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Issue Dedication:

This issue of the JRCD is dedicated to Cheryl Williams who passed away suddenly in 2010. She was in the first semester of her PhD program in Nursing at the University of Saskatchewan at the time of her death. Her co-authored paper in this issue is based on her master's thesis research. Pammla Petrucka was Cheryl's advisor. It was Pammla's wish to publish this peer-reviewed article in honour of Cheryl's work and her family.

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How Young Adults Perceive their Rural Ohio Communities

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Abstract

This study analyzes the trends and issues related to the retention of young adults in Northwest Ohio. Researchers sampled over 340 young adults (25-34 years of age) from 8 counties in Northwest Ohio. Results highlight rural community perceptions of young adults as well as those factors that impact the decision to remain in Rural Northwest Ohio. Sampled adults report generally favorable impressions of the area with emphasis on the quality of schools, community safety, and affordability of the area. Overall lower ratings were revealed on components related to cultural, entertainment, and employment opportunities in the area. Respondents with higher incomes and those with stronger Northwest Ohio roots, i.e., who were themselves raised in Northwest Ohio along with their parents, were more likely to feel positively about Northwest Ohio's economic outlook and the community's strength. In addition, the higher the respondent's education, the more likely they were to react positively regarding the community's strength/safety. Young adults reported that parents were a strong influence on their decision to return or remain in their rural communities.

Keywords: youth, community, development, career, retention

1.0 Introduction

The out-migration of youth from rural areas is an issue predominantly driven by economic factors. Rural adolescents, more frequently than their urban or suburban counterparts, are more likely to experience the conflict of choice between the desire to live close to family and the necessity of moving away to achieve success. Youth who choose to place a predominant weight on the desire to remain close to home in their future career choice are more likely to feel limited and are more likely to have lower career aspirations (Hektner, 1995). A study of Pennsylvania youth, found that youth who planned to stay were motivated to do so because of family and the culture

in the rural area, the connection to family being very strong in these young people. Those planning to leave their home-based rural setting were deciding to leave based on better employment opportunities (Ferry, 2003a). A study of youth in a rural California community, found that educational systems (schools, organizations, community organizations) tend to encourage the best and brightest to pursue opportunities outside of their home community, leading to a “brain drain” (Sherman & Sage, 2011).

A study analyzing the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, found that rural youth aspiring to professional and managerial occupations are more likely to be rural out-migrants at age 35 than are youth aspiring to blue collar occupations (Brooks et. al, 2010). Those individuals who are not as rooted in their rural community (first generation residents) are less likely to remain in rural locations. Individuals who have longer residency tend to make stronger ties and attachments to these rural areas, resulting in a higher likelihood of remaining or returning to their rural community (Wilson et. al, 2010). Analyzing US Census data, about three-quarters of young, single, and college-educated adults reported moving between 1995 and 2000 (Wilson et. al, 2010). There is a tendency, particularly in rural areas, for a large number of youth to seek educational opportunities outside of their home community, particularly those with weaker family and community ties.

This long-term tendency of young people leaving rural areas seeking the educational, occupational, and social aspects of the more urban areas has led to population problems in some rural areas. Rural areas, for many years, were able to replace the high levels of young adults out-migrating because of their comparably higher birth rate. Now families in rural areas are smaller, with an increasing number of areas recognizing a net decline in population (Johnson, 2006). This protracted outflow of young adults from so many rural counties diminishes the available human capital of the area, draining the prospects for future economic development, and reducing the resources available to staff the many social and civic organizations that form the social foundation of many rural communities (Johnson et. al, 2005).

Although there is a well-known challenge in finding suitable employment opportunities in rural areas, it isn't a one-variable decision. The residency choice is impacted by marriage and family status, as individuals returning to rural small communities report that they accept career sacrifices to raise their children in a familiar small town close to relatives and friends (von Reichert et al., 2011).

Career development and occupational choice are important decisions for older youth. Of all of its potential determinants in out-migration, no set of factors appears to be more important than those associated with career formation (Franklin, 2003). Not only do occupations provide a means to support individuals and families, but they also provide meaning and purpose in life for many. The employment decision plays a major factor in the residency choice of young people. The context of the school and community culture has a significant impact on youth occupational choice (Ferry, 2003a). A study of Pennsylvania graduating high school youth found that parents and family members had the biggest influence on youth occupation choice. Closely following parents in terms of influence was the young person's evaluation of their own personal skills, aptitudes, and academic efficacy. Other influences included part-time or volunteer work experience, teachers and school projects (Ferry, 2003b). It is also suggested by Ferry (2003b), that the key to changing youth perceptions about potential careers will be to provide parents, schools, and

communities the tools to communicate positive opportunities about local employment.

A study of Rural West Virginia High School Students (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004) found that family and peer influence are significantly strong predictors of college aspirations for male youth, while individual academic preparation and external barriers (such as economic issues) have a stronger influence on female decisions to seek post-secondary education. This same study found that youth whose parents either had a college education themselves or whose parents worked in professional fields, were more likely to plan to attend college and see it as an available opportunity for them. Providing youth to a variety of careers in a realistic manner will be essential to broadening options and opportunities for them. Adolescents commonly select career options from those they readily understand and can see. The diversity of career options presented to rural youth can be particularly limited in some communities which may lack diversity in career options or opportunities.

Students in a Pennsylvania study of high school graduates reported “money or financial means to attend school or training” as the number one barrier to achieving their occupational goal (Ferry, 2003b). Rural youth tended to have lower educational and career aspirations than their urban counterparts. Major contributors include lower socio-economic status of rural families and the limited scope of available opportunities presented to rural youth (Haller & Virkler, 1993).

A research project by the Center for Rural Entrepreneurism, surveyed over 6,000 young adults in 39 counties of Nebraska, Missouri, and Kansas. Respondents indicated that youth are rarely sought out for their feedback on their rural communities, with 72% indicating that they were never asked their views about making their rural communities more attractive for young people (Dabson et al., 2010). These researchers also found that family ties and the feeling that these rural communities were good places to raise a family were strong influencers on the desire of young people to remain or return to rural locales. A study conducted in Northwest Ohio of 875 young adults from 16 schools, found similar results with youth finding their rural communities to be a “Safe Place to Live” and a “Good Area to Raise a Family” (Homan et al., 2010). The influence of extended family ties in the rural location was found to be a strong predictor of rural retention in this same study, with young adults whose parents were originally from these rural communities more likely to return or remain there themselves.

Previous research has found that the strongest influencers on youth perceptions/retention in rural communities to be a mixture of “quality of life factors” as well as “economic/occupational factors.” Young people tend to look for communities that are safe, good areas to raise a family, enough entertainment options, and places with a quality educational system. In addition, the economic variables, such as occupational opportunities, affordable cost of living, and positive growth in their community are important components in the decision to return or remain in their rural communities.

Population projections provided by the Ohio Department of Development (2011) indicate a long-term overall population growth in the State of Ohio from 1990 to 2030, with an anticipated overall growth rate of 13.6%. With eight sample counties in this study, only two of the selected counties were projected to have overall population growth rates above the state average: Auglaize County (16.8%) and Mercer County (16.5%). Four of the sample counties were projected to have modest

growth rates including: Putnam (6.6%), Hardin (5.5%), Williams (4.2%), and Henry (3.4%). Two of the sample counties were projected to lose a measurable amount of their population: Paulding (-7.8%) and Van Wert (-7.5%).

Table 1. *Population Change 1910-2030 (Projected)*

County	Population 1990	Population 2010	Population 2030 (Projected)	% Change (1990- 2030)
Auglaize	44,585	45,949	52,060	+16.8%
Hardin	31,111	32,058	32,830	+5.5%
Henry	29,108	28,215	30,110	+3.4%
Mercer	39,443	40,814	45,960	+16.5%
Paulding	20,488	19,614	18,880	-7.8%
Putnam	33,819	34,499	36,060	+6.6%
Van Wert	30,464	28,744	28,190	-7.5%
Williams	36,956	37,642	38,490	+4.2%
State-Wide	10,847,115	11,536,504	12,317,610	+13.6%

Source: Ohio Department of Development

The objectives of this research study were to analyze the overall community perceptions held by young adults (25-34) in rural Northwest Ohio, as well as impacts on their decision to return to or remain in these rural communities.

Specific components included:

- How do young people (25-34 years of age) feel about their home community as it relates to their workforce and personal lifestyle needs?
- How do parents impact the decision to retain or return to rural communities in Northwest Ohio?
- What factors influence overall impression of their rural community and likelihood to remain in that location?

2.0 Methods

This study was conducted in spring of 2011 to assess community satisfaction and impacts on the decision to remain or return to Northwestern Ohio. Eight counties were selected: Auglaize, Hardin, Henry, Mercer, Paulding, Putnam, Van Wert, and Williams. Complete lists of registered voters (age 25-34) were secured from each County Board of Election. After receiving approval from the Ohio State University Human Subjects Review, a random sample of 3,800 registered voters within our sample age range were selected. Invitations were mailed to those selected amongst our mailing list asking for their participation on a web-based survey. Complete usable surveys were submitted by 343 participants. Anonymity and confidentiality of participants and their individual responses were maintained throughout the project.

This web-based survey instrument was comprised of a total of 78 questions, including open and closed-ended. Likert-based perception questions (example 1=Strongly Disagree and 5=Strongly Agree), demographic questions and open-ended response questions were utilized. Questions were categorized into sections of

demographics, high school activities, collegiate activities (if applicable), perceptions of the community, impacts on decisions to live and work in Northwest Ohio, and occupation/education levels.

Utilizing a web-based survey instrument may present some limitations in our findings:

A large proportion of this respondent group was well-educated; nearly 50% of the respondents had a bachelor's degree or higher. This is not surprising, given that respondents had to use a computer to complete the survey, and higher-educated people are more likely to have access to a computer. Another possible explanation could be that the research project was developed by local universities and therefore, graduates of these post-secondary institutions might have been more comfortable with, or identified with, the colleges, and thus were more willing to assist the research by sharing data. Respondents in this survey were more likely to be female (about 60% female compared to 40% male). This is not surprising as current research suggests women respond to web based and paper surveys at higher rates than men (Underwood et al., 2000).

3.0 Results

All respondents were between the ages of 25 and 34 years. For the most part, the number of respondents for each year are consistent, except for 25 year olds (6.7 percent) and 28 and 33 year olds (12.6 and 12.0 percent, respectively). 48.2 percent of respondents are under 30 years old and 52.8 percent are 30 or older.

A larger percentage of respondents were female, with 59.2% (n=197) being female and 40.8% (n=136) being male. 71.6% (n=245) of respondents were married, 24% (n=82) were never married, and 4.4% (n=15) were either divorced or separated.

Respondents were asked about the number of children under the age of 18 living with them in their home. 34.3% (n=116) of respondents have no children, and another 47% (n=159) have one or two children. The remaining 18.7% (n=63) have more than two children living with them.

Table 2 indicates greater variation among the responses by county of residence. Auglaize County, which has the largest population of this group (45,949 in 2010), attracted one of the smallest number of responses. Paulding, the smallest county (19,614), attracted about the same number of responses as Auglaize County did.

Table 2. *Respondents by County of Residence*

County	Number	Percentage
Auglaize	31	9.1%
Hardin	47	13.8%
Henry	48	14.1%
Mercer	55	16.1%
Paulding	33	9.7%
Putnam	59	17.3%
Van Wert	29	8.5%
Williams	39	11.4%
Total	341	100.0%

The vast majority of respondents were not only raised in their county of residence (88.4%), but most of their mothers (74.9%) and fathers (80.6%) were as well (See Table 3). Residents in these rural Northwest Ohio counties tend to remain rooted for generations.

Table 3. *Self and Family Reared in Northwest Ohio*

	Self		Mother		Father	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Yes	297	88.4%	251	74.9%	270	80.6%
No	39	11.6%	84	25.1%	65	19.4%
Total	336	100.0%	335	100.0%	335	100.0%

3.1 Level of Education

A large proportion of the respondents were well-educated, with nearly 50 percent of the respondents having a Bachelor’s Degree or higher (See Table 4). The researchers were not surprised, given that respondents used a computer to complete the survey, and higher-educated people are more likely to have access to a computer.

Table 4. *Educational Level of Respondents*

Highest Education Level	Number	Percent
Did Not Complete High School	3	0.9%
High School/GED	37	11.1%
Associates Degree/2-year Degree	60	17.9%
Some College	70	21.0%
Bachelor’s Degree	98	29.3%
Graduate Degree (Masters, Ph.D., etc.)	65	19.5%
Other	1	0.3%
Total	334	100.0%

The average household income of this sample is very similar to the United States’ average. According to the US Census, the median household income in 2009 was \$49,777. The median earnings for our respondents is between \$50,000 and \$59,000 (See Table 5).

Table 5. *Household Income*

Household Income	Number	Percentage
\$0-\$19,999	25	7.7%
\$20,000-\$39,999	77	23.7%
\$40,000-\$59,999	68	21.0%
\$60,000-\$79,999	70	21.6%
\$80,000-\$99,999	50	15.4%
\$100,000 or more	35	10.8%
Total	325	100.0%

3.2 Job Satisfaction

More than half (61.4 percent) of the respondents were very or extremely satisfied with their jobs. Nearly another third (32.4 percent) are in the middle tier of satisfaction (See Table 6). Only 6.1 percent are not satisfied with their jobs.

Table 6. *Job Satisfaction*

Ranking	Number	Percentage
1	5	1.6%
2	14	4.5%
3	26	8.4%
4	74	24.0%
5	118	38.3%
6	71	23.1%
Total	308	100.0%

Likert-Based Ranking (1=Extremely Dissatisfied, 6=Extremely Satisfied)

3.3 Parental Influence on Living in Northwest Ohio

More than 75 percent of the respondents answered that their parents have a strong or moderate amount of influence in keeping them in Northwest Ohio (See Table 7).

Table 7. *Influence of Parents to Remain in Northwest Ohio*

	Number	Percent
Strong Influence (5-6)	152	44.2%
Moderate Influence (3-4)	108	31.4%
Little Influence (1-2)	84	24.4%
Total	344	100.0%

When separated by gender, we found that women feel significantly more obligated to remain in the same area as their parents (mean for women = 4.06; mean for men = 3.65). (See Table 8).

Table 8. *Influence of Parents based on Gender to Remain in Northwest Ohio*

Gender	Mean Influence Rating (1-6)
Men	3.65
Women	4.06

Respondents were given the opportunity to provide additional comments after asked about their parents' influence. Some of the comments indicate that family and work are intertwined:

I work on my father's farm

Now operating third generation family business.

I work with my parents.

My parents own and farm the land I work on.

(My husband) has a good job. If not, we would move.

Others admit that they wanted to remain close to family members and friends:

My friends and family were a big part.

They supported our decision to live anywhere, but we wanted to be close.

Most of my family has lived here; I love it here.

If my family was not located in NW Ohio, I do not think I would have chosen to live here.

Spouse would prefer to move outside of the area. However, both she and I work near this area as well as most of our family resides in the area so for now we have chosen to stay.

My father-in-law is getting older, so moving away from him would be hard for my husband. But he would not keep us here if we wanted to go.

Others mentioned different reasons for remaining in Northwest Ohio:

Born and raised here...guess I don't know any different.

I like the small community I live in. Did not want to move to a city.

Moved away for several years, but moved back because of job position, not because of family.

I'm only living with my parents here because I got laid off from my job in Philadelphia.

(My husband) has no desire to leave the area. He loves not having too many neighbors, the cost of living, and he likes living where he grew up. I can't wait to get to a real city, with real attractions again.

Respondents with children are even more likely to say that their parents are highly influential in their decision to stay in Northwest Ohio. In fact, respondents with children are significantly more likely to cite parents as a strong influence. Some respondents wrote:

Wanted to stay close to home while raising our kids.

I enjoyed my upbringing and wanted to provide my children with the same type of environment.

They don't pressure us into staying in the area...We want our children to know their grandparents.

The researchers asked respondents to rate their rural community based on a number of variables assessing quality of life factors ranging from safety to educational and social activities (See Table 9). The variables receiving the highest ratings included: "Safe Place to Live", "Good Place to Raise a Family", and "Affordable Cost of Living." The variables receiving the lowest ratings were: "Good Income Potential", "Enough Employment Opportunities", "Interesting and Fun Activities" and "Enough Cultural Activities."

Table 9. *Perceptions of Northwest Ohio Community*

Component	Mean
Safe Place to Live	5.09
Good Place to Raise a Family	4.94
Affordable Cost of Living	4.68
Quality Schools	4.59
People Share my Beliefs and Values	4.50
A Good Place to Further my Education	3.46
There is Positive Growth in my Area	3.25
Enough Recreational Activities	3.23
Good Income Potential	2.95
Interesting and Fun Activities	2.92
Enough Employment Opportunities	2.88
Enough Cultural Activities	2.86

Likert-Based Scale (1=Strongly Disagree and 6=Strongly Agree)

The researchers ran a comparison of the individual community perception variables to explore county-by-county differences (See Table 10). On most rating questions, those counties that are projected to have the most positive population growth are the counties whose mean ratings were highest. According to the Ohio Department of Development Population Analysis (2011) for 1990-2030, Auglaize and Mercer County were projected to each see at least 16.5% growth. These counties had the overall highest ratings on 6 of the 12 individual components evaluated. Respondents rated these counties highest in the perceived “Income potential in the area”, “Fun activities in the area”, “Shared Values”, “Positive Growth”, “Employment Opportunity”, and “Recreation Activities.” Two sample counties (Van Wert and Paulding) are projected to have long-term population losses between 1990 and 2030 of 7.5% and 7.8% respectively. These two counties had the overall lowest ratings on 4 of the 12 rating variables including: “Income potential in the area”, “Fun activities in the area”, “Positive Growth”, and “Opportunity to further my education in the area.” The three counties with the lowest unemployment rate (Ohio Department of Jobs & Family Services, 2011) were also the counties that reported the highest community perception ratings by the young adults sampled.

4.0 Conclusions

Northwest Ohio, similar to other rural areas in the United States, continues to deal with retaining youth in their communities. Northwest Ohio Counties, as a region, are not competing as favorably as other more metropolitan areas of the state. When analyzing the impressions that young adults (age 25-34) have regarding Northwest Ohio, the results indicate an overall positive evaluation. Young adults report Northwest Ohio as a “safe place to live”, “a good place to raise a family”, that there is an “affordable cost of living” and that there are “quality schools.” However, it seems this is not the catalyst for keeping younger generations planted in our rural areas. Young adults did reveal that there were challenges in living in rural Northwest Ohio. Among the greatest challenges were the perceptions of limited “income potential and employment opportunities”, as well as a lack of “entertainment and cultural activities.”

Table 10. *Individual Ratings by County*

Question	Auglaize	Mercer	Putnam	Hardin	Williams	Henry	Van Wert	Paulding
Income Potential	3.69	3.64	3.28	3.10	3.00	3.16	2.93	2.59
Affordable Cost of Living	4.50	4.74	4.79	4.04	3.90	4.18	4.29	4.63
Fun Activities	3.78	3.64	3.00	2.94	3.44	3.18	2.89	2.47
Good for Family	5.25	5.17	5.20	4.80	4.85	4.90	4.82	4.38
Safe to Live	5.19	5.24	5.34	4.35	4.61	4.96	5.11	4.66
Quality Schools	4.63	4.88	4.90	3.67	3.95	4.42	4.54	3.78
Cultural Activities	3.09	3.57	3.08	2.67	3.27	3.00	3.18	2.56
Shared Values	4.46	4.88	4.49	3.73	4.10	4.34	4.25	4.19
Positive Growth	3.66	4.00	3.46	2.69	3.02	3.20	2.64	2.50
Employment Opportunity	3.16	3.59	3.02	3.15	3.05	2.82	2.93	2.81
Recreation Activities	4.00	3.83	3.13	2.98	3.29	3.30	3.11	2.75
Further Education Options	3.33	3.65	3.79	3.46	3.03	3.78	3.08	2.83
Population 1990-2030	+16.8%	+16.5%	+6.6%	+5.5%	+4.2%	+3.5%	7.5%	-7.8%
Unemployment Dec 2011	6.3	4.9%	7.2%	8.6%	8.8%	9.1%	8.2%	7.4%

Likert-Based Scale (1=Strongly Disagree and 6=Strongly Agree)

Generally, young adults indicate encouragement from their parents to remain in Northwest Ohio. Those students whose parents were originally from Northwest Ohio reported a higher level of interest in living in the area and indicated more positive evaluations of their home community. The families that are located in Northwest Ohio tend to be deeply rooted with a strong desire reported by the young people who want to stay there if the employment opportunities are available to them. Being female and having higher education levels tends to increase the likelihood that the respondents would remain in their rural communities.

Northwest Ohio has a strong foundation of stable families, strong communities, quality schools, and a reputation as a great place to live and raise a family. However, population trends reveal some challenges regarding the inability of the area to retain youth. A number of recommendations should be considered to further position Northwest Ohio to retain the next generation of working young people. Central to

the issue of retaining youth in Northwest Ohio is employment opportunity for the next generation, and the preparation for this group to match the future job needs of the area. Researchers suggest an analysis of the advising and preparation of high school students as they make choices in their future educational and career goals. These youths need to be aware of what future employment opportunities might look like. Career exploration, mentoring, young professional speakers, etc., can strengthen the link between community employers and their potential workforce. Internships, job shadowing, tours, and other methods of showcasing a realistic view of local employment opportunities will enable youth to make an educated, knowledgeable decision on career goals. To encourage talented youth to remain in Northwest Ohio, they have to be able to see viable professional career options from a realistic perspective.

Communities in Northwest Ohio are initiating recent projects that are excellent examples of efforts to focus on Rural Youth Retention Issues. Van Wert County has initiated a branding effort called “Welcome Home.” This project is bringing together community leadership, businesses, and government officials to highlight the positive aspects of their home community. Advertising efforts have been established to reinforce a positive image to entice those that may have moved away to return home to Van Wert County to seek opportunities. One of the goals of this effort is to challenge the negative stigma that the county isn’t vibrant and a place of choice for young families.

“Hometown Opportunity,” a new effort in Mercer and Auglaize County, Ohio, is designed to highlight the benefits and opportunities in that region. They are advertising success stories of young adults that have been successful in local industries, are developing web/internet presence to highlight career opportunities and benefits of living in the region. Future efforts include career fairs educating local youth and adults about in-demand career fields in the area, encouraging their preparation and training to meet future needs. Realizing the link between career and job opportunity and youth retention, this effort is designed to educate the local community about future career opportunities and link an available talent base with local employers.

Community partnerships with post-secondary schools linking students with working professionals, should continue beyond the high school setting as youth pursue college training. Some organizations and communities have been successful building linkages with students in the form of internships, co-ops, and work study arrangements. As organizations consider their financial support of students traditionally given in the form of scholarship grants, they may want to consider formalizing the relationship in terms of a paid part-time or summer position, or ask for a return of investment with a certain amount of community service hours in the home community. A number of medical organizations in the Northwest Ohio area have been proactive in this arena providing paid internship experiences to talented college students to build a relationship and to encourage their eventual employment in the area.

It is also evident that young people continue to voice frustration with limited entertainment and cultural activities in the area. Community planning should continue to listen to these voices as they plan future development to not only meet current residents, but also strive to retain and attract the next generation.

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