

Book Review

Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America

Hobart L. Harmon

Citation: Harmon, H. (2010) Book Review "Hollowing out the middle: The rural brain drain and what it means for America." *Journal of Research in Rural Education* 25(3). Retrieved from <http://jrre.psu.edu/articles/25-3.pdf>

Hollowing out the Middle represents what should be a critically influential study for guiding education reform in rural America. Using survey data from 275 former high school students, in-depth interviews with more than 100 young adults across the nation who attended the high school in the late 1980s and early 1990s, coupled with intensive community-level fieldwork, the husband-wife team of sociology professors, Patrick Carr and Maria Kefalas chronicle the "coming-of-age" experiences of youth who formerly attended high school in "Ellis," Iowa. In the process they uncover how a high school and its community inadvertently contribute to the brain drain and "hollowing out" of a small town in America's heartland.

According to Carr and Kefalas, the paths students take are not random, but fairly predictable as "Achievers," "Stayers," "Seekers," and "Returners." *Achievers* are the high achieving, most-likely-to-succeed youth who are destined for highly regarded colleges—the "best and brightest" kids of Ellis. They spent their adolescence being cultivated by well-intended adults within the school and community who never gave them a chance to settle for the easy route. Singled out for futures that would take them far from the countryside, Achievers receive special treatment. They realize that "earning good grades, displaying good behavior, and being praised...grant special privileges and

access to adults who can help them break free of small town life" (p. 31).

Stayers, however, are raised to value work, develop responsibility, become independent, and usually marry at a young age. These former students of Ellis High School rationalize it as unwise to spend hard-earned money, or to go seriously in debt, to acquire a higher education when so few local jobs or benefits are available as the reward for the investment in a post-secondary degree. Thus, living in the places where they were raised is reasonable. They like the town, enjoy living in a place where their children can grow up and play freely, and prefer being surrounded by like-minded people. *Stayers* could not really imagine living anywhere else. Carr and Kefalas note however, that "*Stayers* are blind to the reality of blue-collar work in a postindustrial economy, forged in their unwavering belief in the work ethic" (p. 66), and as a consequence place themselves in positions of limited economic mobility and frequently at significant economic risk.

In Ellis, the *Seekers* tend to be average students with little interest in remaining in their small town as adults. They come from families of modest means and grow up "into a sort of unselfconscious patriotism" (p. 93), influenced by a culture that highly honors military veterans and includes a large number of them. *Seekers* aren't encouraged as enthusiastically by their teachers as are *Achievers*. Their class rank at Ellis High School is above the *Stayers*, but below the *Achievers*. Hungry to experience life some place else, restless and impatient in their wishes, *Seekers* have an eagerness for the unknown pushing them to see the world beyond Ellis.

Many *Seekers* thus become prime targets of military recruiters, who view Ellis High School as a "feeder school." *Seekers* may join the military as the only viable way to

Hobart Harmon is an independent educational planning, research and evaluation consultant who lives in Timberville, VA. The 2009 recipient of the National Rural Education Association's Stanley A. Brzezinski Memorial Rural Education Research Award, Dr. Harmon holds an adjunct Associate Professor of Education (Educational Leadership) appointment in the Department of Education Policy Studies at Pennsylvania State University and serves on the editorial or review boards of the *Journal of Research in Rural Education* and *The Rural Educator*.

both see the world and afford additional education. “Now that the military markets itself as a cross between an employment service and a scholarship program” (p.104), enlisting into the military is a practical means to an end for many Seekers of Ellis High School, with hopes of college and a good job later in life.

Last, the *Returns*, are comprised of two categories: Boomerangs and High-Fliers. Most Returns over time become Boomerangs after an unsuccessful college experience, completion of military duty, or harsh realities of unmet personal aspirations bring them back home. Unlike Seekers, however, Boomerangs may have completed postsecondary training programs at vocational schools or community colleges, but possess far less education than the Achievers. Whereas Stayers are overwhelming male, Boomerangs tend to be female.

The second category, High-Fliers, “seem identical to the Achievers because they have prepared to get out of Dodge since grammar school” (p. 108). They are the credentialed and upwardly mobile who set aside their chance at the American wish for self reinvention when they return home in search of stability. They chose to abandon the more lucrative and more stimulating possibility of life in the big city to spend their days in Ellis and the countryside. High-Fliers may have similar views as some Boomerangs, but often have more positive experiences outside Ellis. They bring back much needed skills because of their professional and educational qualifications. Unlike the Boomerangs, the High-Fliers are much more conscious of their role in maintaining small towns and are overtly courted to return.

Carr and Kefalas maintain that if conversations with the young men and women of Ellis have taught us anything, “It is the inescapable truth that what unfolds in the social microcosm of each small town has important implications for how we tackle the hollowing out process. The root of the problem and the seeds of its solution are found in the way that each town prepares its young people, and in the institutions—employers, civic groups, Rotary clubs, schools, and colleges—that play a part in this effort” (p. 171). The authors further point out: “On a fundamental level, small towns can—if they question many of the taken-for-granted assumptions they have about who they should invest in and how—play a pivotal role in securing their own futures” (p. 171).

The role of the school system in “hollowing out the middle” becomes clear in a meeting of the researchers with the high school principal and members of the school board. Expecting to possibly bristle the principal and board members or cause defensiveness, Carr and Kefalas asked rhetorically: “You do realize, don’t you, that because you do your job so well here, that you are basically making sure the best students leave Ellis, and the odds are they won’t come back? And at the same time, you spend very little of your

resources on most of those who stay or return” (p. 109).

But it was Carr and Kefalas who were astonished, “when several people merely shrugged their shoulders and grinned ruefully” (p. 139), with the principal speaking matter-of-factly: “This is the job we set out to do” (p. 139). In talking with the principal after the meeting about why he wasn’t more worried about the idea that Ellis was sowing the seeds of its own decline, the principal replied that “most people felt it was their job to ensure that the best kids got all the help they needed, and that, inevitably, meant that they would move away” (p. 139). The principal maintained, according to the authors, that the job of an effective educator was to nurture and send off talented youth, despite the fact that doing so meant the town was slowly committing suicide.

Based on conversations with Stayers and Returns, Carr and Kefalas conclude there is an urgent need to revamp the rural educational system to address the chronic underinvestment in non-college bound students. They argue it is the first step in arresting the hollowing out process. They add: “It is dangerous and misguided to fund and operate rural high schools with the primary goal of getting the academically-oriented students to college and assuming that the non-college-bound will somehow get a job on their own” (p. 166).

Hollowing Out the Middle adds new and important evidence about how the “brain drain” dilemma somewhat silently evolves, continues to persist, and faces acceleration in small towns struggling to find their place in a “new economy.” It is a timely book, as debate to reauthorize the federal No Child Left Behind law comes front and center in the shadow of the nation’s worst economic recession in 70 years. Reforming the American high school as an engine of individual, state and national economic prosperity may drive the debate. Assuring high and common curriculum standards across America, where each student has “high quality” teachers seems essential. Yet, missing in the debate may be the more personal reasons of why many rural residents chose to live in the countryside, as a trade off to more lofty ideals that have come to define life achievement and success in an urban-minded society. By extension then, also missing in the debate is how public education addresses the needs of rural youth with varying types of post high school aspirations.

Hollowing Out the Middle should be required reading for all persons who are or want to be an administrator, teacher or school board member of a public school system in rural America—and those in colleges and universities who prepare them, as well as politicians and policymakers who seek solutions that best serve the interests of rural places and residents. The authors forcefully demonstrate how a public school like Ellis High fails to function as a viable partner in serving the capacity-building needs in human potential of a small town in rural America. In doing

so, *Hollowing Out the Middle* provides a wealth of issues for researchers to explore, not the least of which is how students in Ellis are representative of other small towns and rural places in America. Many of the solutions proposed by Carr and Kefalas are educated best guesses, beckoning for research to test their feasibility and sustainability in addressing the “brain drain” and “hollowing out” of rural America. Particularly promising might be interdisciplinary approaches to formulating and answering research questions of concern to parents, educators, economists and rural sustainability interests.