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Will Marion suffer from brain drain?

Leaders, teens agree there's a possibility

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MARION - There remains a deep pride among locals when talking about Marion's manufacturing past.

But as some of those industrial powerhouses have closed or relocated and the city has lost other companies, there's a concern that Marion County's young people may eventually become its biggest export.

Community leaders are trying to prevent that from happening as they brainstorm ways to curb what they fear will be a "brain drain," the migration of young, college-educated workers out of rural communities like Marion. The concern is it could lead to an "aging" of the population and a lack of younger people ready to take leadership roles in the community.

Is there reason to be concerned here? There are no hard statistics to say either way, but high school students and a group of young professional workers believe there is.

"There is not much here," said Marion Harding High School senior Bob Jenner when talking about why he doesn't believe many students will return.

Seniors Jenner, Leslie Navarro and Hannah Croyle, talking about their post-college plans, said they hear most of their classmates talking about living elsewhere after college. They said their own plans will depend on whether they can find jobs here in their chosen fields, though they weren't very optimistic.

"I hear from a lot that they want to get out of Marion and go someplace bigger. A lot of them want to get out of Marion," Croyle said. "What we hear from adults even, is you have to leave and experience life outside of Marion."

Reasons given include a lack of jobs and opportunities, including higher paying jobs. Students also discussed what they said was an increasing drug problem in Marion.

"The town is getting bad," Jenner said. "Crime rates have increased."

The reasons aren't all negative towards Marion. There is also a desire to see what's out there beyond the county's borders. Navarro said she dreamed of living and working in a big city after visiting Chicago as a Marion Harding band member.

The problem isn't unique to Marion. Authors Patrick Carr and Maria Kefalas addressed it in their book, "Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America."

Carr and Kefalas identified four types of graduates. There are the achievers, who are "programmed" to leave the area; the seekers, who yearn to see the world; the stayers, who stay here and skip seeking postsecondary education and whose job opportunities are limited; and the returners, who seek higher education, launch their careers and return to raise their family.

While not unique, it's a problem that Marion Community Foundation director Brad Bebout is concerned could have an increasing effect on the county. He said it isn't only an issue with high school students but also with people who have graduated college and moved to Marion.

"It's not only to avoid brain drain but to keep professionals living here," Bebout said. "People who grew up in this community, they know the community."

If Marion County experiences that brain drain, he said, it could affect area industries and leave a void in area leadership positions.

"It can promote an aging of the community we don't want to see," said Bebout. "There will be ... less interest in our community. It can become a vicious cycle."

The concern led the foundation to support the Marion Young Professionals, a group of 21- to 45-year-olds who live or work in Marion County. The group formed to give young people a chance to network professionally and socially and to collectively perform community service. Co-founder Cara Stevens described it as preparing young people to be what she referred to as the "leaders of tomorrow."

"It's our age group who will help carry our community into the future," she said.

The group plans to launch a mentoring program Monday that will reach out to high school students. Part of the group's goal is to encourage them to get involved in the community. The hope is they stay involved and stay here.

"We think it would be an appropriate mission to reach out to these kids," said member Sam Abrams, lead strategist for Vantage Professional Services. "They go off to college, get a degree and don't come back to Marion."

Abrams served in the Army then worked in Texas before returning to Marion. He said he believes "with a little bit of work and motivation, you can create a real good life for yourself here."

In speaking about it, he addressed what he said he felt was his own generation's responsibility to the community, even if it takes work.

"If my generation doesn't start making a change here then it will be too late," he said. "You have to fight for it. You have to have motivation and take pride in this community."

Abrams' concerns about the community echoed that of the Marion Harding students, including crime and a lack of jobs. He also mentioned the drug epidemic and cuts to Marion's safety service connected to the lingering economic troubles.

MYP member Van Creasap, winemaker and operations manager at Shamrock Vineyard, agreed it's a

potential problem and fears Marion should have addressed the concerns sooner.

"You look back to when I was growing up in the '80s," he said. "Marion was a fun, safe place. We still had a middle class. There was no forward thinking to the future."

He said that's when the community began to face a decline as "you had a funnel, things sucked toward Columbus." Marion, he said, didn't take the right approach as the city began to lose industries.

Creasap said there are various reasons why Marion doesn't attract and keep young professionals, including a lack of night life and not enough high-paying jobs.

"We raised our kids, and we didn't have anything for them to come back to," he said.

As far as night life, he referred to the rich art scenes and concert venues closer to Delaware and Columbus.

Creasap shared concerns there could be a future lack of leadership, which he said is noticeable when people go to community board meetings and see "it's a lot of older people."

"We want young people to get involved in these groups," he said. "We are not engaging them in this community."

There were concerns about a potential lack of leadership as early as 1991, when a group of citizens launched the Marion Area Leadership Program, sponsored by the Marion Area Chamber of Commerce. The program invites area businesses and agencies to send employees to leadership training that focuses on how to support the community.

"We truly believe we must groom the next generation of our leaders," chamber president Pam Hall said. She said she hears businesses discuss a "gap of 20 somethings to early 30 somethings" with leadership skills ready to move into management roles.

"There really are not as many bodies who would be eligible to take over business roles," she said.

Hall and others believe they are working towards a change. Also, not all young people are planning this mass-exodus.

While not sure whether he'll return to Marion itself, Marion Harding senior Tyler Swisher said he plans to stay in the area because he's close to his family. He said a lot of the problems people relate to Marion are problems in many other places as well.

Abrams said pluses include Marion's low property taxes and its "great history," including the Warren G. Harding Home.

"This is my home," he said. "I want it to be a better place."

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Art caption: Harding's Tyler Swisher says remaining close to friends and family will be important after he graduates.

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