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## Hollers, Hillbillies, and Higher Education: The Influence of Dialect and Negative Stereotypes on the Academic Experiences of Rural Appalachian College Students

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Eastern Kentucky University

Hollers, Hillbillies, and Higher Education: The Influence of Dialect and Negative  
Stereotypes on the Academic Experiences of Rural Appalachian College Students

Honors Thesis

Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment

of the

Requirements of HON 420

Spring 2023

By

Jessica Boggs

Faculty Mentor

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Department of English

## Abstract

Hollers, Hillbillies, and Higher Education: The Influence of Dialect and Negative Stereotypes on the Academic Experiences of Rural Appalachian College Students

Jessica Boggs

Mentored by Dr. Erin Presley, Department of English

Rural Appalachia is presented in popular culture as a region lacking in resources, morals, education, and more. Consequently, Appalachians who speak in the nonstandard language variety representative of the region are often subject to harmful stereotypes. This work examines the impact of negative stereotypes on dialectal Appalachian college students during their pursuit of higher education. This research was conducted via an anonymous survey investigating how students from specified rural Appalachian counties in Kentucky perceived their academic experiences regarding stereotypes, speaking a stigmatized Appalachian dialect, and how these influence others' perceptions of them when attending any college or university. Hypotheses included the following in relation to dialectal Appalachian students: popular culture perpetuates Appalachian stereotypes and reinforces negative assumptions about Appalachians; academic challenges are common during students' academic experiences; and including dialect as a recognized aspect of diversity in the classroom would contribute to a more accepting academic environment. Survey results yielded support for all three hypotheses. This study is significant in acknowledging the detriment of Appalachian stereotypes and in providing methods to improve the academic experiences of dialectal Appalachian college students.

*Keywords: Appalachia(n), stereotype, dialect, Standard American English, higher education, diversity*

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## **Hollers, Hillbillies, and Higher Education: The Influence of Dialect and Negative Stereotypes on the Academic Experiences of Rural Appalachian College Students**

The Appalachian region is known for many things such as its beautiful landscape, generous people, unique culture, and distinct dialect; however, these seem to be the interpretations only of those who inhabit the region. One does not need to travel very far from the protection of the mountains to realize that these positive descriptions are far from the opinions of those who do not call Appalachia home. To outsiders, Appalachia lacks morals, resources, and education, is wrought with poverty, ignorance, and isolation, and is an overarching representation of the worst failures that America has to offer. These perspectives, of course, stem not only from a lack of understanding about the region itself, but also because of the way that various forms of media and literature in popular culture have historically portrayed the region and its people as something that is inherently wrong, lesser than, and unworthy of respect from the general population, consequently resulting in widely accepted stereotypes. Not only are Appalachians rarely recognized as a marginalized population, but society even remains openly tolerable to discrimination against those from the Appalachian region. These harmful stereotypes, which are largely maintained within modern society, negatively impact Appalachians in various aspects of their lives, especially in their academic experiences when pursuing higher education.

Because there are rarely any actual physical traits that signify a person as being Appalachian, the true marker of their identity is their Appalachian dialect. This distinct dialect is most commonly spoken by individuals who inhabit the rural, central areas of Appalachia. Understandably, speaking a stigmatized dialect that is indicative of belonging to a stereotyped population can cause others to make negative assumptions about the speakers. Because of this, pursuing higher education at colleges or universities where standard language varieties reign presents a multitude of unforeseen obstacles for many dialectal Appalachian college students.

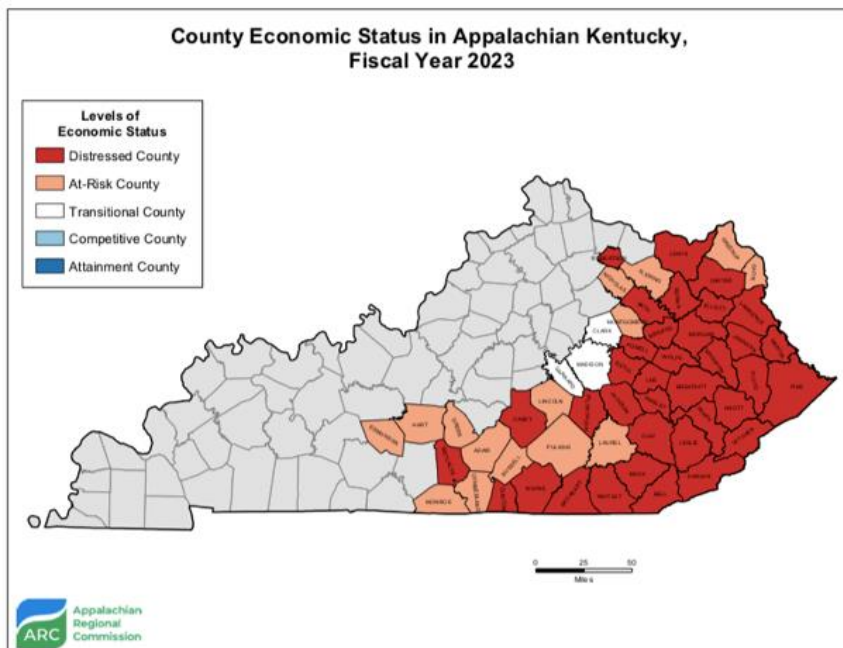
This research examines the notion that, when pursuing higher education, rural Appalachian students are stereotyped based on their Appalachian dialect, which negatively impacts their academic experiences. Through the utilization of a survey combined with extensive literature review regarding Appalachia, stereotypes and discrimination, and sociolinguistics and dialect, this study serves to acknowledge and combat the struggles that many rural Appalachians face when pursuing higher education. The goal of this research is to advocate for including dialect as a recognized aspect of diversity that students bring with them to the college classroom. In setting this precedent, we can begin to combat harmful stereotypes to minimize the discrimination that Appalachians- speakers of a nonstandard language variety- experience, thus resulting in an improved overall college experience that allows students to feel seen, heard, credible, confident, and accepted. Ultimately, the purpose of this research is to empower rural Appalachian students to preserve their dialect as an important part of their identity and still be successful and confident in their pursuit of higher education without being subject to the consequences of negative stereotypes.

## I. *Defining Appalachia*

“Before that I had never known there was an us, but ever since the world has been divided in two.” -Silas House, At the Opening of *Coal Miner’s Daughter*, Corbin, Kentucky, March 27, 1980 (House)

American society has a persistent fascination with what they believe to be a separate world close to home and a desolate life they will never experience. This other world, of course, is in reference to the Appalachian region (Hsuing 1). Society struggles to even agree on how the word “Appalachia” should be pronounced, so it is understandably evident that the population tends to have differing opinions of what Appalachia is and what it represents. The one facet that everyone seems to agree upon, however, is that Appalachia is simply different, or “other,” in comparison to the rest of the country. Because the term “Appalachia” means various things to different people, we must define what it means in terms of this study. As Hess explains, “Appalachia is a place, a people, an idea, a culture, and it exists as much in the mind and imagination as on the map,” (1) so before one can truly understand the depth of what it means to be Appalachian, background must be provided to describe the region in terms of two distinct aspects. First, we must understand what Appalachia is in a literal sense- its geographical location and demographics. Second, and perhaps more importantly, we must understand who Appalachia is- the culture, the perception of Appalachia to those who call it home, and the perception of what the region represents to outsiders.

According to the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), the Appalachian region can be geographically described as an area that spans 206,000 square miles across 13 states ranging from southern New York to northern Mississippi along the Appalachian Mountain range (“Appalachian Counties Served by ARC”). The rough terrain of the Appalachian Mountains is the source of the geographical isolation of this region, but the region is an overall diverse space socially, economically, culturally, and geographically. Although Appalachia encompasses an enormous space, including several Mid-Atlantic states, most negative perceptions of the region target the rural southern and central Appalachian states (Roggenkamp 194). Despite popular belief, all Appalachians do not reside in hollows, or “hollers” as Appalachian natives may pronounce it; in fact, the region contains both rural and major metropolitan areas. However, one-fourth of the Appalachian region’s 423 counties are deemed rural; rural counties are defined as being neither part of nor adjacent to a metropolitan area. Nearly 10% of the 26.1 million people



*Illustration 1. County Economic Status in Appalachian Kentucky*

that live in Appalachia live in rural counties. Appalachian counties in Kentucky served by the ARC are shown in the map in **Illustration 1**. The ARC classifies the

following Kentucky counties as being rural Appalachian: Adair, Bell, Breathitt, Clay, Clinton, Cumberland, Elliot, Fleming, Floyd, Harlan, Jackson, Johnson, Knott, Knox, Laurel, Lee, Letcher, Leslie, Liberty, Lincoln, Magoffin, Martin, McCreary Menifee, Metcalfe, Morgan, Owsley, Perry, Pike, Pulaski, Russell, Rockcastle, Rowan, Wayne, Whitley, and Wolfe. Almost all counties listed are at a distressed level of economic status. In relation to the economic status of rural Appalachian counties, the median household income is \$42,403 (almost \$9,500 less than that of non-Appalachian rural counties) and 20% of persons are in poverty (about 5% more than persons in non-Appalachian rural counties). Further demographics include those of education. 84.8% of Appalachians in rural counties have obtained their high school diploma, 10% have obtained an associate degree, and 18.2% have obtained a bachelor's degree ("Appalachian Counties Served by ARC"). These statistics regarding education do not stray very far at all from those of non-Appalachian rural counties in America, suggesting that Appalachia's problems are "neither unique nor a product of some strange and peculiar culture- in fact, they're deeply interconnected with the political and economic life of the nation as a whole" (Colley 39). When comparing these demographics to the rest of country and using them to justify the general perception of the region, it is worth noting that Appalachian people have historically "been left to clean up the various economic, social, public health, and environmental messes extraction companies have dumped upon [Appalachia], leaving very few internal or external resources from which to build" (McCarroll and Harkins 161). To understand any description of the region, it is important to recognize that "big media have highlighted and exploited these systemic

challenges and problems in recent years and used them to identify Appalachia as the scapegoat for all of America's social and economic ills" (McCarroll and Harkins 161).

Perhaps more relevant than Appalachia's physical description is who Appalachia is. Concerning this idea, Powell poses the question, "What are we talking about when we talk about Appalachia? Is it on the map? Or is it in me?" (40). This sentiment rings true for many Appalachians as he asserts that Appalachia is a longing in the heart to come home again (Powell 38). Appalachia is recognized for its rich, unique culture full of distinct music, literature, arts and crafts, folklore, familial duties, religious beliefs, language, dialect, and more. To Appalachians, people of the region are generally known to be proud, self-reliant, hospitable, generous, and helpful. The perception of Appalachia from those who call it home is typically one of duality. While they do acknowledge the struggles the region faces, they take pride in their home and claim being Appalachian as an important part of their identity. However, this beneficent assessment of who Appalachia is, is not one commonly accepted by the rest of society. Non-Appalachians typically view Appalachia as existing vastly outside of societal norms and accordingly assign many dehumanizing characteristics to the region for what they believe that it represents. As stated by Anglin, eastern Kentucky, which is at the heart of rural Appalachia and is the location of interest in the present study, is perceived to symbolize "ruin on a grand scale... Not only is Appalachia the embodiment of poverty in a rural, normatively white population, it provides potent imagery of what is wrong with the poor" (566). While refusing to recognize the way the rest of the country has repeatedly failed Appalachia, non-Appalachian society generally perceives the region as being representative of the worst that society has to offer and as deserving of the abhorrence it

receives- largely due to the negative, overt stereotypes perpetuated by popular media and literature. The fictional representation that has essentially invented the idea of Appalachia in the minds of outsiders was almost universally accepted by society, and this created a “myth of Appalachia” that continues to cause real adversity for the region’s inhabitants (Billings, Norman, and Ledford 22).

For those Appalachians who leave the region and those who attend higher education institutions in particular, it is crucial to understand the impact that these descriptions and thus perceptions of Appalachia have on them as they pursue an education. These individuals quickly come to realize that Appalachia is much more than a place- it is a marker of their identity. McCarroll phrased this experience as follows:

If it was not obvious to them before, these students quickly come to understand that they are Appalachian, and this characteristic takes on a whole new meaning when you learn that “Appalachian” does not merely mean the place you are from but takes on the representation of all that is immoral and ignorant. (McCarroll 164)

Beyond the elusive descriptions of what and who Appalachia is, it becomes challenging to cohesively describe the region, but popular culture, media, and literature have presented Appalachia as a united idea that tends to overemphasize certain attributes about a group and underestimate the variability present within (Dye 3). Because of this popular yet distorted presentation of Appalachia to the rest of society, there are a myriad of stereotypes that have arisen and been assigned to the region and its people as truth without exception. These stereotypes, their origins, and the obstacles they create for Appalachians will be discussed in further detail throughout this work.

## *II. Stereotypes*

“In short, a Hill-Bille is a free and untrammled white citizen of Alabama, who lives in the hills, has no means to speak of, dresses as he can, talks as he pleases, drinks whiskey when he gets it, and fires off his revolver as the fancy takes him.”

*-New York Evening Journal, 1900 (Hazen and Fluharty 50)*

To understand why being a rural Appalachian pursuing higher education is challenging, we must first discuss the misconceptions that non-Appalachians believe about those from the region, how these originated, and the inevitable negative impact they leave behind. For well over a century, Appalachia has been made a laughingstock and been subject to countless pejorative stereotypes that not even the most culturally sensitive people today would avoid or challenge (Roggenkamp 193). The term “stereotype” can be defined as “a composite of the most vivid, memorable, and reductive traits of a given identity, often resulting in an unchanging character whose traits mark them as different from a cultural, and in America, a particularly modern and educated norm” (Massey 125). Massey explains stereotypes as being tools of signification through which people make judgements about other people. Signification, in this respect, is a process of portraying an identity through behaviors, materials, or speech. Stereotypes are a condensed or concentrated kind of signification that allows us to process large amounts of accumulated information and position a group of people into a certain typification



based on society's general perception of them. This is because people tend to understand the world by referring the perception of individuals in their head to a general classified scheme into which, according to our culture, they fit. The Appalachian in stereotyped form, portrayed through their speech patterns mainly, is thus a product of the national population's perception of the oversimplified, obsolete, generalized characteristics that they interpret as a representation of the entire Appalachian region's people (Massey 124).

One of the most common methods of conveying Appalachian stereotypes is known as microaggression. Microaggression can be defined as "every day, verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages targeting persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership" (Cummings-Lilly and Forrest-Bank 128). Microaggression is one of the most current concepts explaining how discrimination occurs in modern culture and it is important in understanding how "small, often subtle, incidents containing messages of stereotypes and stigma, experienced in the daily lives of marginalized populations, reinforce oppressed status and can have detrimental impacts on well-being" (Cummings-Lilly and Forrest-Bank 127). This method of discrimination is especially insidious in imposing the oppression of Appalachian people since the derogatory stereotypes are broadly accepted while the marginalized status of Appalachians tends to not be acknowledged (Cummings-Lilly and Forrest-Bank 126). Because microaggressions are small, brief incidents that are a normal part of interpersonal communication, they are often ignored or unnoticed and are usually intended to be inoffensive or humorous. The recipients of these comments, however, often struggle with how to interpret the intent behind the microaggressive act which can

cause extreme stress and is likely to have negative consequences. This concept explains how stereotypes and stigma are communicated and reinforced so that they aid in perpetuating discrimination (Cummings-Lilly and Forrest-Bank 130). Despite stigma and stereotypes of Appalachia being clearly linked to historical and ongoing poverty and oppression, Appalachians are hardly recognized as an oppressed and marginalized group. Because of this, it remains socially acceptable-and even encouraged- to ridicule, mock, and demean Appalachian people and subsequently place the blame on the victim by attributing negative characteristics that justify this behavior (Cummings-Lilly and Forrest-Bank 127).

The significance of stereotyping is the stigma that it creates surrounding the stereotyped population. A stigma can be understood as “an attribute of a person that is deeply discrediting and reduces him or her in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (Dye 8). Dye further explains this phenomenon by explaining that a person who is stigmatized is someone whose “social identity, or membership in some social category, calls into question his or her full humanity—the person is devalued, spoiled or flawed in the eyes of others” (8). Understandably, Appalachians, especially those pursuing higher education, suffer severe consequences that negatively impact their academic experiences because they are subject to the stigma surrounding Appalachian stereotypes. Although not much research has been conducted regarding the experience of stigma for Appalachians, some early assumptions that differentiate this experience for Appalachians compared to other marginalized groups is that they often possess a concealable stigma- their dialect (Dye 9). For the purposes of this research, it is important to understand that dialectal Appalachian students especially are aware that if

their stigma is discovered then they will be discredited, and this undoubtedly influences their approach to education and how they interact with others within an academic setting.

Now that a few important terms have been defined surrounding stereotypes and their consequences, we must examine some common stereotypes that are often attributed to the Appalachian region and its inhabitants in order to understand why these can have a detrimental impact on students' academic experiences. First, it must be established that something often overlooked but important to understand is that rural Central Appalachia, contrary to popular belief, is not a monolithic region in terms of heritage, wealth, nor culture. Despite this, the term "Appalachian" tends to be perceived as symbolizing a uniform culture which diminishes the complexity of the region and its people as belonging to a singular culture of white, rural poverty. Appalachians are assigned a set of stereotypes, and this construction of what it means to be Appalachia becomes part of their identity whether the stereotypes are applicable or not (Cummings-Lilly and Forrest-Bank 128). According to Cummings-Lilly and Forrest-Bank, "Regardless of how fabricated and unrealistic the social construction may be, [Appalachian identity] has real meaning in society. The term conjures painful stereotypes and is linked to real oppression," and this simultaneously serves as a cultural identity for Appalachian people (129).

The inaccurate identity created for Appalachians is so wildly unrealistic, yet it persists; therefore, the origin of these stereotypes must be examined to understand how society has been manipulated into blindly accepting a misconstrued reality. The leading culprit in the perpetuation of harmful Appalachian stereotypes over the last two centuries is popular media, including movies, television, and print sources. Until recently, Appalachia did not speak for itself but was rather spoken to and about, and these outside

voices forged a detrimental narrative that still exists. The deceptive external image of Appalachia was molded by non-Appalachians for consumption by non-Appalachians, and it almost always presented the region's residents as being "other" and thus ostracized from the rest of the nation on the basis of morality, dignity, and intelligence (Roggenkamp 195). Many scholars have emphasized the tenacity of this entrenched prejudice in literature, media, and popular culture. According to Roggenkamp, "Exploration narratives, sensational novels, regional fiction, travelogues, films, comics, television shows—all have contributed to solidifying an image of Appalachians as a generally distasteful, sometimes romanticized, pre-modern "other" in the eyes of non-Appalachian Americans" (193). Cultural texts often portray Appalachians as having been stunted by relentless, self-enforced poverty, family feuds, idleness, foolishness, intolerant religious beliefs, bigotry, eternal childishness, and moral degeneration (Roggenkamp 198). The culmination of these stereotypes has come to represent all that is essential to know about Appalachians, thus reducing "a complex regional society that is peopled by diverse groups to a set of simplistic caricatures" (Roggenkamp 198). The consequence of this outrageously imaginative perspective is that the region has been turned into "a dumping ground for the 'fears' and 'dreads,' of non-Appalachian Americans, ultimately transforming the rural south into an ultimate Otherplace, and Appalachians themselves as ultimate Otherpeople— 'creatures' existing like garbage dump rats in 'the hills of an American inferno'" (Roggenkamp 198). These perceptions have permanence in the minds of society, and this creates a highly stigmatized reputation for a group of people who do not even possess nor claim the persona attributed to them.

Not only is the hillbilly stereotypically personified, but the visual appearance of what an Appalachian hillbilly traditionally looks like is also perpetuated through media, literature, and television especially. Television emphasizes the “otherness” of the hillbilly’s physical appearance by exaggerating their large feet, darkened and dirty skin, sinister eyes, and laziness (Massey 128). Unfortunately, the original hillbilly cliché has remained basically unchallenged and even immortalized by the American print and media (Roggenkamp 193). Journalistic, academic, and fictional images of Appalachians as uneducated hillbillies encouraged other facets of popular culture to latch onto the “other” stereotypes of Appalachians. During the twentieth century, sources such as the comic strips Lil’ Abner and Snuffy Smith, the nonfiction report by Charles Kuralt named “Christmas in Appalachia,” movies such as *Deliverance*, and television shows including *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Hee Haw*, and *Green Acres* all conveyed, in some form, the stereotypes that Appalachians are poor, lazy, moonshiners, hillbillies, violent, sexually depraved, uneducated, old-fashioned, backwards, simple, etc. These insensitive portrayals, in the name of entertainment and often comedic relief, were in actuality a boundless effort to belittle, demean, and destroy a minority population (Dye 6). These sources and countless others were fervently and constantly consumed by the nation, and soon the Appalachian region became the white face of poverty in America and ultimately an image of the worst traits that humanity has to offer. Television shows, movies, and cartoons relied lazily on the assumption that viewers would associate an Appalachian accent with a lack of intelligence (McCarroll 165). Many of these widespread perceptions perpetuated by popular media were based on alleged cultural traits that sounded like, and in a sense were intended to be, lists of diseases, and many of these were formulated by

“experts” on Appalachia. Further, this superficial use of “Appalachian culture” in much thinking and writing has done absolutely no service to the region or its people and is more generally used as a weapon against them (Obermiller 104). Notably, these stereotypes have been constructed predominantly by those not from Appalachia and thus “being Appalachian means being presented throughout one’s life with images of Appalachia that bear little or no resemblance to one’s own experience” (Hess et al 11). When these stereotypes become naturalized in society, individuals often fail to notice the contributing underlying factors and these function to divide a society (Hess et al 24). Although stereotyping in media is inevitable, these erroneously attributed characteristics of a minority of a group to the whole subculture is undeniably problematic. Stereotypes usually fail to reflect the richness of the subculture and ignore the realities from which the images come, and this action can result in social injustices for individuals who make up that subculture (Cooke-Jackson 186).

The impact that these stereotypes can have on those affected can be detrimental, especially when the affected individuals begin to internalize them. Unfortunately, the stereotypes that belittle Appalachians are upheld at the group’s expense, and it becomes difficult for these individuals to value themselves or unique aspects of their culture (Cooke-Jackson 186). Meredith McCarroll, in her essay “On and on: Appalachian Accent and Academic Power,” recounts her experience surrounding her Appalachian dialect and the impotence it held in academia:

Yet while I was proud of my home, I was also learning that powerful stereotypes about Appalachia had arrived in places like Boston well before me and had influenced the way that even the most considerate people thought about

me... Instead of calling people out for their ignorance, I distanced myself from Haywood County. I laughed along. I waited longer and longer to reveal my background. I blended in. During this time, I applied to graduate school. In my visits to prestigious universities in Boston, I actively tried to “talk right” and hide my accent. (McCarroll 165)

McCarroll’s experience is noteworthy because she eloquently expresses the difficult experience that is all too relatable for so many Appalachians who seek to leave the region and dive into the world of academia or higher education. McCarroll emphasizes that it is still acceptable to mock “rednecks” and “hillbillies” in popular discourse without much interrogation of authenticity and that “People say to lighten up. It’s just a movie. It’s just a TV show. It doesn’t matter. But it does. It mattered to me as I left home, thinking that the only way to be a legitimate scholar was to attend a college in New England and change my voice. I had learned to talk right, but I had gotten it all wrong” (166). Not only do stereotyped individuals have to deal with the consequences of others’ negative perception of them, but the way in which one chooses to approach their stigma is undoubtedly internally conflicting as well.

Many rural Central Appalachians in particular feel they struggle more than other Americans with legal, educational, employment, and income injustices, “while remaining the last ethnic minority group in America that is not even protected by political correctness or basic civility” (Cummings-Lilly and Forrest-Bank 129). Even the individuals who would actively avoid defaming other cultural or ethnic groups in modern America seem to remain tolerant of the stereotyping and marginalization of Appalachians (Cummings-Lilly and Forrest-Bank 129). As is investigated in the present research,

society's mindset about Appalachia has real implications for Appalachians in academic settings, especially when dialectal Appalachian students feel that no matter their intelligence or effort, they will always be perceived as dumb hillbillies not worthy of respect and not capable of succeeding in an environment and society that sets them up to fail.

Because there is no real physical attribute that deems a person as being "Appalachian," it can be assumed that there is another common yet recognizable trait that marks one's identity as being "Appalachian." In many cases, this stigmatized marker of identity is an Appalachian's distinct dialect. A discussion of dialect and its implications in higher education can aid in understanding why speaking in a vernacular representative of an exceedingly ostracized region can create obstacles in the academic experiences of the students who speak it.

### *III. Dialect*

"Like many Kentuckians who leave the South, I have experienced the shame these images impose upon us. They make you deny your language and your story and accept as authority others' view of you" – Bobbie Ann Mason (Anglin 566)

Language is not only a means of communication, but it also expresses, on a much deeper level, who a person is. The aspect of language that can be accredited for this is an individual's dialect. Because dialect is indicative often of the place an individual is from,



it can be a source of stereotyping, especially when the vernacular is representative of a stigmatized region such as Appalachia. Many Appalachians who leave the region, such as Bobbie Ann Mason, choose to deny their language and their culture to avoid discrimination from others. This conversation surrounding losing one's true voice is important when considering the impact it has on the academic experiences of dialectal college students.

Dialect can be understood as a particular form of language that is unique to a specific region or social group. Dialects are language varieties that are linguistically and generally also politically linked to a standardized language variety where the standard variety typically retains a degree of societal prestige and is thus accepted as "proper" compared to other dialects which are considered to be incorrect depending on the social prestige of its speakers (Luhman 332). For the purposes of this research, the standardized language variety in question refers to Standard American English (SAE). SAE is based on the dialect typically spoken by the dominant, superior class's values-those of the predominantly white, middle- and upper-class speakers (Dunstan and Jaeger, "Dialect and Influences on the Academic Experiences of College Students" 778). Standard English is valued in school, business, government, and the media because it is language most commonly used in educational and linguistic research. Scientific research on language demonstrates that standard dialects are not linguistically better by any objective measures; however, they are socially preferred purely because they are the language varieties used by those who are most powerful and affluent in a society (Godley 30). Because dialect is an implied marker of an individual's identity, the term social dialect is generally used to signify differences that are associated with groups that are unequal in

status and power. According to the principle of linguistic inferiority, the speech of a socially inferior group (i.e., Appalachians) will be interpreted as linguistically inadequate by comparison to that of the socially dominant group (i.e., those who speak SAE); therefore, in popular culture, dialects associated with socially disfavored groups are thought to be unworthy and corrupted versions of the standard dialects spoken by their socially favored counterparts. Linguists, however, refute the notion that any dialect can be defined as a corrupt version of the standard variety. Instead, they insist that all forms of human language systems are fundamentally regular, and characterizing any socially disfavored varieties as slang, ungrammatical, or mutant is incorrect and demeaning (Wolfram and Schilling 59).

Despite some stereotypes surrounding elements of physical appearance, few Appalachians actually possess those. Appalachians do, however, possess a trait that can be heard in their speech patterns and is different from other dialects (Dye 9). Appalachian English, predominantly associated with residents of Eastern Kentucky, is one of the few surviving nonstandard regional dialects of English in the United States. Its distinctiveness from Standard American English is a result of both the isolated physical environment and the industrial economic development of the region, and dialects thrive in such social and physical isolation (Luhman 331). The economic exploitation of Appalachia has created and maintained a level of poverty in the region that has resulted in Appalachian English being considered not only a regional dialect but also an inferior social dialect in the minds of most Americans compared to that of SAE (Luhman 332). Appalachia has a very unique history and culture, and the same is true of its dialect. The Appalachian form of speech was determined predominantly by the Scotch-Irish during their settlement of the

mountain region prior to and following the American Revolution. This group had arrived from Northern Ireland and had not yet assimilated to the older colonial culture, so they brought an old-fashioned Northern English dialect along with their move to the Appalachian region. Due to the Scotch-Irish people being isolated in the rugged terrain of the mountains, their descendants continued for a long time to speak the dialect of the remote Lowland Scots and their Northern English ancestors. This dialect can be dated back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and Appalachian English is thus considered to be the oldest remaining English dialect- older than Shakespearean speech and closer to the speech of Chaucer (Williams 174).

Aside from its historical origin, Appalachian English also differs from SAE in grammar, phonology, lexicon, and intonation. It is considered to be not only an incorrect variation of SAE but is an entirely separate language system in its own right with its own set of rules for correct speech. Of course, the degree to which an individual employs their Appalachian English would determine the extent to which the speaker is identified as Appalachian (Luhman 332). Further, discrimination against persons from Appalachia encompasses various forms, but one of the most prominent forms against Appalachians is that of accent, or dialect, discrimination. Accent, which can be indicative of a particular nation, social class, or locality especially, is said to exist “mainly in a prevailing quality of tone, or in a peculiar alteration of pitch, but may include mispronunciation of vowels or consonants, misplacing of stress, and misinflection of a sentence” (Walker 346). Because accent and dialect remain symbolic of one’s culture, traditions, and upbringing, it is inseparable from the speaker; therefore, Appalachian accents are a prime example of this notion (Walker 346). The rural Appalachian dialect of English is heavily stigmatized

in mainstream American culture causing its speakers to be subject to prejudice and stereotypes which can be detrimental in educational settings (Dunstan and Jaeger, "The Role of Language in Interactions with Others on Campus for Rural Appalachian College Students" 47). Additionally, in modern American society, accent discrimination undermines speakers' credibility and unconsciously guides listeners' perception and judgement (Walker 346).

Perhaps the most pervasive stereotype of Appalachians involves ridicule and criticism related to their distinct dialect, pronunciation, and patterns of communication (Cummings-Lilly and Forrest-Bank 126). Society tends to rely on language traits to judge others because it is simply in our human nature. We use variation in language to construct ourselves as social beings, to signal who we are, and who we are not (Lippi-Greene 291). Because of this, Appalachians have the ability to control their dialectal stigma by monitoring and changing their speech so that their identity may not be revealed. To conceal this marker of identity and avoid being devalued by society, these individuals may choose to conceal their dialect or shift their dialect to a more standardized dialect. It is suspected that Appalachians tend to either change their dialect in order to gain status outside of the region or they choose to maintain their speech as to not lose status within the region, and some may choose to shift between the two depending on their present situation. There is an interesting dynamic between whether one chooses to conceal or reveal their Appalachian dialect based on who and what they value more. Individuals who possess this sense of controllability of their stigma, in fact, are subject to harsher judgement and are more rejected than those with uncontrollable stigmas such as race (Dye 10).

Speech is a prominent marker of social position that we use to make assumptions about others based on incomplete information, and it carries extra weight because it is inextricable from its speaker. The most critical consequence concerning speaking in a low status speech variety is the widely held negative stereotypes it entails. Language symbolizes our social experience in an intimate way and locates us within social groups tied to our identity (Luhman 332). Nonstandard language varieties generally become social markers of the social groups that use them. Through this connection, the varieties reflect commonly held stereotypes of those groups from the perspectives of outsiders (Luhman 331). Low status individuals are completely aware of their relative social position and standard speakers stereotype nonstandard speakers as inferior in qualities such as intelligence, wealth, success, and education (Luhman 332). Notably, a study performed by Tara Parsons suggested that dialect can be used to attribute personality traits to its speakers and found that people tend to associate Appalachian stereotypes to its speakers. The study also suggested that Appalachian students react negatively to their dialect because they are highly sensitive to derogatory media portrayals and have internalized these negative stereotypes (Parsons 37).

In academia, education, and society at large, we tend to use language to make assumptions about numerous character traits, from intelligence to trustworthiness, to assess those with whom we interact. When language is used to judge or categorize others, stereotyping and discrimination become part of the social interaction process as a result of standard language ideology (Dunstan and Jaeger, "The Role of Language in Interactions with Others on Campus for Rural Appalachian College Students" 48). Language is a student characteristic that is not often considered in higher education when

examining elements of diversity and the role these elements play in academic experiences. Rural Appalachian college students bring with them to campus a unique dialect that sets them apart from their peers, and this influences their experiences when interacting with others on campus (Dunstan and Jaeger, "The Role of Language in Interactions with Others on Campus for Rural Appalachian College Students" 47). Students who speak in the distinct, stigmatized Appalachian variety of English find that this often marks them as "other" and influences the way their peers and professors perceive them (Dunstan and Jaeger, "The Role of Language in Interactions with Others on Campus for Rural Appalachian College Students" 48).

The dialects that college students speak represent a type of diversity that can influence many aspects of their academic experience. Dunstan and Jaeger discuss that, while educators attempt to recognize and promote awareness of diversity of race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, religion, etc. in the classroom, "diversity of language (when it is acknowledged) is often not seen as a type of diversity for scholars and educators to learn about and celebrate, but as an issue that requires homogenization and standardization" (Dunstan and Jaeger, "Dialect and Influences on the Academic Experiences of College Students" 779). In the classroom, dialect is often only acknowledged in the context of attempting to correct students' nonstandard dialect and assimilate it to SAE. Students' dialects directly influence their academic performance and instructors' expectations of students' academic potential (Dunstan and Jaeger, "Dialect and Influences on the Academic Experiences of College Students" 779). The problem inherent in the idea that there is a common standard language ideology is the assumption that this correlates to a single, correct form of English spoken by educated individuals. This results in speakers

of less prestigious and valued varieties feeling that they must adapt their speech to the standard or risk not being taken seriously or not being considered educated or intelligent. As phrased by Lippi-Greene, “The educational system may not be the beginning, but it is the heart of the [language] standardization process” (Lippi-Greene 294). There is an issue with correctionist teaching because it encourages the notion that there is something fundamentally incorrect about Appalachian English. Students perceive an obvious separation and implied hierarchal power difference between Appalachian English and SAE in which SAE still reigns (Clark and Hayward 122). This is significant because to reject an individual’s speech on the basis of incorrectness is, in a sense, to reject that individual and their culture (Dunstan and Jaeger, “Dialect and Influences on the Academic Experiences of College Students” 778).

Appalachian speakers learn the skill of shifting between an informal (Appalachian) and formal (SAE) dialect very early in their academic careers for various purposes including solidarity among their peers or earning A’s from their teachers. They realize, however, that no matter how well they begin to master their standardized English, it is vital that they go back to their Appalachian voice around their friends and family, so they are not pegged as being better than their kinfolk, which holds a lot of weight in Appalachian culture. The shifting between their home dialect and that of the world of academia creates a lot of tension (Clark and Hayward 111). Additionally, students who change their dialect to accommodate that of the so-called power structure (i.e., that of SAE) may develop an internal struggle which does not occur without great cost to the speaker (Clark and Hayward 122). Meredith McCarroll, a prominent academic and author within the field of Appalachians studies, provides an account in her essay titled “On and

on: Appalachian Language and Academic Power” of feeling as though she needed to reform her dialect in order to fit into the world of higher education and academia once she left the Appalachian region. Although she had forced her vowels into shape and corrected her language so she was no longer ostracized by her peers, she had to deal with the guilt and regret of losing her true voice- her Appalachian power- despite her success. McCarroll claims that “Our language- diction, phrasing, dialect, accent-defines our identity and, perhaps, our successes or failure,” and this is sadly an experience all too common for so many Appalachians pursuing higher education outside of the region. (164). The aim of the research presented in this study is to demonstrate that this burdening academic experience is often encountered by rural Appalachian college students. After all, an individual’s perception of their experience IS their experience, and it is vital that we develop methods to improve this.

#### *IV. The Voice of Appalachia- Survey*

“Some of the smartest people I have met throughout my life have been from Appalachia. It’s unfair to judge or grade students (or anyone) based solely on their dialect.” -Survey Respondent

### Study Purpose

The population of Appalachia, largely because of misconceptions created by and maintained within popular culture, is especially vulnerable to insidious stereotyping that is still widely perpetuated and accepted by non-Appalachians, and this can be



detrimental for rural Appalachians in higher education in particular. Prior research has not focused on studying the impact of negative stereotypes on academic experiences for Appalachian college students from rural Appalachian counties in Kentucky specifically. In this study, I aim to examine the influence of speaking a stigmatized, nonstandard Appalachian English dialect that is often connected to negative stereotypes on the academic experiences of students from rural Appalachian counties in Kentucky attending any college or university. Evidence and discussion regarding negative academic experiences related to stereotyping may lead to a better understanding of the biases that educators and students in higher education hold regarding Appalachian students and their ability to succeed in an academic environment. My goal is to use the data collected from this research to suggest ways in which dialect can be included as a conventional aspect of diversity so that Appalachian students do not feel the need to mask or unlearn this part of their identity in order to be successful in their pursuit of higher education. Namely, I aim to use this data to advocate for language to be included in the diversity clause in all class syllabi at colleges or universities. In setting this precedent, we can begin to combat harmful stereotypes tied to Appalachian dialect to aid in lessening the discrimination against Appalachians and thus improve their overall academic experiences in a way that they feel credible, confident, and accepted. Because Appalachia is a population that is often silenced and overlooked, this study is especially meaningful in giving Appalachians a voice so that they feel seen and heard on an issue that has plagued the region's people for far too long.

### *Hypotheses*

This study focused on researching instances of stereotyping and discrimination against college students from rural Appalachian counties in Kentucky in relation to their Appalachian dialect. These findings were then compared to previous research performed by other experts in the fields of Appalachian Studies and sociolinguistics. Three core hypotheses were formed and extensively examined for this study.

The first hypothesis is that participants will agree that literature, social media, movies, and TV shows perpetuate Appalachian stereotypes, and these reinforce the negative assumptions that students' peers tend to make about them based on their dialect. This is hypothesized because of the prevalence of Appalachian stereotypes in popular culture throughout history and how it creates a false image of Appalachia that society tends to accept as truth.

The second hypothesis is that many participants will report academic challenges during their college experience due to how others perceived their Appalachian dialect. Challenges included but are not limited to a lack of confidence in the classroom, a lack of verbal or written participation in class, feelings of inadequacy in their academic capabilities, and discomfort among peers who spoke a standard variety of English. As an extension of this core hypothesis, I predict that many participants will report that they felt it was necessary to shift their stigmatized Appalachian English to an accepted Standard American English when in the classroom setting in order to be seen as credible, intelligent, and educated to their professors and peers. These are hypothesized because of the stigma surrounding Appalachia and nonstandard varieties of English.

The third hypothesis is that participants will agree that including dialect as a recognized aspect of diversity in the classroom would contribute to a more accepting

academic environment. Appalachian stereotypes are perpetuated in part because Appalachia is not recognized as a marginalized group, so discrimination against Appalachian students is thus accepted and maintained. Further, Appalachian stereotypes are so engrained into society that those in higher education are not often conscious of their bias. Additionally, dialect is considered a concealable stigma, so language must be acknowledged as an aspect of diversity that students bring with them to the college classroom in order to protect those students from discrimination.

## Methods

### *Participants*

110 total participants completed the survey with ages ranging from 18 to 65 years and older. Participants were not eligible to complete the survey if they were under 18 years of age. To complete the survey, participants were required to be from one of the following Kentucky counties deemed as rural Appalachia: Adair, Bell, Breathitt, Clay, Clinton, Cumberland, Elliot, Fleming, Floyd, Harlan, Jackson, Johnson, Knott, Knox, Laurel, Lee, Letcher, Leslie, Liberty, Lincoln, Magoffin, Martin, McCreary Menifee, Metcalfe, Morgan, Owsley, Perry, Pike, Pulaski, Russell, Rockcastle, Rowan, Wayne, Whitley, and Wolfe. Additionally, participants must have completed or have plans to complete some level of higher education to be eligible to complete the survey. Levels of education included some college but no degree, associate or technical degree, Bachelor's degree, and graduate or professional degree.

### *Materials*

For this study, I constructed a survey to gather information regarding academic experiences in relation to Appalachian dialect and stereotyping in higher education. I

created a survey via Eastern Kentucky University's Qualtrics account to collect data. The survey was divided into five sections. To view the survey used in this study, see appendix A.

The first section of the survey consisted of general demographic questions to ensure that all participant eligibility requirements were met as well as to accrue knowledge of the nature of the participant pool so the results could be properly analyzed. Six demographic questions were asked regarding age, county of residence, education level, whether the college or university attended was located within the Appalachian region, whether being Appalachian was an important part of their identify, and whether they were proud of their Appalachian heritage.

The second section of the survey inquired about stereotypes and consisted of five questions based on Likert scale format and one free response question. Two examples of types of questions from section are: Movies and TV shows promote stereotypes, with answer options being strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, and strongly disagree; and what are some common stereotypes that you think people associate with Appalachians, with the answer option being a free response text box.

The third survey section consisted of four questions relating to Appalachian dialect and all question response options were in a Likert scale format. An example of the type of question asked in this section is: I am often teased because of my dialect, with answer options being strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, and strongly disagree.

The fourth section of this survey contained eight Likert scale-based questions regarding academic experiences. An example of a question asked in this section is: Because of my dialect, I felt that others did not perceive me as scholarly, intellectual, or credible, with answer options being strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, and strongly disagree.

The fifth and final section of this survey consisted of one less structured free response question to allow participants to voice any additional information regarding Appalachian stereotypes, dialect, or the academic experiences of rural Appalachian college students as well as a space for additional comments.

### *Procedures*

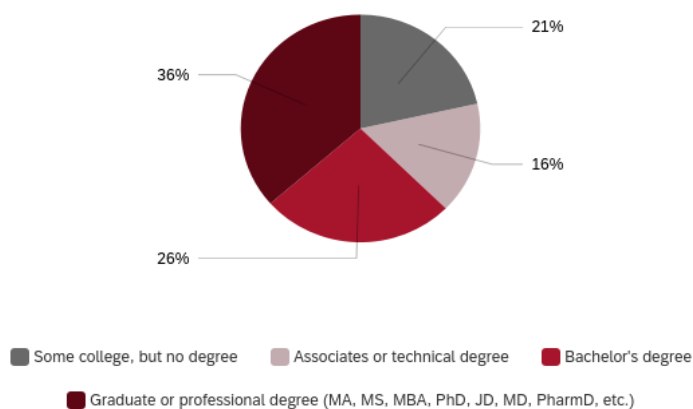
University Institutional Review Board approval was granted for all procedures prior to initiating the study. Participants were recruited through the distribution of the survey on my personal social media platforms. I linked the survey and provided a brief description of the survey on my personal Facebook feed as well as on my personal Instagram story. I allowed others to share the link to the survey on their social media accounts as well. The survey remained open for a four-week period. Prior to completing the survey, participants were asked to read all instructions in which they were informed of my credentials, the nature and purpose of the study, and the anonymity of the survey. Those who decided to thereafter complete the survey accessed the questionnaire via the shared link in which they answered the provided questions in each section. At the end of the survey, participants were thanked for their time and participation. After collecting the completed responses, the raw data was analyzed and interpreted so that my survey results

could contribute to the scholarly conversation regarding Appalachian dialect and stereotypes in higher education.

## Results

### *Survey Section 1: Demographics*

The majority (61%) of participants in this study were between 18 and 24 years old, while the remaining 39% of respondents varied in age from 25 to 65+ years old. When asked which rural Appalachian County in Kentucky they were from, the vast majority (89%) of respondents were from Letcher County. The other 11% of responses were comprised of individuals from Bell, Breathitt, Elliot, Floyd, Johnson, Knott, Knox, Laurel, Pike, and Rowan Counties. No responses were collected from participants from Adair, Clay, Clinton, Cumberland, Fleming, Harlan, Jackson, Lee, Leslie, Liberty, Lincoln, Magoffin, Martin, McCreary Menifee, Metcalfe, Morgan, Owsley, Perry, Pulaski, Russell, Rockcastle, Wayne, Whitley, or Wolfe County. The highest level of education completed or planned for completion among participants, as shown in **Figure**



*Figure 1. Level of Education Completed or Planned for Completion*

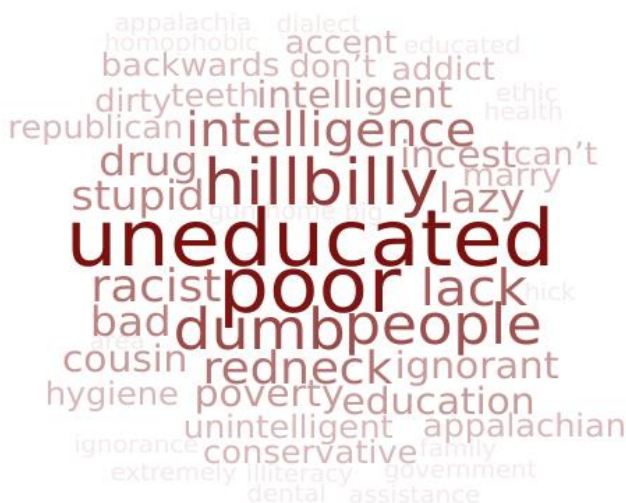
**1**, were reported as follows: some college, but no degree (21%), Associates or technical degree (16%), Bachelor's degree (26%), and graduate or professional

degree (36%). 45% of participants stated that they did attend a college or university

located outside of the Appalachian region while 55% of participants did not. 92% of respondents agreed to some extent that being Appalachian was an important part of their identity while 5% neither agreed nor disagreed, and only 3% did not agree. Similarly, 93% of respondents claimed that they were proud of their Appalachian heritage, while 5% neither agreed nor disagreed, and only 2% disagreed.

### *Survey Section 2: Stereotypes*

87% of respondents agreed to some extent that, upon meeting, people often make assumptions about them based solely on their dialect. 8% of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement, while 5% disagreed with this claim. 88% of participants agreed that social media promotes Appalachian stereotypes, 85% of respondents agreed that movies and TV shows promote Appalachian stereotypes, and 81% of participants agreed that literature promotes Appalachian stereotypes. When participants were asked to list some common stereotypes that people associate with Appalachians, there were various responses, most of a negative and condescending



*Figure 2. Common Appalachian Stereotypes*

ignorant, conservatives, and unhygienic along with various others.

nature. The most common responses, as shown in **Figure 2**, surrounded stereotypes of Appalachians being uneducated, hillbillies, poor,

### Survey Section 3: Appalachian Dialect

79% of respondents strongly or somewhat agreed that they were often teased because of their dialect, as shown in **Figure 3**. 81% of respondents agreed that they tend

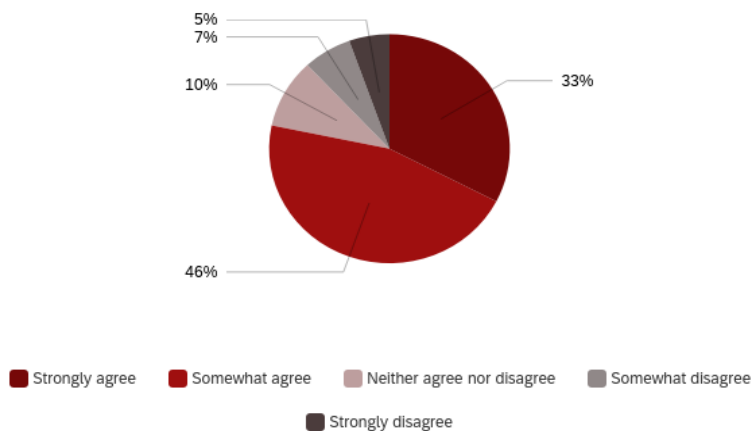


Figure 3. Participants Teased because of Dialect

to speak in an Appalachian dialect when around others from Appalachia. When asked if they tend to suppress their Appalachian accent when around those not from Appalachia, participant responses were reported as follows: strongly agree (13%), somewhat agree (29%), neither agree nor disagree (10%), somewhat disagree (22%), and strongly disagree (27%). 74% of participants agreed that speaking in an Appalachian accent or using specific Appalachian words or phrases would cause others to make negative assumptions about them.

### Survey Section 4: Academic Experiences

When asked if their dialect made them feel less inclined to verbally participate in class, 48% of respondents agreed to some extent, 11% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 41% disagreed to some extent. When asked if participants were reprimanded for the use of their Appalachian dialect when in the classroom, responses varied and were reported as follows: strongly agree (24%), somewhat agree (22%), neither agree nor disagree



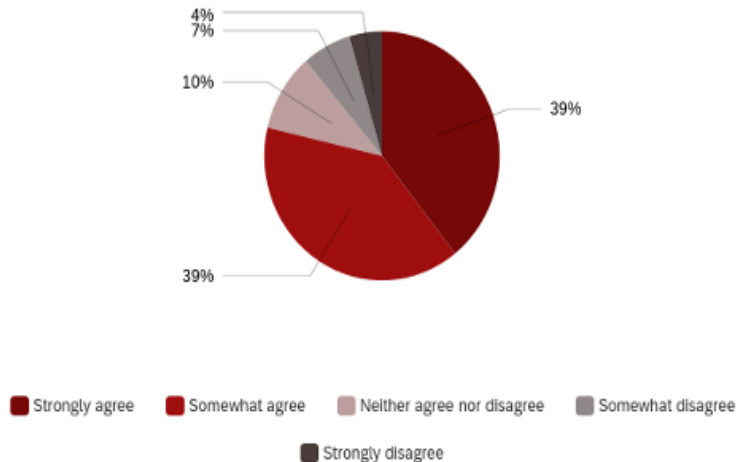


Figure 4. Scholarly Perception of Participants

did not perceive them as scholarly, intellectual, or credible because of their dialect.

Respondents varied in their opinion on whether their professors' and peers' perception of them made them think negatively of their dialect with 17% strongly agreeing, 26% somewhat agreeing, 16% neither agreeing nor disagreeing, 19% somewhat disagreeing, and 22% strongly disagreeing. The majority (71%) of participants, however, did agree that they felt that they had to put forth extra effort to prove their intelligence. 59% claimed that they felt uncomfortable amongst their peers who spoke a standardized English dialect. Further, 66% agreed that, during their education, they were made to feel as though their Appalachian dialect was incorrect or less acceptable than a standard English dialect.

Importantly, as shown in **Figure 5**, the vast majority (87%) of respondents agreed that including dialect as a recognized aspect of diversity in the classroom would

(17%), somewhat disagree (11%), and strongly disagree (26%). 78% of respondents, as shown in **Figure 4**, strongly or somewhat agreed

that they felt that others

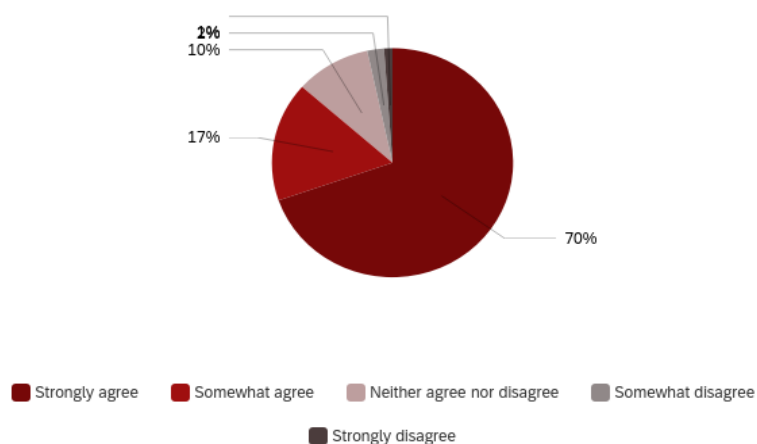


Figure 5. *Dialect should be Included as an Aspect of Diversity in the Classroom*

disagreed with this statement.

#### *Survey Section 5: Free Response*

When asked if there was any more information that they would like to provide regarding Appalachian stereotypes, dialects, or the academic experiences of Appalachian college students, many participants left comments worthy of mention. Several respondents shared about negative experiences in the college classroom due to stereotyping from professors, such as:

“I am a business student and on multiple occasions it has been taught that using Appalachian dialect will negatively impact credibility and that we should strive to ‘correct’ our accent and the phrases we use. It is taught by many professors that the dialect can prevent you from being hired in the workforce. I also attend a business communication course and Appalachian dialect was mocked and used as an example of how not to speak or write on multiple occasions. It was a bit embarrassing to be in attendance when this occurred.”

as well as

contribute to a more accepting academic environment for rural Appalachian college students while only 3% disagree to some extent. 10% of participants neither agreed nor

“A lot of the nursing professors negatively talk about Appalachia and the Appalachian people. They often use examples of Appalachians to show negative health outcomes. They also stereotype us as unfriendly and unwelcoming, and some even insinuated we were racist and did not accept people that are not from Appalachia.”

Regarding their dialect specifically, some respondents shared personal insights, such as:

“My dialect changes depending on the people around me. I’m not sure which one is the real me.”

and

“Dialect is a difference, not a disorder.”

Regarding dialect being a concealable stigma, one wrote:

“I recognize that the way I speak cannot be seen, like race, therefore, I still have privileges that others do not.”

Additionally, some participants recognized that they did not have academic experiences as negative as others because they did not leave the Appalachian region for college, and they shared statements such as the following:

“I went to college in my hometown, so my accent was never an issue. Once I started doctorate school and people came from all over the country, I was immediately made fun of. I had never felt ashamed of my accent until recently.”

Despite the negative experiences commonly shared by participants, many shared positive sentiments about the region, such as:

“I have always been proud of where I come from. I never let the stereotypes bother me. I’m proud of the dialect of my area. It’s the loss of other people that think we’re different, and indeed we are...”

as well as

“Appalachia people are some of the most resilient people in the USA. We’ve dealt with multiple natural disasters (flooding, ice storms, etc.) with minimal government interference or help, and Appalachia has proved time and time again that the people that live within it are strong, helpful, and smart. Neighbors help out neighbors when they need it no matter the lifestyle or background. It’s a loving community built on friendship and neighbors. Most people don’t see that aspect.”

### Limitations

There are some limitations to the study that influenced the results collected and should therefore be discussed. Firstly, the sample population of the survey is a convenience sample because the survey was distributed via my personal Instagram and Facebook accounts, so it could only reach the people who can view my social media. This means that the data was collected from a group of participants that was readily accessible, so the results cannot necessarily be generalized or extrapolated to argue with certainty that these are the shared experiences of the majority of Appalachians who pursued a higher education. This was also the reason that most responses were from participants in the 18–25 age range and from Letcher County because those are the answers that applied to me and were thus the bulk of the population to view my survey. Secondly, I had to provide a scholarly definition of rural counties in Kentucky, and the

ARC definition was the most consistent and reliable source for this. However, the rural counties listed do still include a vast range of counties that surely contained different experiences and perspectives as well as possessed varying degrees of recognizable Appalachian traits, so the negative academic experiences may have been more relevant to some participants than others. To extend upon this limitation, language is not an explicit trait shared by absolutely all people from a certain geographic area; therefore, some Appalachians from the specified counties may not have experienced discrimination in their academic experience because they did not speak with an Appalachian dialect to begin with. Lastly, almost half of the respondents did not attend a college located outside of the Appalachian region, so this could be why some participants did not report either feeling stereotyped because of their dialect or having negative experiences in higher education because it is less likely that they would be seen as different if they were still within the region where the dialect is commonly used and accepted.

## Discussion

The primary purpose of this research was to examine the influence of speaking a stigmatized, nonstandard Appalachian dialect that is often associated with negative stereotypes on the academic experiences of students from rural Appalachian counties in Kentucky attending any college or university. Overall, survey responses yielded support of all hypotheses. Many Appalachians are oftentimes silenced, especially in settings of higher education where it is insinuated that they do not belong because of stigma surrounding the region. The experiences and opinions that Appalachians voiced in the survey regarding stereotypes and their academic experiences in higher education did support the central argument that, when pursuing higher education, rural Appalachian

students are stereotyped based on their Appalachian dialect which negatively impacts their academic experiences. This research should serve as a foundation for acknowledging the falsity of the stereotypes commonly perpetuated in popular culture about Appalachians and how people hold these biases against speakers of an Appalachian dialect. This research also signifies the importance of including dialect as a recognized form of diversity that students bring to the college classroom.

### *Hypothesis 1*

The results yielded from the survey supported the first hypothesis. This hypothesis proposed that literature, social media, movies, and TV shows in popular culture perpetuate Appalachian stereotypes, and this reinforces the negative assumptions that students' peers tend to make about them based on their dialect. These results align with those of secondary research on this topic as well. The majority of participants agreed that social media, movies, TV shows, and literature promote Appalachian stereotypes. 87% of participants also agreed that, upon meeting, people often make negative assumptions about them based solely on their dialect. The connection between these responses is evident, especially when considering the way in which society has been trained to associate an Appalachian dialect with the negative stereotypes sustained within popular culture. When asked about common stereotypes associated with the region, all responses were negative. Responses included stereotypes of Appalachians being uneducated, hillbillies, poor, ignorant, racist, incest, backwards, drug addicts, and more. Basically, the worst possible descriptions of a group of people were mentioned, and yet these are still widely accepted in society as previously discussed. The responses to this were especially interesting because Appalachians are very aware of the way society

perceives them and the struggles they will face because of these misconceptions. Participants are aware that, despite these stereotypes being far from the real truth, they still pose real implications and are ingrained as an, albeit fabricated, part of their Appalachian identity in the minds of non-Appalachians. These findings are significant because these students' dialects are inextricable from their Appalachian identity; when this causes them to be immediately ostracized by their peers and professors, it impacts their comfort level in those interactions. Additionally, immediate assumptions such as lack of intelligence about dialectal students sends the message that they are seen as less valuable, and this influences the students' perceived capability to succeed in the classroom.

### *Hypothesis 2*

The second hypothesis was supported by the survey results. The second hypothesis stated that many participants will report academic challenges during their college experience due to their beliefs about how others perceived their Appalachian dialect. Challenges included a lack of confidence in the classroom, a lack of verbal or written participation in class, feelings of inadequacy in their academic capabilities, and discomfort among peers who speak a standard variety of English. Almost half of the participants agreed both that their dialect made them feel less inclined to verbally participate in class and that they were reprimanded for their use of Appalachian dialect in the classroom. Again, only 43% of participants agreed that their professors' and peers' perception of them made them think negatively of their dialect. Although these responses were somewhat lower in agreement than I expected, I owe the discrepancies to the fact that over half (55%) of participants did not attend a college or university located outside

of the Appalachian region, and these were probably the same participants who disagreed with the above statements. It can be assumed that an Appalachian dialect was not as stigmatized in a location where it is commonly used, so their dialect probably did not pose academic challenges as severely as if they had pursued higher education outside of the region.

Additionally, I predicted that many participants would report that they felt it was necessary to shift their stigmatized Appalachian English to an accepted Standard American English when in the classroom setting in order to be seen as credible, intelligent, and educated to their professors and peers. The majority of participants agreed that they would not be seen as scholarly, intellectual, or credible in the classroom because of their dialect. 71% of participants did feel like they had to put forth extra effort in the classroom to prove their intelligence. The majority also agreed both that they felt uncomfortable amongst their peers who spoke a standardized English dialect and that they were made to feel as though their Appalachian dialect was incorrect or less acceptable than SAE. These findings did support my prediction. The significance of these findings is that Appalachians do generally face various academic challenges which undoubtedly impacts their pursuit of higher education. These findings suggest that commonly perpetuated stereotypes about Appalachians are widely held within classroom settings, and speakers of the region's dialect must pay the expense for these false conceptions. It is unfair that dialectal Appalachian college students must worry about how others will perceive them in addition to the normal challenges that college presents. When students cannot feel comfortably, accepted, or confident, or academically adequate, they are inherently set up for discrimination, challenges, or even overall failure in the



classroom. This is why it is important for higher education institutions to acknowledge dialect as an aspect of student diversity and train their personnel to unlearn their language bias.

### *Hypothesis 3*

The third hypothesis was supported by the survey results. The third hypothesis indicated that participants would agree that including dialect as a recognized aspect of diversity in the classroom would contribute to a more accepting academic environment, and survey results yielded that 87% of participants agreed with this statement.

Appalachian stereotypes are perpetuated in part because Appalachia is not recognized as a marginalized group, so discrimination against Appalachian students is thus accepted and maintained. Further, Appalachian stereotypes are so engrained into society that those in higher education are not often conscious of their bias. As previously discussed, dialect is considered a concealable stigma, so language must be acknowledged as an aspect of diversity that students bring with them to the college classroom in order to protect those students from discrimination. This finding is significant because it emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the hollowness of not only Appalachian stereotypes but also of their origins as well as the need to destigmatize Appalachian dialect and its relationship to its speakers.

### *Free Response*

In the free response section of the survey, several participants shared comments about negative experiences they had relating to stereotypes, their dialect, or their academic experiences. These are significant because they demonstrate authentic scenarios in the lives of real Appalachians that have caused various detrimental internal and

external challenges. Appalachians have been taught to deny their language, be ashamed of their culture, and that they must change and conform to the standard if they want to be successful in education. These individuals are also extremely aware that the discrimination is more prevalent depending on who they are around, and this has trained them to change their dialect depending on the situation. The most devastating consequences for dialectal Appalachians subject to discrimination in higher education are not only a loss of their voice but also a loss of their true identity.

### *Appalachian Pride*

While it is true that Appalachians must overcome many challenges tied to their dialect and identity, it is also true that they are a resilient people who maintain a strong sense of pride in who they are and where they are from. A vast majority of participants agreed that not only is being Appalachian an important part of their identity, but they are also proud of their Appalachian heritage. As one participant shared in the free response section of the survey, Appalachians recognize that they are different from the rest of the nation, but they do not view this as a bad thing. Many individuals do not let the stereotypes bother them; they speak loud and proud in their Appalachian dialect no matter who is around to hear- and this is very admirable considering the heavy discrimination they are ascribed for simply existing and speaking as their true selves. Most non-Appalachians are so focused on the negative misconceptions about Appalachia that they consume from popular culture that they miss out on the positive aspects that are as prevalent as the negative ones. As stated by Cooke-Jackson, “The negative stereotypes of Appalachia usually don’t capture the strong value system of people living there” (189). These values, which include, among other things, individualism, self-reliance, pride,

religion, familism, and love of place, are as much a part of Appalachia as the challenges from which many of the negative stereotypes arise (Cooke-Jackson 189). Appalachians are not the helpless, vulnerable, and depressed group of people that media would have society believe; they always have and will continue to fight for what they deserve. With this in mind, it is past time that colleges and universities listen and become an ally for the success of rural Appalachian students rather than another unquestioning perpetrator of their demise.

### *Connecting the Conversation*

Several studies in prior research have also examined the impacts of negative stereotypes, perceptions of Appalachian dialect, and academic experiences for rural Appalachian students that corroborate the findings from the present research. According to a study conducted by Cummings-Lilly and Forrest-Bank, many rural Appalachian students struggled not to internalize the negative perceptions of themselves perpetuated in various forms of media, and they resorted to coping in practical ways such as modifying the way they spoke. Further findings suggested that students feared receiving messages that all Appalachians embody the negative stereotypes ascribed to them because this could result in becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy (148). Similar to findings from my survey, research performed by Hampton reported that Appalachians feel most comfortable using their own Appalachian English around other dialect speakers, and they are more likely to suppress their use of Appalachian English when around non-Appalachian people or in formal settings (28).

In support of the notion that including dialect as an aspect of diversity in the classroom would improve the academic experience, the Conference on College

Composition & Communication affirmed that college students have a right to their own varieties of language or dialects in which they claim their own identity. They argue that, for a nation that celebrates its diverse heritage and cultural variety, its teachers must have experiences and training that will enable them to respect and uphold the right of students to speak their own language in the classroom (“Student’s Right to Their Own Language”).

Dunstan’s and Jaeger’s study “Dialect and Influences on the Academic Experiences of College Students” provides a case study that emphasizes that the dialects that college students speak represent a type of diversity that can influence their academic experiences in college (777). Comparable to the results of my survey, the results of this study concluded that, for more vernacular students, dialect can influence participation in class, degree of comfort in course, perceived academic challenges, and their beliefs about whether or not others perceive them as intelligent or scholarly based on speech, especially if the student’s dialect is stigmatized in mainstream culture. Additionally, this research has implications for the consideration of language diversity in developing a welcoming academic environment and in the role of language discrimination and stereotype management (Dunstan and Jaeger, “Dialect and Influences on the Academic Experiences of College Students” 777). Another study conducted by Dunstan and Jaeger found that students feel that their language influences their interactions with others on campus. This study suggested that dialect plays a role in the type of classmates to whom they are initially drawn; that it influences how others perceive them; and, for the more vernacular students, it draws attention, sometimes positively and sometimes in the form of teasing (Dunstan and Jaeger, “The Role of Language in Interactions with Others on

Campus for Rural Appalachian College Students” 53). Evidence further suggested that rural Appalachian students who speak nonstandard language varieties feel the effects of the inequity of their language diversity not being considered nor respected equally. This research’s findings imply that it is critical for professionals in higher education to consider the way they view language in the context of diversity and inclusion on campuses (Dunstan and Jaeger, “The Role of Language in Interactions with Others on Campus for Rural Appalachian College Students” 59).

### Significance

Appalachian Studies are meaningful because they are personal; the experiences discussed in this study are relatable and incredibly important to so many individuals who proudly claim Appalachia as a part of their identity. Stereotypes, or fabrications, erase the truth of who Appalachians are. For a population that is so often silenced and overlooked, it is vital that research such as this is conducted in an attempt to shift society’s perceptions of them and to improve their experiences by giving them an opportunity to have their voice and concerns heard and validated. For the purposes of this research, I suggest two central methods to advocate for dialectal, rural Appalachian college students: confronting stereotypes and improving their academic experiences.

#### *Confronting stereotypes*

There is no single truth about Appalachia; the region is much more diverse and complex than what it is given credit for (McCarroll and Harkins 4). With this in mind, we must first confront the stereotypes widely perpetuated and accepted within society and shift the perception to see all complex aspects of Appalachia, especially the often ignored and positive ones. Raising awareness must happen if there is any chance of implementing

effective change and improvement in the lives of Appalachians. We must do more than simply react to negative portrayals about Appalachia in popular media; we must take an active position in highly visible media to combat the presence of false information spread about Appalachia (Speer 17). We must pressure media producers to examine their purposes and moral responsibilities in using stereotypes to represent Appalachians in both fiction and nonfiction works of literature (Cooke-Jackson 198). Non-Appalachians must make it a personal responsibility to question the validity of stereotypes about Appalachians and unlearn the associated biases. Society must make it a moral obligation to refrain from unjustly discriminating against Appalachia and its people, just as they would not tolerate discrimination against any other marginalized group. Within higher education settings, unlearning prejudices and requiring education about stereotypes, dialect stigma, and Appalachian oppression- not at the fault of the region's inhabitants- is only the first step in creating an environment conducive to the success of rural Appalachian students.

#### *Improving the Academic Experience*

The ultimate significance of this research is in advocating to include language as a recognized aspect of student diversity in the college and university classroom. In setting this precedent, students who speak in nonstandard language varieties, including students who speak in an Appalachian dialect, will be protected from discrimination based on their dialect. This will contribute to an improved academic environment in which dialectal students can feel confident, comfortable, and credible in their pursuit of education.

The following is an example of how language is not presently a recognized aspect of diversity. The syllabus provided in every class at Eastern Kentucky University

includes a statement from the discrimination and harassment clause of University Policy 1.4.1 that states the following:

The University does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religious belief, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, pregnancy, ethnicity, disability, medical condition, veteran status, genetic information, age, or any other characteristic protected by federal, state or local law in its programs and activities. This prohibition applies to all University programs or activities, including but not limited to admission and employment. (“University Policy: 1.4.1POL Discrimination and Harassment”).

In this statement, there is no mention of language as a recognized characteristic of diversity that must be protected from discrimination. When language is not adequately addressed as an element of diversity, negative attitudes within higher education can be detrimental to fostering open, inclusive campus environments. When not addressed, the back door to discrimination remains open. Just as we would not expect students of other marginalized groups to simply “get used to” or “deal with” teasing for characteristics related to their minority status, we should not expect speakers of nonstandard varieties of English to accept this, even if it is deemed a social norm (Dunstan and Jaeger, “The Role of Language in Interactions with Others on Campus for Rural Appalachian College Students” 59). This is a disservice to Appalachian students and their academic potential.

Professors and students in colleges and universities often hold an unconscious yet stigmatized perception of Appalachia that automatically causes them to underestimate the potential of Appalachian students based on their dialect. Addressing this issue will involve further education for professionals on language diversity. This may take place in

linguistic diversity professional development workshops and through a number of other educational resources for faculty and staff and possibly students (Dunstan and Jaeger, “The Role of Language in Interactions with Others on Campus for Rural Appalachian College Students” 60). Evidence and discussion regarding Appalachian stereotypes and microaggression may also contribute to a deeper understanding of how institutionalized discrimination of the students from rural central areas in Appalachia is perpetuated and may provide a powerful tool for exposing and combating oppression (Cummings-Lilly and Forrest-Bank 131). Overall, there should be a direct challenge on institutions to combat the exclusion of Appalachian voices on the classroom level. If these measures and surely various others are taken, there is hope in creating an academic environment in which rural Appalachian college students, using their own voice, can succeed.

### Future Directions

This research examined only the influence of stereotypes and dialect discrimination on the academic experiences of rural Appalachian college students, but further work could be completed to enhance the impact of this research. Firstly, the survey could be distributed to reach a wider, more diverse audience to curb the bias of a convenience sample. The field of study in college that the participants pursued could be investigated to understand if specific academic fields were more or less accepting of an Appalachian dialect. This is important because this bias, if present, could inherently limit the academic and career choices that Appalachians feel comfortable in pursuing. Most importantly, this research should be used as a foundation to extend upon advocating for adding dialect as an aspect of diversity in all college classrooms. This advocacy could include developing trainings and workshops for professionals in higher education to learn



about language diversity and bring awareness to their language biases and how to unlearn those.

## Conclusions

Though the region of Appalachia faces many challenges, it is one worth fighting for. Whether they remain in the hollers or pursue higher education, Appalachians have much more to offer than what shallow stereotypes, popular media, and the majority of society give them credit for. It is crucial to acknowledge that Appalachia is not some “other” world; it is an oppressed region fighting for survival despite no signs of help or sympathy from the country that put them in this position to begin with. We must recognize Appalachia and its people as a marginalized population, and we should not be tolerable to unjust discrimination and stereotyping because it creates challenges tied to their identity in all aspects of their lives. The unique culture and distinct dialect are no less worthy or correct than those of the rest of the nation. Removing the stigma associated with dialect is vital in improving the experiences of Appalachians in higher education. The research in this study suggested that, when pursuing higher education, rural Appalachian students are stereotyped based on their Appalachian dialect which negatively impacts their academic experiences. Through the utilization of a survey combined with extensive literature review regarding Appalachia, stereotypes and discrimination, and sociolinguistics and dialect, this study serves to acknowledge and combat the struggles that many rural Appalachians face when pursuing higher education. This study advocates for including dialect as a recognized aspect of diversity that students bring with them to the college classroom. The significance of this research is to combat Appalachian stereotypes and to improve the academic experiences for rural

Appalachian college students. Through dedication to research regarding this topic, the ultimate future goal is to diminish the prevalence of Appalachian stereotypes maintained within higher education and to empower Appalachian students to preserve their dialect and still feel credible, confident, accepted, and heard in academic settings.

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## Appendix A

### Survey

#### Directions

My name is Jessica Boggs, and I am a student in the Honors Program at Eastern Kentucky University. This is a voluntary anonymous survey used to collect data for my Honors thesis project. I am researching the influence of dialect and negative stereotypes on the academic experiences of Appalachian college students. Please answer each question carefully and honestly. Thank you.

#### Page Break

#### Section 1: Demographics

1. What is your age?

- 18-24 years old
- 25-34 years old
- 35-44 years old
- 45-54 years old
- 55-64 years old
- 65+ years old

2. Which rural Appalachian County in Kentucky are you from?

- Adair
- Bell
- Breathitt
- Clay
- Clinton

- Cumberland
- Elliot
- Fleming
- Floyd
- Harlan
- Jackson
- Johnson
- Knott
- Knox
- Laurel
- Lee
- Letcher
- Leslie
- Liberty
- Lincoln
- Magoffin
- Martin
- McCreary
- Menifee
- Metcalfe
- Morgan
- Owsley
- Perry



- Pike
- Pulaski
- Russell
- Rockcastle
- Rowan
- Wayne
- Whitley
- Wolfe

3. What is the highest level of education that you have completed or plan to complete?

- Some college but no degree
- Associates or technical degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Graduate or professional degree (MA, MS, MBA, JD, MD, PharmD, etc.)

4. Did you attend a school located outside of the Appalachian region?

- Yes
- No

Page Break

## Section 2: Stereotypes

Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.

1. Being Appalachian is an important part of my identity.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree

- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

2. I am proud of my Appalachian heritage.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

3. Upon meeting, people often make assumptions about me based solely on my dialect.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

4. I am often teased because of my dialect.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

5. Social media promotes Appalachian stereotypes.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree

- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

6. Movies and tv shows promote Appalachian stereotypes.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

7. Literature promotes Appalachian stereotypes.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Page Break

8. What are some common stereotypes that you think people associate with Appalachians?

- Free response space

Page Break

Section 3: Dialect

Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements based on your dialect.

1. When around others from Appalachia, I tend to use Appalachian English.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

2. When around others not from Appalachia, I tend to suppress my accent and dialect.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

3. Speaking in an Appalachian accent or using specific Appalachian words or phrases will cause others to make negative assumptions about me.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Page Break

#### Section 4: Academic Experiences

Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements based on your academic experiences in college.

1. Because of my dialect, I felt less inclined to verbally participate in class.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

2. Because of my dialect, I felt that others did not perceive me as scholarly, intellectual, or credible.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

3. I was reprimanded for the use of my Appalachian dialect when in the classroom setting (during an oral presentation, participating in class discussion, in a written paper, etc.).

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

4. The perception of me from my faculty and peers made me think negatively of my dialect.

- Strongly agree

- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

5. I felt that I had to put forth extra effort to prove my intelligence.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

6. I felt uncomfortable amongst my peers who speak a standard form of English.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

7. During my education, I was made to feel as though my dialect was incorrect or less acceptable than a standard form of English.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

8. Including dialect as a recognized aspect of diversity in the classroom would contribute to a more accepting academic environment.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Page Break

Section 5: Free Response

1. Is there any more information you would like to provide regarding Appalachian stereotypes, dialects, or the academic experiences of Appalachian students?

- Free response space

2. This space is for any additional comments.

- Free response space

Page Break

End

Thank you for your time spent taking this survey. Your response has been recorded.