

Brain Drain from Small City USA: Liberal Art School Students' Relationship to Their  
Hometowns and their Aspirational Locations

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On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this thesis.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Research shows that educated, talented young people are moving in droves to big “superstar cities”—cities with high levels of innovation, diversity, and capital. College graduates must make a decision of where they will chose to live and pursue their careers. The research presented in this paper seeks to understand the relationship between college students’ attitude towards their hometown and their aspirational locations. Research was conducting through 11 in-depth interviews with current third and fourth year students at Colorado College. The key finding was that the liberal arts school experience was the biggest influencer in where the students see themselves living in the future.

## INTRODUCTION

J.D. Vance, author of *The Hillbilly Elogy* (2016), published an Op-Ed in the New York Times called “Why I’m Moving Home.” In it, Vance, a successful venture capitalist who has made his way from dirt poor to rich and successful through the military, Yale Law, and eventually to Silicon Valley-- decides it’s time for him to give back to where he came from. His argument hits a chord with anyone who comes from a place less glamorous than the one they are living in now.

College graduates have a big decision to make after walking the stage—one that many make without thinking contextually. Graduates think about a job, a significant other, or another aspect that attracts them to a place rather than thinking about how them moving affects both that place and their hometown. The classes, the conversations, and the media around college campuses often focus on big cities—New York, San Francisco, Chicago, etc. Richard Florida refers to these cities as “Superstar Cities”: or cities that generate the greatest levels of innovation, attract the largest shares of global capital and investment, have huge concentrations of leading-edge finance, media, entertainment, and tech industries, and are home to a disproportionate share of the world’s talent (Florida 2017). Florida’s research finds that these are the cities to which the highest caliber of talent is drawn (Florida 2017).

By conducting intensive interviews with students from small cities studying at a liberal arts school, post-graduation migration can be examined in new ways that might reveal the nature of urbanization trends. With increasing numbers of high educational status individuals moving to large cities, it is valuable to study what takes place in their lives that may influence their choices of where to live.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Urbanism Theory on Attractiveness of Cities*

Urban living is often glorified through movies, books, and popular media. Various research has been done to determine what attracts people to certain places. Urban Sociologists Simmel (1903) and Wirth (1938) theorize on the sociological definition of urbanism and why cities attract people. These two theorists give specific attention to 1) the way that urbanism differs from ruralism and 2) urban living's advantages and disadvantages.

Wirth (1938:34) defines cities as: "...a large dense permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals." He writes that heterogeneity is necessary for the division of labor and a wide range of services at convenience. In a limited, dense area, the greater the population, the greater the heterogeneity of residents. The division of labor creates more economic opportunity, meaning people can change their interests and jobs often, particularly wealthier people with access to more resources. As well as searching for capital, people also search for a social sphere of community. Focused on sense of community in the neighborhood unit in their research, Duany, Platter-Zyberk & Speck (2000) find that neighborhoods need higher population density, public open space, heterogeneous populations and pedestrian traffic to support a sense of community. These are qualities more often found in big cities than small cities or rural communities.

Diversity is a quality of place that Florida's (2002,2017) research says attracts young educated professionals. Durkheim (1893) theorized about organic solidarity, which comes from the interdependence that arises from specialization of work and the complementarities between people, as opposed to mechanical solidarity, in which order comes from homogeneity. Therefore,

organic solidarity represents a diverse society, which Durkheim says people of certain class and educational status desire.

Sometimes people are attracted to cities because cities give people the opportunity to be anonymous. Wirth describes “schizoid” as a personality trait shared by all urbanites that, while urbanites may or may not have many personal relationships, lets them remain anonymous most of the day in an urban environment. Being a schizoid in a city is unavoidable, to live among so many people it is impossible to know everyone, in contrast to living in a smaller, more familiar setting where one is constantly running into people they know or at least recognize.

Simmel (1903) theorizes a city as a cycle of success and growth because an intellectualistic mentality, such as a strong university community, contributes to the money economy, which in turn improves the intellectual scene. Simmel writes about how the city gives the greatest individual personal existence because it values the “objective spirit”: what people produce instead of where they came from. He argues cities liberate residents from rural prejudices, such as racism and ethnocentrism. When someone moves to the city, they are in close proximity with people who are different than them, so they can no longer hold onto these prejudices. This expulsion of prejudice, in theory, makes a city an attractive place to be. Whether or not this theory holds true depends on the context of a city (Kotkin 2016).

Wirth disagrees with the notion of the dualism of urban and rural. Wirth (1938: 36) sees urban and rural individuals as ideal types, and with all identities somewhere in between on a spectrum: “Hence, we should not expect to find abrupt and discontinuous variation between urban and rural types of personality.” People may not define themselves as strictly rural or strictly urban, and to accept this is to begin to look into its nuances—looking at what in life influences people of working age to chose to move to cities.

## *History of Urbanization*

The city has been a glorified place since people moved out of nomadic and agricultural society and into urban society (Tonnies 1887). In the words of Wirth (1938:34), “The distinctive feature of man’s mode of living in the modern age is his concentration into gigantic aggregations... from which radiate the ideas and practices we call civilization.” According to the US Census Bureau, the percent of US population living in urban areas has been on a steady increase since the bureau started collecting data in 1791, in which time 5.1% of the population was living in urban areas. In 2017, that number was 80.7% (US Census Bureau 2018). The US Census Bureau defines an urbanized area as an area with 50,000 or more people.

In the decades following World War II, many white, affluent people moved away from inner cities and into the suburbs. This is often referred to as “White Flight” (Boustan 2007), and is often attributed to better schools and lower taxes right outside the city. Now, young people from small cities, suburbs, and rural areas alike are doing the opposite-- moving back to the inner city (Florida 2017). This can result in gentrification, or the drastic changing of a city area that may result in certain populations being pushed out due to the lack of affordability. As many talented college graduates move into “Superstar Cities” (Florida 2002, 2017), they often contribute to gentrification by driving up the costs of rent and the costs of the nearby amenities.

Changes occur in rural America as this migration to cities takes place. Political polarization is increasing as educated populations move out (Sussel and Thomson 2015). This is causing a loss of sense of community. As people move out, other problems move in. Opioid abuse (USDA 2017), deficient public education (Johnson et.al 2014), and obesity (Cohen et al. 2016) have all inclined in rural areas and smaller cities as the rate of urbanization simultaneously goes up (Florida 2017, US Census Bureau 2010). These facts beg the questions: What do people

who are moving out of these small cities and towns consider when making their decision? What social and environmental factors have caused them to leave?

### *Brain Drain and Migration Trends*

“Brain drain” is a concept that refers to the emigration of highly trained or intelligent people from a particular area. Brain drain is usually referred to in an international context. Successful students from developing countries get a chance to study in a developed country, then end up staying there long term, often making their home country at a loss for talented and highly educated workers (Baruch, Budhwar, Khatri, 2007). This can happen to rural areas and small cities too. Kahn (2009) takes a specific look at brain drain in small cities in Appalachia. He cites the need to retain more local graduates because outsiders are not moving in. Kahn’s (2009) study shows that highly skilled labor is likely to leave not only their city, but Appalachia as a whole because of its ties with certain industries, lack of universities, and lack of coastal access.

A body of research points to the urban migration among millennials and the older Gen X’ers. Richard Florida (2002, 2016) narrates this point on the popular front, writing with suggestions for cities on how to attract this talent. Florida (2002, 2017) narrates how the “creative class” is moving to cities and how and why they are moving. The creative class (Florida 2002, 2017) is made up of talented and educated professionals who work in knowledge-based industries like business and finance, technology, healthcare and medicine, law, and education.

He uses interview (2002) as well as quantitative data (2002, 2017). His quantitative data shows that young people of high socioeconomic and educational status are moving to big, liberal cities in droves. Florida’s (2002) interviews found that six main factors contributed to where people wanted to live: a thick labor market, lifestyle, social interaction, diversity, identity (how

well the place fits with and contributes to how someone sees themselves), and authenticity (how the place sets itself apart from other places). In the end he states that these factors all contribute to what he calls “quality of place”: or what’s there, who’s there, and what’s going on (Florida 2002). Pierre Bourdieu (1894:496), theorized that taste, in this case taste in place, is a decidedly social rather than individual preference, shaped in particular by class locations, and often in opposition to the tastes of other: “Choosing according to one’s tastes is a matter of identifying goods that are objectively attuned to one’s position and which ‘go together’ because they are situated in roughly equivalent positions in their respective spaces.” If they have the means of education and wealth, people can decide where they want to live based on their tastes.

The research of Frieze et al. (2006) and Fiore et al. (2015) most closely respond to previously mentioned theories. Frieze et al. (2006) did a psychological study to find what personality factors make people want to move away from Pittsburgh, PA. Pittsburgh is a large city, but one that has struggled based on its dependence on a single industry, manufacturing, which eroded in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and is not considered a “superstar city” like New York City or San Francisco. Small cities and certain larger cities tend to specialize in a single industry, which has causes boom and bust. Frieze et. al (2006) found the pull factors to staying around Pittsburgh to be: relationships, wanting to have more children, and being more religious. They found the push factors to leave Pittsburgh to be: work, achievement, and power. They also found that women were more likely to want to stay in Pittsburgh than men. Frieze et al.’s study shows that people focused on careers do move more often, confirming Florida’s (2002, 2017) research and Simmel’s (1903) theory that people move to cities for individual achievement.

Fiore et al. (2015) used a revealed preference approach to find what was important to seniors in Iowa universities in regards to where they hoped to live. The top features were economic: overall cost of living and a strong local economy (Fiore et al. 2015). These were followed by lifestyle features, but also including two variants-- access to basic consumer goods and access to health facilities. They argues that more human capital does result in more economic growth and people tend to chose based economic and lifestyle factors. The study was done in response to the issue of brain drain in Iowa, a state dominated by small cities and rural areas. This study confirmed Florida's (2002, 2017) findings that amenities were important to city choice.

Waitt and Gibson (2009) challenge Florida's idea of creative cities. They question if city size really does affect creativity and how all this "creative migration" affects issues like gentrification. Using a case study of a small city in Australia, they illustrate the nuances of creativity in a small community. They pay attention to the significance of city size, geographical position, and cultural legacies to the conversations that are had and the actions and ideas pursued. They challenge the idea that cities must compete to be the most "creative" places, but that rather there should be other objectives for a city to pursue. Some researchers, like Norman (2013), argue that small cities are not valued nor studied enough, and that this becomes a cycle because when only big cities are studied, only big cities get better because urban planning is based on big cities. There is little scholarship to go off of when planning for small cities. Kotkin (2016) counters Florida and other high-density urbanists by arguing that population should be distributed around a nation's area more evenly rather than centralized. He predicts that millennials will eventually seek to move to suburbs again just like older generations. In his final chapter Kotkin (2016:170) "argues for a broader definition of what constitutes a great city...to

encompass not only different forms but also people in all their variety and various life stages...to include those broad sections of society...whose long-term interests are often ignored.”

### *Liberal Arts Education and Networks*

People moving to big cities often seek what Bourdieu (1987:284) calls social capital: “Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition....” In other words, social capital is access to more resources and opportunities via relationships, be they close or acquaintance. There are more opportunities for this social capital in a city based on density and close proximity, among other factors. Giuffre (2013) provides that doing a social network analysis—looking into who holds connections and what kind of connections are held—can give new insights into the workings of a community. She does several analyses to come to the conclusion that creativity is best cultivated when someone in a group has connections with someone in a totally different group, filling the space in the hole between two social groups. These people are at higher risk for good ideas because of the social capital that they hold. People often move to cities for specifically for a network of people or creativity. Johnson (2010)’s research confirms that the creativity ratio (creative ideas: population) between big and small cities is larger than the population ratio in big to small cities. This means that there is more creativity per person in big cities.

Creativity and networks are cultivated in the liberal arts education. Liberal arts education is defined as “a holistic approach to learning, stressing the importance of intellectual, emotional, and moral growth of students. The model includes educational breadth and... aims at character formation, critical thinking, communication abilities, and the development of leadership and

good citizenship.” (Pascarella, Blaich 2013:13). In the United States, approximately 6.5% of higher education institutions offer baccalaureate programs in the liberal arts and sciences (Graubarb 2017). Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education shows that 1) in liberal arts schools, reflective and integrative learning activities had positive net impacts on growth in critical-thinking skills and moral reasoning, 2) liberal arts colleges tended to expose students to higher levels of both clear and organized instruction and deep-learning experiences than did research universities or regional institutions, and 3) engagement with diversity during college has positive consequences for students' general cognitive development (Pascarella, Blaich 2013).

## **METHODS**

The goal of this study is to determine how students at Colorado College perceive their hometowns and how that relates to where they hope to live in the future. The researcher uses data collected from qualitative interviews with 11 students at Colorado College, a small liberal arts school in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

There are 2,100 students enrolled at Colorado College (Colorado College 2018). Demographics are 66.1% white, 24.3% students of color, and 8.7% international students. 52.72% of students are females; 44.76% of students are male. 70.3% of classes have less than 20 students. In 2014 and 2015, the years students in the study entered college, the amount of full pay students was 63% and 61.2% respectively. Colorado College is considered an “elite” liberal arts school based on its high tuition, \$68,000 per year, and low acceptance rate, 16%.

The researcher chose a liberal arts college because the experience is engulfing for most students, in that it shapes their lives for the majority of their four years in attendance. There is a

requirement at Colorado College to live on campus for three of the four years, which means that students are constantly surrounded by the Colorado College culture. The schedule is very demanding so students do not have opportunities to return home often.

The students range in age from 20-22 (third or fourth year students), who are at the point in their lives to make decisions about where to live next, and have been at the college for three or four years. The researcher reached out to three interviewees through email, then used snowball effect to find further interviewees (getting recommendations from the first interviewees). The prerequisite for interviewees was that they grew up in a city or town of 250,000 people or less that they would not identify as a suburb. Although this aspect was subjective, each interviewee had a solid stance that their hometown was not a suburb. This method had both pros and cons, the pros being that the student considered their hometown to be a city and worth talking about, and the cons being that some students who may have participated did not due to being unsure if their city fit the prerequisites. The US Census Bureau does not define a “suburban area”. It is defined by the Miriam Webster Dictionary as being “on the outskirts of an urban area” (Miriam Webster Dictionary 2003). The researcher chose not to include suburbs in her study because she assumed that students from suburbs would be unequally influenced to move to the major city of which their suburb is on the outskirts.

The researcher conducted 11 in-depth, open-ended interviews. The interview questions were focused on understanding the participants’ relationship to their hometown, the social factors that influence their lives, and what they hope for in a future living situation-- and how the three coincide. Before the interviews began, the participants signed an IRB-exempt consent form. Interviews lasted from 45 to 90 minutes with an average time of one hour. Interview times

varied based on the participant's openness and the how much they had previously thought about the matter. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The researcher read a variety of literature regarding urban migration, millennials, and creative capital in order to broaden understanding and create the questions the researcher used. The interview guide (latest attached in Appendix A) changed slightly over time as the researcher received noteworthy responses from participants that had not come up in the previously mentioned literature. The researcher wrote analytic memos after interviews that were instrumental in changing the questions asked and the angle taken in the updated interview guide.

Interviews were conducted in locations selected by participants, usually on the Colorado College campus or at a coffee shop nearby. The researcher offered to buy participants a hot drink of their choice before each interview. Six interviews took place at Colorado Coffee at the Colorado College Worner Center, two took place at the researcher's residence, and four took place at a nearby coffee shop. Strategies described by Weiss in his book *Learning from Strangers* (1994) were used when building a positive interviewing relationship with the participants. The researcher used her own experience in her hometown to connect with her participants.

The researcher coded and analyzed data using Google Documents. The themes she used were diversity, career aspirations, anonymity, city "feel", and networks. These themes were determined based on the literature and the frequency of them showing up during multiple read-throughs of the interviews. Specific quotes were then copied and pasted into the theme documents, removing the "ums" and "uhs" for clarity.

There were many limitations to this study. The first is sample size and makeup. The sample is small and relatively homogenous based on where it is drawn from, the Colorado College student body. The researcher's role as a student at Colorado College must also be noted

because it likely affected the contacts, interviews, and analysis by making them tainted with bias from her previous experiences. Additionally, participants may have mentioned issues like diversity more often than they would otherwise because they were aware that this was a sociology thesis.

Table 1 displays the list of participants using pseudonyms, their gender (only cisgender students responded), the population of the place they consider to be their hometown, and what region of the US their hometown is located in. All students identified as white, which was a result of both the make up of Colorado College and the places they hailed from.

**Table 1**

<b>Name (gender)</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>Region</b>	<b>Name (gender)</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>Region</b>
Ali (f)	77,571	Midwest	Samantha (f)	87,574	West
Bryce (m)	64,465	West	Sylvia (f)	106,420	South
Laura (f)	32,065	Northeast	Liam (m)	68,339	Midwest
Susie (f)	223,154	West	Emily (f)	57,110	West
Scott (m)	91,930	West	Ivy (f)	21,485	Northeast
Caroline (f)	20,268	Northeast			

## **FINDINGS**

This study finds that through the Colorado College experience, students form their ideas about what to look for in a city. Through the concepts they have drawn from the Colorado College experience about diversity and politics, city feel, city size, and their own networks, ten out of the eleven students interviewed state that they would ideally not move back to their hometowns.

Students do not fit into an ideal rural type or an ideal urban type, but rather fall somewhere in between with their notions towards small cities--their hometowns-- versus big cities (Wirth 1938). Ten of the students feel gratitude and nostalgia towards their hometown but do not seek to move back. As respondent Ali expressed, "I love Racine, but I don't think I could live there... even though they really need good doctors right now which is what I want to be." Ali feels torn because she loves her hometown and is pursuing a career that is needed there. However, since Colorado College has taught her the complexities of where she is from, she wishes to move somewhere else after graduation. Many participants believe that they, too, could have an influential role in their hometowns-- one that may even deeply impact their community-- but do not want to move there for a number of reasons described below. Only one participant out of the 11, Emily, anticipates moving back to her hometown. She has two young siblings whom she hopes to watch grow up. She aspires to be a social worker to make the most difference in her hometown. The college experience affects some students differently than others, but there are common themes, explained below. Given that Emily is a variant, the findings will focus on the other ten interviews because they represent the most significant trend.

## *Diversity and Politics*

Wirth (1938) does not give a formal definition of diversity, but rather describes “heterogeneity,” or a body that is made up of parts that are different from each other. Wirth (1938) states that diversity is attractive to people because it provides the opportunity for specialization of labor and more choices. However, the data from this study show that Colorado College students tend to want diversity for a greater understanding of people different from them. Participants were first asked about diversity ambiguously, then asked to specify about type (racial, ethnic, etc.). In response to the first implicit question, eight out of the 11 participants commented that they do not see their hometowns as diverse, which makes their hometowns less attractive to them. Several students mentioned that it was not until Colorado College that they had any conversations about diversity with regards to race and ethnicity. When describing her hometown at the beginning of the interview, Caroline brought up diversity right away:

Brunswick is not very diverse. I think that has shaped me because sometimes when you grow up in a place where everyone around you is mostly white, a lot of things about race seemed very abstract-- the concepts and the inequality, none of it was around me. I feel frustrated and sheltered.

Caroline, a sociology major, may have put more thought into this particular issue than other participants at the time because she values learning about inequality. She said that she currently feels frustrated and sheltered because she lacked conversations about inequality while growing up, so consequentially she did not do anything to combat systemic inequalities. It can be inferred that Caroline did not feel this way at the time of her growing up in Brunswick, but instead that she was able to contextualize her experience only after being removed from it and attending Colorado College.

In contrast to Caroline who wanted more diversity in her hometown so she could combat inequalities, others wished they had more diversity in their hometowns for experiential and social

purposes. Liam on the matter said, “I mean, yeah, I wish Eau Claire would have been more diverse. I think that would have been good in a lot of ways-- from politics to food to music.” Liam felt a pull towards diversity after some of his experiences away from his hometown and particularly on the Colorado College campus. He defines diversity as “experiencing new things that are not what you grew up with.” He said later on in the interview that people in his hometown do not value trying new and different things like he does.

Unlike Liam, the biology major, others have read about the benefits of diversity in a more formal setting during their time at Colorado College. Sylvia said, “Workplaces do better with diversity-- not all parts are easy but... I think it’s worth it.” In this quote, she is arguing that diversity might be hard to instill and may even cause conflict. However, with more diversity comes more productivity and creativity. Sylvia said she draws this opinion from one of her favorite classes at Colorado College: “Sociology of Work.” There is a concrete sense among all participants from both prompted and unprompted comments in interviews that diversity is a desirable and important quality in a given place.

This idealizing of diversity is ironic, considering the racial and socioeconomic demographics of Colorado College (66.1 % white, 62.1% full pay students for \$68,000/ year tuition). Students chose Colorado College with the knowledge that Colorado College is not diverse compared to the rest of the world, yet now because of their decision to come to Colorado College are choosing to move to places that are more diverse. Sylvia varied from the rest of the students in that she does not think that Colorado College values diversity and feels that her hometown in Central Florida is more diverse than Colorado College. Durkheim (1893) argued that as people become more educated, they seek “organic solidarity”, or diversity in all forms of difference. Researcher Florida’s (2002, 2017) study on what attracts young, educated people to

cities concurs with Durkheim's notion. Ivy, a senior, reflects on her own experience learning about diversity at Colorado College:

I've learned lessons (at Colorado College) that would have been impossible to learn in my home setting. Colorado College's environment, which is pretty white as well, makes me really interested to live in a more diverse environment. Through different conversations at Colorado College I've decided that I have a lot to learn from a diverse environment like somewhere in a major city.

Ivy describes a direct relationship between her Colorado College experience and her desire to live in a diverse city.

Another mismatch between many participants and their hometowns is politics.

Participants feel that they do not share the same political beliefs as their hometowns. The 2016 presidential election-- a polarizing event in US history in which there was a surprise victory from the Republican side by Donald Trump, came up often in interviews. Sylvia, from Lakeland, Florida, a primarily conservative city, said of her experience,

I always thought I was surrounded by good people. Everyone was a good neighbor, lending each other things, making pies in times of need. It felt like the same page. Then the election happened, and I learned that so many of the people who had showed me kindness had voted for Trump. I felt dumbstruck and I think some ties were cut when that happened.

Sylvia, from a city in the south, describes southern hospitality—"Be kind to those you know, but wary of those you don't." Through her college education, she has learned that the kindness shown to her was not equally shown to everyone, but more specifically to her because of her positionality as white, female, and well connected through her family in the community. Her aspirations to move away from her hometown fit with the literature from Sussel and Thompson (2015), which says that towns like her hometown will likely become more conservative as highly educated people like her continue to move out. Colorado College is a primarily liberal campus, which likely had an effect on participants' political views in that persons, particularly young,

impressionable persons, are likely to take up the political standings of who they are surrounded by. A downward spiral of polarization begins as urban and rural areas become more polarized as liberal and conservative. Potential outliers (i.e. college students moving home to their small town, or veterans coming home to their urban environment) feel more and more uncomfortable, and will move to a place where they will find more people with beliefs like their own (creating even greater polarization).

### *City “Feel” as Socially Constructed by Colorado College*

Most participants talked about hoping to live somewhere with a certain “feel” that they liked often including either coffee shops or museums or an outdoor scene. This “feel” is defined by participants’ recent experiences and what interests them, constructed in their time at Colorado College. “Somewhere with a good downtown scene, shops, things to do. I like the feel of Brooklyn or maybe San Francisco. Hard to put a name to it exactly, it’s just the energy in the air,” said Samantha, after being asked what she is looking for in a place to live. Most students know what feel they are seeking, even if like Samantha, they cannot quite verbalize it.

It is ironic that most participants felt neutral or negatively towards Colorado Springs, a place where they chose to attend college. “The Springs definitely isn’t great... there’s virtually no downtown scene and seemingly not many young people,” said Susie. “Feel” matters to these students because of the travel experiences Colorado College has afforded them and the conversations they have with students more familiar with bigger cities, as well as the literature they read and media they take in at this environment. “I have a friend whose parents are independent film makers in L.A., and I think that the L.A. lifestyle would be one I would like, based on visiting them,” said Bryce.

One variant participant cared more about having her own space and living in a suburb than the “feel” of the city. Laura said, “I definitely see myself living in a suburb of a big city. Just somewhere I can breathe fresh air and chill and be on my own away from it all.” Laura is also passionate about outdoor activities, and so she sees a suburb of Denver as her ideal place to live-- the halfway point between the place she grew up and a big city with access to the outdoors. This finding fits with Kotkin’s (2016) prediction that millennials will eventually idealize suburbs just like older generations.

Participants often mentioned natural aspects of their hometowns during their interviews. Most participants felt that the nature in their hometown made it a great place for them to grow up and is something they seek in the future. The Colorado College community stresses “Sense of Place” and markets itself with Pikes Peak-- the mountain in the background of every shot of the school. “I think Colorado College has really made me think more critically about the space and place that I’m in. From environmental to historical to recreational. I mean Pikes Peak just means a lot to me at this point and I think I want something like that,” said Caroline. Caroline said she connects with both the western heritage in Colorado as well as the mountains. She has a tattoo of mountains on her foot to remind her how Colorado makes her feel. She hopes to move to Denver after graduation. Because of the strong outdoor recreation presence, as well as the strong environmental advocacy presence, Colorado College is a place where students notice the natural environment more. Therefore, they begin to look for specific natural and cultural aspects when they are deciding where to move after graduation, which relates to what Florida (2002,2017) calls searching for identity and authenticity.

In addition to searching for identity and authenticity to fulfill a sense of place, Colorado College graduates look to cities big cities because they seem to be where the things the matter to

them are happening or are located. “What makes me want to be in a city? Cities are where things happen—events, art, I mean history takes place in cities really, not the suburbs and usually not somewhere small” said Scott. Scott’s point holds true with the literature—big cities are more creative than other places (Johnson 2010). It is unclear whether or not Scott picked up this view from Colorado College or has always held it, but his interests expressed were developed at Colorado College—specifically art. Earlier in the interview he mentioned how art is something he has come to value while at Colorado College, “Some things just weren’t on the radar or the priority list back in high school like art or spoken word poetry... nothing pushed me towards that kind of stuff back then but now I’d say it means a lot to me.”

#### *Anonymity and Individuality as related to Colorado College*

Most participants recall their hometown as a place where they lack anonymity. This familiarity is perceived as a negative quality because it means they lack individuality. At Colorado College students experience an opportunity for individuality, or being able to create their identities in the way that they want to be seen, which they hope to experience again after they graduate. Samantha said,

No I couldn’t move back. I definitely love it but I think also just with my parents there, I’d always be Bob or Peggy’s daughter. There’s just no way. I also just know so many people and it’s almost like a high school to some degree. It’s just intense... just couldn’t get out of it. Like you go to the grocery store and you just recognize everybody.

Many other participants had similar experiences in that when they went out in public, they would immediately be identified with their family, an ex-significant other, or some other entity which they did not want to be associated with. In this way, they lacked individuality in

their hometown space. Most have individuality at Colorado College because they come in with a clean slate. However, they lose this sense of individuality when they return home. Ivy said,

I need to develop myself in a more concrete sense in different settings. I've cultivated a Colorado College Ivy that exists outside of my mom but if I just went back with her I could just become a little her. I just want to be different in some ways, so I think I would want to have a job and be in a place that really inspired me.

Ivy described disassociating herself from her roots in order to grow. She had the opportunity to create and identity for herself once at Colorado College, and seeks to build on that in a big city.

It is ironic that nine of the 11 participants sought some sort of anonymity given the size of CC—only 2,000 students. “Yeah I think anonymity is something I am seeking in a big city. All this smallness at Colorado College has been good in a way, but I think I'll be ready to go be an individual somewhere else,” said Scott. The participants currently attend a school where anonymity is extremely limited, but the sense of individuality from family and from uncontrollable aspects (their high school, former reputation, etc.) is more important to participants in the present moment than anonymity. Furthermore, they seek this individuality again when they leave Colorado College and transition into adulthood.

However, variant participants enjoyed seeing familiar faces when they were home. Laura said,

“I really like being in small environments that I can know well and feel comfortable in. I like knowing people and feeling like I can make a difference in a space and when I'm in such a huge environment I just kind of feel like a small fish in a big pond.”

Laura feels that the Colorado College environment actually contributes to her happiness in its smallness and familiarity. She less considers what Colorado College teaches, and more considers what Colorado College emulates—a small, familiar environment like her hometown.

### *Creative and Intellectual Network*

Participants worry about losing the creative and intellectual network they formed in college. Ivy said,

I'd be afraid that if I were to move home right now and even have a similar job to what I would have in San Francisco that I could just regress back into someone who fills out boxes for the sake of what other people deem as success. That's a big lesson I've learned in college and I want to keep the people who have taught me that lesson around.

Ivy felt that there was a completely different mindset among the people that she met in college (the people she hopes to stay around in San Francisco) compared to the people she grew up around. She believes it is important for her, particularly in this time in her life when she is still developing herself, to stick around those kinds of people, therefore moving to San Francisco.

Ivy also spoke about how her hometown is not open to new ideas, which relates to the notion by Simmel (1903) that cities liberate rural prejudices. This theory also follows the research of Florida (2017), that the creative class is attracted to open-minded places. Ivy believes her hometown holds rural prejudices--whether they be explicitly problematic like racism or ethnocentrism, or more nuanced like closed-mindedness-- that don't exist in the cities she hopes to live in.

The locations of older role models from Colorado College also affect where participants hope to live. Susie said, "A lot of my older friends at Colorado College, sort of my role models I guess from volleyball and my major, are working in Denver and San Francisco. Not all, but a

good chunk. I think they are doing really cool things there that aren't really available somewhere like Boise." Susie gained a network at Colorado College, and she sees those ahead of her moving to big cities, which has an affect on how she sees herself. Most students are able to plan their futures based on seeing someone do it before.

Sometimes, the aspiration to move to a city or area away from a hometown resulted in participants talking down on their peers from their hometown who may not have had the same opportunities as them. As Laura put it of those in her hometown area who didn't move away, "I think people don't really branch out. In general, the high school students are going to state schools. They don't aspire to go to terribly challenging schools or get terribly challenging and creative jobs." This view is an example of small-town privilege manifest in the liberal arts school experience. Laura feels that if she were to move back to her hometown, she would be surrounded by, and therefore become more like, the students there who didn't "challenge themselves." This mindset fits with Bourdieu's (1984) idea of taste occurring in opposition to the tastes of others—in Laura's case, her own taste being in opposition to those who didn't leave her hometown. This mindset is instilled by being surrounded by high achievers at Colorado College. Laura and other students at Colorado College see this high achieving atmosphere as the ideal norm for all places, instead of as the microcosm that it is. This makes Laura more attracted to a place where there are more high-achieving microcosms, or a big city (in her case, a suburb of a big city).

Variants use their past experience and relationships in combination with what they learn at Colorado College to come to different conclusions. Emily, the variant who is hoping to move back to her hometown, is open to using what she had gained in her college experience to better her hometown:

I think yes, how well I know my city will definitely be of benefit when I go back to work there as a social worker. I know the nonprofits and the schools and all that. I think sometimes people try to move somewhere new to do the most good, but I think I'll do the most good in the place that I know best. I look forward to bring the mindset I have gained at Colorado College to that situation.

Emily's answer spoke to the brain drain issue mentioned by Kahn (2009). She is not following the small town brain-drain trend, but instead choosing to make a difference in her hometown using opportunity that she had to come to college. Many things in her life are also contributing to her plan to move home: her family at home, having a role model at home, and an all around positive disposition towards her hometown.

Some participants were not sure of what they wanted to do, and consequently ended up not being as sure of where they wanted to live. This indecisiveness can be related to the liberal arts school experience, where students take a wide range of classes and then narrow in on a subject, not necessarily a career path. In the words of Samantha, an English major, her career goals were "As of now... to be successful." Florida (2002) talks about people with high educational status (Colorado College) and without a clear path looking for a wide job market, one in which they can switch jobs and even careers. This place often ends up being a big city, which Samantha confirms, "Definitely would want to see myself in a big city at some point". Similarly, Wirth talks about how a big city means more division of labor and specialization so someone can be exactly what they want to be or change positions often because there are many positions available. Sylvia said, "I want to be a food writer, and I can't make a living off that in my hometown." In Sylvia's hometown of 100,000 people, there are not enough restaurants and people willing to read about restaurants for her to pursue that dream full time. Colorado College gave her the skills of writing, the passion to pursue her dream, and the means to do it by connecting with the career center and creating her own unique class scheduled with some

independent studies focused around food writing. It is because of her liberal arts education that she will not settle for something more practical in her hometown, like being a news writer or being a chef.

Participants feel that Colorado College has challenged them in ways that their hometowns have not both academically and personally. Many now seek that challenge out in a future professional setting. “I want to be in a position where I’m thinking critically and being creative all the time,” said Scott, who wants to live in San Francisco upon graduating. Scott and other participants have felt challenged, engaged, and surrounded by intellectual energy during their time at Colorado College, which plays into how they see their ideal futures. Bryce said, “There’s been this awakening and sense of aliveness that I’ve felt in this college community that has helped me been able to take the risks of pursuing the things that I’m passionate about like film... I just want to do what I love and make money doing it.” Bryce wants to live in Los Angeles or Austin. He sees this transformation that took place in him at Colorado College as overwhelmingly positive.

## CONCLUSION

The beginning of this paper posed the question of what participants' relationships to their hometowns is with regards to where they want to move in the future. The answer to the question is what lies in the middle-- Colorado College. The experience of attending a liberal arts college undoubtedly plays into where the participants see themselves in the future. In general, participants sought diversity because their education at Colorado College stressed the importance of diversity, yet they sought a political environment that fit with their own views. Participants sought a city "feel", defined by the look and makeup of a city that was influenced by their readings, conversations, media intake, and relationships at Colorado College. Participants sought anonymity and individuality in cities; they do not want to be associated with what they were associated with in their hometowns. Participants expressed that it was very important to them to be in an environment and network of intellectuals and creatives; they want to keep challenging themselves as they have at Colorado College.

There were many limitations to the study. The researcher being from a small city herself played into the dynamic of the research. Her assumptions were that people knew their hometown as well as she knew her own, and had reflected on it a bit as she had. She reached out to her initial participants because she had previously bonded with them over being from small cities. The sample truly shows only a small segment of Colorado College, and only a small segment of the students from small cities and rural areas at Colorado College. However, it does provide a starting point for further research.

Further research could go in two directions: 1) doing a wider study similar to this study or 2) doing a study based on the findings. The first would ask a similar question to this study but find a wider sample that tracks students from different regions, socioeconomic statuses, and

other demographics. This would best be done through survey. The second research option would pose the questions of how higher education is specifically influencing its students' choices on where to live, how different institutions approach this, and how factors of higher education such as major and student social groups play in. "Strengthening Liberal Arts Education by Embracing Place and Particularity" (Heffner et. al. 2007) lays out suggestions and programming for making liberal arts students more aware of a sense of place. The paper suggests that the colleges' missions truly matter and that colleges need to actually change their mission statements to show a dedication to sense of place by doing events and programming that focus both on the location of the college and students' hometowns.

For all the reasons above, further research could lead to possible solutions to the brain drain problem for small cities and towns. The study sheds light on a new way to look at rural blight that not much academic literature has touched on. Higher education institutions play a big role in where students chose to move and what they look for, which shouldn't be overlooked. It cannot be assumed that higher education institutions are simply teaching students facts that they can use wherever and however they want to. The decision of where one feels they should live is socially constructed, and should be studied as such.

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## **Appendix A.**

### **INTERVIEW GUIDE**

#### **I. Background/ Interests**

Name

Hometown

Major

Year

How would you describe yourself?

What does your typical week look like?

What do you like to do with your friends?

What do you like to do on your own with free time?

Why did you choose your major?

Why did you chose Colorado College? What were your other top choices?

#### **II. Hometown**

Describe your hometown to me.

What is the culture like?

What do you do for fun there? Do you feel like there is enough to do?

Tell me about your favorite street in your hometown.

Would you recommend that someone visit your hometown?

Did you ever move cities growing up? Describe that to me.

When you mention where you are from in conversation, do people usually recognize it?

What did you want to be when you grew up?

What did you feel pressured to be when you grew up?

Do you/ did you have role models?

Do you have role models in your hometown?

How would you describe the average person in your hometown?

Would you describe your hometown as diverse? How so?

Do you associate with your hometown often?

What would you guess the political make up (percentage wise) of your hometown is?

#### **IV. Family**

Describe your family to me.

Do your parents work and live in your hometown? What do they do?

Do you look up to your parents?

Do you have siblings? Where do they live? What do they do?

Do you or your family pay full tuition here at Colorado College?

Will your family continue to support you financially after graduation?

#### **V. Future Living Goals**

What is your dream job? Location, company, etc.

Where do you hope to live after graduation? Where do you hope to live in five years?

Why do you want to live there?

What do you hope to be surrounded by in your future living situation?

How has your job search in that area gone so far?

Would you ever move back to your hometown?

What would have to change for you to move back to your hometown?

If you had to move back to your hometown, what would you do for work?

Where do you see the top ten percent of your high school class moving to?

Where do your closest friends at Colorado College want to move?

Did you have any role models at Colorado College? Where did they move?

Does being in close proximity to your family matter to you? Why or why not?

## **VI. Creative Network**

How crucial to your character is creativity?

What kind of people would you hope to be surrounded by? Could you find this in your hometown?