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RURAL YOUTH CHASE BIG-CITY DREAMS

More rural high-school graduates see college not so much as a door to opportunity as a ticket out of Nowheresville

By Dante Chinni
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MAHASKA COUNTY, Iowa – Clow Valve Co. has seven job openings in this rural community where it makes fire hydrants and valves, and management thinks it will soon have more: One-third of the factory's workforce of 400 will be eligible to retire in five years.

But listen to some of the freshly minted graduates from nearby Oskaloosa High School, and Clow's hiring problem becomes clear.

John Hammes is heading to the University of Iowa next fall with no plans to come back. "I'm going to choose the job I want, and that's going to lead me to where I live," he said. Alissa Newendorp has her eyes on the University of Northern Iowa and eventually New York City. Natasha Shipp imagines working as a lobbyist in Des Moines or Washington, D.C.

"How are we going to replace that workforce?," said Clow's chief talent strategist, Tiffany Tremmel. "There are a lot of people leaving the community, and they're not coming back."

As more young people decide to pursue four-year degrees, college towns are siphoning students out of the rural heart of the Farm Belt and sending them, degrees in hand, not back to Oskaloosa but to the nation's urban centers.

Overwhelmingly, University of Iowa students after graduation either stay near the university or scatter to Chicago, Des Moines or other big cities, according to Emsi, a Moscow, Idaho, advisory firm that analyzes labor markets. In 2014, Mahaska County sent some 170 people to Johnson County, home of the University of Iowa, according to Census data, while Johnson County sent only about 20 people back. As recently as 2000, Mahaska County was sending 73 people to Johnson County and nearly as many, or 71, came back.

The outflow of young adults is one reason the population of Mahaska County is standing still. It has dipped 1 percent since 2000, while Johnson's population has grown 32 percent.

Other states are struggling with rural population outflow to state-university towns. In 2014, Georgia's rural Pike County sent roughly 116 more people to Clarke County, home of the University of Georgia, than Clarke County sent back. In Pennsylvania, small-town Clarion County sent about 101 more people to Centre County, home of Penn State, than it got back. In Kansas, Barton County sent some 46 more people to Douglas County, home of the University of Kansas, than it got back.

Many young people in rural communities now see college not so much as a door to opportunity as a ticket out of Nowheresville. The result is a redistribution of educated graduates to urban areas, which is helping to widen the divide in educational attainment between urban and rural areas.

Cargill's plant in Eddyville, which processes 8 million bushels of corn a month into corn oil, citric acid, cattle feed and other products, is more dependent than ever on college graduates to run its increasingly high-tech operations. Craig Ambrose, a facilities manager there, said he has jobs to offer, some requiring college degrees: 47 percent of the plant's 500 employees have a bachelor's degree, and an additional 21 percent have a two-year associate's degree. He is struggling to find college-graduate candidates for two senior electrical engineer positions.

"When you are trying to attract high-school and college grads, they want to be close to entertainment, to night life," he said. "When you look at Eddyville on a map, it's not so easy to draw them in." Mr. Ambrose says he has seen the phenomenon with his own children, including a son now at the University of Iowa.

His son's plans after graduation? "He's not completely sure," Mr. Ambrose said with a laugh. "But I can tell you it's not southern Iowa."

At Musco Lighting, which builds lighting systems for businesses and sports facilities, Shelly Herr, human resources manager, says the Oskaloosa company keeps an eye on local high-school students who show promise in engineering and establishes contact with them early, in some cases before graduation. The company also forms relationships with engineering professors at Iowa State University in an attempt to find students interested in Mahaska County's rural lifestyle.

"If there is an Iowa State engineering student who wants to stay in Iowa, we're going to start talking to that kid as a freshman," Ms. Herr said.

Some students talk about coming back to raise a family – if they can find a job in their chosen field. And not everyone is leaving. Oskaloosa High grad Josh Van Donselaar plans to take a part-time job at Agriland FS, an agriculture-supply company in the area, while working on the family farm with an eye toward taking it over someday. "I've always wanted to stay home from college," he said. "I really don't like school that much. I came to the realization one day that there is room on the farm for me, so I decided to stay home."

But in bypassing higher education, Mr. Van Donselaar is the exception among his fellow graduates.

Mark Willett, general manager at the Clow Valve plant, grew up about an hour north of Oskaloosa in tiny Victor, Iowa. At his father's urging, he went to Simpson College, a small liberal-arts school near Des Moines, the first in his family to earn a four-year degree. "He said he wasn't interested in me staying there and farming," Mr. Willett said. "I didn't want to go, but he wanted me to go out and make something of myself."

After years of traveling the country, working at jobs from plant to plant, Mr. Willett worked his way back to rural Iowa, near where he started. He says he sees that path as less likely for the current generation: His 11-year-old son is already telling him he wants to go the University of Southern California.

Mr. Willett says children are more connected to the broader world than they used to be, with a better understanding and a hunger for the world outside their immediate experience: He recalls it wasn't until he got to college that he even saw cable television; now, school children have the world brought to small screens they keep in their pockets.

Whatever the pull, most of Oskaloosa High School's recent grads see their futures somewhere else.

"We have, like, five restaurants in town. Every time you go out, it's like a reunion," said 2017 grad John Hirl, who is heading to Drake University in the fall because he wants to live in Des Moines. "It's all just very predictable."