

*The College Choice Process of Top-Performing Rural Indiana High School Students*

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Through ethnographic methods and dataset analysis, I explain the process through which top-performing students in rural Indiana identify, apply, and choose a postsecondary institution in light of the region's social heritage, continuing economic and population decline, and correspondingly limited educational resources—especially for high aptitude students. The interviewed students' choices reflect a hundreds-strong dataset of their peers graduating in recent years. A vast majority of these students choose in-state institutions; their choices differ from metropolitan students particularly as the latter appear much more likely to attend elite or out-of-state institutions. College choice to top-performing rural students is a matter of matching what they desire to get out of college with a number of individual social, financial, and educational affects and limitations. College visits and an anticipation a "good fit" on a particular campus are centrally important. The factors that result in most students attending in-state institutions are, in varying degrees: ignorance of the college choice process's intricacies, their secondary schools' emphasis on these institutions, a strong desire to pay in-state tuition, and a discomfort of going too far from home. Patterns also exist among the few independent, intellectually engaged students who consider elite colleges and particularly religious students who consider Christian institutions.

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### *Prologue*

*This is America—a town of a few thousand, in a region of wheat and corn and dairies and little groves.*

So begins *Main Street*, Sinclair Lewis's 1920 novel that ruthlessly destroyed the sentimental conception of an American small town as effectively as Theodore Dreiser eviscerated America's urban dreams in *Sister Carrie* twenty years earlier. Lewis's novel takes place in rural Minnesota, but

*The story would be the same in Ohio or Montana, in Kansas or Kentucky or Illinois, and not very differently would it be told Up York State or in the Carolina hills.*

We know, however, that the notion of rural America as the United States distilled, a trope lovingly dolled out by politicians in frozen Iowan prairies before the national media every four years, is incorrect. Rural areas have not been the country's prime locus for over a century, not long after the legendary frontier closed, immigrants flooded the coastal and northern industrial cities, and African Americans began to flee the nightmare of the Jim Crow South.

A hundred years ago, however, the rural Midwest was at nearly its peak population, if not at its peak plurality of the population, thanks largely to the number of people still needed to work farms. Though the 20<sup>th</sup> century began horse-powered, the contemporary agricultural industry was experiencing significant and rapid technological advancement that would continue through its early decades that reduced the need for

sheer manpower. Periodic farm crises have affected rural areas over the decades, particularly in the 1920s and '30s (not just the Dust Bowl and broader economic collapse—recall the role that overproduction following the demise of the World War I demand boom and inflating grain commodities played in causing the Great Depression itself)<sup>1</sup> and in the 1980s, when, after booming prices inclined speculating farmers to buy more machinery and marginal land on credit, prices busted, spurring a debt crisis compounded by two droughts. Thousands of farms folded and rural areas rapidly depopulated.<sup>2</sup> And so the long 20<sup>th</sup> century was that which broke the power and population of the rural United States.

Over the course of this project and my academic career before it, I have become aware of and concerned with the quantity of research within sociology about rural America. At Stanford, one can major in urban studies and take a course on the urban underclass, but one cannot major in rural studies or take a class on the rural poor. With so much attention paid to urban inequality and poverty, I worry that the realities of rural America are unknown to academics, the metropolitan public, and policymakers. The steady decline of rural America's relative importance notwithstanding, around 60 million people are rural Americans, a greater number than Latinos, African Americans, or people over the age of 65. While rural areas are very much "flyover country" for many people, this only reinforces the fact that the vast majority of America's geography is rural,

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<sup>1</sup> Jakob B Madsen, "Agricultural Crises and the International Transmission of the Great Depression" in *The Journal of Economic History* 61, no. 2 (June 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Barry J. Barnett, "The U.S. Farm Financial Crisis of the 1980s" in *Agricultural History* 74, no. 2 (Spring 2000).

producing much of our food, energy, and other resources.<sup>3</sup> Socially conservative rural voters play a huge role as a voting component for conservative candidates.<sup>4</sup> The size of this bloc of people is important to both economic and political concerns. Its identity and quantitative features demand attention.

The cardinal reason I have this interest is because I have a rural background. While I have seen research on rural populations of color—Southern blacks, Latinos in the Southwest, Native Americans on reservations—most of the research on white rural Americans tends to focus on Appalachia, not the Midwest. Logistically, I chose Hoosiers because I am one and could go there easily do research there during the summer of 2014. This has been a deeply personal project for me. I hope it is useful work.

*"My God," she said, "are you a Hoosier?"  
I admitted I was.  
"I'm a Hoosier, too," she crowed. "Nobody has to be ashamed of being a Hoosier."  
"I'm not," I said. "I never knew anybody who was."*  
—From Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*

Indiana is made up of three distinct regions. Northwest Indiana (colloquially called “the Region,” bordering Chicago) and Michiana (centered around South Bend) together are home to white ethnics and African Americans who came for jobs in its steel mills and automobile factories. Gary shows the nadir that resulted from America’s economic shift and white flight in the postwar era. Mid-state is fertile farmland dotted with midsized, tired cities and towns like Fort Wayne, Terre Haute, Lafayette, and

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<sup>3</sup> David L. Brown and Kai A. Schafft. *Rural People and Communities in the 21st Century: Resilience and Transformation* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2011), 11–12.

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence C. Hamilton, “Rural Voting in the 2004 Election” (Durham, NC: The Carsey School of Public Policy at the Scholars’ Repository, 2006).

Muncie as well as Indianapolis and its sprawling environs. The last Ice Age's glaciers did not reach Southern Indiana, today a region of rolling hills and resource extraction, dominated by the Ohio River city of Evansville in the extreme southwest, Bloomington and Columbus in the hills, and Louisville and Cincinnati's exurbs. Most of the state is drained by the Wabash, a tributary of the Ohio; its main tributary, the White River, runs through Indianapolis.

Indiana's purpose-built capital city bears the mean nicknames "Naptown" and "Indiana No Place." The latter moniker carries a salient point: compared to its neighbors and other Midwestern states, the Hoosier State is fairly nondescript. Southern Indiana shares its upland, quasi-Southern character with parts of Ohio, Kentucky, and Missouri, but it lacks a true border state or Appalachian character. Indiana's northern farmland compares with farmland from Ohio to North Dakota, but the region doesn't have utterly dominating metropolitan areas like the Twin Cities, Detroit, or Chicago nor an autumnal industrial character. Unlike the northern Midwest, it lacks many residents with Nordic, Catholic, or Lutheran backgrounds, a progressive or farmer-labor political tradition, and a landscape of pristine woods, shores, and lakes. It does not have Iowa's first Presidential caucus, and it is not a swing state. Politically, Indiana is defined by longstanding conservatism. It was the center of the northern Klan in the 1920s. Democrats can win in a few urban areas and may fondly remember that Eugene V. Debs was a Hoosier, but their statewide victories are lucky and rare. Republicans dominate statewide policymaking and have recently passed a slew of conservative legislation.

Indiana has minimal unifying state culture. The Amish and yesterday's Shakers perhaps more than anyone set an aesthetic of quilts, red barns, and sugar cream pie. There was a Golden Age of Indiana Literature from 1880 to 1920 that produced *Ben Hur* and the poems of James Witcomb Riley. Most Hoosiers will have read "Little Orphan Annie" in fourth grade Indiana history. Basketball is a sacred tradition. The Indianapolis 500 is a drunken rite of passage for many youths. Indianapolis sought to define itself in the 1980s by buffing its downtown with a riverfront park, but it declined to build an ambitious, abstract architectural flourish called the Indiana Tower supposedly because it looked like a gigantic corncob.<sup>5</sup> Its 1987 Pan American Games inexplicably featured Gloria Estefan as the closing ceremony's headliner after controversy when the American Legion refused to lease the originally planned venue due to the Cuban athletes' participation.<sup>6</sup> Though the state gained the Indianapolis Colts during that time period and has long had the Pacers, people from the Region root for the Bears and Bulls. Four out-of-state baseball teams and three major in-state universities divide the states sporting fans along geographic and religious lines, preventing cohesion that unites, for instance, all Wisconsinites behind the Packers and Badgers.

But outside of Indianapolis, the Region, and other metropolitan areas, a declining share of the state's children grows up in a region of towns of a few thousand, corn, dairies, and little groves. They are overwhelmingly white. Many grow up playing basketball, heads steaming in the winter air after coming out of practice. They swim in

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<sup>5</sup> "Indiana Tower Plan is Under Attack" in *The New York Times*, October 26, 1983, US ed.

<sup>6</sup> Tracy Dodds, "Peaceful Closing to Games" in *The Los Angeles Times*, August 24, 1987.

dilapidated municipal pools, creek bottoms, or farm ponds. Many grow up as active churchgoers. Their grandmothers may teach them to can while their grandfathers may take them fishing. Some families are not economically stable; some parents divorced. They may drive tractors to school once a year and join 4-H or FFA or sing in the show choir. They may cheer at home games on Friday nights, and after they turn 16 they may cruise in pickup trucks around the battered town square with friends. They know many boys who enlist in the armed forces straight out of high school and many girls who are mothers by graduation. Some perform better than others in school; they may have inspiring teachers who take a special interest in them or parents who push them especially hard. They eventually apply to colleges and choose one, squaring their desires for the future with the options available to them.

This is their story.

### *Introduction*

*Educated in a small town  
Taught the fear of Jesus in a small town  
Used to daydream in that small town  
Another boring romantic, that's me...  
No I cannot forget from where it is that I come from  
I cannot forget the people who love me  
Yeah, I can be myself here in this small town  
And people let me be just what I want to be*  
—From John Mellencamp's "Small Town"

My first ancestors in Sullivan County, Indiana, bordering Illinois in the southwestern part of the state, arrived there around 1810. My paternal grandfather's side of the family owned a good deal of land there, growing corn and soybeans and raising

hogs and cattle. My grandfather was the son of a Democratic state representative who went to Purdue University through the GI Bill after having been shot in France. He then ran the family farm. His wife, the daughter of uncommonly divorced parents, had dropped out of Indiana University after a semester because she lacked the money for tuition. She built Liberty ships in the shipyards along the eastern coast of the San Francisco Bay during the war, and later kept the farm's books. My mother's family also had long-time Hoosier roots, but they moved to Sullivan later. Her mother's father, a college graduate in geology and the son of a school superintendant, came for work as a coal truck driver during the Depression. He would say that the family was "hillbilly aristocracy," meaning that they were educated. He made a lot of money in coal after the war that has been passed through subsequent generations. His daughter was an elementary schoolteacher educated at DePauw University. My maternal grandfather the third of five boys, born in the apartment behind his parents' neighborhood grocery store. Born poor, he worked his way through Indiana State University and became a self-made businessman. A former paperboy, he bought Sullivan's Daily Times in 1972.

My parents both went to Indiana University. My father graduated in 1975 from the School of Public and Environmental Affairs, dropped out of graduate school at the University of Illinois a few years later, and worked around Indiana for a few years before returning to his family's farm in the early 1980s. My mother graduated in 1982, a year after her father died at the helm of the newspaper, with a degree in sociology and journalism. After living in Cincinnati and Florida, she took over from my grandmother at the newspaper in 1983. My parents married the next year, after my mother had sworn to

her sorority sisters that she would never return home and marry some farmer. They tell people that they married because they were the last two single, educated, unrelated people in Sullivan County. They published the newspaper together until 2011 when they retired and returned to Bloomington.

I am the youngest of their three children, born in 1985, 1987, and 1992. My earliest memories of childhood are of my mother reading to me. We were given as many chances to explore our interests as was possible in our corner of rural Indiana that has experienced decades-long and ongoing economic and cultural decline. Our parents knew we could earn top marks, and earning straight A's was the expectation. Never particularly athletically coordinated, I volunteered for President Obama's 2008 presidential campaign and the Indiana Democratic Party, sang in the school's show choir, participated in academic teams and clubs, and served as Presbyterian deacon.

When my brother first told his guidance counselor that he was interested in applying to Harvard University, he was told to be realistic. He got in and matriculated, and my sister did the same thing the following year. They were the first from Sullivan High School to go to an Ivy League school. Having grown up going to Bloomington frequently and hearing often of my parents' halcyon days at IU, whether I would go to college was never a question. I actively looked forward to it for as long as I can remember, particularly as I was precocious without charm and identifiably queer from a young age—thus never really fitting in at Sullivan. I wanted to follow in my siblings' footsteps and go to Harvard until I visited Stanford University and felt that I would be happier amid the palm trees and sunshine. I applied early and got in.

My brother and sister's experiences at Harvard mirrored my position as one of only a handful of rural students at Stanford. The fact that elite institutions do not appear to actively seek out white rural students the way that they recruit minority students is also very troubling because I feel as though we have a very unique insight into an aspect of this country—the rural, overwhelmingly white part of this country that often influences national elections in swing states—that elite students should be made aware of through personal interaction with us per a liberal education. Not many people at Stanford had a graduating class in which one out of five girls was a mother, for instance. Furthermore, it alarms me that I made it to Stanford because I am so outside the norm of other top-performing white rural students because of my cultural experiences (not many people anywhere have been to all 50 states by age nine) and both sides of my family's strong emphasis on higher education (having half of your great-grandparents attend college is also uncommon anywhere, but especially in rural Indiana). There are many students who could have gone to Stanford or Harvard from the rural Midwest who are going to less prestigious institutions. I interviewed some of them for this study.

In conversations with my friends from Terre Haute, the nearest urban area to Sullivan, once we had left home, I was shocked at the number of students there who had gone to IU or Purdue, Indiana's flagship universities. Only four out of around 100 had initially gone there from my class, with one other girl additionally going to Rose-Hulman, a nationally ranked engineering school in Terre Haute. I always wanted to see whether tax-funded educational institutions were truly completing their charge to educate all capable Hoosiers. I expected that they were not doing so, given the number of

students from my high school who were capable of going to IU, Purdue, or beyond that instead chose to attend second-tier state colleges and universities.

I was afraid my own judgment—that it was bad for students to “settle” for a lower-ranked school over a higher one—would cloud my interpretations of quantitative data, so I planned a qualitative study where I would interview a number of top-performing rural Indiana high school students and ask about their family, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds and then ask them to describe how they began thinking about college, how they applied to college, and how they chose a college. Finding a representative sample of students proved too difficult—I could only recruit the absolute top-ranked students, valedictorians and salutatorians—so I eventually had to compile data about nameless top-performing rural students college matriculations, but I have compared this data against the matriculations of an illustrative sample of their urban and suburban peers in Indiana and elsewhere. The results speak for themselves.

This is the first study of college choice among top-performing high school students in the rural Midwest, and it is a limited study. The top-performing rural Indiana high school students I interviewed cannot be used to fully explain the dataset of such students’ college choices fully. But I believe that this project shows the increased attention that this group craves from academic research. It is clear to anyone that these rural students’ schools are lacking in academic and extracurricular resources compared to metropolitan schools, and these students are lacking in some life experiences that limit their college achievement compared to metropolitan students. This is implied by both sets of data. However, the qualitative data shows that there is something to be said for the

unique background and perspective that a rural childhood gives you in your social and educational development. It also shows how those in the cream-of-the-crop choose colleges and universities, often making choices that exceed those that are a step below them in performance. I hope that these two sources of data together and my analysis of them both will prompt further study in this area. I viewed this as a study of inequality more so than one of education.

*Myra Fleener: You know, a basketball hero around here is treated like a god... How can he ever find out what he can really do? I don't want this to be the high point of his life. I've seen them, the real sad ones. They sit around the rest of their lives talking about the glory days when they were seventeen years old.*

*Coach Dale: You know, most people would kill to be treated like a god, just for a few moments...*

*Myra: Leave him alone, all right? He's a real special kid, and I have high hopes for him and... I think if he works really hard, he can get an academic scholarship to Wabash College and can get out of this place.*

*Dale: Why? Do you have something against this place? [...]*

*Myra: Just stay away from Jimmy. I don't want him coaching in Hickory when he's fifty.*

—From *Hoosiers*, written by Angelo Pizzo

### *Problem Statement*

There is no question that many to most Americans are removed from the realities of life in rural areas, as many metropolitan families are now likely generations removed from having lived there. Metropolitan people are likewise removed from the concerns of rural youth: they are located far away, out of sight and out of mind. Urban poverty is a bigger concern, given the visible disintegration of many inner cities and institutions. The region seems to have exited the national consciousness. Today, free association with “the rural Midwest” may yield only “meth,” “social conservatism,” or “brain drain.”

We know, however, that rural Midwesterners still make up a millions-strong cohort. It's America's breadbasket and heartland. Many Midwestern states are swing states, so some rural Midwestern voters play an outsized role in electing the President and Representatives from swing districts. Its economic situation is in continuing decline without any easy solutions, which demands attention now and will continue to do so in the future. Its civic institutions must meet new demands of an older and smaller population with fewer resources and its schools fewer students; there are no easy solutions to these demands. This problem demands attention now and in the future.

Research has shown that rural schools lack the resources and sustained quality of teachers to offer the same quality of education and breadth of options as suburban schools. We also know that the majority of college choice data on rural students focuses on the effect of rural poverty on students' aspirations—it diminishes them because they are often not financially feasible. What has not been explored is the topic of this project. Top-performing rural students, whose performance is largely the result of parental expectations, usually are in the middle or upper classes, relative to rural areas. This project is designed to see whether rural students are choosing less prestigious colleges than similarly ranked metropolitan peers, and it seeks to understand how they came to these decisions. It is informed by outside research on rural educational quality and what culturally enriching opportunities are available to rural students. The quality of schools with regards to gifted students' needs and the opportunities available to them are less than the quality and opportunity available to metropolitan students.

The matters to a state and region that prides itself on the quality of its flagship public universities. What good is calling it “Indiana University” when many of the state’s qualified rural students choose instead to go to a less prestigious school? These universities are state-funded institutions charged with educating the whole of the state qualified to go there, and it seems as though they are not doing so. The ethnographic component of this project was only able to reach out to the absolute cream of the crop of rural students based on their performance within their high school, and it shows what routes may be taken so that gifted rural students end up matriculating at schools that match their academic potential. I hope that this project will spur education authorities in Indiana to re-think how they are serving rural students as they go through secondary education and choose colleges. It is obvious that there is work there to be done.

### *Definition of “Rurality”*

“Rural” is a rather nebulous term, with different definitions depending on the circumstance. There is a *je ne sais quoi* quality—one knows rural when one sees it. For the purpose of this study, I chose to use a rural–metropolitan binary rather than a rural–suburban–urban metric for a number of reasons.

The Office of Management and Budget has delineated American “Core Based Statistical Areas” into either metropolitan or micropolitan statistical areas, with the former having a core urban area of 50,000 or more and the latter having a population between that and 10,000. The counties around an urban area’s county are linked into Core Based Statistical Areas (CBSAs) by thresholds of population size, density, inter-county commuting, etc., but these thresholds are somewhat arbitrary.<sup>7</sup> No graduates from micro or metropolitan counties were recruited from this study, but if no graduates from a surrounding county in a CBSA were recruited, there could not possibly have been a representative sample taken.

There are several ways to define “rural” in a metropolitan society. Welsh geographer Keith Halfacree proposes a social constructivist approach that contrasts a material understanding of the concept and a dematerialized one that places emphasis on the conception of rural in the public imagination (assumed to be agriculture, resource-extraction, small towns, conservative values, etc.).<sup>8</sup> Another conception define rurality as a matter of how people “construct themselves as being rural,” which shifts the

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<sup>7</sup> Brown and Schafft. *Rural People and Communities in the 21st Century*, 18–19.

<sup>8</sup> “Rethinking Rurality” in *New Forms of Urbanization: Beyond the Urban–Rural Dichotomy*, edited by T. Champion, *et al.* (Ashgate, U.K.: Aldershot, 2004), 285–304.

concept away from structural or environmental characteristics towards how people who identify themselves as rural conceive it, be that as it may.<sup>9</sup>

What, then, defines this slightly imprecise definition of rural in sociological and demographic terms? There are environmental and ecological attributes (i.e. low population density, lots of farmland or woodlands), but these are self-evident. To set the context for rural Indiana and its adolescents, one needs to understand its economic trends, institutions, and socio-cultural trends, though the latter's difference from metropolitan areas has decreased somewhat given the effects of heavily increased interconnectivity. While it has been noted that “spatial isolation resulted in social isolation and a buffer against significant intrusion from the dominant society and culture,”<sup>10</sup> today’s digital communication has had a huge effect on the interconnectivity of rural and metropolitan areas, particularly economic concerns. However, it goes without saying that the experience of students, having been largely isolated in small rural schools save for competition against similarly sized schools in extracurricular activities and sports, are less similar to the experiences of their urban or suburban peers.

In sum, this project defines rural students as those attending high schools outside of metropolitan or micropolitan statistical areas’ core counties and from high schools that serve communities of less than 5,000. This is an appropriate metric demographically and geographically as well as by subjective measures: every student in this study identified as rural.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Woods, *Rural Geography: Processes, Responses and Experiences in Rural Restructuring* (London: Sage, 2005), 11.

<sup>10</sup> Daryl Hobbs, “Social Organization in the Countryside” in *The Changing American Countryside: Rural People and Places*, ed. Emery N. Castle (Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 1995), 369–96.

### *Rural Economic and Demographic Trends*

Because of the degree to which hypnotically flat corn and soybean fields dominate rural Indiana and the wider Midwest, an outsider might think that agriculture is the central economic activity there. But the idea that agriculture dominated local rural economies was as incorrect even fifty years ago as it is today. Less than ten percent of rural workers are employed in agriculture. Nearly forty percent of rural workers are employed in personal and consumer services, jobs that tend to be less well paid, less secure over time, and lacking in advancement opportunities. Twenty percent of rural people work in manufacturing—a greater percentage than metropolitan workers. Twenty percent work in government, and that percentage has increased in the last fifty years and outranks the percentage of metropolitan government workers as well. Rural jobs in mining have decreased ten percent since 1970 to roughly a twentieth of the total workforce. The real difference between rural and metropolitan employment patterns is the placement of the majority of well-paying producer services jobs like finance, real estate, insurance, engineering, computer assistance and development in metropolitan areas. With the coordination of production now being centralized in metropolitan areas, money flows to them instead of circulating in local rural economies.<sup>11</sup>

What can we say, then, about the demographics of rural Indiana? To begin, rural Midwestern areas are poorer, whiter, older, and less educated than metropolitan areas. The racial homogeneity is self-evident: the rural Midwest was not attractive to incoming

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<sup>11</sup> Brown and Schafft, *Rural People and Communities in the 21st Century*, 150–51.

Southern blacks or, until recently (and still limitedly), Latinos. Native Americans were driven out of the region long ago. Educational attainment correlates with the economic reality described above—highly skilled jobs require specialized education, and there are fewer of those jobs in the rural Midwest. The aging of the population results from out-migration of young adults and their children, contributing to both the brain drain and the natural population decrease due to fewer resident adults of reproductive age and a surprising in-migration of retired people. It is important to note for this study that geographic mobility happens most when people are undergoing life transitions. However, as far as going to college is concerned, this usually results in out-migration and thus worsens the rural brain drain. The brain drain is simply the inability of rural areas to replace out-migrants with in-migrants. Migration selectivity—that an engineer would go where the jobs are in metropolitan areas—makes this phenomenon worse in rural areas.<sup>12</sup>

While poverty in the United States is largely concentrated in rural areas and inner cities, very few of the students I recruited for this study were impoverished relative to the average standard living in their hometowns; most were better off than the mean. It would follow that the top-performing students I talked to were not impoverished because their parents tended to be educated with good jobs relative to the rest of rural Indiana's economic climate. Many students said that the choice to pursue higher education was never a serious question for them, presumably because their educated, successful parents had no reason to be cynical about the prospects of success in the labor market vis-à-vis educational attainment, especially as their children sought professions common to rural

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 114–16.

areas (e.g. pharmacy). And, for top-performing students, going to college is expected and encouraged not only by their families but also by their schools and teachers.

It is completely unremarkable that all of this study's recruited students were all white, given also that they attended almost entirely racially homogeneous high schools. Non-white people are simply not represented in rural Indiana. Their household income notwithstanding, these students live in locales defined by white poverty, the brain drain, and stinging setbacks in educational attainment and job prospects compared to metropolitan areas. These qualities have no small effect on their worldview and the attitude with which high schools approach their students. Even if these students were not directly affected by this phenomenon, the tightly interconnected nature of small communities in the rural Midwest, would almost certainly have affected their childhoods.

### *Rural Midwestern Adolescence*

What should one expect from growing up in rural America? A rich ethnographic source that is related to this study's Indiana focus is *Children of the Land*, an account of farm families' children growing up during the 1980s agricultural crisis in north-central Iowa. Though this monograph is now over 30 years old and centered upon farming children, it is still applicable to today's youth in rural Indiana, especially in light of the continuing economic challenges there. There is enough attention paid towards all rural people to make its summation worthwhile.

The book claims that the biggest difference that sets agricultural families apart is their increased familiarity across generations, which itself is correlated with academic

and social success through increased informal social control.<sup>13</sup> As far as parents with adolescent children are concerned, the authors found that parents with a high degree of community involvement are better able to monitor their teenagers' activities outside the home through their network of adults in the community. They also found that parents' community ties are strongly associated with objective measures of competence than subjective measures (e.g. grades and teacher's reports of students' peer success). There is also evidence about parents' investment strategies. Additionally, the authors noted that, by high school, parents who were making sure their children finished work or were in regular contact with their teachers were usually doing so because of bad performance on their child's part.<sup>14</sup>

*Children of the Land* reports on other aspects of rural childhood as well. If they are living, grandparents are usually living close by and tend to play a very active role in their grandchildren's lives.<sup>15</sup> The authors found that rural Midwesterners had the top church-going rate of all Americans, and a vast majority of the sampled adolescents were involved in at least some form of a youth group. Among adolescents, the more religiously involved youth were, the less likely you were to have friends that encouraged delinquent behavior. Religious youth also tended to have higher academic competence than the mean in both objective and subjective (i.e. self-esteem) metrics.<sup>16</sup> In predicting problem behavior among adolescents, the authors come up with a model that connects family

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<sup>13</sup> Glen H. Elder, Jr. and Rand D. Conger, *Children of the Land: Adversity and Success in Rural America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 191.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 112–15.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 127–47

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 153–60.

background and ties to the land to linking resources (i.e. family relations, productive roles and values, family community ties, and children's social relations) and youth competence (i.e. academic, social, self-confidence, and advice seeking); linking resources also affect youth competence. Both of these together effect changes in problem behavior in middle and high school students. They conclude that academic success minimizes problem behaviors, protective family and community activities limit adolescent troubles, and academic success and religious involvement put adolescents on a resilient path away from antisocial activity.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, *Children of the Land* informs an understanding of school in the life of a rural Midwestern teenager. Activities are largely ascribed to the limited resources of schools and their isolation, but there is more opportunity for involvement because of the decreased competition from the comparatively small number of other students. The authors delineate extracurricular involvement into school sports, school and civic clubs, and school leadership roles and note that 80 percent of adolescents were involved in at least one school or civic club and just under half had at least one leadership role. They also found girls were far more active in clubs than boys, which may be the result of them viewing their futures as leaving home and going to college and their activity involvement being reflective of efforts to increase their post-secondary options. Among all students, the researchers also found a decline, then an expansion of involvement in rural teenagers from eighth to tenth to twelfth grades. Sports involvement tends to decrease as time passes, but it decreases most among those with parents who are uninvolved in community

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 197–215

affairs (who also tend to be less stable in terms of residence and have less education).

Engaged parents' children increase their leadership experience from middle to high school, while less engaged parents' children lose influence. Increased extracurricular involvement is tied to increased sense of significance, responsibility, and commitment to schools and communities, but involvement in particular activities are distinctly tied to specific competencies: sports to academic competence and recognition of maturity by parents, clubs to academic success, and leadership to peer success, with the latter two most pronounced in small schools. The Iowan students tended to either not move or move to areas with similarly sized schools. Familial civic ties or the importance of sports was constant in all schools, but small schools' students generally place more value and spend more time on schoolwork and consistently believed that they had more caring and involved teachers.<sup>18</sup>

Multiple studies have corroborated the link between familial educational investment and achievement and attainment. Among these transmissions are investment in cultural capital (e.g. museum visits, extracurricular activity in the arts) and investment in household educational items such as books, computers, and newspapers. Diminished exposure to these benefits because of rural geography and lower socioeconomic development has negative repercussions. Rural parents also have lower educational expectations for their children, perhaps as a result of limited local opportunities and development.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 165–86.

<sup>19</sup> Vincent J. Rosigno and Martha L. Crowle, "Rurality, Institutional Disadvantage, and Achievement/Attainment" in *Rural Sociology* 66, no. 2 (2001).

Rural youth predict that they will cross adult milestones at ages earlier than their metropolitan peers report, even fixed for parents' educational attainment. A 1996 study related this to school performance and educational aspirations for both boys and girls but also saw additional effects of traditional gender roles on males and problem behavior and family relationships on females.<sup>20</sup> A 2009 study of rural Southwestern high school students found several links between their characteristics and motivation through analysis of perceptions of different sources of support and self-efficacy, class interest, goals, effort, and achievement value placed on learning (white students made up two-thirds of the sample; students with a GPA of 4.0 or higher were made up 14 percent; seniors 13 percent). The study found that learning goals and perceived competence and value had strong effects on interest. The more value students found in what they were learning, the more interest and effort in school they displayed. These feelings of competency and self-efficacy were also linked to a desire to graduate and pursue postsecondary opportunities. The study did not find a link between motivation and future intentions the way it found one between perceptions and intentions; the authors theorize that this may be the result of rural students not clearly linking effort to grades. GPA was linked to postsecondary attainment, but not as a predictor of motivation. Teacher support—but not peer support—had an influence on student interest.<sup>21</sup>

Student commitments to family, church, and school activities are huge predictors of academic success and postsecondary achievement, presumably because they delineate

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<sup>20</sup> Lisa Crockett and Carroll R. Bingham, "Anticipating Adulthood: The Impact of Family Ecology and Adolescent Behavior on the Expected Timing of Adult Role Transitions." (Boston, March 1996).

<sup>21</sup> Patricia L. Hardré, *et al.*, "Student Characteristics and Motivation in Rural High Schools" in *Journal of Research in Rural Education* 24, no. 16 (2009).

students with the wherewithal to be involved in things that they are passionate about and more in touch with their interests. Additionally and unsurprisingly, parental involvement in education and activities is correlated with success in both measures. The primary detriment that rural areas have for their children is the terminal lack of resources available that students in metropolitan areas have (a rural student is unlikely to be able to learn lacrosse or harpsichord, for instance) and the effects of diminished expectations because of limited economic attainment in those areas.

### *Rural Schools*

According to a 2004 US Department of Education report a fifth of American primary and secondary students were rural, but rural areas had over half of school districts and just under a third of all schools. Forty percent of rural students' schools had enrollments under 400; ninety percent under 800. Half of all urban students and over a third of suburban students attended schools with 800 or more students. However, rural schools tend to have lower student-to-faculty ratios than metropolitan schools and report lower levels of behavioral problems among students as well as higher job satisfaction rates.<sup>22</sup> The sheer number of schools in rural areas carries a few salient points. Rural schools are usually a top gross employer in rural areas (and almost always the top professional employer), but schools also serve as social and cultural centers—as symbols

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<sup>22</sup> Stephen Provasnik, et al., Institute of Education Sciences. National Center for Education Statistics, *Status of Education in Rural America* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

of community autonomy, vitality, tradition, and identity.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, for many of my students, their extracurricular involvement was their community involvement.

A 2007 U.S. Department of Education report entitled *Status of Education in Rural America* contains data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which measures student proficiency in reading, math, and science at fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades. Rural students do better than urban students in all grades and subject areas:

**Table 1:** Geographic Distribution and Characteristics of Students and Young Adults

	Cit y	Suburba n	Tow n	Fring e Rural	Distan t Rural	Remot e Rural	Total Rura l
Reading achievement levels	29. 5	37.2	33.2	34.2	31.3	34.1	33.4
Mathematics achievement levels	17. 6	25.3	20.6	22.8	18.9	17.2	20.6
Science achievement levels	13. 5	19.8	18.1	18.7	16.7	16.7	17.7
% Aged 16–24 HS dropouts	12. 8	9.0	12.1	—	—	—	11.1
% Adults 25+ with less than HS Diploma	18. 4	12.8	18.5	—	—	—	17.1
% 18–29 Enrolled in Post-Secondary Educational Program	36. 6	36.6	31.8	—	—	—	27.1
% Adults 25+ with BA/BS or Higher	29. 8	31.5	19.9	—	—	—	19.1

—“City” is an urbanized area, 50,000+ people, inside a principal city.

—“Suburban” is outside a principal area, but inside an urbanized area.

—“Town” is inside an urban cluster; a densely settled area, population 2,500–49,999.

—“Fringe rural” is within 5 miles of an urbanized area or within 2.5 of an urban cluster.

—“Distant rural” is 5 to 25 miles distant from an urbanized area or 2.5 to 10 of an urban cluster.

—“Remote rural” is 25 or more miles from an urbanized area and 10 or more from an urban cluster.

—All “achievement levels” are the percentage at or above proficient in the subject.

This data, though eight years old, is ripe for analysis. In science and math, rural high school seniors’ achievement is negatively correlated with distance from an urban

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<sup>23</sup> Thomas A. Lyson, “What Does a School Mean to a Community? Assessing the Social and Economic Benefits of Schools to Rural Villages in New York” in *Journal of Research in Rural Education* 17, no. 3 (Winter 2002).

area, but rural seniors consistently outperform students from urban cities and towns by a few percentage points (with suburban seniors, of course, consistently outperforming both urban and rural students). Rural students are also slightly less likely to drop out of school than urban students but more likely to do so than suburban students. However, there is a dramatic drop between metropolitan and rural students when it comes to adults under 30 enrolled in post-secondary education or adults over 25 with a Bachelor's degree.

Rural schools have limited resources at their disposal, reflecting the lower mean socioeconomic status of rural populations—they have lower expenditures per student and more poor students than the mean of metropolitan schools. This is because property taxes and little capacity for collecting corporate taxes provides for little educational revenue in rural areas. This is compounded by the brain drain where, in an era of diminished local job opportunities, the incentive to allocate diminishing resources to education is reduced. This plays a role in how local school boards allocate resources, as well—to better bolster the majority of their students for the local job market. Teachers' expectations for their students are also lower in rural areas, mirroring lower rural parents' expectations, and expectations are tied to students' socioeconomic class.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, teachers in rural areas often have to be experts in several subjects across several grade levels because of the small sizes of these schools.<sup>25</sup>

There is relatively little information on how gifted students are served by rural schools, though we can make a heavily educated guess that they are afforded far fewer

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<sup>24</sup> Roscigno and Crowle, "Rurality, Institutional Disadvantage, and Achievement/Attainment."

<sup>25</sup> Nicholas Colangelo, *et al.*, *Gifted Education in Rural Schools: A National Assessment* (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 1999).

opportunities than their metropolitan peers because of less specialized teachers, the greatly diminished resources available to rural school districts, *and* the allocation of those resources. A November 2014 article in the *Columbus Dispatch* lays bare the challenges for top-performing rural students within their high school. Dublin, Ohio's schools offer 92 advanced courses to their students, ten times the offering of the same district's rural Hamilton Township High School. Cost effectiveness in terms of course enrollment was cited by a superintendant as the reason for rural schools' meager advanced offerings. Overall, it was reported that an Ohio Department of Education study found that the state's rural high schools averaged fewer than 6.5 advanced courses, compared to 26 in suburban schools.<sup>26</sup>

A 2009 synthesis article further links the aforementioned problems affecting rural communities and schools to rural gifted students. Declining population and rural poverty are the two problems discussed that have the most direct consequences for top-performing rural students in Indiana. Rural schools often lack resources to invest in courses for gifted students. Limited funds in rural schools hamper gifted students because of distance and transportation costs to special programs, resources, and services as well as low interaction with outside, top-performing students that provide academic stimulation and enrichment. Additionally, teachers in impoverished rural schools may not recognize gifted characteristics in poor students, and the schools often lack the funds for training in this area. Because of schools' fear of sanctions coming from not reaching accountability thresholds, curricula has become highly standards-based, which has been

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<sup>26</sup> Catherine Cadinsky and Jim Siegel, "Rural Kids Get Fewer AP Classes," November 30, 2014.

shown to be lacking for the academic development of gifted students. This is particularly bad in rural areas, where traditional, non-differentiated instruction has long been the norm and teachers are reluctant to teach advanced students differently.<sup>27</sup>

A universal feature of this study's interviewed students' academic histories was enrollment in dual enrollment classes—courses that can be used for postsecondary credit by virtue of their curriculum being cleared by a college or university. These courses are thus more academically rigorous than standard courses and offer their students a chance to save money on postsecondary education. They also give advanced students—of whom many have long-since passed all graduation requirements—the opportunity to scope out academic interests for college.<sup>28</sup> The caveat from at least one study on the success of dual enrollment classes, however, is that it only measured enrollment in such classes that were physically taught in postsecondary institutions; the vast majority of the students interviewed for this project took their classes in their high schools from local teachers. None of the guidance counselors interviewed for this study reported much oversight by the postsecondary institutions licensing these classes, either.

Another study sought to isolate and measure a school's qualities that may wax or wane the educational achievement and aspirations of students in high-poverty rural areas. Attending particularly remote rural schools predicted higher academic achievement for youth from high-poverty rural communities (measured by percentage of students on free- or reduced-lunch and questions related to family economic hardship); the authors link this

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<sup>27</sup> Aimee Howley, *et al.*, "Challenges Facing Rural Schools: Implications for Gifted Students" in *Journal for the Education of the Gifted* 32, no. 4 (2009).

<sup>28</sup> Todd E. Johnson and Michael Brophy, "Dual Enrollment: Measuring Factors for Rural High School Student Participation" in *The Rural Educator* 28, no. 1 (Fall 2006).

to the supportive climate of rural schools away from metropolitan problems like gangs.

Tellingly, they found no relationship between geographic location and educational aspirations, controlling for student and family backgrounds—they hold that this relationship is better understood by the complex economic and migratory trends that affect specific rural areas. Their findings did not support other findings that smaller school sizes correlated with higher achievement or aspirations for students—results often found that impoverished schools had higher student-to-teacher ratios, as well.<sup>29</sup>

Rural teachers tend to report higher job satisfaction rates than metropolitan teachers, and they report fewer disciplinary problems. However, rural areas have a higher proportion of inexperienced teachers than metropolitan areas, and this trend accelerates the smaller schools get. Furthermore, rural schools tend to hire teachers with full standard state certification (as stated, rural teachers have less specialization in terms of the classes they teach), but they also tend to hire teachers with lower standardized aptitude test scores. Compensation in rural schools also tends to be lower, and turnover is high. The localized labor market for hiring teachers is also affected by the low college-achievement rates of rural areas.<sup>30</sup>

Rural schools are the universal institution in rural areas: they employ a huge proportion of the area's professional workers, local taxes fund them, and they are the manifestation of the town's identity by virtue of performances and athletics. They are also generally worse than metropolitan schools over a broad array of measurable

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<sup>29</sup> Matthew J. Irvin, *et al.*, “Relationship of School Context to Rural Youth’s Educational Achievement and Aspirations.” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 40, no. 9 (2011).

<sup>30</sup> David H Monk, “Recruiting and Retaining High-Quality Teachers in Rural Areas” in *The Future of Children* 17, no. 1 (2007).

categories due to the lack of funds received from rural areas because of their low populations and lack of substantial tax bases otherwise. Top-performing students suffer from these qualities significantly by not being as worldly as their metropolitan peers and lacking like academic opportunities. Without the resources to invest in the special education of top-performing students from rural areas, those students fall behind their peers in metropolitan areas. This trend carries over into the college choice process.

#### *Overview of the College Choice Process*

Patricia M. McDonough's *Choosing Colleges*, a comparative study of the college choice processes of students from four representative California high schools—rich and impoverished, private and public—was published in 1997; it is now a bit dated. McDonough delineates the three basic approaches to the study of college choice decision-making influences:

1. Social psychological studies, which examine the impact of academic program, campus social climate, cost, location, and influence of others on students' choices; students assessment of their fit with their chosen college; and the cognitive stages of college choice
2. Economic studies, which view college choice as an investment decision and assumes that students maximize perceived cost–benefits in their college choices; have perfect information; and are engaged in a process of rational choice; and
3. Sociological status attainment studies, which analyze the impact of the individual's social status on the development of aspirations for educational attainment and measure inequalities in college access.<sup>31</sup>

Three propositions also guided *Choosing Colleges*'s findings:

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<sup>31</sup> Patricia M. McDonough, *Choosing Colleges: How Social Class and Schools Structure Opportunity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 3.

1. A student's cultural capital will affect the level and quality of college education that student intends to acquire
2. A student's choice of college will make sense in the context of that student's friends, family, an outlook; and
3. Through a process of bounded rationality, students will limit the number of alternatives actually considered.<sup>32</sup>

The book is about how the friends, parents, and guidance counselors of students from different social classes affect ultimate college plans. Her analysis is limited in applicability to this study because none of the four schools she studied match the schools of rural Indiana students: they consist of one affluent private girls' school and one affluent public high school within walking distance of it, a racially heterogeneous Catholic girls' school where many students were placed to keep them out of trouble and where their parents could pay the tuition without help, and a racially heterogeneous public school serving a middle- to lower-middle-class population.<sup>33</sup> Any direct comparison of these students' experiences to the experiences of the top-performing rural Indiana high school students involved in this study would be misguided. However, a core question of this study is, to what degree do the ultimate college choices of relatively affluent rural high school students differ from their metropolitan peers of similar achievement and socioeconomic class? Using this perspective, the experiences of the students profiled in *Choosing Colleges* can be compared to broadly similar rural students, and we might be able to glean information from the rural students' responses to not only

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 45–87.

see how their life experiences differed but also how their circumstances led to different college choices.

McDonough first describes guidance counseling in her four schools: each school has one counselor, but the public schools have far more students than the private ones. As a result, the guidance counselors at the affluent public school placed heavy emphasis on establishing a four-year academic plan that would meet prerequisites for admission to most four-year colleges. While a guidance counselor lacks the time for individual meetings to decide which college to apply to or choose to attend, he assumes a hierarchy of colleges and universities students can reasonably shoot for and runs group workshops where students learn the basics of the different universities' admissions processes (especially those of the University of California and California State University systems). The poorer public high school's guidance counselor starts his involvement latest of all and urges his students across the board to attend a local community college.<sup>34</sup>

The same policy does not follow in Indiana today because the state legislated in 2006 and 2008 that all students and their parents must meet with guidance counselors in sixth grade to develop an initial graduation plan. During that meeting, the students must sign an initial graduation plan with a signed intention to graduate from high school and an acknowledgment of the importance of good citizenship, school attendance, and diligent study habits. In ninth grade, the student and guidance counselor, consulted by the students' parents, must meet again to further develop the plan to include the student's subject and skill interests, a program of study that meets state requirements for a college

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 93–94.

or technological preparation curriculum, an assurance that the student will graduate and will meet the minimum required qualifications for entry to a state educational institution if he or she follows the curriculum, and what exams (e.g. the SAT, AP, workforce readiness) the student intends to take. The plan can be modified, and the guidance counselor must meet with the student at least annually to go over progress, with additional steps plotted if academic remediation is needed.<sup>35</sup> Each of the students and guidance counselors interviewed for this project said that this protocol was followed.

McDonough remarks that the efforts of the guidance counselors match their students' postsecondary plans; in schools where most students expect to go to college, the guidance counselor will devote most of his time to college continuation. The affluent public high school kept records of each past students' college destinations while the poorer public high school kept no such records. (This divide was evident in the assembly of this project's dataset: far more metropolitan schools had these records while many rural schools did not keep them, their guidance counselors often unable or unwilling to compile it.) The former's students spoke highly about their school's course advisement; the latter's complained about its inadequacy. The affluent high schools' counselors assumed that their students had familial knowledge of college hierarchies and based their counseling around this presumed knowledge, but the poor public high school's limited professional resources move the school to have no policy to fill this gap among its students. This also means that many of its first-generation college-bound students are entering uncharted territory alone.

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<sup>35</sup> Ind. Code § 20-30-4.

McDonough speaks repeatedly of “habitus”—the shared, subjective perceptions that individuals of a socioeconomic class take from their immediate environment—and she points to students’ families, friends, and finances as its influencers. Concerning finances, it is noteworthy to consider that parents chose private high schools for their children because their desire for a particular outcome—a Catholic education for the religious students, comfort and leadership development for the secular students, positioning for college for both. These students and those at the affluent, relatively academically rigorous public school often enlisted the services of a public college counselor. Needless to say the students at the poorer public high school or at rural Indiana schools lack these resources due to higher rates of poverty and, in my study’s case, geographic isolation<sup>36</sup>

This study’s participants reported varying levels of parental involvement, but most reported that their parents were consistently interested in maintaining their academic position and expected them to go to college. McDonough reports that having an older sibling who has recently undergone the admissions process increases familial involvement in subsequent children. A big difference between many students profiled in *Choosing Colleges* and this study, however, is that rural top-performing Indiana students reported far less stress and competitiveness in admissions with their classmates. I imagine that this is simply due to the fact that many of these students apply to the same schools with generous admission policies instead of everyone competing for a position at more selective postsecondary institutions. Few students reported any complications or struggles

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 111–20.

with their parents resulting from them taking a too proactive or restrictive hand in choosing colleges for application or matriculation. However, McDonough's ethnographic work with college-bound students shows how parental beliefs over the relative value of a college education and on what terms (i.e. liberal education versus education for employment; emphasis on attending a public institution) affect their children's beliefs, plans, and actions. Parents could be supportive but not knowledgeable of the process. They could be strongly involved in the processes or hands-off and allow their students to go through the process more independently. These trends and their repercussions are reflected in the students' stories in this project.<sup>37</sup>

Geography plays a role in *Choosing Colleges*, with students who desired to be away from home expressing a desire to be appropriately far from home, dependent on a desire to be able to come home frequently to visit or to have one's parents come quickly in the event of a crisis; they measured distance in time. The attractiveness of a close or far-away college is additionally affected by parental opinion. McDonough found that all students spoke of the necessity of college visits, but students of higher socioeconomic status asked more specific questions and had a better sense of what they desired to learn from the visits; she attributes this to these students' greater cultural knowledge. While the effect of competitiveness in admissions among affluent students has been mentioned, McDonough notes that students of lower socioeconomic status report being anxious about going to schools away from their friends because they fear being lonely. Affluent students did not consider tuition when applying; almost all low socioeconomic students

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 120–32.

assumed they should take the initiative to figure out how to finance college and that any familial involvement was them “helping out.”<sup>38</sup>

### *College Choice Among Top Students*

Alexadria Walton Radford’s 2013 *Top Student, Top School? How Social Class Shapes where Valedictorians Go to College*? examines how social class shapes where valedictorians go to college. While the focus on social class does not match with this study’s focus on rurality, it is still useful to consider because it shows the effect of low socioeconomic areas’ schools on college aspirations for the absolute top students. The author, using data from the High School Valedictorian Project, found that social class was the most consistent factor shaping students’ educational trajectories, even fixing for race, gender, academic preparation, and high school and community variables.

<sup>39</sup> Radford describes the “college destination process” as a series of steps: predisposition, preparation, exploration, application, admissions, and matriculation.<sup>40</sup>

Most of the valedictorians studied—84 percent—reported that they always believed that they would attend college, but high socioeconomic status children reach this conclusion much more than those of lower socioeconomic status. While some poorer students’ parents said that they wanted them to go to college, their parents were not nearly as actively involved in the process as richer students often stressed that they would stay near home. From this data, *Choosing Colleges* delineates between levels of inferred support valedictorians of different socioeconomic statuses report from their parents and what they themselves view as important. Findings they consider noteworthy are that

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 132–45.

<sup>39</sup> Alexandria Walton Radford, *Top Student, Top School? How Social Class Shapes where Valedictorians Go to College* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 11.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 20–21.

middle and lower class students report that their parents are similarly not concerned with them going to a prestigious college compared to upper class students, the relatively small percentage of lower and middle class parents who said that going to a four-year college was very important, the difference in views between lower class mothers and fathers, and the fact that, even fixed for a multitude of issues by regression, upper class students still reported that going to a prestigious college was important at rates 75 percent higher than other students.<sup>41</sup>

The trend in high school preparation is, of course, delineated by social class: wealthier students generally go to schools with coursework and test preparation that facilitates competitive college admissions while poorer students' academic preparation is comparatively lacking. Rural schools' comparatively poorly paid teachers and limited curriculum for top-performing students obviously affects rural students' competitiveness in the admissions process. The analysis of Radford's study suggests that valedictorians took the most challenging courses available without thinking of college simply because the classes reflected their aptitude. Her study divided students into groups depending on whether they participated in extracurricular activities for an edge in the admissions process; those participated for that reason made up a scant majority of respondents, but many students said that they took part both for their applications and because they enjoyed it. Leadership positions within groups and community service were activities most tied towards participation for getting into college.<sup>42</sup> There was no mention of

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 23–35.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 37–52.

students participating in activities for an edge in obtaining scholarships, something often mentioned by this study's participants.

There is a clear divide in how parents from different socioeconomic classes led their children to begin exploring college options. Radford's valedictorians first go to high schools for information regarding college admissions, but they report that the services are usually inadequate. Parents are the second most common source of information. Middle and upper class parents tended to provide encouragement and support based on their greater likelihood of being familiar with college admissions and because they tended to educate themselves about it. Lower class parents and those of first-generation college-bound students tend to be encouraging but less supportive because they lack this background. Thirdly, they go to colleges' information regarding their admissions. Students likewise reported that they seldom had a total grasp on the logistics of financial aid. Schools usually ran group FAFSA workshops. While lower class students reported that their parents never were active participants in the financial aid process, several middle and upper class parents took an active role. This point especially pertains to the cohort of top students in Indiana: parents were generally misinformed about financial aid policies to the degree that some wrote off colleges as options out of financial concerns even while aid was available to those within their income.<sup>43</sup>

Some valedictorians never really explored their college options: they believed that they would be admitted to their top choice, and cost concerns were a major reason that they did not look at any other schools. Valedictorians either only investigated known

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 55–67.

institutions (upper class students knew of the most institutions through their social networks), set parameters and investigated schools within them (usually just by two requirements like pharmacy schools in a particular region), or conducted an expansive search (the smallest group). They reported that college mailings were ineffective at influencing them. Many reported that guidance counselors discouraged looking into selective, out-of-state, or private schools, so students interested in these schools got information from another source. Parental involvement in this area mirrored parental involvement with the financial aid process, and older siblings and friends were often a source of information because of their experience. While most valedictorians did not consider going to two-year colleges because they did not match their academic abilities or aspirations, valedictorians who did not consider attending prestigious institutions did not do so across class lines because of concerns about cost and distance. Less affluent valedictorians, however, cited the academic and social environments of such institutions.

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Regarding the application stage, Radford's data reflects that upper class valedictorians are more likely to apply to more-selective private and public institutions than less-affluent students. They also apply to more schools. By a large margin, students reported that prestige was the biggest factor that determined where they applied, followed by campus visits. More affluent valedictorians were likely to pick based on reputation and campus environment while less affluent ones chose based on cost and distance from home. Half of these lower class valedictorians and 42 percent of the middle class ones did

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 68–94.

not apply to most-selective private colleges and 66 percent and 59 percent, respectively, did not apply to most-selective public institutions. In admissions, valedictorians logically have high levels of admissions in all colleges except most-selective private (where only 54 percent got in), but lower class valedictorians applying to those schools had a higher change of admission (63 percent) compared to those from the middle class (50 percent) or the upper class (54 percent)<sup>45</sup>

When valedictorians actually choose which college to attend, more are likely to consider cost and facilities then reputation, rankings, distance from home, and location, a change from reported concerns in the application stage. However, affluent students were still more likely to consider reputation and campus environment (to a lesser extent), and lower and middle class valedictorians were more focused on cost. When students were admitted to the most-selective private colleges, they were likely to matriculate there (71 percent of admitted valedictorians did so).<sup>46</sup>

### *College Choice Among Rural Students*

This study is, as far as I can tell, the first study specifically on the college choice process of rural Midwestern students and the first on top-performing rural students anywhere. However, there has been a lot of research related to both topics that informs the accounts of college choice given by the students recruited in my study.

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 95–122.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 123–40.

Recall McDonough's three categories of college choice studies: social psychological, economic, and status attainment. These approaches are particularly nuanced when considering the students that took part in this study and how they were, to a degree (the vast majority of the students interviewed in this study were the valedictorian or salutatorian of their class, not just graduates in the top-ten percent of students), so substantially similar. All of the interviewed students were white rural Hoosiers in their late adolescence who had done very well in high school, and most were economically stable and from two-parent households. I assume, given the homogeneity of rural Indiana, that this trend is common among the statewide cohort. This study could be seen as a sociological status attainment study because of how the students' social status as rural top-performing students affected their college choice, but in interviews they gave the logistics of their decision that relayed the importance of factors included in all three approaches to understanding college choice. This is a result of the open natured quality of this project. I went into interviews with a set list of standardized questions to glean their personal and social backgrounds and then coaxed a lengthy description and explanation of their own personal routes to choosing a college.

What change has been seen in the last few decades regarding rural students and college matriculation? Though the data is old, a 2008 study tracked rural Pennsylvanian students' postsecondary decisions in 1995 and 2005. The study showed a rise in the number of students planning to attend college (an 11 percent gain to 65 percent), and this gain was more pronounced in students with parents who both had postsecondary schooling than among those whose parents had not done so (71 to 83 percent and 38 to 66

percent, respectively). Those who had only one parent attend some postsecondary school actually declined two points, 67 to 65 percent. Effects of siblings' education were not found to be statistically significant. There were statistically significant findings that lower-middle class students' plans to attend college rose 55 to 76 percent in that decade.<sup>47</sup>

A large survey of rural Midwestern high school students found that career expectations and grades were the features of adolescent career development that best predicted what degree of education would be required by students' intended postsecondary settings. Career exploration, social skills and work-readiness behaviors, person–environmental fit, and involvement (the latter two measured by activity involvement) predicted students' satisfaction.<sup>48</sup> Another study found that while rural students are as likely to aspire to a high school or undergraduate education as non-rural youth, only 16 percent of rural students expressed a desire to attend graduate school compared to 30.5 percent of non-rural students. The authors interpreted this result as rural children seeking higher education within the context of their familial commitment to place: that jobs requiring postgraduate education in rural areas are rare.<sup>49</sup>

In sum, however, the primary detriment to college attendance among rural youths is still their lower average socioeconomic status—a feature that halts matriculation even among those with the cognitive ability to do so among all demographic zones. Indeed, poorer students with the same cognitive ability as their wealthier peers are entering and

<sup>47</sup> Robert S Legutko, "A Decade's Difference: Research Revisited on Family Influence of Rural High School Students' Postsecondary Decisions" in *The Rural Educator* 29, no. 2 (Winter 2009).

<sup>48</sup> Richard T. Lapin, *et al.*, "Preparing Rural Adolescents for Post-High School Transitions" in *Journal of Counseling & Development* 81, no. 3 (Summer 2003).

<sup>49</sup> Caitlin W. Howley, "Remote Possibilities: Rural Children's Educational Aspirations" in *Peabody Journal of Education* 81, no. 2 (2006).

completing college at lower rates than they were 20 years ago.<sup>50</sup> A study of rural West Virginian high school students suggests that there are gendered differences that explain why some rural students choose not to attend college—boys either dismiss college as an option or desire to stay close to family, girls cite a lack academic preparedness.<sup>51</sup> A comprehensive study of rural and non-rural disparities found several other features of rural life that both hinder and hamper rural postsecondary educational achievement. As stated before, the meager realities of rural life result in parents generally having lowered economic and educational expectations for their children, and this is true in college selection and attainment, as well.<sup>52</sup>

A study on where rural high school students go for information regarding the college choice process found the process, like many others, to be strongly affected by geographic isolation and the tendency towards poverty in these areas. A study of thousands of rural youths, the majority of whom desired both postsecondary education and careers requiring such education, is summarized in **Table 2**, listing sources of information alongside the percentage of students who used that source *and* the percentage that said that source was useful. There is also a tendency of students to seek more professional sources of advice (e.g. counselors, college visits) as they grow older and older students' had a total increased preponderance to seek information relative to

<sup>50</sup> Martha J. Bailey and Susan M. Dynarski, "Inequality in Postsecondary Education" in *Whither Opportunity? Rising Inequality and the Uncertain Life Chances of Low-Income Children*, 117-31 (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2011), 117–26.

<sup>51</sup> Erica Chenoweth and Renee V. Galliher, "Factors Influencing College Aspirations of Rural West Virginia High School Students" in *Journal of Research in Rural Education* 19, no. 2 (October 2004).

<sup>52</sup> Soo-yong Byun, *et al.*, "Rural–Nonrural Disparities in Postsecondary Educational Attainment Revisited" in *American Educational Research Journal* 49, no. 3 (2012).

younger high school students. Rural students' tendency to go to teachers for information was also noted as more pronounced in this cohort.<sup>53</sup> Related to this research is a study from rural upland Mississippi that measured attitudes of administrators viewed campus visits and ACT workshops as the most effective programs that aimed to increase college attendance.<sup>54</sup>

**Table 2:** Sources of Information and their Reported Usefulness among Rural Adolescents

	<i>Grade 11–12</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>White</i>
<i>Parent or guardian</i>	72.8; 47.9	66.6; 51.2	77.4; 55.7	75.9; 57.3
<i>Friend</i>	61.0; 24.3	48.3; 23.5	61.9; 25.2	58.1; 24.6
<i>Teacher</i>	52.3; 25.9	41.0; 24.9	51.1; 26.1	46.6; 23.8
<i>School counselor</i>	57.7; 36.8	35.1; 25.5	48.3; 32.1	44.6; 30.3
<i>Other relative</i>	37.4; 14.4	33.8; 17.0	43.1; 19.8	39.2; 17.9
<i>Brother or sister</i>	33.1; 18.1	29.3; 19.6	36.4; 20.4	34.0; 20.9
<i>College search guides, publications, or websites</i>	41.7; 26.2	23.0; 14.9	38.2; 26.1	31.9; 21.0
<i>A visit to a college campus</i>	35.3; 22.8	21.9; 13.5	29.0; 19.2	26.9; 17.6
<i>College representatives</i>	37.0; 22.9	20.1; 13.0	25.5; 16.3	23.1; 14.6
<i>Other adults in the community</i>	24.5; 8.0	19.0; 7.1	24.0; 8.3	22.6; 8.1
<i>Coach</i>	17.6; 7.8	20.0; 12.1	12.9; 5.3	16.0; 7.9
<i>Principal or other school staff</i>	12.1; 3.6	10.4; 3.9	11.2; 3.9	10.7; 3.3
<i>None of the above</i>	5.9; 10.8	12.3; 11.6	5.0; 6.4	7.1; 6.1
<i>Pastor/priest/other religious leader</i>	7.8; 3.6	7.2; 3.2	8.4; 3.6	7.8; 3.4

—Only information for demographic groups related to this thesis is presented here.

Similar to this vein was a study that tracked rural Iowan students' routes to four-year colleges based on whether their parents were professionals or managers, farmers, or lower status. It calls forth the maxim in the rural Midwest that a lack of education does not necessarily lead to a lower status. Farmers, for instance, buck this trend found elsewhere. Students of professionals and managers tended to follow the traditional model that students reflect their parents' educational history, using their

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<sup>53</sup> Dana Griffin, *et al.*, "Where Do Rural High School Students Go to Find Information About Their Futures?" in *Journal of Counseling & Development* 89, no. 2 (2011).

<sup>54</sup> Stephanie B. King, "Increasing College-Going Rate, Parent Involvement, and Community Participation in Rural Communities" in *The Rural Educator* 33, no. 2 (Winter 2012).

parental and other resource support towards their educational involvement and in building their own postsecondary aspirations. The college choice process of children from farm families matches their professional–managerial peers; the authors explain this because their middle class parents’ social involvement lends resource support in and out of school that compensates for the lack of parental background in postsecondary education. Lower-status youth do not benefit from parental educational or community involvement. Some of them, however, were educationally ambitious from a young age (thought to be as a result of a lack of ability to put off college planning and decisions), and while their modest rank in society prevented them and their parents from high involvement in community groups and schools, any involvement on their parts affected educational attainment. They were also more likely to utilize church as a community involvement.<sup>55</sup>

Finally, there is a geographic component to college choice that may uniquely affect rural students. The author of a study on the geographic context of the college choice process notes that socioeconomically disadvantaged students usually express a desire to stay close to home. There must also be a relation to a desire on the part of parents for their children to go to college close to home and the demonstrated rural ties to the land. The study mapped the places of residence of a national sample of high school seniors and all postsecondary institutions within commuting distance of them, and it found that each additional nearby college was associated with a small, significant

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<sup>55</sup> Daniel J. McGrath, *et al.*, “Breaking New Ground: Diverse Routes to College in Rural America” in *Rural Sociology* 66, no. 2 (June 2001).

increase in the odds of applying to college. The author reasons that this may be the result of closer colleges making the postsecondary transition easier for both students and parents (it might be cheaper, if it is a state institution, and it may allow local social ties to remain unbroken). It could also be the result of proximity to postsecondary institutions encouraging students to consider college because of those institutions' effects on local character.<sup>56</sup>

I believe students make decisions about college based on their knowledge about what is possible for them to achieve in this world, given their academic performance, as affected by their family, friends, secondary institutions and interests, and bounded by their financial situation and other limitations outside of their academic ability. While rural students are now going to college at rates that barely fall behind those of metropolitan students, lower general socioeconomic status and perhaps a lack of an immediate collegiate culture (per parents sometimes not expecting much from their children and a lack of geographic proximity) continue to push them back.

While low socioeconomic class affects top-performing students less, they are still affected by the limitations of their schools that I believe may be the cause of their somewhat lowered aspirations. But with grades and career expectations being the top-predictors of what degree of education top-performing rural students wanted, there is an indication that future aspirations are the best prediction of where students would wind

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<sup>56</sup> Ruth N. López Turley, "College Proximity: Mapping Access to Opportunity" in *Sociology of Education* 82, no. 2 (April 2009).

up, affected, of course, by economic realities and the degree of chance involved in college admissions.

### *Conclusion*

While the volume of data on top-performing rural students is relatively limited, there is obviously enough information about the wide variety of things in play here—rural locations, rural schools, rural students, rural demographics and trends—that we can construct a rough picture of what to expect from the college choice process of top-performing rural students. But I wanted to focus rural in the Midwest, a region I view as overlooked in the field of rural sociology, with its mono-racial nature and cultural and economic heritage unique from Appalachia, the South, or the West. I decided to go home in the summer of 2014, to Indiana, to see what I could learn about students like the student I had been a few years before, by constructing an ethnography and allowing their stories to speak for themselves, to allow for this work to converse with the array of studies summed in this chapter. But to do so, I needed to find the students, draft the parameters of what I wanted to ask them, and interview them. This proved somewhat difficult.

### *Methodology*

Planning for this project started during the winter of 2014. The Stanford Office of Undergraduate Research and Advising awarded a major grant in March 2014 to fund this research.

Because privacy laws prevent guidance counselors from directly giving me the names of their students, I asked counselors from rural Indiana high schools in April to give them an outline of the project and my contact information so that the students could contact me directly. I chose to define “top-performing” as students set to graduate in the top ten percent of their class. After a few weeks passed and only one student responded, I realized that this approach would not work. I decided instead to wait for local newspaper articles on high school graduations to be published, and I learned the names of the valedictorians and salutatorians.

The students were offered a ten dollar gift card for participation and signed a protocol with me that had been cleared by the Stanford Research Compliance Office. Interviews began in mid June and ended in mid August; the days of specific interviews

are listed in Appendix F. I began by interviewing students from southern Indiana, within driving distance from my parents' home in Bloomington. After about a month, it became clear to me that I was running out of interested students close enough to interview on-site, so I began to search for students outside of driving range elsewhere in the state.

Eventually, I interviewed 19 students and contacted scores more. Ultimately, the modest number of subjects makes this a pilot study of sorts, but one that lays clear the parameters and logistics of college choice in a rural population that has been underexplored, in my opinion. I wish to revisit this area with greater detail in the future.

The interview questions for graduates can be found in Appendix A. I began by broadly asking them about their high school experience, followed by their extracurricular activities, work experience, and activities outside of school. I asked them why they were involved in those activities. They then described their high school academic experience: their favorite classes, the quality of the instruction, advanced education, etc. We then described home life, friends, and personal background emphasizing their effects on education. We then discussed their college choice process. I attempted to let them tell me about their initial views of the subject and how they began to apply to colleges. I would ask questions based on their responses (ascertaining the importance of various influencing factors, like parental and school support, college visits, and interested majors).

I also scheduled interviews (questions in Appendix B) with three rural high school guidance counselors that had been particularly interested in the project when I had initially contacted them to reach their top-performing students. I asked to describe their

school's approach to college preparation and readiness and what was expected from them in this capacity. I then asked about how, if at all, the school would treat top-performing students differently than the rest of the student body: how the school viewed advanced course options and what options were available, if they interacted with top-performing any differently than the rest with regards to college admissions, and any change they had seen over time.

The interviews were then transcribed and analyzed with NVIVO software. The findings and a discussion follow in the next chapter.

While I managed to find enough students to show the broad patterns of college choice among my subjects, I could not examine the total situation with how top-performing students selected a college since the sample consisted almost entirely of valedictorians and salutatorians. I thought that there was a chance that their ultimate college choice did not match those of students graduating lower in the top ten percent. I contacted every rural guidance counselor in Indiana for the colleges that their top ten percent of graduating seniors in the last five years had planned to attend. The yield from this paints a broad picture of college choice among the subject population; against it, I have acquired the same list of college choices from two metropolitan Indiana high schools to identify the degree of difference between rural and metropolitan students in Indiana and beyond. I also measured the distance between the students' high schools and chosen postsecondary institutions using Google Maps.

As far as classifying postsecondary institutions is concerned, I made the decision not to include Catholic colleges with other overtly Christian colleges. I found that

membership in the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities is a universally better metric for such a distinction. I classified “elite” colleges as such if they were ranked 20<sup>th</sup> or higher in the 2014 *US News* College Guide among national institutions.

### *Interview Analysis*

Top performing rural Indiana high school consider what colleges they will apply to and attend by weighing two distinct options: what kind of school will be the best fit for them based on their background and interest and what personal limitations are, be they financial or academic. All other aspects of their social, educational, and familial background conspire to affect these two bases upon which the college choice is made.

Consider **Table 3** (page 79) of all interviewed students’ location, chosen college, distance between their high school and college, and any other colleges to which they applied. The thing that most vividly jumps out in this sample is that so many of the students only considered institutions similar to their chosen college, if they applied more than one place at all. The two boys who were to attend elite, selective universities were the only students who applied to several elite, selective institutions. Two of the three girls who desired a Christian education only applied to relatively obscure, out-of-state schools.

Those set to attend Purdue University, Indiana University, and Indiana University—Purdue University Indianapolis (Indiana's flagship public research universities) usually only considered those schools. Some of these instate public university-bound students toyed with the idea of applying to more selective institutions, but they lacked either the sense of self-efficacy to submit an application or lacked the qualifications necessary to apply—Liam, for instance, lacked SAT Subject Tests scores because his guidance counselor never told him of their existence.

Students largely make decisions based on their financial situation: whether they will pay tuition by themselves or with their parents partial or entire assistance, how much they can afford to pay in tuition before needing to take out loans, etc. Interestingly, students often make a matriculation judgment call, in the event that their ideal college will require them to take loans. Consider two examples:

- Brooke's mother earned a degree at 36 from the local community college, and one steady income over the previous year yielded a household income of 80,000 dollars. "It's really weird that I've been so successful and so adamant," she said, because her parents never asked about grades and "never pushed me to where I'd be scared to do poorly. They always said, 'Just do your best.'" Her older sister had gone to the tiny St. Catherine College in rural Kentucky before transferring to the regional IU branch in New Albany. She was a member of a Baptist church (her family hosted Bible study) and helped a friend's grandmother clean another church.

Brooke graduated fifth of a class of 151 and scored an 1800 on her SAT. She admired her biology teacher who first broached the subject of college with her and decided that she wanted to focus on genetics and microbiology at a smaller school. She was open to playing volleyball in college as she had in high school.

After ruling out some private Indiana institutions and searching the Internet for the “top Christian schools in the US,” Brooke discovered Covenant College in northeastern Georgia. It was the only out-of-state school she visited, and she fell in love with its setting, distance from Indiana, and Christian identity. She planned to take out loans for 14,000 dollars a year for tuition that her athletic scholarship did not cover. Her parents told her, “Don’t worry about the price, because everyone’s going to be in debt.”

- Jake was born to chronically unemployed, verbally abusive, chain-smoking prescription narcotic addicts. There was often no food in the home, and he moved into a friend’s house on his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Of high school and rural life, he said,

*I made the mistake of coming out my freshman year. I went to “Small School, USA.” There’s corn on three sides of me right now. I can tell you all the crop cycles of everything, and so can everyone else at my school. That being said, the redneck ideology is prevalent in my school. There is a “Drive-Your-Tractor-to-School” Day. People aren’t kind, as freshmen go, but my junior and senior year I really didn’t have to deal with that. I didn’t have classes with any of them.*

He conceded that the size of his school led to fewer opportunities, but he was happy with the academic options available to him, especially the ability to get into any class he wanted to take. He graduated salutatorian out of a class of 152. During his sophomore year, he started thinking seriously about college at his school’s spurting. After telling his guidance counselor about his situation, “She really, really pushed me and told me that if I just worked a little bit harder, put a little more effort in, then I could probably be really successful in life.” They met biweekly with him to plan finances and work on applications. An English teacher decided that his initial SAT score was not high enough, and with her help he scored a 1970. An older friend majoring in chemical engineering, his intended major, at Purdue encouraged him to visit, and Jake liked it enough to only apply there largely because it was a cheaper public option; he vaguely considered MIT and the Rose–Hulman Institute of Technology, but he found their additional

academic strain and tuition unattractive. A guidance secretary helped students find scholarships for all students, and he hoped to graduate without taking loans through this and a part-time job.

These two top rural students—straight and gay, female and male, from southern and northern Indiana, middle class and poor—were both alike in that they had parents who were ambivalent about their academic performance. For as much as any student's success is driven by their own willpower, Brooke and Jake did well largely and entirely without familial support. They both had support from their schools, however (which allowed Jake to escape the demographic trajectory of so many impoverished rural people like him), and this effect can be noted among several students who are set to be the first in their family to attend a four-year college or university. But the fundamental key difference between the two of them was that Brooke was willing to go into debt to pay for a postsecondary education that would align with her faith while Jake was set to study engineering at Indiana's public institution with this major, and he would not go into debt to do so. Brooke's attitude suggested that she did really understand what having over tens of thousands in student debt would be like, but there is also this: Jake did not know that MIT would surely grant someone of his background full financial aid.

There are two categories apart among students whose college choice is largely driven by their sense of how they would feel as a student there: students who strongly desired an education at an elite, selective university and students who desired a religious education. Of far greater significance to the whole body of top-performing rural Hoosiers is that these two ways of approaching the college choice process in rural Indiana were

two of the very few and uncommon paths that resulted in choosing a far out-of-state institution. Sports—whether they were recruited athletes or simply because they were fans—are likely another influencing factor. But the biggest tendency, as the next chapter’s analysis of hundreds of top performing rural Indiana students’ chosen colleges shows, is that most of these students stay in-state.

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Let us consider the sampled students’ household incomes and their parents’ educational background, occupations, and marital status (**Table 4**, page 80): Obviously, this cohort is too small to make any assumptions about whether having college educated parents results in a particular chosen college, but nevertheless it stands that a majority of interviewed students had at least one parent with his or her bachelor’s degree, which follows research suggesting that propensity towards education is largely transmitted through parental background. All students who were younger children of educated parents had older siblings who were either in a postsecondary program or college graduates. Many students were going to the same institutions that their siblings or parents attended. Older siblings who had gone to college are often sources of advice to those whose parents did not go to college. Lisa, for instance, had emigrated as a child from the Netherlands. She said of her parents,

*They had no idea what college entailed... So when [my brother] went, a lot of it was on his own. So [he] kind of learned the hard way about everything. I feel like [he] was really my number one person to talk to when it comes to stuff like that.*

Only a few of the students, first generation or otherwise, reported a big or specific influence on their parents' part in their college choice process, apart from financial considerations. Most parents expected their children to do their best, and their best resulted in being top-ranked in their classes. For those who had at least one parent with a bachelor's degree, there was of course a common expectation that they would go to college. The flow of values, apart from education being important to many parents, can also be seen to play a role in shaping students' college aspirations. Abigail's parents, for instance, were public educators who strongly instilled in her an appreciation for public education, which played a large part in her eventual decision to attend IU. Many students had a collaborative relationship with their parents when they narrowed their list of interested colleges down. Many going to private schools had to convince their parents to help cover tuition costs higher than an in-state institution.

Unsurprisingly, top-performing rural Indiana students' parents seem to have high expectations for high school academic performance. A few students reported that, upon their continued good performance, their parents stopped being so diligent about checking grades and concerned about upcoming tests and projects. Students were generally friends with similarly performing students, but most did not report any significant effect from them on their application and selection process. For those going far from home or to a school outside the matriculating norm of their high school, the chance to not go to college with high school friends may even be a positive factor for that postsecondary institution.

Aside of students who sought out advice from older friends, only other effect that students' personal relationships with their peers on their application and selection process

was if a romantic partner was taken into consideration. For instance, Kaitlin considered North Carolina institutions because that is where her boyfriend lived, and they broke up when she chose the University of Evansville. Brandon chose IU partly because he wanted to be close to his girlfriend. That said, most top-performing students tend to have similarly academically oriented friends. As Brandon explained,

*The people I would consider to be close to me—the people I'll keep in touch with—being that the school is so small, a lot of the advanced kids have been in my class since middle school when the three elementary schools came together, and I've had the same kids in my class ever since. So it was really easy to bond with them, and they were all really ambitious.*

Older students were also commonly sources of advice. Georgetown-bound Dave befriended a senior going to an elite university when he was a freshman, which played some role in shaping his own aspirations. Kayla was interested in Butler from eighth grade, when an older friend studying there told her how much she would like it.

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Three rural Indiana guidance counselors were interviewed for this project, which, alongside the students' perspectives, gives a picture of how these high schools approach the college choice processes of their top students. Given the tendency of rural schools to recruit faculty from the surrounding area, it is unsurprising that all interviewed counselors were alumnae of their employers. Two counseled smaller schools, grades seven through twelve, with graduating classes of around 60. The other was the head of guidance at a high school that graduated around 160 students. Each had well over a decade's experience in rural public education.

Per their top students' demographics, one said that the norm was more females than males and another said that there was usually gender parity. They also noted that many top students were the children of educators, which is reflected in the sample of interviewed students. The guidance counselors met with their students in eighth grade to craft their state-mandated four-year plans; each coordinated college visits, organized workshops for parents and students to learn the logistics of FAFSA and scholarship applications, assisted with essays or planned college visits upon request, and had students take inventories that match interests and aptitude with potential careers. One had mock interviews for all students, whether they were applying for postsecondary institutions, jobs, or scholarships. Another had a "college boot camp" for seniors that met weekly before and after school during the fall to prepare students for different aspects of college applications and financing.

One counselor explained that her school's focus on dual credit over Advanced Placement classes was that the former are usually cheaper (though Indiana subsidizes math and science AP exams for all eleventh and twelfth graders, along with all exams for students of all ages who receive free and reduced price lunches in conjunction with federal grants<sup>57</sup>) and will always carry credit at institutions that accept it while students actually have to pass the AP exams. This trend of dual credit over AP in terms of emphasis and offerings was common to all interviewed students. However, the counselors reported varied oversight by the credit-granting institutions and varied degrees

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<sup>57</sup> Leslie G. Fatum, Indiana Department of Education, "Memorandum to AP School Coordinators and High School Principals" (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana Department of Education, 2015)

of teacher competency in teaching to a postsecondary standard, which was also noted by many students.

Each of the counselors said that college visits are uniquely important to their students. However, the counselor from the bigger school had a much more successful policy with regards to visits: she gave the impression that they are utilized more at her school than the other two. This may be because her bigger school afforded her more discretion with her time (she only worked with juniors and seniors) and financial resources (a smaller school's counselor said that her school lacked the money to do plan group visits). She had yearly trips to IU available to all students and could miss work to take a student to a nearby college when the student had no other means of transportation available. More than the other two counselors, she said she was available to talk to students through email or social media at all hours.

Counselors tried to be proactive in turning students towards institutions that had their major and were feasible, economically and academically. Echoing research, one said that she found that rural students tend to gravitate towards the limited professional occupations that they consistently see in their communities. While one said that she would urge a top-performing student considering only community college to aim higher and that perhaps ten out of her sixty yearly graduates were capable of going to one of Indiana's flagship public universities, only five or six would actually do so. She felt as though athletic concerns were frequently held above academics: she did not encourage students to take the June SAT because so many would participate in or watch the school's baseball team in the state playoffs. The school sent no students to Hoosier Boys' State

anymore for the same reason. Students were “too busy playing baseball, volleyball—the things that seem to get more glory in a small school” at the expense of their academic work. Even when she got a grant to take students on college visits, she could only get one or two to sign up.

The two smaller schools’ guidance counselors expressed strong concerns about the apathy and listlessness of many of their students. One explained the work of Ruby Payne, a self-published author with a PhD in educational leadership, who espouses a “culture of poverty” argument holding that poor people largely reinforce their poverty through their values, actions, and fear of the unknown—which is why poor children do not advance. Payne, whose books are strongly marketed to educators, also argues that those in generational poverty have also an attitude that society owes them a living.<sup>58</sup> Critics argue that her books have little to no empirical support, ignore disparities between rich and poor schools, and place the locus of blame on stereotypes of people in poverty.<sup>59</sup>

Nevertheless, the other counselor echoed these sentiments, saying that many of the lower-performing students do not know how to work, which in turn reflects a societal shift away from recognizing the value of work. She also said that parents now were less collaborative with schools and more “accusatory.” Contrary to these sentiments, the bigger school’s counselor said that, over her career, she has seen the curriculum steadily get harder, which she says has precipitated students seeking out more elite postsecondary educations in recent years than before. She said, “We have a lot of kids whose parents

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<sup>58</sup> Ruby Payne, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (Highlands, TX: Aha! Process, 2005).

<sup>59</sup> Esther S. Prins and Kai A. Schafft, “Individual and Structural Attributions for Poverty and Persistence in Family Literacy Programs: The Resurgence of the Culture of Poverty” in *Teachers College Record* 111, no. 9 (2009).

either aren't helping or not know what to do to help. We have teachers who help along the way. We have an administration that's supportive."

The limited exposure to professional careers and the general reluctance of some students to visit colleges reflects the relative isolation of rural Indiana life. One student was to visit Vincennes University, Indiana's public two-year residential college, whose namesake city has a population of 18,000. Her mother gave her mace for her visit. When her counselor assured her that she would be fine on a college campus during the day, the student replied, "Vincennes is a big city!" She mentioned that many students would commute to VU, even though living a regional, branch, or flagship public in-state institution would be cheaper over time. Another counselor expressed all students' situations: "Not everyone's got it cut out for IU; it's too big and overwhelming. But not everyone is cut out for Franklin or Hanover, either."

Students, in turn, had mixed feelings regarding their school's role in the college choice process. Students' sentiments ranged from, "Well, my high school made me not want to go to college and didn't really do anything else, I guess," to more commonly expressed misgivings including a lack of a personal relationship with the guidance counselors or their lackadaisical job performance. Liam missed out on applying to two elite, selective institutions because no one ever told him about the SAT Subject Tests. Brandon was wary of his counselors because some friends were missing credits that were necessary for admittance to some institutions, meaning some counselors do not make the mandated four-year plan and track progress to prevent such oversights from happening. Rachel said that her counselors basically only sent transcripts, and that many students

settled for community college or did not perform at their best because the counselors did not reach them in time.

On the other hand, many students said that guidance counselors did support and steady students' trajectories. It appears, logically, that the guidance counselors who were the most effective were those who reached out to the students without other adults to turn to for help. As Kaitlin remarked, "The school definitely helped me plan for college and made it a little easier, especially for those of us that didn't have parents that had done it before." Many students said that their counselors and teachers noted their potential and lack of other positive influences (whether parents were miscreants like Jake's or just unlearned about the college admissions process). Several were very helpful at finding scholarship opportunities for their students. Although her mother was the assistant principal at her high school, Anna made clear the value in having a counselor who kept track of students' deadlines. Nevertheless, counselors were not seen as outstandingly helpful or bad among students who were very independent and self-directed in the college choice process. Dave, for instance, knew he wanted to aim "higher" after receiving his PSAT score, and while his counselors told him what options were available in Indiana, he had to apply outside of Indiana on his own. He said that rural students are not always aware of their college options and that their schools do not move to expand horizons beyond typically chosen, in-state institutions.

While only a few students were overwhelmingly negative regarding their high school educational experiences, many called out specific areas in need of improvement that reflect the identified problems with rural secondary education detailed in the

previous chapter. Rachel said that, while her school had prepared her to study pharmacy at IUPUI, “If I was majoring in English or something, I’d be worried about that.” She said that those teachers needed to be stricter about curriculum and less tolerant about cheating or plagiarism. She would proofread papers in senior English with such poor grammar that she would think, “How did you make it this far in school?” In four years of high school, she only read two books for class: *Animal Farm* (“It’s only like 70 pages!”) and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Nevertheless, she cited her senior composition teacher as having been particularly effective, especially with regards to advice in the college choice process.

In **Table 5** (page 81), we can see that, unsurprisingly, students’ intended college majors and the careers that interested them aligned with their favorite high school classes. That so many students want to work in some capacity in healthcare is unsurprising, given that all students interact with that industry. That so few want to go into teaching is surprising, given that they are, after all, students and also because so many themselves are children of educators. That such a great percentage desire careers in science, technology, engineering, or math is perhaps a testament to the quality of or emphasis placed on STEM in rural Indiana schools. Additionally, there was a clear line of reasoning from personal background to intended careers for many students. In Grant’s case, a good investment by his father had allowed the family to put in a new heating and air conditioning system, which made him want to go into finance.

Finally, these students tend to partake in certain extracurricular activities not, as other students statewide might, to enhance odds of admission at selective schools, but to

attract as many scholarships as possible. These top-performing students tend to have leadership positions their activities. Many students' activities were service-oriented (clubs like the National Honor Society combine academic qualifications for membership with an emphasis on fund-raising and volunteering in the community) or centered on advocacy (like SADD, for Students Against Destructive Decisions). Others followed academic interests through competitions like quiz or spell bowl or through clubs focused on foreign languages, robotics, band or choir, FFA (formerly Future Farmers of America), and Business Professionals of America. Given rural schools' small sizes, there is great opportunity to take part in athletics for many who would not have been good enough at a bigger high school. Over half of the interviewed students played at least one season for a high school team; many were captains. Outside of school, associations with community organizations and especially 4-H are common.

The pursuit of academic scholarships among this population in Indiana seems to be extremely widespread. Some students are, of course, good enough athletes to be considered for earn athletic scholarships, and earning one is a big draw to a particular school. Others use their extracurricular activities and personal involvements for lucrative merit-based scholarships offered by community or charitable foundations. Indeed, many students were in extracurricular activities purely in pursuit of this money. Students also know the link between high standardized test scores and scholarships. While far from unanimous, there is some animosity within this overwhelmingly white rural population against minority populations because of their like pursuit of scholarships. At the very least, though there is a common sense of racial identity. Kayla's father's employer had a

scholarship available for employees' children, and she applied for it. She received a thousand dollars as a finalist but said,

*Three out of the four minorities [who applied] got the scholarship, and the four that didn't get the scholarship were majority students. ... As a majority student from a middle class family in Indiana, I felt like I needed something else to help me stand out. I have all these extracurriculars... [but] I didn't get the scholarships that I thought I would get and I thought... if I had gotten a higher score on the ACT, maybe I could have gotten those bigger scholarships.*

If any students have regrets about their high school years—any many said that they do not—they tend to revolve around the pursuit of scholarships. Many wish they would have put less effort into getting scholarships through extracurricular involvement, and many said that they wish they would have had higher test scores to be in a better position for scholarship attainment. A few students expressed a desire to have applied to or visited more schools, especially students who felt like they unjustly missed out on applying to them in the first place.

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It would be misguided to say that a rural Indiana student's parental upbringing or educational background can unquestionably bring about a particular college choice. As has been the general argument, students make a deliberate judgment call about what sort of schools that interest them crossed with their position and attitude towards financing such schools. This decision is affected, of course, by personal intricacies of schools and families, but the interviews conducted with 19 students the summer after their graduation are representative enough of the whole Indiana-wide population to inform a discussion. We can make broad inferences from these interviews to the whole population because of

the homogeneous nature of rural Indiana's demographics and because the following chapter's dataset shows how similar these interviewed students' choices match hundreds of students' choices in recent years.

To begin, half of the interviewed students were set to attend public in-state institutions, the great majority of which were Indiana's flagship schools: Indiana University, Purdue University, and Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI). This does not match the dataset, which shows that a significant number go to Indiana's second-tier public institutions, including the flagship universities' branch campuses (though none to either of Purdue's branch campuses in the urban northwestern Region). Given that the means of recruiting students for interviews resulted in a disproportionate number of valedictorians and salutatorians in the sample, this is perhaps unsurprising: the cream of the crop tended to go to the cream of the crop. Many public regional or branch institutions may offer top students scholarships that they would not receive from the flagship institutions, as in Grant's case. Additionally, IUPUI does not carry the same academic reputation as its namesake institutions (for instance, it does not rank as high in *US News*'s undergraduate rankings); if it does not warrant consideration alongside Indiana State University, Ball State University, the University of Southern Indiana, and the flagships' regional branch campuses, it should not be considered quite alongside its home campuses in Bloomington and West Lafayette.

The most vivid manifestation of breaking the college choice mold in rural Indiana, both in this chapter's sample of interviewed students and in the bigger following dataset, is the tendency to go far out-of-state to school. Similarly uncommon is to attend

an elite, selective institution, including Indiana's University of Notre Dame. More common is the tendency to matriculate at an institution with a strong religious identity. These two means of college choice are unique in their process and unique in their tendency to push students to consider schools outside of Indiana.

There is no question that rural areas have a tendency to be defined by a substantially common religious heritage. The rural Upper Midwest's German, Nordic, Catholic, and Lutheran communities, for instance, have played a large role in those states' sense of identity. Rural southern Indiana shares much of its common evangelical or born-again Christian identity with the Bible Belt; the rural North has sizable Amish and Mennonite populations. To be a little uncouth, rural Hoosiers are like President Obama's rural Pennsylvanians: they cling to their guns and religion. It is unsurprising that the former plays such a role in some students' college choice, as tradition, insularity, and generational family ties are a huge component of the overarching rural mindset. As self-described "hard-core Christian" Amy remarked,

*I like the small town feeling. I like being out in the country. I live way out in the middle of nowhere. My only neighbors are my grandma, my great-grandma, and my uncle. My grandma's right next door—three hills away, but it's close. I just don't like the big city. I feel like everyone's rude and rushing around.*

Students seem to make the decision to pursue education at a strongly religious institution because a Christian mindset firmly ingrained into their identities. The trope of college as a time to sow wild oats or explore alternative lifestyles is not attractive to some. Instead, there is a desire to learn whatever they seek to learn alongside like-minded peers in a

like-minded institution. Therefore, some students first seek out institutions that match their religious persuasion.

Simply having regular church attendance does not necessarily mean that a student will gravitate towards a Christian institution, however. Most students had some involvement with an organized religious organization, but for every student like Amy, who had first heard of Harding University from fellow missionaries, there were other students who had gone on mission for whom their faith did not affect their college choice. There were exceptions, however. Chris was not a member of a church, yet he found Xavier's Jesuit influence appealing because he "felt that, with its religious influence, it could bring certain values into its academic perspective" (neither Dave nor Brent expressed similar sentiments about their Catholic institutions). Students may consider a college's local churches and overall atmosphere before making a decision. Kaitlin, for instance, chose the University of Evansville because of its loose Methodist affiliation and because she found several churches close to its campus appealing. Given the social conservatism of rural Indiana, these sentiments is perhaps unsurprising even from students whose religion does not play a centrally important role in their lives: they might associate familiar Christian values with their general worldview or an absence of the stereotypical collegiate partying that does not appeal to them. Students like Kaitlin might imagine that a loose affiliation with religion will may play a stronger role in their lives when they move somewhere new, perhaps not knowing anyone there, to start college.

Nevertheless, from the interviews it appears that students who choose overtly religious colleges are, of course, most likely those whose religion is most important to

their worldview. Shannon's Mennonite faith has a strong ethnic identity and commitment to pacifism; her sole consideration of Mennonite colleges is unsurprising. The sample's two broadly evangelical Christians, Amy and Brooke, found their colleges through their social network (Amy's missionaries) and online (Brooke's search for "top Christian colleges"). For these two girls, finding their single college so serendipitous—at Covenant College, Brooke could study sciences and play volleyball (for the scholarship and for the community of being on a team, just like her high school volleyball team), and Amy could study pharmacy at Harding—that one might infer that they found a match and oriented their other stated desires around it. Like so many students, all three girls' visits to their respective colleges sealed the decision, and none said they were afraid to go out of state.

Students going to out-of-state religious colleges are not, of course, the only students to leave Indiana. Three other students did so, and around twelve percent total of the following chapter's dataset did as well. Many sampled students considered or did apply out-of-state for other than religious reasons. Some students were recruited athletes. Kayla got into Baylor and Oklahoma State because of her equestrianism, but ultimately chose to go to Butler because of its smaller size, her parents' desire for her to go to school in Indiana (for in-state tuition; they relented upon seeing how happy she was during her college visit there), and her desire to intern for the state government. Grant was recruited to play football at Yale, but they would not admit him unless he raised his SAT score 100 points. Both an athletic and academic all-state athlete, he gave up after taking the test twice more. While he said that he would have gone "anywhere" in the

country for free, he only considered in-state colleges and eventually chose ISU, just a short drive from his high school, because they covered his tuition.

Still other students consider going out-of-state for the same reason that drives every student's college choice process: they wanted to go somewhere that appealed to them. Tellingly, many rural students only have a frame of reference for in-state school in this regard, and knowledge of the broader rural Midwestern identity explains why: the region is largely insular and conservative, with strong emphasis towards the family, traditional social institutions, and conformity. However, the exceptions exist, and the interviews yielded a picture as to why they exist. Some students have family or a romantic partner that draws them to a particular locale, in- or out-of-state. Other reasons include that of Brandon, for instance, who applied (but was not accepted to) the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: "I was a big fan of their medical program, and I like their basketball." Liam was accepted to the University of Michigan, but decided that he could not bear Ann Arbor's winters (with scholarships, his parents could also cover all of his in-state IU tuition, as well). Expectations of homesickness are a widespread reason why many students did not consider colleges outside of Indiana.

The other key influencing factor, at the other end of sensing what college would be the best fit was where the students could afford. In addition to a lack of acceptance, a distaste for the weather, and a concern for the difficulty, Brandon, Liam, and Jake discounted UNC, Michigan, and MIT also because they were concerned for the cost. While some are misguided in their thinking—MIT would surely have given Jake near peerless financial assistance—it shows the vital role that the ability to pay tuition

logically holds among this cohort. This exerts a huge influence on a number of students, whether they select a less expensive option, work or apply for scholarships, plan to go heavily into debt, or have their parents pay for it.

The next chapter's dataset shows how rare a rural student's attendance at an elite, selective institution is, and the interviews suggest how students often do not apply or choose to go to such schools. Many factors may influence this decision: a guidance counselor or teacher might take special interest in a truly exceptional student, but this does not appear to be common, given that some interviewed students in very high percentiles on standardized tests but did not consider elite institutions. They might have parents that push them to consider these options, but given the limited professional occupations that demand exceedingly qualified people specifically and the lower rates of adults with a bachelor's degree or higher in rural areas, this would also not appear to be common.

Indeed, Brent and Dave (set to attend Notre Dame and Georgetown, respectively) shared characteristics uncommon among the rest of the interviewed students. Like many students, they were the children of college graduates (Dave's mother went part-time for a teaching degree in her thirties; Dave's father went "somewhere in Canada," though he could not say where). Uniquely, Brent was not the first in his family to attend an elite college: an older had attended the University of Oxford. They scored very well but not uniquely on standardized tests, but they took by far the most AP exams—seven each—and they uniquely self-studied for some of them (**Table 6**, page 82). They were also the only students to apply to numerous elite institutions.

It appears that a strong independent streak, intellectualism, and a lack of financial constraints (either through parental tuition assistance or substantial financial aid) are the calling cards that may possibly mark whether a top-performing rural Indiana student will seek out an elite postsecondary education. It is clear from the interviews and next chapter's dataset of rural Indiana top-performing high school students' matriculations that schools are not guiding a number of their top-students to consider elite institutions. If they were, we could expect more than a handful to be going, especially given the financial aid resources of elite institutions.

Neither Dave nor Brent said their guidance counselors had told them of the special requirements to apply to top schools—extra letters of recommendation and SAT Subject Test—and they did not encourage them to apply to those institutions. While Dave and Brent scored within the top quartile of the 19 students, others scored similarly to them and did not apply to the same schools (**Table 6**).

Rurality affected these all of these interviewed students. Said Dave, “A lot of people, especially in places like this, aren’t aware of the options available when it comes to colleges.” Both expressed a desire to learn at a higher level: Dave’s favorite teacher’s classes had “almost a collegiate atmosphere,” and she helped him study for two additional AP exams outside of class. Brent, formerly homeschooled, liked to watch college lectures online. He was very bitter about his education, echoing other students’ sentiments that classes were paced for the “slow kids” and that there were a lack of academic options for high aptitude students. Both students needed and received generous financial aid; this allowed Dave to choose Georgetown over Columbia out of preference

after visiting both campuses. Both wanted to go out-of-state, but Notre Dame gave Brent a full scholarship—an offer too good to refuse—and the distance from his high school to South Bend was the fifth highest among all interviewed students (**Table 3**, page 79). Out of these students bound for elite or religious institutions, one stayed in-state because of a preference for one campus in particular, and another did so for financial reasons. Obviously, a concern for finances is the biggest factor that effected selection of an in-state institution.

Indiana's flagship universities are slightly differentiated in their academic focuses (i.e. IU's administration, journalism, and music schools; Purdue's programs in agriculture, engineering, and pharmacy). For a good number of top-performing students, these programs and greater academic and campus resources drew them to these universities. Abigail, for instance, said that her parents would have paid for her to go anywhere, but she liked IU's campus (her proximity to it allowed her to visit several times) and was excited to attend their School of Public and Environmental Affairs. Indiana's second-tier branch and state institutions offer cheaper tuition, but they carry less positive connotations than the flagships in some students' minds. Abigail said of the summer classes she was taking at IU-Southeast: "It's not the same [as IU-Bloomington]. It feels like I'm back in high school, and I don't want to feel like I'm in high school."

Never the less, it seems obvious that the greatest reason that rural Indiana students choose Indiana public institutions is because they desired to pay in-state tuition. All but two interviewed students' household incomes surpassed the statewide 2009–13 mean of

48,248 dollars<sup>60</sup> (**Table 4**, page 80). If we discount Abigail from the group of students who chose an in-state public institution as she chose IU without regard to the tuition and Jake because he had no household income, the median household incomes for these students was just 2,000 dollars less than the 75,000 median of all other interviewed students. While Jake's inclusion would have driven down the median significantly, Jake's situation as a statistical outlier (because of his family background) merits his exclusion: few top-performing rural students have overcome situations like his.

While there is not significant data from 19 interviewed students' backgrounds to suggest that a lower household income among top-performing rural Indiana high school students correlates with going to an Indiana public postsecondary institution, it would be grossly misguided to assume that income does not play any role in a students' decision to attend a cheaper institution. Consider Grant, whose interest in finance may have played a role his feverish desire to avoid paying tuition. After missing the Yale's SAT cutoff for recruitment, he applied to the business programs at four public institutions: IU, IUPUI, Ball State, and Indiana State. Marion College in Indianapolis recruited him for football, but he did not like its small size. IU was his top choice, but he was not directly admitted to its Kelley School of Business. With freshman housing included, IU cost "21,000 a year, and I was getting 3,500 a year to help pay for it." When asked if the cost associated with university room and board or with finding housing in Bloomington was his biggest concern, he said, "It didn't matter what it cost. It was more than free, and that's what I was

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<sup>60</sup> United States Census Bureau, "State & County Quickfacts: Indiana" (Washington, DC: US Department of Commerce, 2015)

getting at ISU,” which covered his tuition but not room and board. He applied but placed second for Eli Lilly Endowment Community Scholarship—full tuition at any accredited Indiana institution—and had he gotten it, he would have gone to IU.

There was a significant draw to public, in-state schools mostly for their in-state tuition. This was a much higher draw than the appeal of living in a Big Ten college town or the universities’ resources associated with being research institutions. Many students in Indiana are 21<sup>st</sup> Century Scholars, a program for low- and medium-income students that will award scholarships equal to full Indiana public tuition for those that sign a “pledge of good citizenship” and meet educational benchmarks.<sup>61</sup> When the choice is between debt and a subsidized college degree from institution with their intended major, many students choose the latter.

Indiana’s flagship universities are located in two quintessential college towns—they utterly revolve around higher education, their main industry. To some students, this setting is attractive. Indiana also has a joint IU–Purdue campus in Indianapolis that is much larger than either flagship’s branch campuses (IUPUI itself has branch campuses in Fort Wayne and Columbus), and its Indianapolis location—as urban as Indiana gets—or marginally lower tuition than its parent campuses additionally attracts students. Rachel wanted to go to school in Indianapolis because of its possibilities for biomedical research internships (the pharmaceutical giant Eli Lilly is based there). She

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<sup>61</sup> Learn More Indiana, “FAQs: Indiana 21<sup>st</sup> Century Scholars” (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana Commission for Higher Education, 2015).

considered both IUPUI and Butler, but after visiting both schools, “I liked IUPUI’s campus and vibe more. Butler seemed sort of stuffy.”

Kayla, interested in public administration and politics, also considered IUPUI and Butler. She also desired to pay in-state tuition. However, after her visit she felt that IUPUI had the same problem that caused her to discount other public institutions: it was too big. Instead, she decided that she wanted to go to Butler (she additionally liked their pre-law society), but she had to work hard to convince her parents to let her attend there.

As the interviewed guidance counselors remarked, the stress of being in an institution with tens of thousands of other students is too much for many rural students, so they instead consider smaller colleges. There are many possible reasons that can explain this. A student that is very apprehensive about leaving home and small town life could a college appealing for its close proximity and because its smaller student body would be manageable. Anna, for instance, was a self-described “homebody” who said that she “wasn’t really a social person in high school.” She seriously considered taking a gap year so her younger sister could start college alongside her. After putting off the search until the last possible moment, she and her parents decided that a small liberal arts college would fit her best. She applied and was admitted to a handful of small, in-state, equally rigorous rural or Catholic programs. She eventually chose Hanover College for its campus on the Ohio River and, ironically, because of its study-abroad programs.

Several tendencies marked students who eventually elected to go to in-state private colleges: many applied to state schools as a “safety” option—a word extremely common in the lexicon of suburban students when applying to college but hitherto

unmentioned among top-performing rural students. It is perhaps a reason that these students, unlike those that shot straight to Purdue, IU, or IUPUI, applied to many schools: they imagine that acceptance rate into private programs is less certain than public school acceptance. This is especially true of students who apply to elite colleges. However, the 2013 acceptance rate of Butler (66.1 percent) is not terribly removed from that of IU (72.2 percent) or Purdue (60 percent).<sup>62</sup> At any rate, the tendency of private college-bound students to apply several places often cements the effectiveness of one influencing factor in the college choice process: the campus visit.

Students who go on campus visits are oftentimes considering either a public institution with a large student body or a smaller private school. In some cases, students may choose the larger option because they see the smaller schools as lacking in terms of campus vitality or academic resources. In many other cases, students report that being on such a large campus, often for the first time, was disorienting and directly dissuaded them from considering the school; other students who decided to go to private schools had already counted large public schools out. Such students echoed a guidance counselor's statement that a large school is too intimidating for a student coming from a small town. Said Kaitlin,

*I got lost on Purdue's campus when I was down there with a map. Hard to do, but I did it. Same thing with IU. ... So that was another thing, after I started visiting, looking at how many people were at the school or how big the campus is. I'm directionless—I'll admit it. So then we started narrowing down colleges based on size.*

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<sup>62</sup> U.S. News & World Report, 2015 Best Colleges Rankings (Washington, DC: U.S. News & World Report, L.P.: 2014).

After realizing that she wanted to go to a smaller school, she started searching for the scholarship money to pay for it.

All students were asked about their travel experience in the interviews to gauge how the isolation of their rural childhoods. While many rural students are within easy driving distance of a larger metropolitan area (Indiana is, of course, studded with a number of mid-sized cities), many students, including these students who expressed a fear of going to a large campus, had not traveled extensively—perhaps only to Florida or a few neighboring Midwestern states. These widespread facets of rural Midwestern life and a reluctance of guidance counselors to push institutions outside of what their students normally choose result in the limited eagerness of many students to matriculate at a huge campus. After all, such schools are very different than their small rural high schools.

But apart from homesickness and a possible fear of disconnect between their values and those of a college town (which is present in students considering an expressly Christian education), what are these students afraid of? Consider Nicole, the daughter of Purdue graduates who considered that school and Butler for pharmacy. She said that she only looked at schools in Indiana because she wanted to pay in-state tuition. When asked why, then, she chose a more expensive private school, she responded,

*When I started looking at colleges, I didn't think that I was going to go to Butler because it was so expensive, honestly... and my parents didn't want me to go to Butler either, but after the college visits and after I saw how well they did they program and how much they tried to help students and how Purdue failed miserably at their college visit, my parents and I decided that Butler was a better place for me.*

Nicole was the only student on her tour on that fateful day in West Lafayette. The tour guide, however, refused to take her to the pharmacy building. But additionally, Butler had set itself apart because its pharmacy program had accepted her an incoming freshman, whereas Purdue was very selective with its admittance into their pharmacy program. This program selectivity has come into play before—Grant was not directly admitted to IU’s business school—but it tends to come up alongside another dissuading factor for a particular school: Nicole found Purdue’s campus dehumanizing, and Grant only got a full scholarship at Indiana State. At the very least, students are choosing colleges depending on whether their academic programs appear to be a good fit for them.

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From the interviews with top-performing rural Indiana high school students, we have seen that college choice is an ultimately fickle process. The only definitive tendency is for students to stay in Indiana; students may not do so because a particular out-of-state religious college appeals to them, they desire an education from an elite and selective out-of-state institution, or because they are being given a scholarship that compels them to matriculate out-of-state. Students may stay in Indiana because of a reluctance to leave home or, more often, because they want to pay in-state tuition. One wonders whether these students attending private colleges are doing so at a much higher cost than other like student going to in-state public colleges. While this sample of interviewed students is obviously too small to be representative of all top-performing rural Hoosiers, we are able to generalizations about this phenomenon and how tuition factors into college selection.

Like students anywhere, this population pays for college with money from their parents, scholarships, jobs, or student loans. The vast majority of the time, it is through a combination of two or more of these resources. It is unsurprising that lower- and middle-income top-performing rural students attending elite, selective institutions appear to often reap the benefit of generous financial assistance. Other schools offer big scholarships to students to entice a matriculation there, as was the case with Grant. There are private scholarships from charitable and community foundations that assist with tuition for many students. Indiana's 21<sup>st</sup> Century Scholars program and federal student aid also provide assistance to many lower income students.

While all interviewed students who were to attend non-elite private schools were planning to take out loans, this tendency among those attending public schools was much lower. Grant had only taken out 5,500 dollars for housing, but hoped to give it back before he matriculated if he got an on-campus job. Though this is not a study of how rural students pay for college, it should be noted that the trend appears to be that of them, regardless of whether or not their parents were assisting them in paying, pursued the same routes of paying tuition. It appears that they are nearly unanimous in their accumulation of scholarships, from full four-year scholarships to a few thousand dollars for their first year. Many plan to work. Through a combination of these methods, in-state public tuition to affordable to some without having to take out loans. Many students attending non-elite private institutions reported that they planned to have around 60,000 dollars in debt after they graduated.

While it is logical to assume, based on the interviews, that all students recognize the link between a cheaper public education and less or no student debt, these applicants do not always wind up at Indiana's flagship public institutions—something we would assume to be very common for these top-performing students. We know that many students do not consider IU, Purdue, or IUPUI because of their size or distance from home, but some students' scholarships make attending a private institution cheaper. Kaitlin, for instance, chose the University of Evansville because, she said, "They had offered me enough in scholarships that, [compared] the other schools I was looking at, it didn't make sense and wasn't financially responsible for me to go there." Given the still-common tendency of public flagship institutions' tuition to necessitate student loans, it is unsurprising that many top-performing students statewide choose a regional or branch public institution for a degree, though these schools are not as academically rigorous. A few also begin their educations at community colleges, but it is probable that the higher educational aptitude and ambitions of this cohort limits this tendency. Some of these students surely start at one of these institutions planning to transfer after a year or two to save money.

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One of the final questions asked of the interviewed cohort, usually a few weeks after their high school graduation, was, "Are you satisfied with your college choice? If you could do it again, what would you do differently?"

The answer to the latter was addressed earlier—many wish they would have spent less time doing extracurricular activities and more time hiking up their test scores for

greater competitiveness in scholarship applications. But during over summer before their matriculation, the overwhelming answer among rural Indiana high school students—so unanimous in the interviewed cohort that it can probably be similarly inferred about the state-wide cohort—was, Yes, they were satisfied with their college choice. Given what has been expressed here, this is not surprising. It appears that students are centrally aware of their financial situation—whether or not they will have to take loans for their ideal education—and that they match this with what colleges will match their desires. Aside from elite schools, these students' grades and standardized test scores allow them to be reasonably sure of admittance at all schools to which they apply.

The key difference that a rural upbringing, marked by social conservatism and traditionalism, small populations, and limited educational and cultural resources, manifests in a strong tendency for many students to pursue expressly religious educations or other smaller, private schools. While the tendency draws a few students out of Indiana, it often draws students to institutions with familiar environments: often in Indiana and in small or medium-sized towns. Even among rural students who attend college in Indianapolis or other larger cities, a smaller campus and student body is attractive to some. These limitations also push fewer rural students to elite institutions, and the uncommonness of going out-of-state is effected by a lack of a foundation to build towards this undertaking from educators and families. The other key concern, of course, is finances. Even though many top students' household incomes are higher than the state average, only some students can expect their parents to help them graduate loan-free, even if the student's tuition is lowered by scholarships. As we will see from the next

chapter, the conclusions drawn from this interview analysis appear to match statewide trends moderately well.

**Table 3:** Students' College Choices

<i>Student</i>	<i>Region</i>	<i>College</i>	<i>Distance</i>	<i>Other schools applied to</i>
Kayla	North Central	Butler University	103	Baylor University, Oklahoma State University, Valparaiso University
Shannon	Northeast	Goshen College	91	Hesston College (KS), Bethel College (KS), Bluffton University (OH), Eastern Mennonite University (VA), Indiana University
Jake	Northeast	Purdue University	97	—
Jason	Northeast	Purdue University	121	—
Lisa	Northeast	Purdue University	150	IU, Butler, Notre Dame
Chris	Northeast	Xavier University (OH)	198	Valparaiso University, University of Notre Dame, IU
Kaitlin	Northeast	University of Evansville	300	Carthage College (WI), IU, Purdue University, University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill, UNC–Charlotte, North Carolina State University
Nicole	Central	Butler University	36	Purdue
Grant	Southwest	Indiana State University	19	IU, Marion University, Ball State University, Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis
Liam	Southwest	Indiana University	50	University of Michigan
Brandon	Southwest	Indiana University	80	University of Southern Indiana, IU, IUPUI, UNC–Chapel Hill
Rachel	Southwest	IUPUI	99	—
Anna	Southwest	Hanover College	132	Valparaiso, Franklin College, Manchester University, Holy Cross College, St. Mary-of-the-Woods College, DePauw University, Butler

Brent	Southwest	University of Notre Dame	275	Swarthmore College (PA), Washington and Lee University (VA), Colorado College, Purdue, University of Chicago
Amy	Southwest	Harding University (AR)	413	—
Dave	Southwest	Georgetown University	671	U Chicago, Columbia University, Brown University, Washington University in St. Louis, Vanderbilt University, IU, DePauw
Molly	South Central	University of Evansville	98	Butler
Abigail	Southeast	Indiana University	60	—
Brooke	Southeast	Covenant College (GA)	343	—

—Students' names are pseudonyms

—“Type” derived from Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (“Regional” institutions do not award PhDs; all “Religious” institutions are “Regional” in this sense)

—Distance figured in miles driving using Google Maps

**Table 4:** Students' Parents' Characteristics

<i>Student, region, college</i>	<i>Parents' marital status</i>	<i>1- or 2-parent household</i>	<i>First gen.</i>	<i>Parents' employment</i>	<i>Parents' education</i>	<i>Annual household income (\$)</i>
Kayla, NC, Butler	Married	2	Yes	Medical receptionist, Agriculture (dairy worker)	Ivy Tech CC; –	75,000
Shannon, NE, Goshen	Divorced	1 (mother)	No	Math teacher, institutionalized	Goshen C; John Brown U	60,000
Jake, NE, Purdue	Divorced	– (moved out)	Yes	Unemployed, incarcerated	No college (2)	0
Jason, NE, Purdue	Married	2	Yes	Construction, Beautician	No college; Technical program	66,000*
Lisa, NE, Purdue	Married	2	No	Dairy farmers (retired)	No college (2)	55,000
Chris, NE, Xavier	Married	2	Yes	Hospital director of environmental services, Manufacturing (factory quality care technician)	Ivy Tech Community College; College dropout	80,000*
Kaitlin, NE, U of Evansville	Divorced	Joint custody	Yes	Controller-accountant, Factory worker	Vincennes University (AA); No college	112,000*
Nicole, C, Butler	Married	2	No	Banker, Probation officer	Purdue; Purdue	130,000
Grant, SW, ISU	Married	2	Yes	Car dealership controller, Manufacturing (printer)	No college; College dropout	92,000

Liam, SW, IU	Married	2	No	Pharmaceutical manufacturing, Elementary teacher	IU; IU	80,000
Brandon, SW, IU	Married	2	Yes	Home daycare, Manufacturing (factory worker)	No College; No College	66,000
Rachel, SW, IUPUI	Married	2	No	Engineer, logistics management specialist	No College; Ivy Tech (BA) Indiana Wesleyan (MA)	100,000
Anna, SW, Hanover	Married	2	No	Education (assistant principal), law enforcement (state trooper)	St. Mary-of-the-Woods (BA) Indiana Wesleyan (MA); College dropout	130,000*
Brent, SW, Notre Dame	Married	2	No	Car company, school secretary	4-year college; No college	70,000
Amy, SW, Harding	Divorced	2 (mother–stepfather)	No	Corrections, Mechanic	ISU, VU; 4-year college	60,000
Dave, SW, Georgetown	Divorced	1 (mother)	No	Elementary teacher	St. Mary-of-the-Woods College (BA); No college	30,000
Molly, SW, U of Evansville	Married	2	Yes	Accountant, Restaurant manager	College dropout; College dropout	60,000
Abigail, SE, IU	Divorced	2 (mother, stepfather)	No	Secondary teacher, Principal	IU-Southeast; Hanover College	180,000
Brooke, SE, Covenant	Married	2	Yes	Phone technician, Mail clerk	Ivy Tech (AA); No college	80,000

—“First generation” students will be the first in their immediate family to graduate with a BA or BS.

—Household incomes marked with asterisk were unknown by the students and estimated from Indiana Occupational Employment Statistics from the US Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics

—All degrees BA unless mentioned; Mothers’ educations listed first

—Mean household income: \$80,315.79 (Median: \$75,000)

**Table 5:** Students’ Favorite High School Subjects, Potential Majors, and Intended Careers

<i>Student, region, college</i>	<i>Favorite HS subjects</i>	<i>Potential major</i>	<i>Intended career</i>
Kayla, NC, Butler	Spanish, English, history classes	Political science, communications	Lawyer (criminal law; prosecution, investigation,)
Shannon, NE, Goshen	History, math, writing, chemistry	History	Teacher, Lawyer, Entertainment (makeup tech)
Jake, NE, Purdue	Physical science classes	Chemical engineering, Environmental engineering	Engineer
Jason, NE, Purdue	Math	Electrical engineering	Engineer
Lisa, NE, Purdue	Biology, home economics	Agricultural business, agricultural economics	Agriculture
Chris, NE, Xavier	Anatomy	Pre-med	Medical doctor (neurosurgery, psychiatry)
Kaitlin, NE, U of Evansville	Chemistry	Chemistry	Medical researcher (neurology, oncology)
Nicole, C, Butler	Chemistry	Pharmacy	Pharmacist

Grant, SW, ISU	Accounting, economics	Business	Finance
Liam, SW, IU	Chemistry, biology	Biology, chemistry	Medical doctor (oncology)
Brandon, SW, IU	Sciences classes, math classes, chemistry	Psychology, health administration	Hospital administration
Rachel, SW, IUPUI	Anatomy	Pharmacy	Pharmacy, Politics
Anna, SW, Hanover	History, math, visual art	Psychology and sociology	Psychologist (art therapy)
Brent, SW, Notre Dame	Math, science	Applied and computational mathematics, statistics	Finance
Amy, SW, Harding	Chemistry	Pharmacy	Pharmacist
Dave, SW, Georgetown	European history	English, History, Government, Economics	Writer, Journalist, Lawyer, Policymaking/politics
Molly, SW, U of Evansville	Band, biology, chemistry, English	Biology	Medical doctor (neurology, cardiology, gastroenterology)
Abigail, SE, IU	Chemistry, biology	Environmental management	Natural resource management
Brooke, SE, Covenant	Anatomy and physiology, physics	Biology	Medical research (genetics), Natural resource management

**Table 6:** Students' Standardized Test Scores

Student	Advanced Placement (Score 1–5; Passing Score 3+)	SAT and percentile <sup>63</sup>	ACT and percentile <sup>64</sup>
Kayla, NC, Butler	Calculus AB (4), Spanish language (3), English language (3), US history (3)	1700, 73 <sup>rd</sup>	32, 98 <sup>th</sup>
Shannon, NE, Goshen	Chemistry (1), World history (3), US history (3), English literature (3)	1800, 82 <sup>nd</sup>	26, 83 <sup>rd</sup>
Jake, NE, Purdue	English literature (3), Calculus AB (5), Chemistry (5), Biology (4)	1970, 92 <sup>nd</sup> (twice)	—
Jason, NE, Purdue	Chemistry (3), Calculus AB (2)	1960, 91 <sup>st</sup>	—
Lisa, NE, Purdue	—	1630, 66 <sup>th</sup>	—

<sup>63</sup> The College Board, “SAT Percentile Ranks for Males, Females, and Total Group” (New York: The College Board, 2013).

<sup>64</sup> ACT, Inc. “National Ranks for Test Scores and Composite Score” (Iowa City, IA: 2015)

Chris, NE, Xavier	Calculus AB (5), English language (3), US history (2)	2080, 96 <sup>th</sup>	31, 97 <sup>th</sup>
Kaitlin, NE, U of Evansville	Chemistry (4), Calculus AB (4), English literature (4)	1870, 86 <sup>th</sup>	27, 87 <sup>th</sup>
Nicole, C, Butler	Microeconomics (4), Calculus AB (3), English language (3), Biology (3)	1820, 83 <sup>rd</sup>	30, 95 <sup>th</sup>
Grant, SW, ISU	Chemistry (2)	1700, 73 <sup>rd</sup> (three times)	—
Liam, SW, IU	Calculus AB (4), Chemistry (3)	1900, 88 <sup>th</sup>	32, 98 <sup>th</sup>
Brandon, SW, IU	Calculus AB (1), English literature (2)	1760, 78 <sup>th</sup> (2 times taken)	31, 97 <sup>th</sup> (twice)
Rachel, SW, IUPUI	—	1690, 72 <sup>nd</sup>	—
Anna, SW, Hanover	US history (3), European history (2), Calculus (1)	1740, 77 <sup>th</sup> (five times)	27, 87 <sup>th</sup> (once)
Brent, SW, Notre Dame	English Literature (5), Calculus AB (5), Physics B (5), Macroeconomics (5)*, Microeconomics (5)*, Statistics (5)*, Chemistry (4)*	—	32, 98 <sup>th</sup>
Amy, SW, Harding	Calculus AB (2), Chemistry (2)	—	30, 95 <sup>th</sup> (5 times)
Dave, SW, Georgetown	Calculus AB (3), Physics (1), Chemistry (1), European history (4), US government* (4), European history (5), World history* (5)	2050, 95 <sup>th</sup>	30, 95 <sup>th</sup>
Molly, SC, U of Evansville	Psychology (?)	1940, 90 <sup>th</sup> (five times)	—
Abigail, SE, IU	English language (3)	1700, 73 <sup>rd</sup> (once)	24, 74 <sup>th</sup> (once)
Brooke, SE, Covenant	—	1800, 82 <sup>nd</sup> (twice)	—

—AP exam cores marked with asterisk were self-studied

—Molly did not know her score on the AP Psychology exam and dropped out of communication before she could report it

—SAT data from 2013 college-bound seniors; ACT data from 2014–15 tests

—Mean number of AP exams taken: 2.63; mean number of AP exams passed: 1.95

—Mean SAT percentile: 82.18<sup>th</sup>; Mean ACT percentile: 92<sup>nd</sup>

### *Data Analysis*

Close to one-eighth of around 200 rural Indiana high schools returned requests for ranked matriculation data for students graduating in the top ten percent of classes from around 2010 to 2014 (Figure 2, page XX). I eventually compiled data the postsecondary plans of 763 such high school seniors graduating from 2008 to 2015, with most of the

data coming from 2010 to 2014. 737 students had planned to matriculate somewhere in the fall.

**Table 7**

	<i>Statewide Sample (Total)</i>		<i>Statewide Sample (Top 5%)</i>		<i>Interviewed Sample</i>	
	<i>Total</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Purdue	144	19.54	72	25.09	3	15.79
IU	104	14.11	48	16.73	3	15.79
IUPUI	29	3.94	11	3.83	1	5.26
<i>Total IN Flagship</i>	<i>277</i>	<i>37.59</i>	<i>131</i>	<i>45.65</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>36.84</i>
Ball State U	62	8.41	19	6.62	0	0
Indiana State U	29	3.94	8	2.79	1	5.26
U of Southern IN	23	3.12	6	2.09	0	0
<i>Total IN Regional</i>	<i>114</i>	<i>15.47</i>	<i>33</i>	<i>11.50</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>5.26</i>
IN Public Branch	47	6.38	8	2.79	0	0
IN CC	23	3.12	4	1.39	0	0
<i>Total IN Public</i>	<i>461</i>	<i>62.55</i>	<i>176</i>	<i>61.32</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>42.11</i>
IN Religious	46	6.24	13	4.53	1	5.26
IN Private	137	18.59	64	22.30	5	26.32
IN Elite	2	0.27	2	0.70	1	5.26
<i>Total IN</i>	<i>646</i>	<i>87.65</i>	<i>255</i>	<i>88.85</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>78.95</i>
OOS Public	35	4.75	10	3.84	0	0
OOS CC	6	0.81	0	0	0	0
OOS Religious	20	2.71	7	2.43	2	10.54
OOS Private	22	2.99	10	3.84	1	5.26
OOS Elite	8	1.09	5	1.74	1	5.26
<i>Total OOS</i>	<i>91</i>	<i>12.35</i>	<i>32</i>	<i>11.15</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>21.05</i>
Total Religious	66	8.96	20	6.97	3	15.79
Total Secular	671	91.05	267	93.03	16	84.21
Total Public	501	67.98	187	65.16	8	42.11
Total Private	236	32.02	100	34.84	11	57.90
Total College	737	100.00	287	100.00	19	100.00
Total No College	26	—	5	—	0	—

—“IN” means “Indiana” or “in-state”; “OOS” means “out-of-state”

Obviously, there are some differences between the interviewed sample and the full statewide sample in this dataset. As far as similarities ran, the percentages of students going to in-state public flagship institutions (i.e. IU, Purdue, or IUPUI) was nearly the same in both samples, and the number of students to each campus was likewise very

similar. The interviewed sample reflected the religious–secular divide of college choices as exhibited in the large, statewide sample. It turns out that going out-of-state to a religious college is fairly uncommon; only around one in thirty-seven of the statewide sample did this, compared to two of the nineteen interviewed students. Furthermore, leaving Indiana for college is not as common statewide (12 percent) as it was in the interviewed sample (21 percent). Students going to private institutions and especially elite institution-going students are overrepresented in the interviewed sample.

In many ways, these discrepancies are not too detrimental because the over-sampling of uncommon statewide college choice processes provides insight into how their peers across the state, few as they are, are approaching the process. From talking to students planning to go to public Indiana institutions, we know that there is a great deal of similarity among this cohort: most choose this route because it is cheaper, though a few may also like the atmosphere at a big college town or Indianapolis or appreciate the resources of a large, research-oriented school. We have a sense of what may have pushed the ten statewide students to pursue an education at a selective, elite institution through interviews with two such students, and the same goes for other students choosing uncommon paths statewide.

There are major caveats with the interviewed sample that become apparent, however. Nearly everyone interviewed *was* planning to go to college; only three percent of the total sample of students planned to start working, join the armed forces, or attend online for-profit college or a trade program (e.g. beauty college) Furthermore, the interviewed cohort is seriously lacking representation of students who planned to go to a

public regional or branch campus or to community college. We can infer that these students may choose these second-tier schools because of their lower tuition (some plan to transfer), unique capacities (Ball State, for instance, has an architectural program; Indiana State's teaching program is held in high regard), closeness to home (especially for commuting students), or their targeting of top students for merit scholarships (which brought one interviewed student to study there). We can be less certain of the strength of one of these over another because we do not have the qualitative data to explain the quantitative.

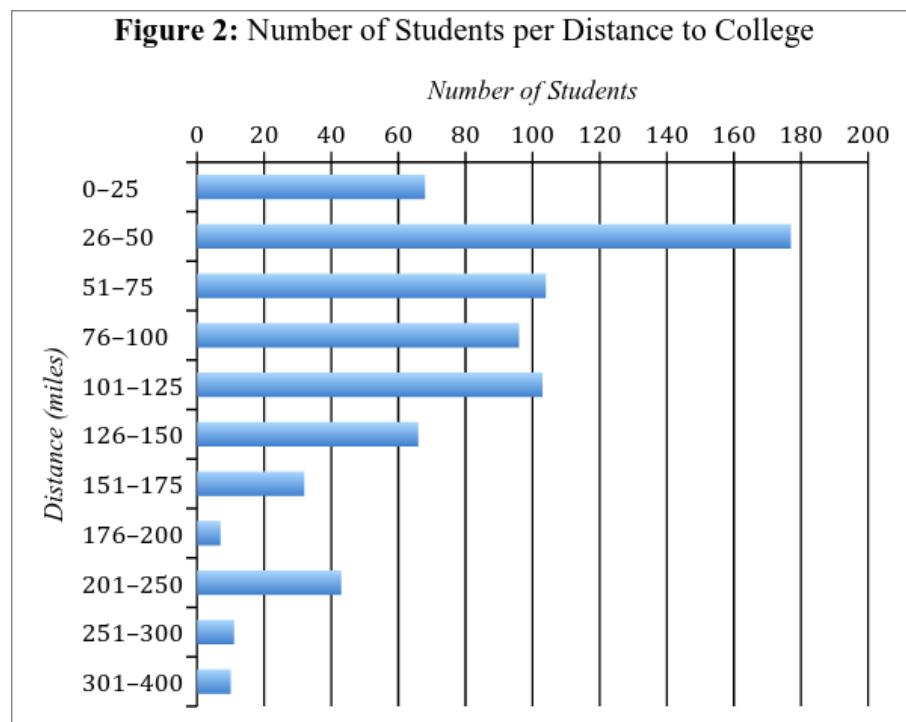
This gap might be due to the interviewed students themselves. Due to the process through which they were recruited for this study—many were contacted over social media after being named valedictorians or salutatorians in local media stories on graduation ceremonies—the cohort of interviewed students skewed towards the top of the top-ten percent. From part of the statewide sample, however, can compare a sample of top-five percent-graduating seniors to the interviewed students. Though not all contacted schools returned data that had each top student's college choice arranged by class rank, 20 schools did; thus the 292 students in **Table 7**.

There is an increase in the number of students attending IU and Purdue and a decrease in students attending its public and branch institutions and community colleges from the top-ten top-five percent datasets, though the number of students attending in-state public institutions is similar for both cohorts. There are small increases in the number of students attending elite schools; the rest of the elite-going students were from schools that returned unranked placement lists, so we can probably assume that these

students were at the very top of their classes, as well. In all, the number of top-five percent students attending second-tier Indiana postsecondary institutions declined towards the percentage of interviewed students that did so, but the data suggests that the top-five percent cohort is also less likely to attend religious institutions than either the interviewed or top-ten percent cohort.

+ + +

Given that we have both the secondary and postsecondary schools of this statewide sample of students, we can also measure statistical trends in distance between a student's selected college or university and their high school.



—1 student went between 401 and 500 miles away from his or her high school; 2 went 501–750 miles; 9 went 751–1000 miles; 3 went 1001–1250 miles; and 2 went 1,500+ miles (both to Brigham Young University)

### *Out-of-State Institutions*

We already know that the vast majority of rural Indiana high school students choose an in-state postsecondary institution, and this dataset suggests that the roughly 12 percent of students who leave Indiana do not go far beyond its neighboring four states.

For students attending religious colleges outside of Indiana and its bordering states, the average was around 445 miles; of those that choose religious schools in Indiana's bordering states, the average distance was about 214 miles. Continuing with the theme established in the interview analysis, religiously oriented often students appear to be willing to choose schools far from home. Nine students going to religious institutions beyond Indiana and its four neighboring states were planning to go over 300 miles away. Comparing ratios of students going to in-state and out-of-state religious and private colleges also gives credence to the idea that religious college-going students are more apt to leave Indiana. For every student going to an out-of-state religious college, 2.30 students are going to an in-state one; for every student leaving Indiana for a private college, 6.23 are going to an in-state one.

Of the students who chose private colleges outside of Indiana, only a few were set to attend nationally known colleges: one each was attending St. Olaf College in Minnesota and Alma College in Michigan, both members of the Consortium of Liberal Arts Colleges (CLAC). One was attending the recently reopened Antioch College in rural southwestern Ohio, where students receive narrative evaluations instead of grades and the curriculum focuses on collaborative education; another was attending the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York. However, a large majority of these students were attending a college in one of Indiana's neighboring states, with a mean distance of 95

miles and a standard deviation of just under 65 miles. Though the standard deviation was about 25 miles less among students staying in-state, the means only off a little over three miles.

This trend follows in other states' regional public institutions and community colleges. While a student went off to Cleveland State, Marshall University, Louisiana State, and South Dakota State along with two from different high schools to Colorado State, the vast majority of students going out-of-state stayed close to Indiana. Including five students attending community colleges in rural Illinois, the mean distance for 25 students that kind of institution was only 47.08 miles from postsecondary institution to high school with a standard deviation of 71.42 miles. 14 students attended Miami University of Ohio, and the mean distance was only 14.42 miles with a standard deviation of 1.09 miles (12 of these students came from one high school that placed 15.58 percent of its reported top-ten percent of graduates there). Only four students were set to attend flagship state institutions, all in the Big Ten: two to Michigan, one to Ohio State, and one to Illinois.

Finally, of the scant number of students set to attend elite, selective universities (10 of 737), only two were reported at Indiana's Notre Dame. Two chose Carleton College in Minnesota, a member of CLAC and ranked eighth of all national liberal arts colleges by *US News*. One had been selected by West Point, and another was going to Cleveland's engineering powerhouse Case Western Reserve University. Two were staying in the Midwest, to Washington University in St. Louis and the University of Chicago, and two were going east to Harvard and Yale.

*In-state Public Institutions*

**Table 8**

<i>Institution</i>	<i>Number of Students</i>	<i>Mean Distance (miles)</i>	<i>Standard Deviation (miles)</i>
<i>Flagship (PU, IU, &amp; IUPUI)</i>	277	95.09	50.77
Purdue	144	109.03	54.43
IU	104	80.64	44.60
IUPUI	29	75.50	26.37
<i>Regional Institutions</i>	114	88.21	60.72
Ball State U	62	88.62	48.82
Indiana State U	29	69.38	47.60
U of Southern Indiana	23	111.86	92.61
<i>Branch Institutions</i>	47	31.23	11.19
<i>Community colleges (IN &amp; IL)</i>	29	44.96	31.59

Though IUPUI is considered a flagship institution by the state—it awards degrees from both of its parent institutions, has branch campuses of its own, and produces a fair amount of research—in terms of atmosphere and academic reputation, it is not in the same class as IU or Purdue. This is reflected in the statewide sample: for every student at IUPUI, 7.52 go to Bloomington or West Lafayette.

That being said, Purdue attracts more top-performing rural Indiana high school graduates than IU. This is clear from both statewide datasets; additionally, though both IU and Purdue attract a greater percentage of those graduating in the top-five percent of their high school classes than top-ten percent students total, Purdue attracts a higher proportion of top-five percent students compared to IU than it does in the total top-ten percent dataset. This is likely because, as stated, Purdue is Indiana's land grant public institution, with well-known programs in agriculture, engineering, and pharmacy that offer students a path to the professions that they more likely see in their rural

communities. Purdue's higher rates of attendance among this population also manifests in a larger mean distance from students' high schools to the college campus: 109.03 miles for Purdue (with a standard deviation of 54.43) compared to 80.64 miles for IU (**Table 8**), though this shift is *very likely* due to the dataset's unfortunate oversampling of Southern Indiana high schools (**Figure 2**, page ). That more students are going to Purdue even as the statewide dataset of students skews southward is also a testament to its attractiveness for rural students. Another factor may be cultural: Purdue, located on Indiana's northern plains with a pronounced agricultural presence, may be an easier change for rural students compared to IU, located in Indiana's most visibly progressive city (akin to Madison compared to the rest of Wisconsin, though with a much smaller population).

Indiana's regional and branch institutions and community colleges attract students from much smaller radii from their campuses. This carries an inferred point: for this population, there is a key distinction between attending IU or Purdue and attending another state institution (there is probably a distinction for IUPUI for some students as well, because of its location adjacent to downtown Indianapolis). Except for the students who live very close to Bloomington or West Lafayette, going to IU or Purdue carries a connotation because of the schools' academic and popular reputations statewide (i.e. collegiate sports). They are institutions apart from all other institutions in the state, similar to Notre Dame's position from its Catholic character, renowned football program, and academics. Though the interviewed sample did not yield enough top-performing students attending a branch or regional institution to directly make a comparison, we

know that most of the students who were set to attend IU or Purdue only considered those two schools. They attract students statewide because they provide the best undergraduate educations for the price of in-state tuition.

As said, Indiana's community colleges and branch and regional institutions attract students from much smaller average distances than the flagship (**Table 8**). IUPUI's standard deviation is much larger than that of IU. One should remember that IUPUI is located in Indianapolis, which is ringed by nine suburban counties. This suggests that IUPUI does indeed tend to attract rural students primarily from central Indiana, though these students must first push through suburbia to get there.

Another caveat from a lack of interviewed students who were set to attend Indiana's regional institutions is the inability to explain the tendency of schools to attract students from as wide radii as Indiana's flagships. The lower sampled populations at Ball State, ISU, and USI compared to IU and Purdue make sense given the latter two schools' much larger undergraduate populations; IUPUI's small sampled population could also be explained by the fact that many of its students are likely commuters from the Indianapolis Metropolitan Area. Ball State's largest number of sampled students also makes sense given that it has nearly twice as many undergraduates as ISU or USI. However, it appears that students are as prone to travel as far to Ball State, ISU, or USI as they travel to IU, Purdue, or IUPUI. Suburban areas surround neither Muncie, Terre Haute, nor Evansville like they do Indianapolis. Perhaps Indiana's regional institutions do a good job at recruiting rural talent through offering big scholarships, like the interviewed student going to ISU. Additionally, we should not ignore that the total number of undergraduates,

from rural areas or otherwise, at Indiana's regional campuses is smaller than the populations at its flagship campuses. Finally, the statewide sample shows that nearly as many top-performing rural students attend in-state regional or branch institutions and community colleges as attend in-state religious or other private institutions (184 compared to 185, including Notre Dame, respectively).

The key distinction between Indiana's regional and branch institutions is that the former are residential while the latter alongside community colleges largely serve commuting students. This is reflected in the mean distances and standard means of both branch campuses and community colleges; they are located much closer to top-performing students' high schools than any other type of institution.

#### *In-state Private and Religious Institutions*

**Table 9**

<i>Institution</i>	<i>Number of Students</i>	<i>Mean Distance (miles)</i>	<i>Standard Deviation (miles)</i>
RHIT	18	109.56	48.57
U of Indianapolis	27	73.96	14.45
Butler	28	88.11	39.06
<i>Total IN Private</i>	<i>137</i>	<i>91.84</i>	<i>39.41</i>
<i>Total IN Religious</i>	<i>46</i>	<i>67.77</i>	<i>39.93</i>

Excluding the students going to Notre Dame, 183 top-performing rural Indiana high school students were listed as attending a private or religious college in Indiana. Of the latter, the most popular were Rose–Hulman Institute of Technology, Butler University, and the University of Indianapolis. Of students attending private colleges, twelve were attending CLAC institutions (three to Earlham, four to Wabash, and five to DePauw), and thirteen were attending Catholic-affiliated private colleges.

First to compare Rose–Hulman Institute of Technology, the University of Indianapolis, and Butler. Rose–Hulman, as its name implies, focuses on STEM fields. Though the relatively small number of students who matriculate there lessens the applicability of mean distance and standard deviation measures, the former is nearly identical to that of Purdue while the latter is only 5.86 miles off. It is not difficult to imagine that a good engineering program is an draw for many statewide rural students, hence the similar radii. Additionally, given that Terre Haute is very close to the Illinois border and that the statewide sample consists only of Hoosiers, we can imagine that Rose–Hulman draws top-performing rural students from around the state that are somehow able to cover the increased tuition or find its smaller size appealing.

Both Butler's mean distance and standard deviation is larger than the University of Indianapolis, although they are both located in the capitol and attract a near equal number of students in the statewide sample. Reasons that Butler might attract students from a larger area include its enhanced profile—it is located near Indianapolis's cosmopolitan Broad Ripple district and has a nationally successful basketball program—and because, as we know from the interview analysis, its pharmacy program is appealing to some who might be comparing it to that of Purdue. The mean distance of students' high schools to the University of Indianapolis is similar to that of IUPUI, though its standard deviation is smaller by nearly 12 miles. The median distances in miles of Rose–Hulman, Butler, and the University of Indianapolis (113, 79, and 69) also carry these inferences.

Altogether, the mean distances of students set to attend private Indiana institutions are similar to that of IU, Purdue, and IUPUI in aggregate. That being said, the standard deviation associated with private in-state schools is lower, by around 11 miles. Given what we know from the interviewed cohort, this is not unexpected: many choose a smaller, private college because they worry about being lost in the hustle and bustle of an impersonal large, public campus. This apprehension may correlate with fear of homesickness, which contributes to students choosing a private school that is closer to home.

There is little statistically to glean from the rest of the data regarding rural students' distances to other, less widely attended Indiana public colleges. Earlham only draws students from 34 (1) and 6 (2) miles away in the dataset, while students come to DePauw and Wabash from 35 to 135 and 42 to 156 miles away, respectively. Most of these schools recruit students from similar ranges, though the furthest anyone went was 257 miles (to the University of Evansville in Indiana's southwest corner). Given what we know of the interviewed students who chose private Indiana colleges—that they explore many, often in-state options, this is not surprising.

The evangelical Indiana Wesleyan University, the college choice of 12 students in the statewide sample, was the most popular religious, in-state institution in the statewide sample of students. The mean distance of students to its campus—79.67 miles—was above the statewide mean of religious colleges, though four students from the same high school 43 miles away had gone there. The case of religious colleges, in or outside of Indiana, remains difficult to read. The tendency for these students to choose religious

colleges close to home may be a manifestation the sense of traditionalism and social conservatism associated with evangelical and born-again Christianity. Given the expense associated with tuition to these institutions and the availability of public institutions at a comparable distance, it appears unlikely that students choose to go to a religious college close to home to save money, unless they are being covered by scholarships more there than they would be at public institutions. As has been always the case, it appears that students choose these colleges for the same reason that they choose any college: they match their desires with any fiscal, social, or academic limitations.

+ + +

One last point of comparison to make would be to match the eventual college choices of top-performing rural Indiana college students with the choices of their metropolitan peers. This table compares the statewide dataset alongside the chosen colleges of the top-ten percent of 2014 graduates from Bloomington High School North and Muncie Central High School.

**Table 10**

	<i>Statewide Sample (Total)</i>		<i>BHSN &amp; MCHS</i>	
	<i>Total</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Purdue	144	19.54	4	6.25
IU	104	14.11	20	31.25
IUPUI	29	3.94	1	1.56
<i>Total IN Flagship</i>	<i>277</i>	<i>37.59</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>39.06</i>
Ball State U	62	8.41	9	14.06
Indiana State U	29	3.94	0	0
U of Southern IN	23	3.12	1	1.56
<i>Total IN Regional</i>	<i>114</i>	<i>15.47</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>15.63</i>
IN Public Branch	47	6.38	1	1.56
IN CC	23	3.12	0	0
<i>Total IN Public</i>	<i>461</i>	<i>62.55</i>	<i>36</i>	<i>56.25</i>
IN Religious	46	6.24	1	1.56
IN Private	137	18.59	9	14.06

IN Elite	2	0.27	0	0
<i>Total IN</i>	646	87.65	46	71.88
OOS Public	35	4.75	4	6.25
OOS CC	6	0.81	0	0
OOS Religious	20	2.71	0	0
OOS Private	22	2.99	7	10.94
OOS Elite	8	1.09	7	10.94
<i>Total OOS</i>	91	12.35	18	28.13
Total Religious	66	8.96	1	1.56
Total Secular	671	91.05	63	98.44
Total Public	501	67.98	40	62.50
Total Private	236	32.02	24	37.5
Total College	737	100.00	64	100.00
Total No College	26	–	0	–

Though the data college obviously skews the metropolitan dataset somewhat towards IU and Ball State, it should be noted nevertheless that these city high schools send marginally more students to IU and Purdue than the rural high schools. Nevertheless, the percentages for Indiana flagship and regional schools are nearly constant in both groups. Very few in the metropolitan cohort go to Indiana branch schools, but this not surprising given the other public institutions in the high schools' back yards.

The biggest difference in college choice between top-performing students from rural Indiana and their identically ranked peers from Bloomington North and Muncie Central is that the metropolitan students are much more likely to leave Indiana for their postsecondary education. They are also much less likely to choose a religious school. It may be that metropolitan students who go to out-of-state public schools are more likely to choose more prestigious programs—the four from Bloomington North who did so were

all going to flagship member schools of the American Association of Universities: North Carolina, Georgia Tech, Virginia, and Colorado. But perhaps the most shocking difference is that just a three fewer students total were set to attend an elite school from Bloomington North or Muncie Central than the whole rural dataset; in aggregate, the latter outnumbers the former by 11.52 to 1.

+ + +

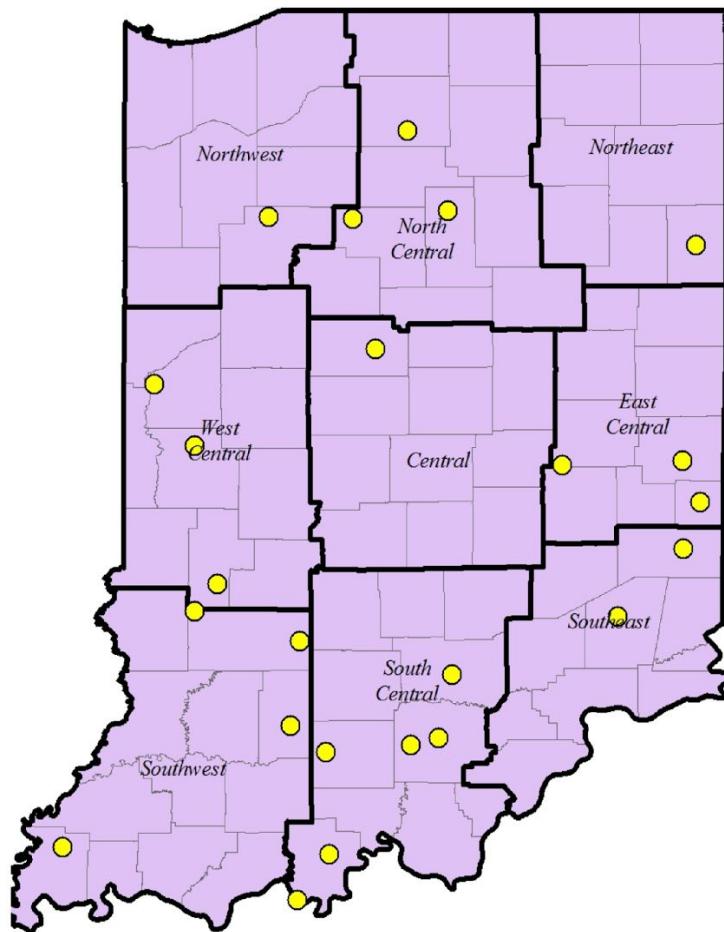
Through its size and sampling of rural high schools throughout Indiana, this dataset gives a key insight into the parameters of college choice among top-performing students in the rural Hoosier state. Through illustrative comparisons, we also have some idea how these students' college choices differ from those of their same-ranked metropolitan peers.

The dataset shows that the interviewed sample was not terribly off; its oversampling of rural students set to attend elite, religious, and out-of-state schools provides an insight into what drives these students out of the rural statewide norm. Given the dataset, we know that top-performing rural Hoosiers rarely leave the state, and they rarely go far from its borders if they do. A majority of this cohort chooses a college that is 75 miles or less from their high school via best route (on roads, not as the crow flies); nearly three-quarters go less than 125 miles. The average distance traveled for all categories of in-state schools are less than 100 miles, though the standard deviations vary greatly.

Nevertheless, the rate college placement of top rural students into flagship state schools does not differ too much from the same rate among recent top graduates of high

schools in Muncie and Bloomington, Indiana. The difference is, in terms of percentages, these metropolitan students are far more likely to attend elite institutions or leave Indiana for college. Given what we know from the interviews, we can imagine why this is: a student needs to be independent in their college choice process if he or she wishes to attend an elite institution because rural schools obviously are not pushing their students to consider such options. If they were, more would be going, if the percentage of interviewed students achieving competitive standardized test scores is common to the statewide percentage. The lack of academic opportunities specifically for high aptitude students and the relative isolation of rural areas also plays a role in keeping rural Indiana students in-state. The region's high rate of religiousness also correlates with marginally more students seeking out Christian postsecondary educations.

*Figure 2: Rural High School Data Sources (created with ArcGIS)*



### *Conclusion*

*Little ditty about Jack and Diane  
Two American kids growing up in the heartland*

*Jackie's gonna be a football star,  
 Diane's debutante, backseat of Jackie's car  
 Oh, let it rock, let it roll  
 Let the Bible Belt come and save my soul  
 Hold onto sixteen as long as you can  
 Change is coming 'round real soon, make us women and men*  
 —From John Mellencamp's "Jack and Diane"

Out of the many ways that this study could have been improved, two in particular stand out to me. To begin, I should have taken more interviews. While I believe that we can establish series of patterns through which top-performing rural Indiana high school students choose a specific college—they find schools that match their aspiration and match it with any existing limitations—some aspects of the story are missing. I did not talk to any students who were planning to commute to college, and these students doubtlessly exist within the population. We do not know what number of these students dealt with rejection from their preferred school.

There are also limitations that came alongside a simple list of faceless students' college choices. To begin, we did not measure whether men and women eventually choose different colleges. Though we can assume from the literature and through most of the interviews that lots of these students came from somewhat more affluent and educated backgrounds than the rest their peers in high school, this tendency and the extent to which is evident is not certain.

There is, however, strength in the number of similarities existing in the dataset and in the interviews. We can assume that the path to IU or Purdue is a result of a student not wanting to pay more than in-state tuition while still getting the best public education in Indiana. We have an inclination that students who go to IUPUI, Butler, or the

University of Indianapolis may measure a desire to pay in-state tuition against a desire to be in Indianapolis; students may choose between Butler and Purdue not for location or tuition, but because they think that Butler's pharmacy program might suit them better. Rural students are often turned off by the newness and size of Indiana's flagship schools, and they tend to be more attracted to smaller, private institutions. Some of these religious student choose a college that directly aligns with their faith.

We can apply the interview analysis to the trends evident from over 700 top-performing rural Indiana high school students' college choices. We can assume that around one in three of these students will choose to go to IU or Purdue. Around three in ten will choose IUPUI, one of Indiana's three regional universities, one of its branch campuses, or one of its community colleges. Almost a quarter will go to a private or religious college in Indiana. Only around one in ten will leave the state; only around one in a hundred might go to an elite college. We know that these last two points and the number of students going to religious colleges differs greatly from the college choices of top-performing students in high schools that have more resources to offer them.

How could we improve the college choice process of top-performing rural students in this state and, potentially, beyond Indiana? A scenario in which these schools gain the ability to offer three times as many Advanced Placement classes well does not seem possible, nor does offering teacher salaries comparable to Indiana's wealthiest public school districts. One thing that I would encourage postsecondary institutions to do, purely because of my own background and belief that rural people have a perspective worth bringing to a diverse student body, would be to make an affirmed effort to reach

out to these students, especially in the event that their counselors or parents will not encourage them to apply to elite or flagship schools. Guidance counselors should also encourage students to seek the best postsecondary education available to them in light of their circumstances. An impoverished top-performing student should also know that many selective, elite colleges and universities can offer him or her fantastic financial aid.

Top-performing students should receive the best higher education that they can, through being admitted to the school and through being able to pay for it without crushing student debt. For the two students that I interviewed that were going to elite universities, perhaps five could also have been competitive in elite admissions based on their standardized test scores. One of these students wanted to apply to an elite program but lacked the SAT Subject Tests necessary to apply. For as much as individual independence appears to be necessary for rural students to apply to elite schools, this degree of independence is not required from metropolitan students. Rural guidance counselors and educators should be more proactive at encouraging their students to seek out and apply to institutions that match their potential. From the dataset and interviewed students' testimonies, it appears that there is room for improvement among many rural Indiana counselors.

+ + +

I asked every student, "What do you think the purpose of higher education is?"

*I think everyone should strive to be as educated as they can be.  
—Why?*

*One, it's a desire that I have to learn as much as I can possibly learn. It confuses me when people don't have that desire. I'm not studying astrophysics by any means, but I love to learn, and I think everyone should*

*strive to learn as much as you can. It can improve your life in so many ways.*

*—So the purpose is to be well-rounded?*

*Exactly, and just for the entire betterment of society... I think [education] could solve a lot of problems. I think a lot of world problems are caused by ignorance. Racism is a result of ignorance, in the true sense of the word. People just don't understand.*

*—Did you find that growing up where you are?*

*Yeah, in a way. I came from a farming and coal mining community... I see things people say and do, and it just seems like, if you knew more about that, it wouldn't be your opinion. It's just people believe what they want to believe based on their experience and their knowledge, and you almost need to have a certain level of knowledge to have an opinion on some things.*

*To teach people how to do their jobs. You can't get a job without it, and there's a reason for that, I'd say. You have to learn how to do it before you start it.*

*Actually at orientation, an IU professor explained his take on it, and I think it made some sense. He said that the purpose of a college education is to teach you to think in the real world, and that sounds really, really good to me.*

*Well, to me the purpose is to get out of poverty. At least for me, because it's basically I was the perfect kid to get to college, because my parents have no money whatsoever, and I'm really smart. So unless I was like a minority, there's no way that getting into college would have been easier for me. And I know that sounds cocky, but it's true.*

*It's really just to get a piece of paper that says you're qualified. That's pretty much what I feel that it is. What is should be, though, is a place where people who have a large desire to learn and an intellectual curiosity move beyond in their education, and learn a lot, establish independence, and move on—prepare for the next chapter of their life. That's what I want it to be.*

There is no question that rural Indiana—and rural America in general—is in decline. Population loss (and corresponding loss of political influence), meager job opportunities, and schools having fewer and fewer resources will probably continue for

the rest of the century. Sociologists need to take a record of the human cost of this decline; more importantly, research needs to be done on how to mitigate its effects on rural people. The field needs to teach students about the situation in a massive majority of this country's total area. It is my hope that people will do this work. The rural population matters enough and is needful enough to warrant it.

But coming from these areas, these students have a key advantage as they finish their secondary education. To be blunt, they are smart. They were capable of graduating with grades in the top tenth of their high school classes. Most have an idea of what they want to do with their lives, and if they do not they have an opportunity to figure this out soon. *Nearly all of them are going to college.*

We need to make sure that they are not significantly limited by their surroundings. Some of them will heal the sick, teach, engineer, practice law, or create. With their background, some of them will do the work necessary to help the lives of those from places like they grew up. They need a college education to do so, and they have made the best decision available to them. There is obviously room for improvement in this process with rural students, but, at the end of the day, they have made the decision to invest in becoming educated women and men. The kids are alright.

*Once I thought I'd never grow tall as this fence  
 Time dragged heavy and slow  
 But April came and August went before I knew just what they meant  
 And little by little I grew  
 And as I grew I came to know how fast the time could go  
 Once I thought I'd never go outside this fence  
 This space was plenty for me  
 But I walked down the road one day, and just what happened I can't say  
 But little by little it came to be  
 That line between the earth and sky came beckoning to me.*

—From “Laurie’s Song,” Aaron Copland’s *The Tender Land*

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### *Appendix A: Interview Questions for Students*

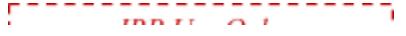
- Tell me about your high school experience.
  - Did you take part in extracurricular activities or sports?
  - Did you work part-time?
    - Why did you work? Were you enriched by it, or was it just to make money?
  - Tell me about experiences you've had in the organizations you belong to inside and outside of school.
    - Why were you so involved in those organizations? What did you gain from the experience? Why was it important to you?
- How was your academic experience in high school?
  - What classes were your favorites?
  - What subjects challenged you? Did you feel challenged by your classes?
  - Did your teachers seem interested in the subject and in your learning?
  - What was your experience in dual-enrollment or advanced placement classes, if any?
  - How much time were you spending doing work?
- How did your family affect your education?
  - What did you and your parents talk about at home?
  - How were your parents involved in your education and/or school? Were they in PTA, etc.? Did they ensure that you were doing well, were finishing homework, etc.?
  - How many people in your family attended college?
  - What did you and your parents talk about in terms of education? Coursework? Homework?
  - Did you talk to other family members who are or were recently in college about your college choice process?
- How did your friends affect your education?
  - Did your friends have a similar work ethic as you? Similar interests? Did their post-secondary plans affect your own?
  - Did you talk to them about plans for after high school? How you were going to afford college?
- The college choice process:
  - Tell me about when you first started thinking about college.
  - What, if any, college will you attend this fall?
  - For you personally, what does it mean to “prepare for college”?
    - What is the role of standardized testing in this process? Of choosing specific high school courses?
  - What was, or should have been, your school’s role in the process.
    - Did you talk to teachers or counselors at the school? What did you talk about?
  - Were you prompted to begin the process, or did you do it yourself?

- Did other adults besides teachers and family affect your education or college choice process? How?
- What majors are you interested in, and how did this affect what schools you applied to?
- What other factors influenced what schools you applied to? Distance from home? Tuition? Legacy status? Location? Public or private status? Did you feel like you had a chance of admission at all of the schools?
- Are you satisfied with your college choice? If you could do it again, what would you do differently?
- Life background
  - What do you think the purpose of higher education is?
  - Describe your travel experience.
  - Are you a churchgoer?
  - What careers are you interested in and why? What do you want to do with your life?
- Personal background
  - What were your SAT/ACT scores, advanced placement test scores, and GPA?
  - What do your parents do for a living, and around how much money did they make?
  - Will you receive on financial aid? Do you anticipate taking student loans?

#### *Appendix B: Interview Questions for Guidance Counselors*

- Describe your school's approach towards college preparation and readiness.
  - What do you do with curriculum, advising?
  - How do you approach preparing students of varying ability?
- How are your school's top-performing students prepared for the college choice process? If their process any different than other students'?
- What special artistic or academic curriculum is available for top students?
- Do you work with all students on their college application? Describe this process.
- What do you view is successful college preparation? When they go to a two-year college? A four-year college? How do you think this differs from students' conceptions? Out of college visits, testing preparation, career information, etc., what do you think is the most important component of college preparation?
- Is there any collaboration between you and teachers, administration regarding college choice?
- How have education patterns at this school shifted over time? Are students performing as well and going to the same colleges as they were in the past?
- Do you think top students generally should aspire to go to elite universities and colleges?

*Appendix C: Protocol and Students' Consent Form*

<b>STANFORD UNIVERSITY Research Consent Form</b> Protocol Director: <i>Aaron Gettinger</i>	
Protocol Title: The College Choice Process Among Top Rural Midwestern High School Graduates	

**DESCRIPTION:** You are invited to participate in a research study on the college choice process among top rural Midwestern high school graduates of the class of 2014. I will ask questions about your family, socioeconomic, and educational background. This will include personal information like standardized test scores and parental income level/range. You will be asked to discuss how you specifically chose the college that you plan on attending or why you are not attending college this fall. I will record this interview and transcribe it later, but I will erase both the recording and transcript at the end of my study. Your identity in the finished project will remain anonymous.

**TIME INVOLVEMENT:** Your participation will take approximately an hour.

**RISKS AND BENEFITS:** There are no personal benefits or risks from participation in this study. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect anything about you.

**PAYMENTS:** You will receive a ten-dollar gift card as payment for your participation.

**PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS:** If you have read this form and have decided to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. The alternative is not to participate. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. The results of this research study may be presented at scientific or professional meetings or published in scientific journals.

**CONTACT INFORMATION:**

**Questions:** If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this research, its procedures, risks and benefits, contact the Protocol Director, Aaron Gettinger, at (812) 564-1288 or [adg2015@stanford.edu](mailto:adg2015@stanford.edu) or the Academic Sponsor, Anthony Lusius Antonio, at (650) 723-4053 or [aantonio@stanford.edu](mailto:aantonio@stanford.edu).

**Independent Contact:** If you are not satisfied with how this study is being conducted, or if you have any concerns, complaints, or general questions about the research or your rights as a participant, please contact the Stanford Institutional Review Board (IRB) to speak to someone independent of the research team at (650)-723-2480 or toll free at 1-866-680-2906. You can also write to the Stanford IRB, Stanford University, 3000 El Camino Real, Five Palo Alto Square, 4th Floor, Palo Alto, CA 94306.

**Appointment Contact:** If you need to change your appointment, please contact Aaron Gettinger at 812-564-1288

**Indicate Yes or No:**

I give consent to be audiotaped during this study.

Yes No

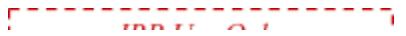
I give consent for tapes resulting from this study to be used for transcription.

Yes No

The extra copy of this signed and dated consent form is for you to keep.

**SIGNATURE** \_\_\_\_\_ **DATE** \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix D: Protocol and Guidance Counselors' Consent Form

<b>STANFORD UNIVERSITY Research Consent Form</b>	
Protocol Director: <i>Aaron Gettinger</i>	
Protocol Title: The College Choice Process Among Top Rural Midwestern High School Graduates	

**DESCRIPTION:** You, as a guidance counselor of a rural Midwestern high school, are invited to participate in a research study on the college choice process among top rural Midwestern high school graduates. In an interview, I will ask questions about your school's college preparation program, including the rigor of your artistic or academic curricula, how it conforms to the needs to top-performing students, and your opinion of its effectiveness. You will also be asked to discuss how your beliefs on the value of particular colleges and universities for top-performing students and how educational patterns at your school have shifted over time. I will record this interview and transcribe it later, but I will erase both the recording and transcript at the end of my study. Your identity in the finished project will remain anonymous.

**TIME INVOLVEMENT:** Your participation will take approximately an hour.

**RISKS AND BENEFITS:** There are no personal benefits or risks from participation in this study. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect anything about you.

**PAYMENTS:** You will receive a ten-dollar gift card as payment for your participation.

**PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS:** If you have read this form and have decided to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. The alternative is not to participate. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. The results of this research study may be presented at scientific or professional meetings or published in scientific journals.

**CONTACT INFORMATION:**

**Questions:** If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this research, its procedures, risks and benefits, contact the Protocol Director, Aaron Gettinger, at (812) 564-1288 or [adg2015@stanford.edu](mailto:adg2015@stanford.edu) or the Academic Sponsor, Anthony Lusius Antonio, at (650) 723-4053 or [aantonio@stanford.edu](mailto:aantonio@stanford.edu).

**Independent Contact:** If you are not satisfied with how this study is being conducted, or if you have any concerns, complaints, or general questions about the research or your rights as a participant, please contact the Stanford Institutional Review Board (IRB) to speak to someone independent of the research team at (650)-723-2480 or toll free at 1-866-680-2906. You can also write to the Stanford IRB, Stanford University, 3000 El Camino Real, Five Palo Alto Square, 4th Floor, Palo Alto, CA 94306.

**Appointment Contact:** If you need to change your appointment, please contact Aaron Gettinger at 812-564-1288

**Indicate Yes or No:**

I give consent to be audiotaped during this study.

       Yes        No

I give consent for tapes resulting from this study to be used for transcription.

       Yes        No

The extra copy of this signed and dated consent form is for you to keep.

**SIGNATURE** \_\_\_\_\_ **DATE** \_\_\_\_\_

### *Appendix E: Dataset*

Adams Central		2014	2013	2012	2011	2010
HS	Ball State	IPFW	<i>Anderson</i>	IPFW	<i>Taylor U</i>	
Unranked	Ball State	IPFW	<i>Anderson</i>	IPFW	<i>Taylor U</i>	
	Ball State	IPFW	Ball State	IPFW	<i>Taylor U</i>	
	IPFW	IPFW	Ball State	IPFW	IPFW	
	IPFW	<i>Huntington</i>	<i>Bethel</i>	IPFW	IPFW	
	IPFW	<i>Huntington</i>	<i>Huntington</i>	<i>Goshen</i>	Purdue	
	Purdue	Purdue	IU	<i>Goshen</i>	Purdue	
	Purdue	Purdue	Purdue	<i>Rose-Hulman</i>	<i>Indiana Business College</i>	
	Purdue	Ball State	<i>Taylor University</i>	<i>Taylor U</i>	<i>BEAUTY COLLEGE</i>	
	<i>Olivet Nazarene University</i>	<i>Ohio Northern</i>	<i>University of St. Francis</i>	<i>University of St. Francis</i>	<i>University of St. Francis</i>	
				<i>Wabash</i>		
Argos HS	Butler	Word of Life	IU	U of Indianapolis	Butler	
North Central	Grace	Ball State	Purdue	Purdue	Butler	

	IU	Purdue	Purdue	IU–South Bend	Indiana Wesleyan
	Purdue	Ball State	Purdue	Purdue	USI
			Indiana Business College		
	Ball State	Manchester		Indiana Business College	Grace
	2014	2013		2012	2011
					2010
Brownstown Central HS	IUPUI	IUPUI	University of Indianapolis	Notre Dame	IU
	Butler	IU	Butler	West Point	Purdue
	Purdue	IU	University of Indianapolis	Marshall	Purdue
	Cincinnati Christian	Hanover	University of Indianapolis	IU	IU
	U of Indianapolis	NO COLLEGE	IU	Ball State	IU
	Olivet Nazarene	Butler	Indiana Wesleyan	?	Purdue
	IUPU–Columbus	IU	Cleveland State	Ohio State	Franklin
	Purdue	Purdue	Purdue	U of Indianapolis	U of Louisville
	Ball State	Western KY	IU	Rose–Hulman	IU–Southeast
	IU	IUPU–Columbus	Butler	IUPU–C	Purdue
	Purdue	Anderson	U of Indianapolis	Colorado State	Purdue
	Purdue	U of Indianapolis	IU	Purdue	?
	2014	2013		2012	2011
					2010
Cannelton HS	Purdue				
Centreville HS	IUPUI	Calvin College	IU	Ball State	IU
	Harvard	Valparaiso	IU	Manchester	Ohio Northern University
	Rose–Hulman	Butler	IUPUI	Xavier	WASH-U
	IU	IU	IU	Ball State	Trine
	IU St. Olaf College	MILITARY	IU–East	Ball State	U of Evansville
	Earlham	Ball State	Earlham	Purdue	
	Butler	Manchester	Ball State	IU East	Manchester
	IU	Alma College	IU	Ball State	IU
	IU–East	IU–East	IU	Asbury University	IU–East
	IU	MILITARY	IU	University of St. Francis	Hanover
	2014	University of Dayton	2012	Wilmington College Asbury University 2011	2010
		2013			
Clay City HS	Oakland City	Purdue	IU	U of Indianapolis	Ball State
Unranked	ISU	Purdue	IU	ISU	Ivy Tech
	USI	ISU	IU	ISU	Ivy Tech
	IU	ISU	ISU	USI	USI
	Rose–Hulman	IUPUI	ISU U of	Ivy Tech	Purdue
	Purdue	VU	Indianapolis	Indiana Baptist College Blinn College 2011	Purdue IUPUI 2010
	2014	2011	2012		
Clinton Central HS	Kansas State	IU	USI	Purdue	Butler
	Purdue	IU	Ball State	IUPUI	Ball State
	MILITARY	Valparaiso	Valparaiso	IU	IU

Purdue IUPUI Ball State USI 2014	Ball State Purdue Ball State 2013	IU IU Purdue Purdue 2012	Purdue Purdue Eastern Mennonite University Ball State 2011	Wabash Purdue Indiana Wesleyan Anderson 2010	
Covington Community HS West Central	Purdue Purdue	Purdue Purdue	Purdue Butler	University of Miami Purdue	
ISU Indiana Wesleyan Ball State Danville Area CC	Ball State IUPUI Butler Illinois	Indiana Purdue USI IU	Manchester	Mary-of-the-Woo ds	
			University of Indianapolis	Purdue	
			IU	Butler	
			Danville CC ISU 2011	Purdue	
2014	2013	2012		2010	
Eastern Greene HS	Purdue Purdue IUPUI Purdue IU IU IU ISU IU Ivy Tech	Rose-Hulman Murray State IU ISU Ball State Ivy Tech Olney Central College IU ISU Purdue	Purdue Ball State IU IU Purdue IUPUI Purdue Michigan IUPUI IU IUPUI IUPUI IUPUI Ivy Tech	Purdue IUPUI IU IUPUI IU IUPUI Michigan IUPUI IU Ball State	
	2014	2013	2012	2011	
Franklin County HS		Mount St. Joseph Xavier University Purdue ISU Northern Kentucky U of Cincinnati U of Indianapolis Louisiana State Hanover Northern Kentucky Miami University Ball State			2010

ISU  
 Indiana College of Business  
 University of Indianapolis  
 Miami University  
**MILITARY**  
 Ball State University  
 Ivy Tech  
 U of Evansville  
 Butler  
 2015

Jac-Cen-Del HS	U of Indianapolis	Manchester	Rose Hulman	Marian	Purdue
SOUTHEAST	Purdue	Indiana Wesleyan	Purdue	Mount St. Joseph	U of Indianapolis
	IUPUI–Columbus	Brigham Young	IU	Purdue	U of Indianapolis
	U of Dayton	U of Indianapolis	U of Indianapolis	Marian	U of Indianapolis
	Ivy Tech	IUPU–Columbus	IUPU–Columbus	Hanover	U of Indianapolis
	Ball State	WORK	ISU	Marian	Ball State
	Purdue		2013	ISU	2011
	IUPUI			2012	IUPU–Columbus
					2010
		2014			

Knightstown Community HS	Purdue	Carleton	Butler	Purdue	Earlham
	Butler	Butler	IU	Ball State	Ball State
	IU	Purdue	Anderson	Moody Bible College	Purdue
	Anderson	Butler	Purdue	Wilam Woods	IU
	Purdue	Rose–Hulman	IU–East	Purdue	Ball State
	Moody Bible College	IU	USI	VU	VU
	U of Indianapolis	Purdue	Purdue TRADE SCHOOL	Hanover	IU–East
	IUPUI	IU–East		Ball State	Hanover
	Ivy Tech	Purdue	2012	Purdue	Ball State
	Ball State	IUPUI		IUPUI	Taylor
		2014	2013		2011
					2010

North Miami HS	Taylor University	DePauw	Indiana Wesleyan	Purdue	Purdue Indiana
	IU–Kokomo	IPFW	Manchester	Rose–Hulman	Wesleyan Indiana
	ISU	IU–Kokomo	Purdue	IU	Wesleyan Indiana
	University of Dallas	Rose–Hulman	IU–Kokomo	Colorado State	Wesleyan
	IU–Kokomo	Purdue University of St.	South Dakota State	Trine St.	Grace
	Grace	Francis	Butler	Mary-of-the-Woods	Ball State
	Butler	Huntington	Ball State	Purdue	Grace
	U of Indianapolis	Evansville	IUPUI	IU–Kokomo	USI

	2014	Ball State	IU-Kokomo	2011	2010
		2013	2012		
North Posey High School	Purdue	Notre Dame	Purdue	Rochester Institute of Technology	USI
	Purdue	Purdue	VU	Purdue	Butler
	Purdue	Purdue	USI	Purdue	Butler
	U of Louisville	USI	Rose-Hulman	Purdue	ISU
	IU	Purdue	USI	University of Charleston	Ball State
	USI	Purdue	Ball State	U of Evansville	Butler
	IUPUI	IU	USI	Purdue	Carlton College
	Wabash	USI	Rose-Hulman	Purdue	U of Evansville
	Purdue	IU	USI	Purdue	Purdue
	2014	Purdue	Purdue	Purdue	Oakland City U
		2013	2012		2010
North White Jr-Sr HS	MILITARY	WORK			
	IUPUI	Purdue			
	Purdue	Purdue			
	Purdue	Purdue	MILITARY		
	IUPUI	2015			
	St. Joseph's College				
	WORK				
	2014				
Perry Central HS	IU				
	IU				
	Manchester				
	Purdue				
	IUPUI				
	USI				
	IU				
	IU				
	VU				
	2014				
Pioneer HS	Bethel	Huntington	Butler	Trine	
North Central	Purdue	IU	Purdue	Wabash	
	Purdue	Purdue	St. Joseph's College	Purdue	
	U of Indianapolis	Purdue	?	IU	
	Huntington U	Purdue	Purdue	Ball State	
	Butler	IU	?	Ball State	
	Purdue	2013	IU-Kokomo	Ball State	
	2014			2012	2011

Salem HS            U of Louisville  
                   IU-S  
                   Butler  
                   Ball State  
                   Ivy Tech  
                   Anderson  
                   Covenant College  
                   Purdue  
                   Ball State  
                   IU  
                   DePauw  
                   IU  
                   IU-S  
                   IU-S  
                   Ball State  
                   Purdue

2014

	IU	IU	Purdue	Purdue	Ball State
Shakamak	Harding	ISU	Purdue	Purdue	Grace College
	ISU	Rose-Hulman	Purdue	VU	Rose-Hulman
	ISU	Ivy Tech	Purdue	VU	DePauw
	ISU	VU	ISU	Ivy Tech	ISU
	Ball State	Olney CC	VU		2011 Ball State
	2014		2013	2012	2010
Shoals HS	USI	Ball State	U of Evansville	IU	VU
SOUTHWEST	ISU	Ball State	IU	U of Evansville	Butler
	IUPUI	Rose-Hulman	U of E	U of Evansville	U of Indianapolis
	Purdue		Purdue	USI	IU
	2014		USI	IU	2010
			2012	2011	

*Spring Valley HS*      *IU*  
*Unranked*                *Purdue*  
*Unnumerated*            *U of Evansville*  
                           *VU*  
                           *Rose-Hulman*  
                           *ISU*

*Lipscomb  
University*  
*USI*  
*IUPUI*  
*Johnson Bible  
College*  
*Butler*  
*Brigham Young*  
*U of Louisville*  
*MILITARY*  
 2010–14

	Butler Spring Arbor U	Purdue	Purdue	Purdue	Purdue	Hanover
Turkey Run HS	Ball State	Ball State	Indiana Tech	Indiana Wesleyan	Purdue	St. Mary-of-the-Woods
	Ball State	Danville Community College	Purdue	ISU	Purdue	DePauw
	2014		2013	2012	2011	2010
						2009
Union County HS	IU	IU	IU–East	Miami University	DePauw	IU
Unranked	IU	U of Indianapolis	Ball State	Miami University	IU	IU
	IU	Northern Kentucky U	Purdue	Miami University	IU	IU
	Grace College	Indiana Wesleyan	Purdue	Miami University	IU	IU
	Case Western	Purdue	Purdue	Miami University	Rose–Hulman	Miami U
	Miami University	Purdue	USI	Johnson University	Miami University	U of Dayton
	Miami University	Indiana Wesleyan	Antioch	Johnson University	Miami University	U of Dayton
	Miami University	Capital University	IU	IU	Purdue	IUPUI
	Ball State	University of Dayton	University of St. Francis	IU	Ball State	Hanover
	U of Indianapolis	Ohio Northern	Manchester	Ball State	2010	Butler
	Franklin	Miami University	Michigan	Purdue	2009	
	IU–E		2013	2012	Purdue	
	ISU				IU–East	
	2014				2011	
2008: IU (3), U Chicago, Ball State, IUPUI, IU–East (2), Rose–Hulman						
West Washington HS Only valedictorians	IUPUI	IU	IU	Olivet Nazarene	Rose–Hulman	
	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011	

Muncie Central, top 10%, class of 2014

1 Wesleyan  
 University  
 1 Ball State  
 University

3 Ball State  
University  
4 Indiana  
University - East  
5 University of  
Southern Indiana  
6 Ball State  
University  
7 Purdue  
University  
8 Northeastern  
University  
9 Ball State  
University  
10 Taylor  
University  
11 Indiana  
University -  
Bloomington  
12 Indiana  
University -  
Bloomington  
13 Art Institute of  
Indianapolis  
14 Ball State  
University  
15 University of  
Indianapolis  
16 Wabash College  
17 Indiana  
University -  
Bloomington  
18 Hanover  
College  
19 Indiana  
University -  
Bloomington  
20 Indiana  
University -  
Bloomington  
21 Indiana  
University -  
Bloomington  
22 Valparaiso  
University  
23 University of  
Toledo  
24 Ball State  
University  
25 Ball State  
University  
26 Purdue  
University  
27 Ball State  
University  
28 Trine  
University  
29 Ball State  
University  
30 Sullivan  
University  
(Louisville, KY)

Bloomington HS

North, class of '14

1. University of  
North Carolina

2. I.U.

3. Vassar

4. I.U.

5. Yale

6. Stanford

7. I.U.

8. I.U.

9. I.U.

10. Washington  
University

11. West Point

12. Purdue

13. I.U.

14. I.U.

15. I.U.

16. Rose Hulman

17. Georgia Tech

18. Xavier

19. IUPUI

20. Tufts

21. University of  
Virginia

22. I.U.

23. I.U.

24. Purdue

25. Marian

26. Bellarmine

27. Kenyon

28. IU

29. Colorado

30. Xavier

31. I.U.

32. I.U.

33. I.U.

34. DePauw

Obviously, this data in print isn't the most useful; please contact me at  
[adg2015@alumni.stanford.edu](mailto:adg2015@alumni.stanford.edu) for an Excel file.

- Grant, 6/18/14
- Guidance Counselor #1, 6/18/14
- Rachel, 6/19/14
- Guidance Counselor #2, 6/30/14
- Brandon, 7/1/14
- Liam, 7/2/14
- Guidance Counselor #3, 7/3/14
- Brooke, 7/3/14
- Abigail, 7/3/14
- Anna, 7/8/14
- Zach, 7/8/14
- Molly, 7/10/14
- Brent, 7/13/14
- Amy, 7/14/14
- Lisa, 7/23/14
- Chris, 7/24/14
- Jake, 7/24/14
- Nicole, 7/24/14
- Kaitlin, 7/25/14
- Jason, 7/25/14
- Shannon, 7/26/14
- Kayla, 8/8/14

All transcripts and recordings have been erased, pursuant to the issued and agreed-upon IRB protocol, and are therefore unavailable for review.