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ABSTRACT

This paper explores issues surrounding the interplay of college preparation, financial assistance, cultural norms, and transition to college for Appalachian first-generation college students from low-income rural families. The Robinson Scholars Program aims to significantly improve the college-going rate in 29 counties in eastern Kentucky. The program uses a highly competitive application process to identify scholarship recipients in the eighth grade, awards scholarships covering the full costs of 8-10 semesters in the University of Kentucky and associated community colleges, addresses the needs of student participants while they complete high school, and assists in the transition to college life. Surveys, focus groups, and interviews were conducted with approximately 50 Robinson scholars in a "rising junior" summer academic program and with 5 college freshmen receiving Robinson scholarships. Questions covered expectations and realities in making the transition to college, including issues related to homesickness and ties to family and community, new friendships and dealing with diversity, freedom and responsibility, and academic transitions. Implications for transition programs are discussed with regard to building bridges between the university and rural communities, providing social support to college students, dealing with students' unrealistic beliefs that they were well prepared for college, and promoting faculty-student connections. Broader program impacts on the region are also discussed. (Contains 33 references.) (SV)

"Can we send some of the money back home to our families?": Tensions of transition in an early intervention program for rural Appalachian students

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Introduction

Money *or* preparation???

How do we increase college participation and retention among traditionally underserved populations, such as students from low-income backgrounds, people of color, first-generation and non-traditional students? As a recent Colloquy in the Chronicle of Higher Education[1] indicates, there is a lack of consensus on the relative merits of programs designed to provide financial support for students from low-income families vs. the need to improve educational opportunities at the pre-college level to prepare more of these students for college success. Policy debates, grounded in a focus on limited finances, tend toward an "either/or" approach. Students need money for college *or* we need to improve pre-college preparation. In the Chronicle debate, many respondents instead argued that both approaches are necessary if we are to significantly improve the college-participation rate for low-income, traditionally underrepresented students.

This paper, situated in the context of an early intervention and scholarship program for rural, Appalachian first-generation[2] college students from generally low-income families, explores issues surrounding the interplay of pre-college preparation, financial assistance, cultural norms, and transition to college for one group. In elucidating issues that face students, and institutions of higher education, in this program, we hope to raise issues and provide insights for others engaged in efforts to increase access to college and build human and social capital in low-income communities. In exploring the tensions and gaps inherent in one program, we also challenge "either/or" approaches and essentializing perspectives on what support mechanisms traditionally underrepresented students may find useful in making the transition to successful college students.

Low-income, first-generation college students

In an era when only 47% of low-income high school graduates immediately enroll in college or trade school while 82% of high-income graduates do so (NCES, 1999), decreasing the educational divide and increasing access to postsecondary education for underrepresented students is an issue of social justice as well as talent development. Among high-achieving students the gap is even larger. According to the 1998 National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS 1998) high-achieving students from low-income families are five times less likely to attend college than high-achieving students from high-income families. Certainly, research has concluded that financial aid has a positive influence on student enrollment decisions (St. John & Noell, 1989 citing, Jackson, 1988; Leslie & Brinkman, 1988; St. John, 1991; St. John & Noell, 1989). Yet, many other factors have a powerful impact on college participation for first-generation college

[1] The discussion began on January 29, 2002 in response to a January 25, 2002 article. Responses are archived at http://chronicle.com/colloquy/2002/income/income.htm.

[2] In the 1992 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, a first-generation college student was defined as "(A) an individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree; or (B) in the case of any individual who regularly resided with and received support from only one parent, an individual whose only such parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree (Adelman, 1993)."

students. For example, first-generation college students are usually from low-income families, are less involved with their teachers in high school, and receive less encouragement from their parents to attend college (Terenzini, P., Springer, L., Yaeger, P. M., Pascarella, E. T. & Nora, A., 1996). A 1998 study by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 1998) found that first-generation college students tended to be part-time students, work, have children, and not be involved in school activities. In exploring the research on factors that "inhibit and enhance success" for first-generation college students, Kezar (2000) summarizes:

> This research consistently shows that some of the major barriers to success include: 1) lack of self-confidence; 2) inappropriate expectations or knowledge about college environment; 3) lack of connection to the college community or external community; 4) lack of early validation within the college environment; 5) family members who do not understand the goals of college; and, 6) not involving faculty in summer bridge programs and the transition process (Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg & Jalomo, 1996).

The NCES study also found that although 45% of first-generation college students dropped out of college, those that did graduate had employment prospects that were the same as those of non first-generation students. In other words, if first-generation college students are retained through graduation, they experience the same post-college employment success as other students.[3]

Intervention programs

In recognition of the challenges faced by low-income students, students of color, and students from other underrepresented populations the number and variety of early intervention and scholarship programs[4] has grown dramatically in recent years. These students frequently lack information about financial aid, the courses they should take to prepare for college, and the processes and timetables necessary for college admission. For example, according to a September 1998 Gallup survey (Gallup, Sept. 1998), almost 70% of parents wanted more information about what courses their children should take in order to prepare for college and 89% wanted more information about how to pay for college. Knowledge gaps are likely to be much greater in poor rural communities and in families where adults have not attended college. Our own experience in working with parents of rural, low-income potential first-generation college students indicates that few are aware of the widespread availability of scholarships, grants, and loans for college or the importance of their children taking appropriate mathematics, science, and language courses in order to do well on college admissions tests such as the SAT and ACT. Intervention programs can fill in these knowledge gaps.

[3] Unfortunately, these data do not address a critical issue for many rural students, that of appropriate employment in their hometowns and nearby areas.

[4] These include initiatives such as HOPE, Project GRAD, Passport to College, I Have a Dream and the federally-funded GEAR UP initiatives

While there is little research on the success of intervention programs, and the research that does exist is generally focused on specific programs, according to the College Board (2001) "The limited research that is available suggests that early intervention programs increase college attendance rates for underrepresented groups. Participating in any type of outreach program during high school nearly doubled the odds of enrolling in a four-year college or university among "at-risk" 1992 high school graduates (Horn & Chen, 1998).

York & Tross (1994) note that student ratings in intervention programs tend to be quite high for the social aspects of these programs (mentoring, confidence-building, community development, social activities) while the impact of academic components are lower-rated.[5] According to Kezar (2000) "This suggests that programs need to be realistic about their goals." This does not mean that programs may have no academic impact. In her summary, Kezar notes that Garcia (Garcia, 1991) provides reports of students who succeed on entrance exams after failure on attempts prior to program participation. She adds that studies examining retention and grade point average indicate that students in support programs tend to perform better (GPA) than students who did not receive the same type of support (Santa Rita & Bacote, 1996).

Our focus

In this paper we identify a number of issues faced by students in one scholarship and intervention program for predominantly rural, low-income first-generation Appalachian students from eastern Kentucky. Data from surveys, focus groups, and participant observation in summer program activities for the program's high school rising junior cohort and interviews with a second cohort of participants currently in their first year on the University of Kentucky campus provide insight into issues including perceptions these students hold about themselves and their college preparation, their expectations about college, and their skill levels. These include:

- tensions faced by rural students between ties to home vs. assumptions that education means "up and out";
- expectations of changing relationships to family, friends, community and church;
- concerns about family support (including students who inquired about sending "excess" scholarship monies to their families);
- unrealistic expectations about the amount of work required by college courses (engendered by low expectations and weak preparation in many of their high schools);
- difficulty in adapting and making friends at a large school and in large classes;
- promises and perils of "early identification" scholarship programs; and,
- many issues of transition to independence common to college students from a variety of backgrounds.

[5] This phenomena is also seen in the Robinson program, where the social aspects of the program are consistently rated far more highly than the academic components.

We explore these issues from a social constructivist perspective that focuses on the multiple identities and perspectives these students bring to the transition to college.

Together, this perspective and these data, albeit messy and contextually-bound, may prove useful to others conceptualizing, implementing, and assessing early intervention, and scholarship programs targeted to first-generation students from rural low-income communities and provide insight for teachers and others balancing expectations and standards. In particular, we wanted to enhance our understandings of the social, cultural, economic and educational factors that place many rural Appalachian students at risk in the transition to college. The scholarship facet of the Robinson Scholars program can address many of the economic barriers to college attendance. We want to develop a better way of addressing human and social capital issues that influence access to postsecondary education and the gaps between reality and student perceptions that may create roadblocks to college admission and success.

Perspectives and frameworks

This paper brings a social constructivist approach to understanding the development of both knowledge and identity. We view culture as dynamic and continually reconstructed, assuming that young people in Appalachia are part of multiple cultures. How they interpret experience is shaped by factors including ethnicity, social class, and gender, as well as place. To explore these factors we draw on studies from student development, sociology, and anthropology to develop richer understandings of the issues and identify critical points and processes for intervention. In particular, studies of Appalachian sociology such as Maggard (1990, 1993), DeYoung (1993, 1994), Duncan and Lamborghini (1994), Gaventa (1982), Aquizap and Vargas (1970), Banks, Billings and Tice (1993), and Anglin (1995), and educational studies such as those by Weis (1992, 1993) and Borman, Mueninghoff and Piazza (1988) inform our work. We are also influenced by our own status and life experiences as first-generation college students from low-income families who have spent much of their lives in Appalachia and have years of experience in working with Appalachian students at the high school and college levels.

While Appalachians have long been depicted as "a people apart," hillbillies, a backward and fatalistic people, deeply mired in poverty and destitution, it is important to realize that promoting the image of an ignorant and undeserving population served a powerful purpose for outside owners of land and mineral resources. If the people of Appalachia were unworthy of the land they occupied, then it became not only acceptable, but an admirable modernizing force for others to take control of the land and its resources in order to put them to a "better and higher" use.

While job creation and industrialization of a depressed area might be loudly trumpeted, at the same time the coal industry created an economy with a very small middle class, where there was little incentive to invest capital in the region. Education was not generally an avenue to good-paying jobs in communities dominated by mining and timbering. As the coal was mined out, or mines moved to automated systems

requiring little local labor, many communities in Appalachia have been left with the environmental problems of a post-industrial economy, little viable physical infrastructure for industrial development, generally weak educational systems, a small middle-class, and, in many cases, a governmental system grounded heavily in power politics rather than democratic decision-making (Duncan, 1999).

Appalachia has often been depicted as a homogeneous place, peopled by the Scotch-Irish. However, this stereotype was never accurate, even before coal booms turned many rural Appalachian communities into cosmopolitan villages. The Appalachian region has for generations been home to descendents of Native Americans who escaped forced relocation, runaway slaves, and, if recent theories about the Melungeon population are correct, Spanish, Portuguese, Turkish and other European and eastern peoples. In the heyday of the coal industry, rural Appalachian communities saw large influxes of African-Americans, Italians, Russians, and others searching for employment. Many of these cultural influences are still evident, and have been joined by cultures from across Asia as physicians and their families moved in to fill voids in medical care in the region.

While average incomes in Appalachia are some of the lowest in the nation, class differences loom large as indicators of access to quality education. Relatively small differences in economic level can lead to large differences in access to social and human capital (Carter, 1998; Carter, Kusimo, & Keyes, 1997). Given that African-American miners were often the last hired and first fired, and thus, frequently from lower-income families, it can be difficult to sort out influences due to ethnicity and social class.

These brief examples illustrate that Appalachians are not univocal. Appalachia is not "a" context. As we discuss this program for Appalachian students, it is important to keep in mind that gender, social class and ethnicity play a very strong role in access to quality schooling. Many of the schools in the small towns that are the county seats in Appalachian counties are much stronger and provide students with greater access to challenging courses and links necessary to build social capital than do schools "in the hollers". In fact, one of the questions we found ourselves asking most often about students was, "Were they from the county seat or from a "holler" school?" These differences have implications for ethnic and socioeconomic diversity and recruiting. Many of the students in the Robinson program went to county seat schools.

Context and methods

The Robinson Scholars Program

This study takes place in the context of an early-identification program for Appalachian potential first-generation college students from 29 Eastern Kentucky counties, the Robinson Scholars[6] Program. Grounded in the fact that college attendance

[6] The program is funded by revenues from mining and lumbering on the university-owned Robinson Forest, located in eastern KY. Unfortunately, revenues from these operations have dropped in recent years as

from this region is considerably lower than the already low rate for the state of Kentucky, the Robinson Scholars program was developed to:

- Make a substantial impact on the college-going rate of high school graduates in Eastern Kentucky.
- Make significant progress toward improving the overall regional college-going rate to the level of the state college-going rate.
- Address the needs of student participants while they complete their high school education.
- Assist in their transition to college life, and
- Encourage continued success throughout their college career.

In 1997 the Robinson Scholars Program began to award scholarships to first-generation college students from Eastern Kentucky. The scholarship provides tuition, fees, room, board, books and money for personal expenses for ten semesters[7] at either the University of Kentucky or any Kentucky community college[8]. The Program hopes to encourage students from the rural, economically depressed region of Eastern Kentucky to pursue higher education, and thus enhance economic development and quality of life in eastern Kentucky.

Students are awarded the scholarship in their eighth grade year after a highly competitive application process. Scholarship winners are selected upon the following criteria:

- First-generation college student
- Demonstrated potential to succeed
- Potential barriers to the completion of a four-year degree, and
- Live in one of the designated 29 Eastern Kentucky Appalachian counties.

The program includes regular meetings with regionally based coordinators in conjunction with summer programs on the University of Kentucky's campus. Students in the first-year cohort were not required to achieve a minimum high school grade point average or ACT/SAT score other than the college admission requirements. They must, however, maintain a 2.5 GPA while in college[9].

To date, 394 Robinson scholarships have been awarded. Of these 394, 162 are now in their first year of college. (The remainder are still in secondary schools). Of the

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resources have been depleted or gone down in price. Thus, the Robinson program has been forced to scale back dramatically both in number of new scholarships offered and in program activities.

[7] Students in the first-year cohort were provided funding for ten semesters. Students in later cohorts will be provided with eight semesters of full funding.

[8] At the time the Robinson program was developed, the state community colleges were all part of the University of Kentucky. Lexington Community College, located on UK's campus, still remains part of the University. The remaining community colleges now form a separate system.

[9] The high school GPA component was changed for future cohorts, who are required to maintain a 2.50 high school GPA.

162 students, 78 are enrolled at the University of Kentucky. An additional 9 are enrolled at Lexington Community College, 52 are enrolled in other state community colleges and 23 either attended other institutions or dropped out of the program.

The first group of Robinson Scholars arrived as college students in Fall 2001. In general, standardized test scores for this cohort were a source of dismay to program administrators, who were concerned about students who may have scholarships but not meet university admissions requirements. The standardized test scores for the first class of Robinson Scholars were slightly below the entire freshmen cohort. The Robinson Scholars enrolling at UK had a ACT middle 50% range of 21 to 26 compared with the freshmen middle 50% range of 22 to 27.[10] To partially address academic concerns with future cohorts, a two-week summer academic program was developed for rising high school juniors. (Previous summer programs for this cohort had not been focused on academic preparation.) Surveys, focus groups, and observational data reported in this paper were collected during the 2001 summer program, organized by the authors. The high school students will be referred to in this paper as the rising junior cohort. The first-year University of Kentucky students will be referred to as the first-year cohort.

The University of Kentucky

The University of Kentucky (UK) is the flagship doctoral granting institution for the state of Kentucky. Data from the Office of Institutional Research for Fall 2000[11] notes that 2,928 students began their college careers at UK, a campus of 23,852 students. UK's students are 71% undergraduate; 82% full-time. The freshmen-to-sophomore year retention rate for 1999 was 80.1 % and the 6-year graduation rate for 1994 was 55.3 %. The number of first-generation college students or rural students was unavailable. However, within the last two years, UK has been collecting data on the first-generation status of its students through the admission process and undergraduate surveys.

Methods and data sources

Our work with two cohort groups of Robinson Scholars informs this paper. One cohort consisted of rising high school juniors[12] who were taking part in a two-week academically-focused program in Summer 2001. Students in the rising junior program participated in focus groups, completed pre- and post- surveys, and interacted with the researchers in the course of academic program activities. Students in the first-year cohort were enrolled in their first semester at the University of Kentucky in Fall 2001, with some interviews occurring in Spring 2002. Five students participated in interviews conducted by Robinson as part of the first-year cohort study.

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10 This does not include the students who did not enroll at UK, however.

11 UK's most recent freshmen class for which statistics were available. (The incoming class prior to that of the interview participants.)

12 Students who had just completed their sophomore year of high school.

The rising junior cohort. We used a variety of methods to explore transition-related issues for the approximately 50 Robinson Scholar participants in the summer "Rising Junior" program.

Our approach was primarily qualitative. Data sources include: 1) focus groups; 2) pre-post surveys; 3) notes on project sessions, meetings of project staff and others; 3) notes, photographs and video of project sessions; 4) researcher reflections and logs; and 5) analysis of student-produced writings, drawings, speeches, WWW pages, photographs, videos and other artifacts.

Survey instruments were designed by the authors and administered to students during one evening session. Focus groups were conducted by program counselors who were undergraduate UK students working with the Robinson students with evening activities. In the focus group sessions participants were asked about factors related to their college preparation and expectations, their post-graduation goals, what they hoped to contribute to their community upon graduation, and what they knew about the classes they would take in college.

Authors were present in most project sessions and played multiple roles of instruction, assisting in session management, and monitoring session processes and outcomes. Our role was limited mainly to the academic activities occurring throughout the day. Observations and reflections made during these sessions also factor into our analysis of the rising junior cohort data.

We were recruited to conduct the summer program for the rising junior high school students. In conjunction with this role, we engaged in research to better understand the needs of the Robinson students and ways in which UK could better serve these students in the future. Later, one of us (Robinson) conducted a qualitative study as an independent research project. The goal of the qualitative study was to extend our understandings and explore how transition issues played out with the Robinson students who were on campus as college freshmen.

Focus Group Questions

1. What are the big issues you face in coming to college?
2. How do you think coming to college will change your relationships to your family and community?
3. What are some things that are helping you or encouraging you to go to college?
4. What do you perceive as barriers to being successful in college?
5. What can the University of Kentucky do to ease your transition to college?

The first-year student cohort Participants in the interviews were members of the first group of Robinson Scholars to attend UK. The Director of the Robinson Scholar Program selected the students for the study based upon student willingness to participate. The students selected had ACT scores of 21, 21, 22, 24, and 29[13]. According to the director of the Robinson program, these students were fairly representative of the academic quality of the group, perhaps skewed a little toward the low end of the middle. There was no representative of the lower academic end of the group.

There were four females and one male participant. All participants in the study were Caucasian[14]. At the time of the first interviews the students were in their first semester at the University. The participants had good high school academic records. Three of the participants had a 4.0 GPA and two had a 3.5 GPA. One participant maintained a 4.0 GPA throughout elementary, middle and high school.

Robinson conducted three interviews with each student during the 2001-2002 academic year (October, November and January respectively). Only three students completed all interviews, however. Two of the female students, Amy and Jennifer, only completed the first interview, due to personal reasons. The interviews consisted of a common set of questions. An audio recording was made along with field notes. Each interview lasted one to one and a half hours. Detailed field notes were maintained of each interview session. Pseudonyms were used to maintain student confidentiality anonymity.

Expectations and realities in making the transitions to college

Social transitions (I): Homesick and getting lost

As expressed in the focus groups, the overriding concerns of the rising juniors in the Robinson program were 1) homesickness and loss of family/friends; and 2) finding their way around UK's large campus. They were concerned that they would miss their families and their boyfriends/girlfriends, would miss their churches, or would have difficulties in getting transportation to and from home on weekends. This transition can be difficult, especially for first-generation students. The Robinson students are not only from rural Appalachia but also from relatively small high schools[15]. Interviews revealed that the first year students maintained many of their high school friendships and family connections by returning home on the weekend, particularly at the beginning of the semester.

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[13] Only 9 of the 78 UK Robinson Scholars had high school GPAs below 3.50, and only 3 had below a 3.00. 28 of the students had a 4.00 HS GPA. The middle 50% for high school GPA was 3.64 to 4.00 (UK freshmen ranged from 3.2 to 3.8).

[14] Eastern KY has a relatively low rate of ethnic diversity as designated by Census responses, however the composition of the Robinson program does not reflect even these low rates. This is most likely due to differences in the schools that African-American students attend in communities where educational opportunities are highly stratified by socioeconomic class. However, the discrepancies may also be a reflection of the recruitment/selection process where decisions are made at the local level.

[15] One student's high school was so small that it did not have a football team.

Kurt: **Yeah, I go back Friday night 'cause a lot of my friends still go to the football games. That's just about the only opportunity to hook back up.**

Lucy: **Yeah I go home every weekend. *(laughter)***

I get homesick, well, I miss my church, my mom, and my sister and all my friends 'cause they are still home.

When I don't get to go home, I don't like that too much. I have only had to stay here twice, I think. I don't drive so I can't just take myself home whenever I want to, so that stresses me.

Susan: **Uh, *I go home* pretty much every weekend. (*laughter*)**

The students often had daily contact with their high school friends.

Jennifer: **Yeah, and then like I got MSN on my computer. I talk to my friends back home every day almost. I think if I didn't do that I would get real bad homesick.**

Often they maintained the same social activities over the weekend that they did when they were in high school.

Susan: **This past weekend I went to our big festival. I've been to the fair and pageants. Like I went deer hunting this past weekend, next weekend I am going four wheeling. I always have something to do when I go home. It was fun. I liked it.**

During the semester the students to some degree began to transition into college returning home less frequently, feeling less homesick, and participating in campus activities. Interviews conducted later in the first semester provide evidence of successful adjustment to being away from home.

Kurt: **The first couple of weeks I went home every weekend cause I was still in the transition process. Then I just kind of go back every other week. One time I did not go back for three weeks. The only time I go back is if I need something or want to see somebody. And once football season is over, I really don't have a reason to go back except for like holidays, or special occasions. After Thanksgiving rolls around, I probably won't go back until Christmas break.**

Lucy: **The adjustment itself was hard, but I'm doing a lot better now. I'm not as homesick.**

Susan: **Like I have stayed up here three weekends and when I have stayed up here I went to football games, hockey games, and parade pep rally and all that stuff during homecoming. I really didn't feel like I was having a whole lot of fun at school until I started going to all**

> **that stuff. Ever since I started going to some of the games and stuff I have felt a little more involved.**[16]

Susan, however, did work to maintain many of her old high school friendships.

> *Susan:* **There's a couple of people (friends), like most of the people goes to EKU (*Eastern Kentucky University*) which is only like 20 minutes away (*from UK*) so like all those people I can still hang out with a bunch. So, and then there's like four other people who came from my high school up here. So I still get to see everybody.**

The middle-class stereotype often paints college as a time to get away from home, to loosen ties, to learn to live on one's own. For the Robinson students, as well as for many UK students and first-generation college students elsewhere, maintaining ties to home and family are a critical lifeline, at least initially. York-Anderson (1991, citing Kirby, 1976) notes that non-cognitive factors such as parental support, parental expectations, and parental values affect student success. First-generation students generally perceived their parents to be emotionally supportive (York-Anderson, 1991 citing Billson & Terry, 1982). The rising junior cohort listed family, friends, and community as their prime motivators for attending college. They believe that college will only increase their appreciation of their families and communities, and many expect to keep these ties strong. Trips home can serve as reminders of why they made the commitment to leave for a time.

The "rising juniors" – the high school students who participated in the summer program -- were equally concerned about getting lost on campus and wanted UK to provide more campus tours and assistance in finding their way. Students from the freshman cohort seemed to have become comfortable with their ability to find their way around campus. They did not raise the issue of being lost on campus because they knew their way around campus because of the summer on campus programs. In fact, Lucy was giving campus directions to other freshman.

Social transitions (II): New friendships and dealing with difference

The rising juniors in the precollege cohort anticipated that adjusting to "new and lots of people" would be a major adjustment issue. While some noted that they were interested in meeting new people, they were also concerned about meeting and adjusting to new people, including classmates and roommates. One group reported that they expected cultural clashes to be a barrier to their success in college. Another said they would like UK to "Kick everyone else out" to make their adjustment easier.

[16] This is consistent with Tinto's (1987) argument that students must integrate into the college environment or otherwise they are at high risk of dropping out. Living on campus and being involved in extra-curricular activities are important for the students' development and transition to college according to Astin (1985).

Building new friendships with their college peers was a challenge to many of the first-year students. Susan thought there existed a great difference between her new college friends and her old high school friends.

> *Susan*: **Like the people I hang out with here, I can't see myself hanging out with at home. Yeah, because like, my friends at home would be like 'what or who are you hanging out with (*laughter*)?'**

Often the students were exposed to people from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds that they did not encounter in their hometowns.

> *Kurt*: **They have a lot of foreign students. Actually, I room with one. That's kind of a big adjustment because *my hometown*, there is no foreign people. Sometimes when he is in the room he brings in some of his friends and they will be talking in their different language. I will just be, you know, doing my own thing, reading a book, (*pause*) wondering what they are talking about me.**

Susan struggled the whole semester with building new friendships.

> *Susan*: **Lately, I have been like, like at the beginning of the semester it was like my roommate didn't think she had any friends, and I was ok with the whole friend situation, but now she has all these friends and she always doing something with her friends and I am always like sitting on the phone with my boyfriend from home. So that's one of the things that I am starting to like struggle with, is the fact that I feel like, well I do, the only people that I know here and that I'm friends with, it's just that I don't get out and do anything with them. So that's one of the things that I am struggling with lately.**

Often the friendship building process began with students in the same class/course or in the dormitories.

> *Kurt*: **Well outside of the little clique I have, not really, just like, like what I do is like people in class, I have a friend, well like in English class, he's a golfer, so we like we could talk. We kind of hit it off. Then there is another guy-rebel looking guy, he's got the big fro, but yet he's white, he's a real interesting guy, he's pretty smart too. So kinda, I talk with him. Like we are suppose to get together later and work on an English paper.**

> *Jennifer*: **I have like three or four friends from every class that I talk with and the girls on my floor in my dorm. I only got one class with a scholar so I didn't have any friends there and I didn't come here with any of my friends so like I had to meet all new people when I came here.**

Friendships were also often built through the Robinson Scholar Program and the summer activities in which they participated. Each summer, during their high school

years, they would come to campus for a week or two for college preparation and programmatic activities.

> *Lucy*: **Cause like the girl that lives next door to me she's a Robinson Scholar too and she is going to be my roommate next year. So we are trying to get a lot of the same classes so we can study together cause neither one of us are doing really great in our classes now. So that will help a lot. When you turn the corner you see somebody you know, people you went to camp (*Robinson Scholars Summer Programs*) with for a few years. It has helped me from being homesick a whole lot.**

> *Kurt*: **No, so like the only friends, I have are out of the program. There is one other person I knew in the program. That is it.**

> *Jennifer*: **I think if I hadn't known the scholars then I would really be homesick. And plus coming down here in the summer and stuff, being gone (from home) like helped me prepare. At first they (*parents*) would call, but now I just call like every couple of days like just to see how I'm doing. They say, so just anytime you want to come home, you can just come home (*laughter*).**

Kurt and Amy expressed little interest in establishing a new group of friends.

> *Kurt*: **See I don't want to make friends with like every person I meet because, if you have friends like there are so many friends up here its unreal. Like everyone wants to do something. Like I mean it's kinda of hard to say 'Naw' I don't want to eat.' You know, 'I don't want to play ball' or whatever, So if you have to do that, that's gonna try to push your homework back, so right now it's like, 2.5 (*GPA*) until I get settled in this semester. I am focused on homework and block everything else out.**

> *Amy*: **No I stay right around my dorm. I go eat, class and back to my dorm. I either use the computer, read a book, or talk on the phone, watch TV, so I don't have a big life. I just do what has to be done. I don't see the point in all the frivolous stuff, partying, or being in a sorority. I never was interested in that. Just being me and trying to stay out of trouble and keep trouble away from me.**
>
> **Yeah, it's more of a popularity thing, at my high school it was a big thing. I was in the book clique, the ROTC clique, you know, I would read all the time. I would go out and run a couple of miles with the ROTC, so. I wasn't the cheerleader, the dancer. But I wasn't look down upon by most people. I wasn't degraded for not having as much money or being the cheerleader. I was accepted for who I was by most people. But the people who I thought were friends really weren't. So I don't try to make friends real easy up here. I'm afraid too. I'm afraid of rejection, mostly.**

Friends were very important to these students, except for Amy and Kurt. Kurt's indifference to friends is based on his desire to maintain his academic standing while Amy's indifference is due to personal life experiences. Having boyfriends back home kept the connection to their home and community. Their high school friends were still a part of their Friday and Saturday nights whether going to a football game or just hanging out. They did make some new friends during their first semester. Their new friends included their roommates, other Robinson Scholars, fellow classmates, and dorm friends. For the other students, going home on the weekends provided connection to their home and community. Visiting with their high school friends was important to them. Parents and siblings were their support network except for Kurt whose ties to his high school friends filled this role. While going home was very important for these students, data is not available to say whether these students were going home any more often than other University of Kentucky freshmen, however.

Social transitions (III): Freedom and responsibility

The rising junior cohort focus groups reported that they expected some difficulties in adjusting to the freedom and responsibilities of being on their own, including class attendance, managing time and money, being where they are supposed to be with the materials they need, keeping track of personal items, and balancing the social and academic facets of their college life. "Boys" and "parties" were repeatedly listed as potential temptations. The junior cohort was also concerned about dealing with pressures related to alcohol and drugs.

The first year cohort did not have any trouble with the items mentioned by the rising juniors. These first-year students were very focused with one exception. Lucy did not attend class as she should, went home on the weekends, maintained contact with high school friends and boyfriend, did not study as she should and completed her first semester in a probationary status.

Academic transitions

"Fear of failure," advanced classes, and apprehensions about having to study and staying focused were concerns of the rising junior cohort. They were also concerned about choosing the correct classes and were unsure about the academic advising they would receive. The students expected to do well in college, but knew there would be some differences and difficulties. They were very concerned about their academic achievement, perhaps due to their need to maintain a 2.5 grade point average to keep their scholarship. Even Lucy, who was not doing well, was concerned about academics.

> *Kurt*: **I always made A's. I was one of the top of the class. That is a big transition to where you go from being the top of the class where everyone looks up to you, like an academic God, but here you are just one of the crowd.**

Amy: **I expected to struggle in some of my classes and like in my English class I am. I expected to be clueless about what life really was, cause I expected it to be this wonderful place, you went to class, could go party and still make the grades, but now I know because I am making C's and I don't party at all.**

The success of academic transition is often based on a student's high school preparation. The students felt their high school preparation for college was sufficient except in the areas of math and English.

Susan: **My chemistry class, this chemistry class is easier up here than my high school. Like there is some stuff that we didn't cover in high school, but if you like could stay awake in my chemistry class in high school, you'd do good (*laughter*). I just think it's more interesting up here and the tests are a lot easier multiple choice with 25 questions. In high school they were like fill in the blank and all that different stuff. You had to work out problems. There wasn't a right answer to choose from you had to figure out the answer.**[17]

Math, my math department in high school has always been, like, they got a new superintendent this year and he hired like that was the first thing he did was hire a new math teacher because the math department has been like a low thing forever, so.

English was bad (in high school). I think English and grammar are pretty much bad in southeastern Kentucky school. We had to write papers and stuff, but it wasn't graded as hard as it should have been. In high school, ok we like had a lot of grammar but after my 8th grade year I didn't have grammar until my senior year in high school. So, I mean like I forgot everything.

Biology I don't know about my Biology, but I don't think my Biology in high school was very good. But we had a good Chemistry department, but he is about to retire but he does care about the students.

Susan: **It's been like I said before, it didn't take much to adjust to the classes, it's just the studying, like in Math I never had to study in high school math. I didn't believe in studying for a math test in high school. I thought that was a big waste of time. But here I've learned that you have to study even for a math test. And, I guess that's really the only big adjustment from high school cause like with the scholar program I had lived on campus over the summers and all that stuff so… Like, you can't really go out and do all that stuff and make**

[17] Susan's comments are particularly interesting in light of repeated arguments from the Chemistry Department at UK that a major source of their high failure and withdrawal rates result from the poor preparation of students from Eastern Kentucky.

good grades at the same time. I think that's another reason my social life is so horrible but maybe really it's not, so.

Kurt: **That's the other thing, papers, write paper, in high school we didn't have to write papers so that is a big transition, so I have no idea about what is going on. I have to ask so many questions and I try my best to take advantage of the professor's office hours so if I have questions or anything. Yeah, that's another thing, see like my high school didn't even offer AP classes or anything, so if I had AP classes I would of taken everything possible…**

When asked about her high school preparation for college Amy responded with laughter. She does not think her high school English class prepared her for college level English. Kurt also commented on his lack of high school preparation.

Amy: **Yeah, I know they didn't (*laughter*). Like my senior English class I think we wrote a letter to the reviewer and maybe one other paper, but I never had to write like an argumentative paper in any of those classes. I never had to do like vocabulary like extensive vocabulary like you have to use in the English papers and we never really had to restate the question and do like paragraph answers. I don't think they prepared me at all for this. If I'd taken an AP class they might have, but the AP classes at my high school went too fast for me. But my senior English class went way too slow. There were like eleven of us but she still went like really slow, so I don't think I was prepared by not being in fast enough class to learn everything I needed to do for this, so.**

Kurt: **One class, well I've really had interactions in two classes. Like English, before coming up here, I never wrote a paper in my life. I didn't know the system of writing. So I went to my English professor and started asking her questions what format she wanted, how she wanted the paper written, what can I do to improve my writing. Then that's when we made a connection. I am like her favorite because I come in a lot and talk to her. Math on the first test I made an 89 then I slacked off to a 71 because we were getting into a harder study. So my Math professor, he started helping me out and making sure I understand it a lot better. On this last exam I made a 94, so I made a big improvement there.**

Kurt: **Then in English, you know I told her I was worried about English and she was kinda guided me about that. She taught me everything I need to know and guided me in the right direction. Math our professor, he knew I was better that what I showed on the test. He urged me to study more and start coming to him more to improve my grade a little bit.**

They expressed mixed expectations regarding the difficulty of their classes.

Kurt: **Well it's pretty much what I expected except it's a lot easier than what I figured even though I'm not making the same grades as I did in high school, but it's easy compared to what I thought it would be considering it's my freshmen year. Right now it's comparable courses once you get settled in to college atmosphere. I am sure the classes will get a lot harder as you go along...I never had to take notes in high school, so that's new to me.**

Jennifer: **Which everybody that went away even to the small colleges said it's going to be different like they didn't hardly teach you nothing in high school so you are going to have to study, which I pretty much knew that when I came here. I just took along what I learned in high school. The work is harder and they grade harder, but.**

Lucy: **Well I don't know it's kind of depressing. I like it but my classes are a lot harder than I expected them to be, nothing like high school. I had probably the hardest English teacher in the whole high school. She had been there since the school was built. And my English class and it is just English 101 and I still, it just the work in there just I am not used to it at all. And my Math is hard too. I haven't got my recent test back but the one before that I got like a 69 and I never made that in high school. I did not have to study in high school (*laughter*) I passed with A's (*laughter*).**

Amy: **So I know that it's not the place that everybody describes. It's a whole lot harder. And I expected to just be able to jump right in and be ready to go and I am not. I wasn't ready for what it offered at all. But I as a person I didn't expect to have to work so hard cause I always made it through without having to study through high school, cause all through high school I didn't have to study at all. I could read something and just not have to worry about it or hear the teacher say I didn't have to worry about it. But now I have to actually have to open a book and study for myself. I have to rely myself more than I can on my teachers and that wasn't expected at all. I thought it would be just like high school spoon fed pretty much but it's not. I'm having to work on it, so. But that's ok. So I expected to have the responsibility of taking care of myself but it was a little bit more than what I was prepared for. You know having to make decisions of what to eat, what time to eat, when to get up, when to go to bed, when to get ready for school, cause it was always done for me until I got into high school and a little more was expected. I didn't expect this. It's a lot harder.**

Often their academic transition was influenced by their high school experiences, especially their ability to do well in high school with minimal effort. Studying obviously plays a key role in the academic transition to college, especially considering the high school academic success of these students. This success in high school often came without the need to develop sound study habits.

Jennifer: **Yeah, my high school was easy, if you played a sport or anything you wouldn't have to do hardly anything and you would pass. So like you didn't have hardly any homework and if you did, you had time to finish it in class.**

In high school they gave you study guides. If you studied it and knew it then you'd make an A. Like here the study guides they may not be what is on the tests. Cause like in Human Ecology the study guide had three things but it was totally different. So next time I know not to really rely on the study guides.

Amy: **But I as a person I didn't expect to have to work so hard cause I always made it through without having to study through high school, cause all through high school I didn't have to study at all. I could read something and just not have to worry about it or hear the teacher say I didn't have to worry about it. But now I have to actually have to open a book and study for myself.**

To transition to the level of college academics, these students had to developed new study habits and techniques. Some studied by themselves while others studied in groups.

Kurt: **I can't go in and study all weekend, cause I won't be able to get that done. If I do I have to pull an all nighter doing all that stuff. See what it wouldn't take one hour to do it takes me two hours to do. I don't know why, it just is.**

Jennifer: **I study by myself, when you study with a group you tend to like start a conversation on something totally different from what it is. So like if I have a test I usually study like an hour or two hours for like start a week ahead and maybe an hour one night two hours the next, just whatever I have time for. Because if I study all at once I get really all stress out about it and over study completely and get over stress and I just quit and don't study any more. But I found out that if I study a little bit or a chapter a night then I will at least know the information.**

Lucy: **I study a lot more now. Cause my grades weren't doing too well, that scarred me. I wasn't use to studying.**

Like I already met Heather and Stephanie to eat for lunch but like after that like I study in between classes. That's why I stay so caught up much cause I could study in between but I get really tired at night and can't concentrate and don't have to stay up too late. Then I study for two or three hours after my evening class. I probably go eat again which is my favorite thing to do. Sometimes I stay up late doing papers and stuff cause I get real nervous if I put stuff off to the last minute. I try to get everything done cause I'm a poor student. I'd get nervous about getting it done if I only had a day or two.

Susan: **Well it depends on what it is (*laughter*). Like my Chemistry exams, Chem Excel helps a lot cause we work problems. I really don't have to worry about studying as hard for it as I would if I didn't have Chem Excel. I just like read my notes and try to make sure I understand them. Then I'll memorize anything that I need to memorize like formulas or something. In Chem Excel we always get like a sample test. I will work those out and see which ones I get right and wrong. The ones that I miss I will figure out how to do them or ask somebody or something. The ones you miss are the ones you do best on cause those are the ones you remember better. Then like my math test, well I, the last time I had a math test I worked out like three of the practice exams on the Internet and then I studied my notes a whole lot. Then Psy exam, he gave us a study guide for Psy test, so I just like, I read through, like I always read the chapter before class and highlight like all the definitions in yellow and then when he give us the study guide I go back and any of the definitions in the study guide I will highlight over the yellow with pink so it jumps out at me which ones I need to know. So I will study my book then I will study my notes until I think I've got it. I don't really question my self in that class. I've only had one test in Honors. She gave us a study guide for that but she specifically said the stuff on the study guide is not on the tests. It wasn't but they are like related. So I just I was like one of a very few people who listened to her when she said that, so I just went through and studied and once again highlighted the stuff that was on the study guide and anything that was with it at all. I have that in green. I have these color coded (*laughter*) for every class and I just then read over my notes five or six times. I got a 97 on that test.**

Susan: **Well the main thing that I do that a lot of people don't do is read the material before you go to class. It's common sense but most people don't do it and they don't do well on the test and I like here's why. They are just too lazy to do it I think. But that helps a lot. Really I don't study every night for my classes except for my math. If I know that I'm going to have to memorize something, like sometimes he will let you know he will say you need to memorize this then I will start memorizing that like a week before the test or something.**

Susan: **Probably the biggest change has been in my math class caused I realized that I needed to study more often, spread it out and not try to cram it all in at the last minute. I realized that I had to study my notes and work out problems where I was just doing one or the other, because I had a poor grade on my second tests.**

Kurt and two of his Robinson Scholar friends formed a study group. They are studying three hours each day including the weekends. They are very intent upon high academic achievement their first semester.

Kurt: **Well, I'm getting more settled in and have more of a schedule. In the mornings is when my classes are. Then after, say 2:00, me and my**

> **scholarship buddies we have like a mandatory[18] three hour study session cause we hadn't been studying. So we set it for three hours up here (library) in a study room. Then after that we lift weights and run for about two hours then after that if there is anything left to do I just do it, go to my room and go to sleep… We figured cause the way we are we can't be self-motivated, but if we are in an atmosphere where we will have to study we will have to do it. Like in our room we have options of getting on the computer or watching TV and not do our work.**

Finally, Kurt compares college to a job, something that you just have to do.

> *Kurt*: **We're on a scholarship you have to maintain a 2.5 (*GPA*). The way I look at it, it's kind of a job while you are in college, it's like a job, you do work and if you don't do your work you drop below that you pretty much get fired. I mean they are pretty much paying you to go to college, paying for all your books, tuition, everything and you're getting money on top of that, so you are getting paid to go to college. In my view it's a job and you have to do it. It's a hard job but.**

Issues and Implications

Several issues emerging from these studies have implications for transition programs. While some may be specific to the Robinson Scholars group, many are more widely applicable.

Ties to home/"up and out". Ties to home were very powerful for the Robinson students. The first-year students returned home most weekends and their high school relationships remained intact. In general, they saw themselves returning to their communities upon graduation and were able to foresee themselves helping others in their community. While strong ties to home are an important influence in Appalachia, and in rural communities in general, the power of these ties is not limited to these students.

The Robinson program and many other retention/scholarship/intervention programs targeting traditionally underrepresented students, focus on building bridges between the university and local communities, drawing upon student idealism and concern with making life better in their home areas. For rural Appalachian students and their communities, and likely many other communities as well, programs must actively challenge the rhetoric of "up and out" or "give them an education and they will just leave home," not only with rhetoric about community development, but with concrete examples of ways in which students who participate in higher education can make their home communities a better place. Encouraging students to keep home ties strong, and facilitating educational experiences that enhance local ties may be a far more productive strategy than telling them that their homesickness will go away.

[18] This "mandatory" study period was self-imposed, not mandated by the program.

Like many other new college students, the Robinson students found it difficult to establish new relationships at the university. Focusing on helping students maintain home ties should not get in the way of efforts to help them expand their communities at school as well. The importance of the social support offered by the Robinson program, and the strength of being part of a cohort, is important to the success of these students.

Bright students/high grades in high school/low skill levels. In general, both the rising junior cohort and the first-year Robinson students made good grades in high school without working very hard. The rising juniors reported on surveys and in their focus groups that they believe they are well prepared for college. Most believed that they would need to spend less than ten hours per week on homework and studying in college. Project staff, visiting teachers and others all described the Robinson students in the rising junior cohort as "bright." There was little disagreement that the identification process had been successful in selecting students with "potential." These same teachers were also quick to tell us that the students were from one-to-several years below grade level in the science, mathematics and communications skills that formed the basis of the summer program. Gaps between their expectations about college demands and reality quickly became evident in the summer program. Time and effort commitments that would seem light to seasoned college students were viewed as unreasonable. We had little success in changing this perception in the course of the two-week summer program.

Academic/Social Orientation. While the high school preparation of the first-year cohort varied, through their preparation in the Robinson program the students knew to expect the academic aspects of college to be difficult. Other than Lucy who received very poor grades because of the amount of time she spent communicating with her friends via computer and skipping class, they were focused upon their academics rather than their social life. The need to maintain a 2.5 GPA in order to keep their scholarships kept the students focused on doing what it took to be successful. For example, when the students were not particularly well-prepared for a subject, they made adjustments by seeking out their professors and visiting them during their office hours and by attending study sessions. Susan took advantage of the opportunity to participate in the peer-led Chem Excel program. In general the students reported that they had to develop new study habits and techniques to succeed academically in college.

Through the support provided by the Robinson program, and the motivation provided by a full-ride scholarship, the first-year students were generally able to adapt successfully to college. However, in communities where low expectations for students are the norm, schools are severely under funded, and avenues for enrichment are few, a scholarship program without the support provided to the first-year cohort could actually set underprepared students up for failure when they reach college.

Low educational expectations/High student aspirations. Both cohorts of Robinson students expressed very high career aspirations. They planned to pursue graduate and/or professional degrees, frequently in medical fields. They expected to do well in their college courses. Their early selection as scholarship students certainly influenced these high aspirations. And, in some cases, students who attended the generally stronger

"county seat" schools were well-prepared. In other cases, low expectations and "grade inflation" in the schools they attended led students to believe they were much better-prepared for college than was the case. Withholding appropriate challenges and failure to hold students to appropriate standards can permeate the system and structure educational opportunity without being evident enough to call into question. Students, as their part of the unwritten schooling bargain, are socialized not to ask for challenge and learn quickly what is necessary to 'get by', without realizing that the skills they should be developing will be expected background knowledge in their college courses. In high-poverty rural communities such as those described in Carter (1998) low expectations and high grades can mislead students about their preparation for higher-level courses and for college. As noted earlier, the first-year cohort had slightly below-average ACT scores and the rising juniors were described by instructors as "bright" but several grade levels behind where they should be. Hard work enabled most of the students in the first-year cohort to overcome these obstacles.

Faculty development for helping students deal with transitions

Literature on retention and engagement indicates that students who interact with faculty are more likely to remain in school (Tinto, 1987). Many of the students had favorable experiences with faculty, in conflict with their expectations about university faculty, and in conflict with stereotypes about faculty in Research I institutions. Some students had been told by their high school guidance counselors that the professors would not care about them. They found this to be incorrect.

Lucy: **I didn't expect the teachers to be so nice, but that's about it, cause they are. I thought they would all be evil, so it's working out good.**

Jennifer: **Well like I think UK is a really good school. They say the professors like if you are whatever like high school, they said that the professors like would not help you like. But they actually like try to teach you. In the smaller classes like if you have a question, they will try to answer it for you instead of saying you have to learn it yourself.**

Susan: **My Honors professor and my tickets. She talked with me about that forever. And there was an assignment for UK 101 and I just emailed her and asked her if she would answer some questions. She answered them and said I was glad to be of assistance. Uh, I don't know like all my other teachers haven't shown me individually, but I can see like how they treat other students most are outgoing and try to help as much as they can. That was something I was really surprised about when I came up here, because like, my high school guidance counselor was always like they're not going to give a crape about you, you're just a number in class you know, but when I actually got here they go out of their way for people.**

Elsewhere Robinson (Robinson, 2002) has documented that even though faculty interactions were limited to e-mail, visits during office hours, and prior to or after class,

with even more severe limitations in larger classes, most faculty have showed care and concern for the students. For example, when students were absent due to illness or a death in the family, the faculty made special arrangements for make-up tests and assignments. The faculty helped the students by providing extra study sessions, study guides, and tutoring as needed. Smaller classes provided a better opportunity for the students and faculty to interact. Lucy's comments are typical of those of students from the first-year cohort.

> *Lucy*: **Like I had a death in the family and I missed school and I didn't want to talk to my teachers about it. I emailed my English teacher about it. She said she was sorry and gave me an extension on my paper. I got to make up my Ecology exam and Math exam. Everyone was nice about it. I didn't expect them to be so caring but they were.**

We frequently hear comments from Appalachian students that they are afraid to speak out in class, for fear that their accent will be ridiculed or that they will be labeled by faculty or by other students. At least in the students we talked with, these fears were not realized in their interactions with faculty.

In spite of the importance of faculty interactions, faculty development is often an absent presence in discourses on retention and bridging programs. Certainly, some faculty may see development efforts targeted toward dealing with underrepresented students as calls to "dumb-down" the curriculum or inflate grades. Others may see efforts to increase faculty awareness of student skills as a call for more work which will go unacknowledged and unrewarded. In spite of such barriers, many UK faculty were already interacting positively with their students and were eager to be of assistance. Faculty development can provide additional tools for faculty to make the most not only of these interactions, but of other efforts to help students bridge the gaps between their preparation and the demands of college. In the case of students such as the Robinson Scholars, development may need to take the focus of helping faculty re-think assumptions about student background and preparation, identifying the specific skills that students will need to be successful in their courses, and developing creative mechanisms so that students without that background can quickly get up to speed.[19]

Scholarships or programs?

The value of programs such as the Robinson Scholars goes far beyond enhancing the lives of the individual students and their families. The Scholars program enhances connections between UK and an underserved, economically challenged region of the state. The connections the program provides makes the University much more accessible to other students in the region who may not have scholarships, but who can see their

[19] Of course, this is important not just with first-generation students or those from Appalachia, but with all students. As noted by Brad Goan, director of the Robinson program, "issues of faculty understanding and interaction are magnified there, but many faculty members don't have a clue about the average freshmen's skill set" (Goan, 2002, personal communication)

friends being successful in college. As students go back to their home communities, and report to their home schools, they can be active agents for educational reform there.

The Robinson students are very loyal to their region and want to make it better. While they are interested in the money and independence that college can help them develop, they overwhelmingly reported that family, friends, teachers, and community members provided their encouragement and motivation to go to college. The Robinson Scholars program also provided major motivation and support. Their self-interest and goals were far down the list as motivators. These are students who will make a difference in their communities.

Early intervention programs can be expensive. Both scholarship and support services costs can be hard to predict effectively. However, continued, stable funding is critical to the effectiveness of such programs. When funding is intermittent, students, families, and schools can lose hope in the possibility of college. Support mechanisms become intermittent, and dreams can die. Unfortunately, the Robinson Scholars program has encountered financial difficulties just as the first-year cohort are, in general, making the transition to successful college students. The number of scholarships and the summer programs have been cut dramatically. This is a regrettable not only for potential recipients but to the region and state.

Simply because students were identified as promising in middle school does not mean they receive immunity from chronically-underfunded schools, the slings and arrows of adolescence, and the oft-tumultuous transition to independent college student. Some Robinson Scholars will not be successful in gaining admission to college or in making the transition to a thriving college student. However, many students who would not otherwise have access to college will come to UK or a community college and may return to their home communities to make a positive difference in life there.

Socioeconomic, ethnic, geographic and academic place has critical implications for program implementation. In working with non-advantaged students, increasing interest and motivation are not sufficient. To truly open doors for these young people requires providing the support and opportunities necessary for them to be successful in academic environments. Early intervention programs must address the academic, social and material needs of these students, not just the economic costs of college. While the challenges are many, a small number of determined, successful young people who return to their communities with cultural toolkits enhanced by higher education could provide a powerful lever for community development and educational reform.

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