familiarity with the local rural culture, CeCe leveraged his brother’s insight as a Mountain View student and employee to help him navigate on-campus resources such as the work study program.

CeCe thoroughly enjoyed his experiences at Mountain View and was able to apply his criminal justice degree to a career as a police officer in a major metropolitan area. He loves his new city because it is very diverse and has many activities. Interestingly, his brother still resides in a community within reach from the college and will most likely remain there for the rest of his life. CeCe, however, is adamant that he will never return to the area. “I miss my brother, I miss my nephews and some of the friends I have there. But I just think [major city] has so much more to offer.”

### ***Taylor***

Taylor<sup>7</sup> is a White retired student affairs program assistant who spent nearly 40 years at Mountain View College. Although she retired four years ago, two of those years were spent working at the school in a part-time capacity. Taylor is neither an alumna of

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<sup>7</sup> The interview with Taylor was conducted on June 11, 2020.

the college nor originally from the area. In fact, she grew up in Ohio and previously worked in the banking industry. Her banking experience matched her to a position in the cashier's office at Mountain View College. Based on her observations and experiences with the Black students who have enrolled at the college throughout her tenure, Taylor estimated that approximately 10-11 percent of the student population is Black. She also estimated that Black students comprise about eight percent of the student-athlete population. Taylor was under the impression that the majority of them learned about the school from friends and family. She also believed that academics, affordability, athletics, and reputation were the most important characteristics Black students sought. Athletics emerged as the most important characteristic.

Taylor cited athletics as an important factor for Black students because many of them are recruited by Mountain View's coaches to play sports. But she also reflected on Black students who did not enroll for an athletic related reason like "B" and Stephan. Stephan, in particular, served as the student government president and graduated from the college approximately 10 years ago. He still resides in the local community and "really likes it here." Taylor recalled that Stephan "came from an area out of Ohio that wasn't a real good area." "B" also remained local to the area and eventually married.

It is apparent that for Black students like Stephan, the perceived safety of the campus community was paramount in his decision to permanently move from Ohio. The community that surrounds Mountain View College is rural and predominantly White with an aging population; Taylor was "surprised that they want to come here." Combined with its significant distance from more populous areas, the community does not entice younger residents to move there. As Hicks and Jones (2011) observed, rural areas are often

isolated from major metropolitan areas and have limited social activities. Despite the racial homogeneity of the local community, Taylor felt that the friendliness displayed by both the locals and the on-campus community eased the transition for many Black students. In addition, Mountain View College is one of the most affordable colleges in the region and because of its small size, Taylor emphasized that students are “not just a number” and are able to develop more personable relationships with faculty.

While Mountain View College promotes a safe environment for Black students to thrive in, Taylor felt that more effort needs to be made to get Black students involved in aspects of student life such as student congress. She cited the difficulty of enticing Black student-athletes to participate in on-campus activities. “A lot of our Black students are not involved in too many organizations on-campus. I don't know why, if they're in athletics, maybe they just don't have time, but I don't know why.” She also advocated for better communication in order to address the issues affecting the country. This was in reference to the current protests created to highlight several high-profile racial injustice and police brutality cases occurring throughout the country. Lastly, Taylor acknowledged that transitioning to a college located in a predominantly White and rural community had to be quite the adjustment for Black students. However, she could not articulate the availability of on-campus resources utilized to assist Black students make such a transition.

Taylor's interview provided a limited scope into the transition for Black students enrolling at Mountain View College. In addition, her reflection did not articulate the types of resources available on-campus for these students. This limited knowledge could be due to Taylor's past role as a program assistant which most likely kept her isolated

from other offices and resources. Regardless of the limitations, Taylor's interactions with the Black students demonstrated that safety and affordability were enticing factors prompting them to enroll at the school. The college's small size allows students to receive more personal attention from faculty. In fact, campus size is an important factor that prospective college students scrutinize in regard to faculty-student relationships and overall campus friendliness (Braddock & Hua, 2006; Hicks & Jones, 2011; Klein & Washburn, 2012; Lopez-Turley, 2009). Lastly, Taylor emphasized the importance of promoting more on-campus engagement among Black students, especially those who are student-athletes. If such engagement is promoted, Black students may be motivated to engage in activities that can support their academic and social foundations.

### **Comparisons of Staff/Administrators Interviews**

The first phase of interviewing involved conducting individual interviews with four college administrators who either represented a particular domain of student affairs or who had experience in various roles over a period of time. All four of the college personnel interviewed worked at Mountain View College at the time of their interview. Although all interviewees were local to their respective off-campus rural communities, only John and Barry were born and raised in the local community. They were also the only administrators who were alumni of Mountain View College. In contrast Taylor and Amy were not born and raised in the communities surrounding their schools. Taylor was born and raised in Ohio; Amy was unique in that she grew up in a military family which required her to live in different states and countries.

When asked to reflect on why they sought employment at their respective institution, each participant gave a different response. While Taylor, Barry, and Amy

were attracted to Mountain View's career opportunities and benefits, John appreciated the campus environment. John in particular appreciated Mountain View's close-knit family atmosphere. All participants identified as White and have an average length of service of 23 years at Mountain View College. Taylor had the longest length of service: 40 years.

Despite these differences, nearly every college employee interviewed believed that Black students enrolled at their respective colleges because of an excellent reputation, affordability, athletics, safety, and academics. All participants believed that affordability was the most important deciding factor for Black students. In fact, the Mountain View College administrators felt that recent reductions in the out of state tuition made their school a more affordable option than the in state options available to Black prospects. In addition, all participants expressed that a safe and welcoming environment was an important trait of their respective institution. They felt such a trait was particularly important for low-income Black students who were either leaving high crime areas or were currently living in households with minimal guidance and support.

While the respective staff and administrators interviewed shared some commonalities, obvious distinctions existed between the tone, length, and context of the interviews. Whereas Amy, Taylor and John's interviews were more fact based and direct, Barry's interview had subtle paternalistic leanings. For example, Barry often referred to himself as a "father figure" during segments of the interview. Amy, Barry and John's interviews were approximately 60-90 minutes each and provided greater context into the financial, social, and academic issues that affect Black students enrolled at Mountain View College. More specifically, these participants articulated the correlation between athletics and Black student enrollment. In other words, they believed that Black students

enrolled at the college were more likely to be recruited as a student-athlete. Amy, Barry, and John indicated that a large percentage of incoming Black prospects were student-athletes with Amy estimating that figure to hover around 90 percent.

In examining the “culture shock” Black students encountered while making the transition to a predominantly White community, the Mountain View College participants universally agreed that there were some challenges. They alluded to instances highlighting racial tensions between Black students and the White locals. Amy recalled several incidents where Black students entering local businesses were stereotyped as shoplifters. CeCe recalled a negative interaction with several White police officers who stopped him while he was driving and searched his vehicle. And lastly, Barry recalled a notable incident in which a White student paraded around an on-campus dorm while wearing a sheet and handing out Ku Klux Klan flyers. These incidents portray examples of negative interactions that have occurred between Black students and White members of the local community. Such portrayals also imply that the local community holds prejudices that need to be addressed. Additionally, there were no on-campus resources such as cultural clubs or a multicultural affairs office to help Black students successfully transition. Participants indicated that this void was due to funding and staffing limitations. Despite these limited multicultural resources, the Mountain View College interviewees indicated that such voids were filled by the nurturing and family-oriented environment that encourages all students to ask for help. In addition, Mountain View College participants indicated that some Black graduates of Mountain View College have planted roots within the local community.



## Comparisons of Student Interviews

The interviews conducted with Mountain View College alumni B and CeCe presented two strikingly different trajectories. Although both interviewees are Black men who attended the college during a similar timeframe, there were no other commonalities between them. The first indicator of this contrast exists in how both alumni learned about the college. Whereas a random internet search introduced B to Mountain View College, the positive experiences shared by an older sibling enticed CeCe to enroll at the school. Differences were also observed within each participant's respective backgrounds. B is a first-generation college student from a low-income household who was born and raised in a high crime urban region in the South. CeCe, however, is a second-generation college student who was born in New York State but later moved to an area approximately two hours away from Mountain View.

Despite these individual differences, there were some commonalities among B and CeCe's experiences at the college. Both graduates felt that Mountain View College was a match for them because it was affordable, had a good reputation, and offered a family-oriented atmosphere. The college's small size and welcoming environment were crucial in making them feel like they were truly valued as a student. B and CeCe had considered other colleges like the large regional schools in their respective regions but felt that such schools would ultimately ignore their needs and treat them like a number. Although both participants believed Mountain View College needed to engage Black students better by facilitating the creation of on-campus multicultural organizations, each person found ways to thrive. B forged friendships with various students on-campus and CeCe thrived in a student worker role in the college's admissions office.

But the transition to a rural campus within a predominantly White community was more difficult for B. B readily admitted to experiencing culture shock which at one point made him question his decision to enroll at Mountain View College. He was neither thrilled about the limited social activities available in the area nor was he eager to drive a significant distance (at least one hour one way) to the closest store. B also expressed skepticism about how he as a young Black man would be accepted by the predominantly White community. Surprisingly, the same community he was cautious of provided him with a sanctuary to thrive. B was “adopted” by a local White family and eventually married their daughter. They welcomed B with open arms and provided an off-campus sanctuary for him to thrive.

Unlike B who had some challenges transitioning to campus, CeCe had a rather seamless transition to Mountain View College. Most importantly, CeCe found it relatively easier to navigate the predominantly White rural landscape. Such acclimation can be attributed to CeCe’s upbringing in a rural community located approximately two hours from the college. While his home community had slightly more racial diversity, it embodied the close knit and familial values observed within the campus and off-campus communities. CeCe also benefitted from having an older brother attend Mountain View College. Because of that connection, CeCe was able to establish friendships with key personnel prior to enrolling at the school. And his frequent visits to campus to meet with his brother allowed him to get a sense of the atmosphere, resources, and staff. All of these factors worked in tandem to help CeCe transition to Mountain View College with little to no issue.

In addition to the differences observed with the respective transitions, differences were also apparent in how B and CeCe critiqued the college. B provided a much more critical view of certain areas such as athletics and student activities. He condemned the coaches for failing to prioritize academics for the Black athletes. B was also critical of the school's attempts to celebrate Black culture with a failed "soul food" celebration. In contrast, CeCe's reflection of his time at Mountain View College was not as critical. He felt that the college makes do with the limited resources it has. Unlike B, CeCe did not give detailed thoughts on his impression of how Black student athletes are treated. It is possible that CeCe's more positive evaluation of the college is linked to both his adaptation to the rural culture as well as previous access to the campus.

From a critical perspective, B and CeCe's paths to Mountain View College revealed remarkable differences. It is apparent that CeCe's upbringing in a community similar in culture and population to the community surrounding Mountain View College greatly eased any anxiety during his transition. In contrast, B did not have these support systems in place, and this made his transition to the college challenging. He also had to forge a multitude of internal and external relationships. Despite these differences, both men used their time at Mountain View to develop into successful graduates. B applied his degree in behavioral health to a career in mental health in the region. In the interim, CeCe's criminal justice degree helped him become a police officer in a major city. B and CeCe appreciated the resources, support, and family-oriented atmosphere provided at Mountain View College. Their experiences may serve as the template of success for future Black graduates of Mountain View.

## **Emergent Themes**

The interviews with student and staff participants representing Mountain View College revealed the complexities concerning the college choice process for Black prospects. In general, most college prospects consider cost, location, reputation, and campus atmosphere as some of the important qualities embodied by their top college choices. While these qualities are also carefully considered by Black college prospects, subsequent interviews implied that a sizeable percentage first generation and/or low-income Black students prioritized cost and safety over other characteristics. Moreover, interviews with Mountain View College personnel revealed that a high percentage of Black students were recruited as student-athletes. Lastly, subsequent findings revealed that a growing contingency of Black post-graduates making the community surrounding their college their new home.

### ***Theme 1: Rural Campus as a Safe Space***

As part of the college choice process, a college's geographic location is a characteristic that is carefully critiqued by students and parents alike. Hamrick and Hossler (1996) posited that location is one of the perceived benefits college students seek in their school. For example, prominent Pennsylvania schools like Temple University, The Pennsylvania State University (Main Campus- University Park, PA) and The University of Pittsburgh, use their enormous financial resources and socially active locations to their advantage to attract swaths of incoming students seeking both socially active on-campus and off-campus environments (Levy, 2017). In contrast, colleges located in less populated and rural areas like Mansfield College in Pennsylvania are faced with a geographical disadvantage. Located in less populated areas with limited activities,

schools like Mansfield College may have more difficulties attracting students or sustaining enrollment (Levy, 2017). These challenges are also intensified by these schools' limited financial resources which is a barrier to upgrading buildings and facilities- a necessity in a competitive market to attract college students (Selingo, 2017; Simon, 2017)

Like its Pennsylvania counterparts, Mountain View College is overshadowed by West Virginia University and Marshall University. Both schools exist in rural areas of West Virginia but are able to thrive because of their abundant financial resources, state of the art facilities, and reputable academic programs. Yet, the rurality and limited resources associated with Mountain View College was not a deterrent for the Black students. The institution exists in a rural area surrounded by a predominantly White population. There are little to no social activities available and many instances, the next closest shopping mall or entertainment venue is at least one hour away. In fact, it is common knowledge that Mountain View College literally exists in a "one stoplight town". While such perceived limitations may deter some college students, such characteristics were viewed as a benefit by some incoming Black students. In fact, the common trend observed among the participants interviewed was that the institutions' geography was used as a major recruitment tool. Amy, an administrator at Mountain View College, recalled countless interactions with Black students who enrolled at the school because they were eager to escape the crime, drugs, and gang activities that plagued their home cities. She remembered one such example involving a young Black student from Detroit who did not return to the city after graduation because of the violence and crime. "He had a friend of

his, with a drive by shooting and, you know, family members, got caught up... caught up in crime and he just didn't want to go back.”

John was intentional in making sure that incoming Black students understood that the college was located in one of the safest areas in the region. In his opinion, “not everybody wants to party when they go to college. Some individuals are mature enough to understand that they want a place that gives support academically.” This declaration also alleviated anxiety for the students’ parents who are not only influential in the college choice process employed by Black students but also prioritize safety as an important component (Chapman et al., 2018; Goings & Sewell, 2019; Teranishi & Briscoe, 2008). Mountain View alum B prioritized a safe campus environment during his initial search. He grew up in an urban environment plagued by high levels of crime and believed that enrolling at Mountain View College was an escape from those circumstances.

But safety is not just indicative of physical security. In fact, the interviewees implied that the term “safety” was also indicative of a greater emotional, social, and academic network of resources. Black students appreciated the small campus environment because it allowed them to establish real relationships with faculty, staff, and other students. The majority of interviewees believed that their small rural colleges promoted a family-oriented culture that did not categorize students as a number. B expressed that “at a big prestigious university, I would say that you’re, you know, you’re considered a number, you know, or another individual.” Such a positive on-campus climate is one reason Mountain View College has high student satisfaction scores. According to John, “we made the top 3 percentile in the United States of America because our faculty care. We didn't just go away.”

Mountain View's approach to reduce attrition was to embody a family-oriented culture. This personable approach can be much more impactful for a small school than a large public institution. There is no room for error for even the slightest decline in student enrollment at a small school like Mountain View can lead to financial setbacks. In John's opinion, larger schools would not be impacted by the loss of a few students. "Do you think they care about those [10] students? Does it break their budget? It's not even a blip on them!" Hence, Mountain View College and similar schools can only have a small margin of error (Hicks & Jones, 2011).

Administrators like Barry and Taylor readily extended themselves to Black students who met with them to discuss some common academic related issues. In particular, Barry was often viewed as a "father figure" by the students. While Barry was adored by Black students, he recognized that his identity as a White man would be a barrier. "A lot of them will tell me you know sir, I love you because you try but you're not black so you can't fully understand what I go through." John revealed a similar reflection in which he recognized that as a White man he can never know what it is like growing up as Black person. Both participants expressed a willingness to listen and provide as much guidance as possible.

### ***Theme 2: Rural Colleges as a More Affordable Option***

During the college choice process, most prospective college students carefully consider costs such as tuition, room and board. More specifically, students and their parents are more likely to consider schools that offer generous financial aid packages (Klein & Washburn, 2012). Studies have found that Black students and their families consider college costs to be the most important factor during the college choice process

(Maxey et al., 1995). Affordability was one of the major characteristics touted by both Mountain View College.

While Mountain View College is considered an affordable option by Black students, participants affiliated with this school did not give insight into the financial aid packages offered to students. Rather, greater emphasis was placed on comparing the costs of attending Mountain View to the costs associated with attending schools within the students' home regions. Lopez-Turley (2009) posited that out of state schools have higher rates of tuition, room and board, and other fees. This often prompts students, especially those from low-income households, to consider local colleges with more affordable price tags. Yet, interviews with all Mountain View College personnel and alumni revealed that local options available to Black students often had higher tuition costs. Since Mountain View's out of state costs were far more affordable than in state tuition options, it made much more sense for Black students to enroll at Mountain View. According to Barry,

Well, I know for a lot of the students that I talked to, they can go cheaper to Mountain View then they can go in their own state. So I think affordability is a big issue. And if they're coming for something particular, whether it be athletics or some of the programs that you don't see nationwide like um land forestry and surveying. For a lot of students, it's not offered in their state. And so they can get a special rate by coming here and then taking it back to their state when they graduate.

### ***Theme 3: Athletics as a Recruitment Tool***

One of the most surprising revelations that emerged from the interviews was the fact that an overwhelming majority of Black students enrolled at Mountain View College are student athletes. Amy, an administrator who works in Mountain View's registrar's office, estimated that Black students accounted for 90-95 percent of all student athletes enrolled at the school. This is an astounding figure, especially considering that Black



students account for only 12 percent of the student population. Although fellow colleagues John and Barry could not provide numerical estimates, they believed that a high percentage of athletes were Black. The only exception to this belief was Taylor who estimated that Black students comprised under 10 percent of the school's athletics population. This discrepancy could be due to Taylor's confinement to the student services office which would have limited her access to student data concerning the college's athletics population. In contrast, Amy, John, and Barry held positions that provided them with greater access to student data related to recruiting and student athletes.

Mountain View College used its position as a member of Division II collegiate athletics to attract Black student athletes. Amy shared that a significant number of Black athletes are recruited from junior colleges in California. These students do not receive enough playing time so they transfer to Mountain View on the promise that they will receive more athletic development. It was also revealed that some Black student athletes may have some academic challenges and would receive additional academic resources to help them. In turn, Black student athletes may reap additional benefits such as transferring to a prestigious Division I athletics program or advancing to professional sports. John and Barry shared that the same expectations are applicable to Black student athletes recruited from Florida, Washington, D.C., Virginia, and Maryland.

But acquiring more playing time and preparation was often overshadowed by a desire to live and study in a safe environment. Mountain View College personnel believed that many Black student athletes viewed Mountain View College as a safe and affordable sanctuary that allowed them to escape the high crime environments, they previously lived in. Mountain View College administrator Barry recalled an interaction

with a Black football player who he described as “having a real attitude”. Barry believed that this “attitude” was merely a protective mechanism. After all, the student felt he needed to maintain this demeanor in order to “survive.”

#### ***Theme 4: Community/Region as Post-Graduation Safe Haven***

Unlike their urban and suburban counterparts, rural communities tend to have higher rates of poverty, declining populations, and limited racial diversity. And the isolated nature of these communities from more populous hubs makes it difficult for rural colleges to attract talented staff (Eddy, 2012; Hicks & Jones, 2011). These features aptly apply to the community surrounding Mountain View College. Mountain View College personnel Barry, Amy, Taylor, and John confirmed that the local community was predominantly White and that there were very limited social activities available. Taylor expressed surprise that many Black students would want to enroll at a college situated in a region with both limited resources and diversity. An exception to this belief was CeCe, a graduate of Mountain View who was quite accustomed to the characteristics of the rural community because he grew up in a similar community located approximately two hours away from the college.

B’s experiences, however, were quite reminiscent of the culture shock that most incoming Black students encounter. B admitted that he was initially intimidated by the community’s isolation from the main metropolitan hub, limited activities available, and the obvious predominance of the White population. He exclaimed that “it was terrifying you know, I didn’t know what I was getting myself into and regretted it wholeheartedly. This is my first week I wanted to go back home because I was used to, you know, being in walking distance with everything.” He was also aware that the predominantly White

community was not as embracing. Barry and Amy recalled a series of off-campus racial incidents that negatively stereotyped Black students leading to mutual mistrust. But Barry and Amy also indicated that the same community that displayed subtle notions of mistrust towards Black students has gradually evolved to become a second home for Black students. B is a primary example of this phenomenon. He was “adopted” by a local White family who supported him throughout his journey at the college. B is now permanently linked to this family by marriage to their daughter and has remained in the region for five years.

Other Black graduates of the college have also sought refuge in the local community. Amy, Barry, John, and Taylor all recalled Stephen, a Black alum from Cleveland who graduated from Mountain View College approximately 10 years ago. Similar to B, Stephen grew up in an urban area plagued by crime and poverty. Upon enrolling at Mountain View, Stephen found refuge in the safe environment and vowed to never return to Cleveland. Stephen kept that promise and has remained in the area for over a decade.

In addition to making the local community their new home base, some Black graduates have remained in the area to secure careers related to their degrees. Based on her observations and access to data, Amy shared that Black students tend to focus on popular majors such as criminal justice, business, and health sciences. A criminal justice degree, in particular, has granted Black students careers in lucrative federal and state capacities such as the FBI and the nearby prison. Without a doubt, these examples of success prompt Black prospects affiliated with current and recent graduates to enroll at Mountain View College.

## Summary

The interviews with Mountain View College personnel and alumni presented rich insights into how this rather obscure rural college has become an attractive option for Black prospects from urban and suburban areas. Affordability and safety were the most important factors that worked in tandem to provide Black students with safe on-campus experiences at a competitive price. Additionally, it was also implied that safety represented the abundance of support and resources from the faculty, staff, and administrators. It is important to acknowledge the overrepresentation of Black students in athletics at the college. This was an unexpected development; however, participants suggested that Black student athletes prioritize affordability and safety like their non-athletics counterparts. Mountain View personnel like Barry labeled himself as a “father figure” for some of the Black students who felt comfortable discussing their personal and academic concerns with him. Such support was prominent throughout interviews with all participants and appeared to be the norm, not an exception to the rule. It was also readily apparent that despite Mountain View College’s isolation from populous areas, this distance served as a benefit for Black students seeking a quiet environment with limited distractions. Overall, Mountain View College is the true definition of a “hidden gem”. With such dedicated personnel, competitive tuition rates, and a safe environment, the college could become an oasis for Black students interested in expanding their college choice process.

## CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study sought to gain a better understanding of the social, academic, and financial aspects of the college choice process for Black students enrolled at a rural college. More specifically, the following research questions were generated to assist in this task:

- What are the perceptions of administrators and staff members about current admissions practices used to recruit prospective minority students?
- What are the main factors that prompted Black students to apply for admission to *and* enroll at a rural school institution like Mountain View College?
  - What role, if any, has undermatching played in the college selection process of students enrolled at Mountain View College?
- What are perceived future benefits (social, workforce, etc.) of attending a school like Mountain View College?

In order to answer these questions, a series of surveys and interviews were initiated with six staff and student participants representing one small, rural college: Mountain View College. The college has a small student population (under 1800), is located in a rural, predominantly White community, and is rather isolated from major cities. Mountain View College is considered a “less selective” school because it accepts nearly 100 percent of applicants. And while Black students represent 12 percent of the student population, participants interviewed for this study estimated that they account for about 90 percent of the college’s athletics population.

Based on interviews with participants, four major themes emerged. Safety and security were considered to be the most important factor Black prospects prioritized

during the college choice process. In fact, safety and security was described by participants as the key factor they believed prompted many Black students from high crime urban areas to flock to a rural school like Mountain View College. The college's isolated location in a quiet community was quite appealing for Black students.

Affordability was the next most prominent theme to emerge. In general, most college students do not want to incur debt associated while attending college, and Black students are no different. While Black prospects were in closer proximity to an abundance of colleges and universities, those institutions may have been more expensive and may have provided inadequate financial aid. In contrast, Mountain View College was appealing because it's out of state tuition and board costs rivaled the in state tuition and costs associated with other schools.

In addition to safety/security and affordability, athletics emerged as a significant theme. It was determined that a significant percentage of incoming Black students were recruited by Mountain View College's athletics teams on the promise of more playing time as well as the potential to be scouted for future professional sports opportunities. These athletes were also attracted to the college's safety and abundance of resources. Lastly, the off-campus community as a post-graduation safe haven emerged as an unlikely theme. Rural colleges are generally located in areas isolated from social activities and large cities which makes them less than ideal for some college students. However, these characteristics have become ideal for a growing number of Black graduates of Mountain View College who may not be interested in returning to the unsafe cities they once hailed from. Black graduates are also finding lucrative careers in the region near Mountain View's campus. Overall, it is quite evident that Mountain View

College is a “hidden gem” that offers an eclectic network of resources for Black students. The next section describes the implications and future considerations for scholarship on this topic.

### **Implications**

Contemporary research has often represented small rural colleges as unglamorous institutions surrounded by poverty-stricken communities with little to no social activities (Hicks & Jones, 2011). Additionally, research argues that such schools cannot compete with larger colleges because they have limited funding, outdated facilities, and ongoing challenges sustaining dwindling student populations (Selingo, 2017; Simon, 2017). While these descriptors hold some truth, the current research has failed to recognize the positive attributes associated with small rural colleges. These attributes include offering competitive tuition rates and financial aid packages, providing students with a safe space, and offering career opportunities related to their majors. Rural colleges like Mountain View have a small campus population which is advantageous in creating a family-oriented atmosphere for Black students. Their small size also allows them to facilitate a small student-faculty ratio allowing students to engage in more individual interactions with faculty and administrators.

With this in mind, small rural colleges must utilize advanced marketing strategies to highlight these characteristics. A foreseeable challenge will be the lingering shadow of larger institutions that have sizable marketing budgets to actively recruit students. Despite this challenge, small rural colleges can counter this by catering their recruiting and marketing to Black prospects from urban and suburban areas. Emphasis can be placed on the abundance of safety, small class sizes, and the abundance of financial and academic

support. Moreover, rural colleges must market the post-graduation opportunities that can be utilized by Black students such as career opportunities and the option to remain in a region that may have lower costs of living than their urban counterparts.

Because small rural colleges can provide students with more resources and an individualized experience at a competitive cost, larger colleges and universities must recognize that these are their main disadvantages. The Black alumni interviewed believed that larger colleges would “treat them like a number.” Therefore, larger colleges and universities must find ways to create individualized experiences for vulnerable student populations that include first generation Black students and/or Black students from low-income households. Institutions with significantly larger student populations must also recognize that they are not invincible. Specifically, large colleges located in both rural regions and traditionally populous regions of the country like the Northeast are trying to counter the collective “brain drain” or exodus of talented college students from their grasp. This exodus includes talented Black prospects who may be gravitating to schools like Mountain View College that can provide individualized experiences without the heavy debt burden.

With this in mind, Black college prospects need to recognize that they have the upper hand in the college choice process. Colleges both large and small are facing enrollment challenges and are desperate to remedy this issue by marketing schools to scores of college prospects. Black college prospects should carefully consider institutions like small rural colleges whose size can create more personalized experiences with limited debt. The original intention of this study was to carefully determine the factors that prompted Black students to enroll at a rural and predominantly White institution like



Mountain View College. While the Three Phase Model of College Choice (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) and the Model of Predetermination (Freeman, 2005) were useful in providing context into the nuances of the college choice process, the evolution of the study to one in which participants provided in-depth feedback about their on and off campus experiences requires the application of conceptual frameworks confined to this arena. Colleges like Mountain View College must be intentional in gaining insight into whether or not the factors that prompted Black students to enroll at their school could devolve into a series of social, academic, and financial challenges for these students.

The core themes presented an interesting dichotomy of rural colleges. On the surface, there is a perception that rural colleges and their surrounding communities are not ideal atmospheres for college students. Rural colleges face financial disadvantages, declining enrollment, and sparse pools of talent. The rural communities in which they exist tend to have higher rates of poverty and are not racially diverse. Given these factors as well as their general isolation from more populous areas, it would be plausible for Black prospects to bypass these types of institutions during the college choice process. Yet, the in-depth interviews with personnel and students from Mountain View College revealed that rural colleges may appeal to Black students because they are affordable, provide a family-oriented atmosphere, and offer access to coveted post-graduate careers. More specifically, rural colleges may appeal to many Black students who are first generation and/or represent low-income households. Rural colleges may be able to offer these students a safe physical environment that serves as a sanctuary. This may be applicable for Black students coming from the high crime and high poverty cities.

While these were important developments that emerged, it is important to note that the small size of this study greatly limited my ability to gain more insight into the application of undermatching at Mountain View College. Smith, Pender, and Howell (2012) described undermatching as a phenomenon that occurs when “students’ academic credentials permit them access to a college or university that is more selective than the post-secondary alternative they actually choose” (p. 247). Undermatching is often associated with low-income students of color who enroll at less selective 4-year colleges, community colleges and for-profit schools at higher rates than their White counterparts (Lowry, 2017; Smith et al., 2013; Tobolowsky & Bers, 2018; Wellman, 2017).

This study engaged only four Mountain View College personnel and two Black alumni. Therefore, the insights gathered are not significant enough to determine what possible role undermatching played during the initial college choice process. In addition, this study only provided insight from two Black graduates who were both years removed from the college. COVID-19 made it difficult to recruit Black students currently enrolled at the college. If such barriers did not exist and the study was expanded to include a larger number of currently enrolled Black students, perhaps undermatching could be better explored.

### **Future Considerations**

This study was limited to the perspectives of administrators and students affiliated with a small rural college. With this in mind, it will be important for future research to explore the perspectives of employees and students at other institutions with similar characteristics as Mountain View College. In order to expand on this research, it will be important to consider the perspectives of Black parents whose children are enrolled at

these types of colleges. Current studies posit that regardless of income and education, Black parents stress the importance of attending college (Chapman et al., 2018; Goings & Sewell, 2019). However, these very same studies did not focus on Black parents with children enrolled at rural colleges like Mountain View College. This void can be easily filled by interviewing Black parents with children enrolled at rural colleges.

The overlap between kinship networks and peer influence should also be considered for future studies. An underlying theme that emerged from interviews was how many current and post-graduate Black students of Mountain View College used their positive experiences at the school to influence the decision making of Black peers within their networks. Positive word of mouth convinced these peers to enroll at Mountain View College. A subsequent gap exists as to how Black students use their peer groups to establish both on and off-campus kinship networks. Interviews revealed that Black students did not always feel comfortable engaging in the predominantly White local community. Moreover, many Black students experienced anxiety during their transition from urban and racially diverse environments to a campus set in a rural and racially homogenous community. Interviews implied that this anxiety was associated with the prejudices exhibited by White community members. Multiple participants revealed that the local community held some reticence about engaging with Black students. Despite these challenges, this study found that a small but growing number of Black graduates are remaining in the local community. With this in mind, future research should consider exploring how Black students create and utilize kinship networks as a means to transition into rural colleges. It should also examine the mechanisms Black graduates use to acclimate in the predominantly White community.

It is also important for Black student athletes to be considered for future studies on the college choice process of Black students. A surprising development that emerged from this study was the disproportionately high percentage of Black student athletes enrolled at Mountain View College. While Black students comprise 12 percent of the student population, it is estimated that they comprise over 90 percent of the student-athlete population. Affordability, safety, and the promise of playing time were some of the main reasons Black student athletes were attracted to Mountain View College. Interviews implied that because of rigorous sports schedules, Black student athletes are rather isolated from the general student population. Therefore, future research should examine the resources and extended networks utilized by this group of Black students to assist in acclimating to a rural environment.

Finally, it will be important for future studies to examine the college choice process of Black students enrolled at a broad range of private rural colleges. Current literature on rural post-secondary schools appears to be limited to small rural community colleges that are characterized as having limited resources, outdated facilities, and strained funds. It is also implied that these colleges do not attract a talented pool of students and staff. Focusing research on private rural colleges could reveal unique findings related to their funding, resources, and social climates that shape the landscape for Black students. It would also be important to determine the extent to which private rural colleges and their local communities co-exist.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, this study intended to examine the college choice processes of Black students enrolled at a small rural college. Interviews with administrators and alumni

indicated that Black students prioritized affordability and safety as important qualities they sought in a college. In addition, a growing number of Black students are remaining in the local community after graduation to find career opportunities. It was also revealed that Black students are overrepresented in athletics. Small rural colleges like Mountain View College are often overshadowed by their larger (and sometimes more urban) counterparts. It is assumed that because larger post-secondary institutions have generous budgets, state-of-the art facilities, and world class academics, they can provide students with a well-rounded college experience.

However, this study indicated that this may not be applicable to all college-bound students especially Black students who are first generation and/or from low-income households. By all accounts, Black students enrolled at a small rural college like Mountain View do not want to be treated like a number and are able to build direct relationships with staff and faculty. They also prioritize a safe and quiet environment that can help them focus on their academic goals. Because this study was limited to one rural college, it will be essential for future research to account for Black students enrolled at a variety of rural colleges throughout the country. Despite this limitation, the current study served as a foundation to remove the obscurity of rural colleges.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A: SURVEY 1

#### Survey 1

Description: Survey instrument to be administered to Black students enrolled at Mountain View College

1. What is your family's annual household income?
  - \$10,000 – 24,999
  - \$25,000 – 49,999
  - \$50,000 – 74,999
  - \$75,000 – 99,999
  - \$100,000 +
2. What is your current class year?
  - Freshman
  - Sophomore
  - Junior
  - Senior
  - Transfer
3. What is your parent(s) highest level of education?
  - High School Diploma/GED
  - Some college
  - Bachelor's degree
  - Graduate/Professional degree
  - Doctorate
  - Other
4. If you selected "transfer" as your response to the previous questions, was Mountain View your first choice?
  - Yes
  - No
5. Are you the first person in your immediate family to attend college?
  - Yes
  - No
6. Which best describes your hometown?
  - Urban
  - Suburban
  - Rural
7. Select the response that best describes your residency:
  - In state resident
  - Out of state resident

8. If you selected "out of state" as your response to the previous question, write in the name of your home state:
- \_\_\_\_\_
9. How did you hear about Mountain View College?
- Friends and/or family
  - Internet search
  - Mail/postcard
  - Alumni
  - Other (please explain) \_\_\_\_\_
10. What factor(s) influenced your decision to enroll at Mountain View College? (select all that apply)
- Academics
  - Affordability
  - Athletics
  - Location
  - Reputation
  - Social life/activities
  - Other (please explain) \_\_\_\_\_
11. If you selected more than one response from the previous question, which factor was the most important in your decision to enroll at Mountain View College?
- \_\_\_\_\_
12. Did you consider other colleges besides Mountain View College?
- Yes
  - No
  - Maybe
13. If you responded yes or maybe to the previous question, please list the other colleges you considered and/or were accepted in:
- \_\_\_\_\_
  - \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR STUDENT/ALUMNI  
PARTICIPANTS**

Description: This appendix lists the standard questions that will be asked during interviews with student/alumni participants.

1. Compared to other schools you considered, what made Mountain View College stand out?
2. Before applying to Mountain View College, what did you know about the college in terms of location, reputation, academics?
3. What expectations did you have prior to enrolling at Mountain View College ?
4. Has Mountain View College met your expectations? Explain.
5. If you the opportunity to restart the college selection process, would Mountain View College still be your top selection? Explain.
6. Given the rurality and limited diversity at the school and in the surrounding community, what resources did you utilize to adjust?
7. Before arriving at Mountain View College , did you feel you were capable of enrolling in and succeeding at more selective school? Why or why not?



## APPENDIX C: SURVEY 2

### Survey 2

Description: Survey instrument to be administered to administrators and staff employed at Mountain View College

1. Select the job category that best describes you
  - Administrator
  - Executive
  - Faculty
  - Staff
2. How long have you been employed at the college?
  - 0 – 5 years
  - 6 – 9 years
  - 10 – 14 years
  - 15 + years
3. Are you an alumni(a) of the college?
  - Yes
  - No
4. Are you local to the community?
  - Yes
  - No
5. Are you originally from West Virginia?
  - Yes
  - No
6. If you selected "no" as a response to the previous question, type in the city/state of hometown
  - \_\_\_\_\_
7. Based on your experiences, how do students hear about Mountain View College?
  - Friends and/or family
  - Internet search
  - Mail/postcard
  - Alumni
  - Other (please explain) \_\_\_\_\_
8. In your opinion, what factor(s) influence students' decisions to enroll at Mountain View College? (Select all that apply)
  - Academics
  - Affordability
  - Athletics
  - Location
  - Reputation
  - Social life/activities
  - Other (please explain) \_\_\_\_\_

9. If you selected more than one response from the previous question, which factor do you believe is the most important in students' decision to enroll at Mountain View College?

○ \_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR ADMINISTRATOR/STAFF**

### **PARTICIPANTS**

Description: Semi-structured interview format for Mountain View College administrators/staff.

1. Introductions
  1. Name
  2. Administrative title/role
  3. Years employed at college
  
2. In your view, what makes Mountain View College a viable option for Black students?
3. In your view, what expectations do you believe Black students enrolling (or enrolled) at the college have?
4. From your perspective, what improvements does the College need to make to provide black students with an exceptional experience?
5. Given the rurality and limited diversity at the school and in the surrounding community, what resources were used to help black students adjust to campus life?
6. Compared to other schools (regionally and/or nationally), what makes Mountain View a more viable options for students, particularly black students?
7. In your view, why do you think high achieving students, particularly high achieving black students, would opt to forego a more selective and/or academically competitive school?