

Rural Outmigration & Community Sustainability

The Power of **AND**

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Eau Claire

UWEC STUDENTS AND THEIR PLANS TO RETURN (OR NOT) TO BUFFALO & TREMPEALEAU COUNTIES, WI.

Katelyn Zuelsdorff, Dr. Paul Kaldjian, and Honors/Geography 303.502 Class, Fall 2016 | Department of Geography and Anthropology

INTRODUCTION

According to USDA's Economic Research Service, over 1,300 non-metro counties in the United States lost population between 2010-15. The permanent departure of young people – a primary factor in this population decline and its consequent aging – is an ongoing concern for rural regions across the United States. Without their integration and contributions, community viability is threatened. The purpose of this research is to understand the push and pull factors at play in rural outmigration from the perspective and experience of the very people in the process of making the decision to return home after college or not. The results of this research are intended to inform community leaders interested in retaining, (re)attracting, and empowering young people.

We used two rural western Wisconsin counties as our case study region. Buffalo and Trempealeau Counties border Minnesota along the Mississippi River, and are situated between the cities of Eau Claire

(WI, Pop: 67,000), LaCrosse (WI, Pop: 52,000), and Winona (MN, Pop: 28,000). Trempealeau county has 40 people/mi² and Buffalo has 20 people/mi², both of which are far below the state mean (166 people/mi²). See table 1 for additional characterizing statistics.

Mondovi (Pop: 2,800), Buffalo County's largest city, is located 20 miles south of Eau Claire and is the site of a major refrigerated trucking firm. Buffalo County has four high schools, with a 2016 high school (grades 9-12) enrollment of 600. Nearly 18% of the population over 25 years of age has a bachelor's degree while the state average is over 27% and the national average is nearly 30%.

Arcadia (Pop: 2,900), is Trempealeau County's largest city and is located toward the middle of the county. It is known for its furniture manufacturing and meat packing plants that together employ over 4,500 people. Trempealeau County has seven high schools, with a 2016 high school enrollment of 1733. Just over 19% of the population aged 25 or over have bachelor's degrees.

In a five-county area that includes Buffalo and Trempealeau Counties, the biggest occupational clusters are "agribusiness and food technology" and "skilled production work". Buffalo County has fewer occupational opportunities in the areas of community and social services, computing and math, the arts, and life/physical/social sciences than surrounding counties.

	Buffalo County	Trempealeau County
Population 2010 (2015)	13,587 (13,192)	28,816 (29,550)
Percent Non-Hispanic White	96.4%	92.0%
Median Earnings (\$)	29,807	30,317
Mean Earnings (\$)	44,277	44,730
Below Poverty	13.6%	11.7%
Average Commute Time (min)	24.1	21.1
Work in County of Residence	46%	69%

Table 1

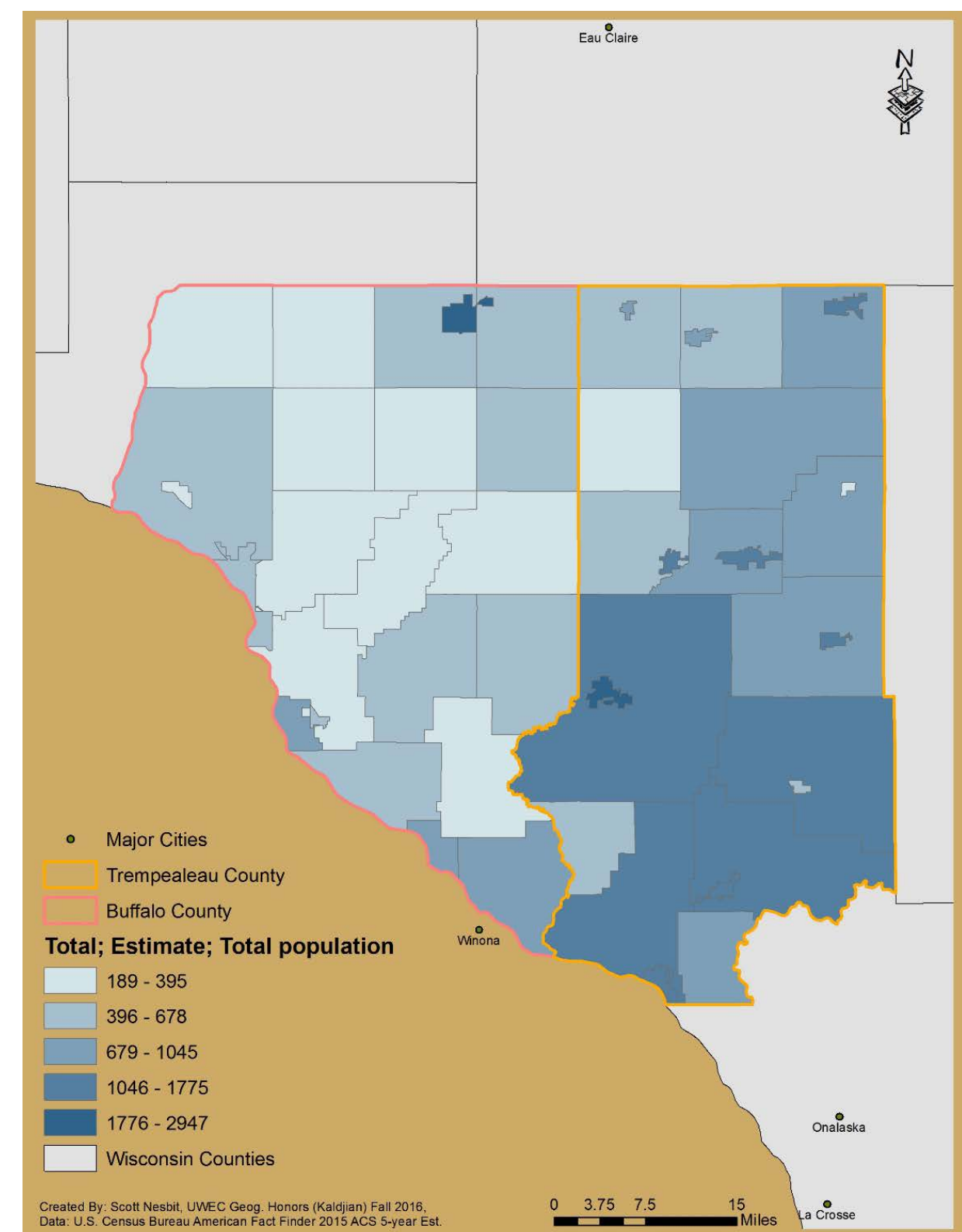


Figure 1

APPROACH

In Fall of 2016, we emailed a 34-question survey to all University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire students from Buffalo and Trempealeau Counties. With IRB approval, 167 student email addresses were drawn from admissions data provided to our faculty research mentor. Student anonymity was maintained throughout the research process, including survey recipients and their responses. After three email notifications over two weeks, we received 76 responses – a response rate of 45%. Women responded in greater proportion than males; 18-21 year olds were evenly represented. Students were first asked to provide demographic and geographically distinguishing details (age, gender, high school, UWEC major, distances, etc.). This was followed by asking respondents if they plan to return to their home communities or not, why they are leaving or not, and about factors influencing their decision.

The ten students of HNRS 303:002 and their faculty mentor compiled and analyzed the survey results. Survey respondents and a selection of county officials were invited (separately) to presentations of preliminary findings in an effort to share our efforts and to compare our research interpretations to local experience and perspective. Over the course of the project, we drew from academic, gray, and popular literature to inform our research interpretations.

SELECTIONS FROM CURRENT LITERATURE

Rural issues have received increased attention with observations of a rural-urban divide associated with contemporary politics. From J.D. Vance's bestselling *Hillbilly Elegy* (Harper 2016) to Karen Cramer's *The Politics of Resentment* (University of Chicago, 2016) and Julianne Couch's *The Small-Town Midwest* (University of Iowa, 2016), people across the country yearn to understand what is happening in rural areas and what to do about it. Vance's is a memoir of getting out of rural Appalachia; Cramer emphasizes the politicization of the rural urban-divide in Wisconsin, and how rural sentiment can be exploited for political ends, and; Couch highlights the benefits, advantages, and innovation occurring in select rural towns. There is also a growing literature on the socio-economic struggles facing rural regions in the United States (and Canada) in which the outmigration of young people and related aging of the rural population is a central theme. The relative loss of young people from these communities may be a primary indicator of county well-being – the "canary in the coal mine."

Others suggest local communities, leaders, and decision-makers bear responsibility for their own problems - but also play an essential role in finding solutions. In *Hollowing out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What it Means for America* (Beacon 2009), Patrick Carr and Maria Kefalas examine the inadvertent role of local adults and educational systems in pushing bright young people from their communities. Former Canadian Parliamentarian Doug Griffiths, in *13 Ways to Kill Your Community* (Frontenac House, 2010; with Kelly Clemmer), identifies decisions he has seen local communities make that weaken their future viability. In pointing out rural communities' self-defeating actions, these authors provide important insights that community leaders must consider as they attempt to retain and attract young people.

FINDINGS

In response to the central question, "After you graduate and finish your post-high school education, do you plan to live long-term in Buffalo/Trempealeau County?", 66% of the UW-Eau Claire students from Buffalo and Trempealeau Counties do not plan to return. This response was consistent across gender and county of residence. There appears to be, however, some variation according to a student's academic major and career aspirations.

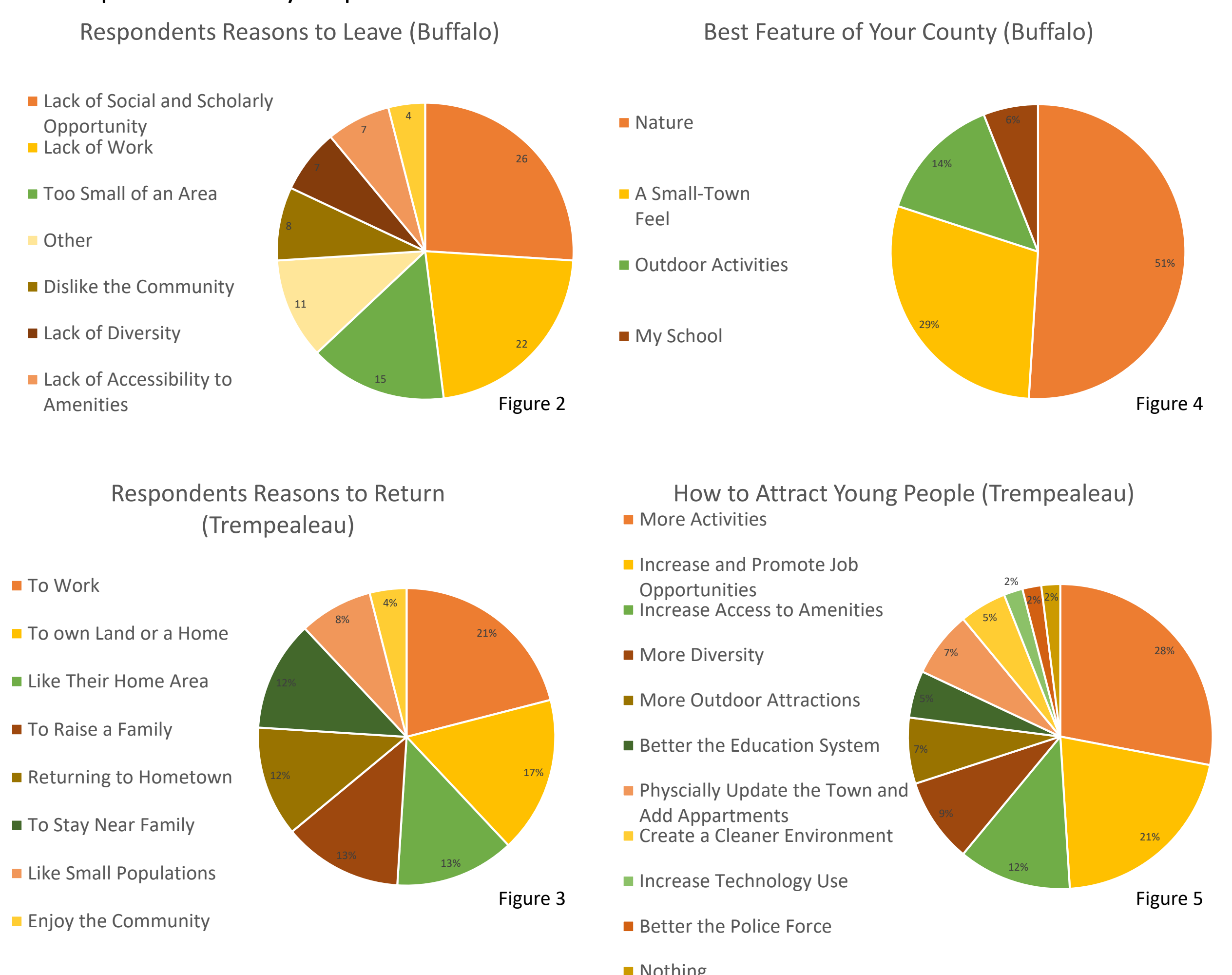
Reasons for Leaving: The 66% of survey respondents who do not intend to return to their rural home communities were asked why they are not returning. Figure 2 shows Buffalo County students' responses. The main reasons were a lack of social, scholarly, and employment opportunities, as well as the smallness of their hometowns. Students from Trempealeau County responded similarly.

Reasons for Returning: The other 33% of respondents were asked why they intended to return to their home communities. Their reasons varied widely, and some of the reasons were the same used by the non-returners. That is, some of the rural characteristics serve as pull factors of migration for some, and push factors for others. Work, for example, attracts those who are going to school for jobs offered by their rural community (teaching and health care, for example), and numerous people do like the small town, rural atmosphere and culture. A summary of the reasons respondents give for wanting to return to Trempealeau County are shown by Figure 3. Buffalo County responses were similar.

Hometown Likes: Over 50% of both Buffalo and Trempealeau County respondents identified nature or outdoor activities as their hometown's most attractive feature. Many respondent also valued the small-town feel. Figure 4 shows the distribution of responses for Trempealeau County students. Responses for Buffalo County were similar, but did not mention family or large businesses as attractive factors.

Hometown Dislikes: When asked what was wrong with their county of residence, respondents from both counties emphasized the lack of diversity, not enough social or school-related opportunities, and a lack of jobs in their chosen field. According to one respondent, "There's little diversity and the overall feeling is very stagnant, like the community isn't open to change or accepting/trying new things."

Suggestions to Get Young People to Return: Figure 5 shows responses to the question of how young people might be attracted back to Buffalo County. While many respondents mentioned wanting more shops and activities like small coffee shops and movie theatres, others wanted to make better use of the outdoor space. One suggestion was to add, "Bike paths along the main roads, and more small town shops in the city. It would really invite those to the city and help revitalize what we already have." More job opportunity and better education systems were also major suggestions. Responses were similar for Trempealeau County respondents.



DISCUSSION

While the survey results indicate that 33% of respondents plan to return home, there is a noticeable variation according to where in the county a student grew up. Students from "in town" were least likely to return home after college (24% of respondents) while students who lived in the country but not on a farm were the most likely to return (42%). 30% of students who grew up on farms plan to return to their home county. That is, those who live "in the country, not on a farm" are more likely to view their home community positively. This suggests differences in the lived experiences of rural young people, perhaps associated with lifestyle, expectations and opportunities.

Regarding the issue of jobs and employment, there are many jobs available in both counties, yet many respondents said they are still leaving because of a lack of job availability. Clearly, those leaving are searching for specific jobs not offered in their rural community. This suggests a disconnect between rural work availability, career aspirations, and the focus of college opportunities.

In addition to this disconnect between student aspirations and local opportunities, there is also an awareness of educational limitations in some rural areas. Respondents continuously brought up concern with the scholarly and extracurricular offerings of schools. For one respondent to return, "There would have to be more attractive schooling systems or good growth opportunity for myself and my family... Schools in bigger cities get the chance at taking classes that were never offered at my school." Creating a more inviting school system that gives students the ability to excel both inside and outside of the classroom may be an opportunity to draw young people back to their rural communities.

The lack of diversity and sense of progressiveness was also problematic for many students. One respondent writes, "There's little diversity and the overall feeling is very stagnant, like the community isn't open to change or accepting/trying new things." This was supported by another student who wrote, "People seem to be very stuck in their ways. Zero change, zero difference. Very closed minds and not very accepting of (what they classify as) different people or lifestyles." This suggests a need to address welcomingness in rural communities. Welcomingness addresses inclusivity of all community members, including newcomers and outsiders, which is associated with community prosperity.

Rural communities need to be welcoming to ideas and innovation in addition to people. In fact, some rural communities are turning to art festivals and galleries in an effort to attract more young people to their towns (Can the arts save rural America, *Stateline*, Teresa Wiltz, 2016). This would add more attractions and make the area more welcoming. Young people often have a phobia of missing out on attractions and enjoying life, but bringing new innovative ideas and businesses to rural communities has the ability to end that fear. Indeed, Buffalo and Trempealeau Counties have numerous innovative enterprises (Organic Mills, Pizza Farms, Organic compost production, innovative technical education [Cardinal Industries]) that demonstrate high levels of innovation and creativity using local resources and capacity.

CONCLUSION

The abundant literature on rural issues indicates that rural outmigration, variable access to opportunity, and associated decline is not a new problem and a concern to people and regions in the North America. Our findings are consistent with the literature, and confirm that the outmigration of young people is a complex situation that isn't solved with a single, handy change, nor by formula. Change and adaptation needs to be systemic, and likely requires innovative outlooks and approaches that consider the perspectives and priorities of young people.

This research gives voice to the young people who are leaving. While this study applied to Buffalo and Trempealeau County, the approach we used, and the information we gathered, could be useful to rural areas across the nation. The recommendation for these rural areas is to take young people and their perspectives, expectations, and aspirations into consideration when planning for the future of the community. As Doug Griffiths (2010) argues, there are numerous ways to kill a community – ignore the youth, live in the past, degrade the environment, reject everything new, and ignore outsiders. Our survey of the young people of Buffalo and Trempealeau counties in Wisconsin affirms that these very kinds of problems threaten the long-term viability of such rural regions. Couch (2016) comes to a similar conclusion, "Taking steps like investment in education, housing, entrepreneurship, infrastructure, and civil public discourse are important everywhere, in communities of all sizes—possibly nowhere more than in the rural areas of this region, which by many measures is in deep trouble."

Cramer's (2016) exploration of a rural-urban divide in Wisconsin may provide one area for consideration. As young people are attracted to the amenities of urban areas, counties like Buffalo and Trempealeau, that are situated between small urban areas and their universities – Eau Claire, La Crosse, and Winona, MN – can work to build socio-geographical relationships in the region that draw on the benefits that both the rural and the urban have to offer. In this way, the needs and opportunities throughout the region can be understood, shared, and developed.