



**Straight from the Heartland
Coming of Age in Ellis, Iowa**

Patrick Carr, Department of Sociology
Rutgers University
Maria Kefalas, Department of Sociology
Saint Joseph's University

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Small-town America is supposed to be the place where normalcy and tradition reign supreme. Among all the chapters in this book, from San Diego and New York's immigrant youth juggling so many options to the optimistic Minnesotans figuring out how to make their dreams a reality, the unifying story seems to be that adulthood does not begin at age 18, or even 21. Yet, for the young people we came to know in Iowa, it seems they suffer far less from the "failure to launch" syndrome plaguing their counterparts. Although most twenty-somethings encounter delays in leaving home, getting married, finishing school, and finding a job, most Iowans we interviewed followed the lightning fast transitions more common in another era. The question is why?

In 2001, we followed in the footsteps of Robert and Helen Lynd, the husband and wife ethnographers who studied Muncie, Indiana, for the landmark *Middletown* series, and moved our family to a farming community¹ in the northeastern corner of Iowa, a town we have renamed Ellis to protect the inhabitants' confidentiality. We wanted to learn as much as we could about how young, rural Iowans navigate this time between adolescence and adulthood and how growing up in rural settings shapes these young people's life chances.

Wayne Osgood and his collaborators call young people like the Iowans we met *fast-starters*.² Considering that nationally more than 44 percent of men and 38 percent of women between the ages of 18 and 24 still live at home with their parents, it is apocryphal that just 36 percent of men and only 29 percent of women in Iowa in this age group do.³ On average, Ellis fast-starters, many of whom remain in and around the community, settle quickly into long-term, full-time employment and establish separate households—very often purchasing their first homes by age 25—a time when their college-educated peers may be struggling to find their first full-time job. Though the average age at first marriage continues to rise nationally, as a young Ellis woman, who "waited" to wed at age 23 explained, "around here 24 is old to be getting married."

Meanwhile, the young Iowans in our study who left the region follow paths more similar to their urban and suburban counterparts: extended education, delayed family formation, and hopscotching from job to job as they explore options. The question, then, is, what is it about small rural towns that set some young adults on pathways to adulthood that are more aligned with that of their parents and grandparents' paths than their own contemporaries, while others mimic the more elongated transitions of their urban and suburban counterparts? What is it about rural America that allows (or makes?) some kids "grow up" so fast?

¹ Because of our teaching commitments in Philadelphia, we flew back and forth to Iowa over a span of 18 months, our family lived full-time in Ellis for the summer of 2002.

² The markers of being a fast-starter, age at first marriage for example, vary widely by geography. In Iowa, the median age at first marriage is 24 for women and 25 for men, which is just a year above the national average of 26 for men and 25 for women. On average, people in rural states, particularly southern ones, have more marriages and these usually happen earlier in life. In Arkansas, for instance, over a third of women 18-24 year-old women are married, compared to Massachusetts, where approximately 13 percent are. Iowa occupies a middle ground with just over one-fifth of the young women in this age group being married. In our Ellis sample, the average age for first marriage was approximately 23. For more information on these trends see, Jekielek, Susan and Brett Brown. "The Transition to Adulthood: Characteristics of Young Adults Ages 18 to 24 in America." *Kids Count/PRB/ Child Trends Report on Census 2000*. The Annie Casey Foundation, Population Reference Bureau, and Child Trends: May 2005.

³ Jekielek and Brown. *Ibid*.

Understanding what it means to come of age in small-town America is not inconsequential. Roughly one in five Americans lives in a nonmetropolitan area. More important, the forces pulling some young people to stay and pushing others to leave have important lessons for policymakers and social scientists interested in how opportunity, social reproduction, and community contour rural youths' life chances. Unlike the often simplistic view of rural America the media heralds, we find that the story of how rural youth become adults features a complex interplay of economic forces, early influences from family, community, and social institutions, and personal desires. The youth in our sample distinguished themselves from their urban peers by their early economic independence and socialization into the world of work during their teenaged years; in the cultivation by personal boosters beyond their parents, such as teachers, coaches, or the entire community itself; by a strong preference to see the world (for those who leave) or an equally strong (if more rarely articulated) preference for staying put; to an overriding pragmatism toward life, love, and work.⁴

The Study

As we set out to study how rural youth navigate the transition to adulthood, we decided to focus on two groups of young adults from Ellis: the *mature transition* group (those ten years out of high school) and the *recent transition* group (those five years out). Selecting these two groups allows us to study young people who have mostly settled into adult roles and those still in the process of acquiring the roles and responsibilities. In late 2001 and early 2002, we worked with the staff at Ellis High School to compile lists of the incoming freshmen classes for the years 1986-88 and 1991-93.⁵ We distributed a survey to all of the people on the freshmen lists, and collected completed questionnaires from 275 young people, about 82 percent, of the eligible former students.⁶ Armed with the survey data, we identified specific individuals for in-depth interviews to capture a wide range of experiences. Over a span of a nearly two years, we conducted 104 interviews, and we spoke with young people who had dropped out of high school, faced bouts of unemployment, married and divorced, spent time in jail, abused drugs, bore children as teenagers and outside of marriage, and relied on public assistance. We also spoke with those who had attended four- and two-year colleges (whether they graduated or not), served in the military, and pursued postbaccalaureate and graduate level training. To learn about work and economic opportunities, we spoke with young people employed in a range of occupations, from doctors working and living in Cedar Rapid's affluent suburbs to factory workers in the meat processing plants struggling to make payments on trailer homes. Finally, to learn about family life, we talked with young people in various stages of family formation, married couples, unmarried parents, and unattached singles. While

⁴ In her new book, *Generation Me: Why Today's Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled- And More Miserable Than Ever Before* (Free Press, 2006), psychologist Jean Twenge argues that the platitudes such as "believe in yourself and anything is possible" make many of today's 20- and 30-somethings out of touch with reality.

⁵ We wanted the freshmen lists because we wanted to include any young people who might have dropped out of high school later in their careers.

⁶ The survey response rate was 81 percent of students who had entered the high school as freshman. We did not seek interviews with young people who moved away and completed high school in another community or visiting foreign exchange students. We did, however, complete surveys with young people who dropped out of high school and who completed a GED.

it might have been convenient to interview only the young people who had stayed or returned to Iowa, we made a special effort to seek out those whose lives had taken them far away from the small town where they had grown up. By the time we concluded the in-depth interview phase of the project, we had spoken with Ellis youth living in 14 states across the nation, on each coast and in many places in between. In fact, we received survey responses from former Ellis High students now living in 21 states and five countries.

The Setting: Ellis, Iowa

Ellis (population 2,000) is located in the northeastern part of the state in Liberty County. Although Ellis does not have a stoplight—and any small-town dweller can tell you that the number of stoplights is one way to take the measure of a town's size—it does have its own high school, two gas stations, a local grocery store, several churches, and two taverns. The median price of a house in Ellis is about \$68,000, with some more modest homes, namely mobile homes in trailer parks, priced as low as \$30,000, not much more than the cost of a new car.⁷

Ellis is neither noteworthy for its historical significance nor its scenic beauty. With a water tower bearing the town's name hovering just beyond Main Street, grain elevators, a John Deere dealership, and farms perched on the town's outskirts, Ellis has the look and feel of a farming community “with its roots deep in the land.”⁸ But one must remember that Iowa's farming towns are not exactly what they seem, given that few people still depend solely on corn and soybeans for their livelihood anymore.⁹

Despite the economic and demographic upheavals of the last two decades that have transformed so many towns throughout rural Midwest, Ellis appears to have weathered the storm well. Ellis is home to several factories, a small hospital, and a nursing home. These employers, along with a sprinkling of smaller construction companies, have helped wean the town from its dependence on agriculture. Also, on the plus side of the equation, Ellis has an extremely effective core of civic activists who are responsible for constructing a state-of-the-art public library, recreation center, and a local outdoor swimming pool. Community leaders recently renovated and reopened the town's movie theater, which had lain dormant for more than a decade.

Ellis is in good shape economically and civically, for now; if one of the major local employers were to go out of business, however, the town might not survive another decade. Even though things seem stable, the harsh reality is that local opportunities are limited and new jobs at one of the factories are few and far between. Moreover, the careers that attract professional, college-educated young people really only exist beyond the town's limits.¹⁰

⁷ Indeed, a glut of local housing makes landlords offer reliable tenants the rent-to-own option. Nearly every engaged or married couple we interviewed in Ellis and its environs was using this option to rent/purchase a home.

⁸ Davidson, Osha Gray. 1996. *Broken Heartland: The Rise of America's Rural Ghetto*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press: 1.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ See for example, Crockett, Lisa J. and C. Raymond Bingham. 2000. “Anticipating Adulthood: Expected Timing of Work and Family Transitions Among Rural Youth.” *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 10(2), 151-172.

The Context for Coming of Age in Iowa

Much of the research on the life course has focused on how major events shape people's lives. Glen Elder's classic work on children coming of age during the Great Depression shows how social upheavals play a profound role in shaping the pathways of young lives.¹¹ In the same way, we can point to several macro-level events that form the larger context in which these young Iowans grow up: they include the farm crisis, the shift to a technology-based economy, and the rapid expansion of postsecondary educational opportunities, especially for women.

The young people we interviewed have a unique perspective on the changes transforming their communities. Most were born during the 1970s, which meant they experienced the farm crisis during their teenage years.¹² Jonathan, a 24-year-old college graduate, now working in Washington, DC, as a school administrator, grew up on a dairy farm, which was hit hard in the 1980s. "The price of milk was always a topic of conversation amongst my parents," he says. "When the price of milk was good, there was a lot of money coming in." But if the price went down, "times were tough," and necessities, like clothes, "would have to last for a couple of years." Other people spoke of the calamities brought on by the farm crisis. Rose, a 30-year-old homemaker and former school teacher now living in an upscale Maryland suburb recounts the how leaving the land destroyed farming families she had known. "I had a couple of friends whose parents committed suicide. [For these people], you grow up, you live there, you know nothing else [but farming] and then everything crumbles...you've failed and it's the only way of life you've ever known."

A second major transformation influencing Iowans' lives was the shift from a blue-collar economy to a high-tech one. Since 2000, Iowa has lost more than 10 percent of its factory jobs, or approximately 30,000.¹³ In an economy that values specialized expertise, educational qualifications and certification become ever more important. Even semi-skilled and service occupations now demand basic computer literacy. Many of the young Iowans we interviewed were in high school before such computer classes were compulsory. Trevor, a 26-year-old high school graduate who works near Ellis as a mechanic, now realizes his education prepared him for industrial era economy, not a technology-driven one. The school "should have tried to make a computer class required. [If] you asked me anything about a computer, I wouldn't have a clue." Jasper, a 31-year-old machine operator with a high school education sums up the dilemma of the digital

Hektner, Joel (1995). "When Moving Up Implies Moving Out: Rural Adolescent Conflict in the Transition to Adulthood." *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 11(1): 3-14.

Ni Laoire, Catriona (2000). "Conceptualising Irish Rural Youth Migration: A Biographical Approach." *International Journal of Population Geography*, 6: 229-243.

Stockdale, Aileen (2002). "Towards a Typology of out-Migration from Peripheral Areas: A Scottish Case Study." *International Journal of Population Geography*, 8: 345-364.

Stockdale, Aileen (2004). "Rural Out-Migration: Community Consequences and Individual Migrant Experiences." *Sociologia Ruralis*, 44(2): 167-194.

¹¹ Glen H. Elder Jr. (1984), *Children of the Great Depression*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹² See Elder, Glen and Conger, Rand D. 2000. *Children of the Land: Adversity and Success in Rural America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

¹³ McCormick, John. 2004. "Iowa's caucus voters tend to be older, educated." Chicago Tribune, January 8. (retrieved August 17, 2006 <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/chi-0401080302jan08,1,5923470.story>)

divide, “Nowadays, everything is so much computer[s] that you either are going to be a laborer or your going to be on your butt behind a computer. You got to do one or the other. And if you’re not good at reading and writing like I am, you’d better learn some of those alternatives.”

As the digital technology changed how and what we learn, the importance of a college degree grew significantly. During the last three decades, as the number of full- and part-time student enrollments rose by 30 percent, going to college shifted from a pursuit of the most privileged young people to the typical experience for young people 18 and older. The expansion of opportunities for a college education, especially at community colleges, took hold at the very moment our oldest Iowans were in high school. Indeed, in our interviews, we were struck by the incredible range of post-secondary school educational experiences our young Iowans spoke about. Only about 18 percent of our respondents failed to go on to any form of study or training after high school.¹⁴ Many of our respondents experienced pressure from the school, the community, and from their own families to pursue higher education in one form or another. Even students with the weakest academic records made an effort to attend a one-year program at one of the nearby community colleges. Another option was the military. For a town with a population of just over 2,000, Ellis sends an impressive number of its young men and women to serve in the armed forces. Indeed, the military is still one of the most important ways out of small towns like Ellis.

Large-scale economic forces have shaped not just the look and feel of towns like Ellis, but the nature of what people do there. In recent years, rural regions’ economic—manufacturing, agriculture, and mining—have been systemically challenged by global competition and technological change.¹⁵ Since the downturns in the rural economy have seeped, rather than swept, through small-town America, the “rural collapse has been largely silent because it happened so slowly.”¹⁶ The massive upheaval in river, railroad, and farming towns means that places like Ellis must reinvent themselves to hold on to young people.¹⁷ Iowa is now the fourth oldest state in the nation.¹⁸ From 1995 to 2000, almost a quarter of the state’s college grads moved out of state upon finishing their degree. Depopulation—particularly among the region’s educated twenty-somethings—means that the Iowa will face severe shortages of educated workers in the next two decades.

Ellis has already seen evidence of depopulation. Since 1980, the town has lost 10 percent of its population and the median age of the town’s residents has risen from 36 to 44.¹⁹ At the time we contacted them, approximately one-half of respondents were still living in Ellis and other parts of Liberty County, with one-quarter living elsewhere in the state, and one-quarter having moved away from Iowa. However, the survey only offers a static glimpse of this complex process. When we talked to young people about the twists

¹⁴ Nationally, 18 percent of 21 to 24 year olds have less than a high school degree, in Iowa, just 10.2 percent do.

¹⁵ Freudenberg, William. R. 1992. “Addictive Economies: Extractive Industries and Vulnerable Localities in a Changing World Economy.” *Rural Sociology*, 57, 305-332.

¹⁶ Egan, Timothy. “Pastoral Poverty: The Seeds of Decline,” *The New York Times*, December 8, 2002, B1.

¹⁷ Hobbs, D. 1994. “Demographic Trends in Nonmetropolitan America.” *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 10(3), 149-160.

¹⁸ Median age in Iowa is 36.6 years.

¹⁹ Jane Norman “State Continues Low Growth Rate.” *Des Moines Register*, December 23, 2005.

and turns their lives had taken with regard to school, work, and family, we found that the most important moment, if becoming an adult can be conceived in terms of moments, takes shape in the decision to leave, stay, or return to small-town Iowa.²⁰ The reasons that young people give for their trajectories reveal as much about their own circumstances as they do about their conscious choices. As we combed through the thousands of pages of interview transcripts, we identified five separate, but interconnected pathways. These pathways are grouped around the distinct trajectories of whether people stay in, return to, or leave Ellis to pursue their adult lives elsewhere. In the next section, we show how staying, leaving and returning are key parts of our young Iowans' transition to adulthood and that their experiences as workers offer important clues about who stays and who goes.

The Leavers, Stayers, and Returners

Based on their motivations for moving away, we identified two types of Leavers: the Achievers and the Seekers.²¹ Given their very definitive educational goals, Leaver Achievers begin their journey out of Ellis by heading off to college. Not surprisingly, when we caught up with them in their late twenties or thirties, they had earned (or were on-track to do so) the highest incomes of any of the groups. Yet, the Achievers' most striking feature is how they remember being told, from high school and even earlier, how leaving was in their future. The very culture of small towns assumes that the best and brightest will go on to success someplace else. As a result, parents, teachers, and neighbors push these young people to leave Ellis behind given that their abilities have marked them as gifted and special. Not only are they given permission to leave Ellis, they are expected to do so. Twenty-four-year-old Ella, a Leaver Achiever now working toward graduate degree in a large Midwestern city, says a wide assortment of people from Ellis encouraged her to imagine a life beyond Ellis.

I felt like I had a lot of people who were really hoping that I would go on and really do good things, and that I had a lot of potential and I think that

²⁰ According to an analysis of our survey of 275 young people who attended Ellis High School, we know that 43.3 percent of the young people surveyed currently reside in Ellis or a community within rural Liberty County (where Ellis is located); 26.9 percent reside outside of Iowa. Almost 30 percent currently live in Iowa, but not in the rural area of Liberty County. The migration pattern out of Iowa within the Ellis sample mirror the larger trends in the state.

²¹ See, Jamieson, Lynn (2000) "Migration, Place and Class: youth in a Rural Area." *Sociological Review*, 48(2): 203-224.

Stockdale, Aileen (2002). "Towards a Typology of out-Migration from Peripheral Areas: A Scottish Case Study." *International Journal of Population Geography*, 8: 345-364.

A number of scholars have recently derived taxonomies of rural youth leavers and stayers. Stockdale (2002) describes the three categories of migrants as employment-motivated, education-motivated, and personal-motivated. The three main motivations young people offer for leaving rural areas include employment, education, and personal ones. Education-motivated migrants leave the region to pursue degrees and high status careers, while migrants who leave because of labor market forces tend to be more marginalized economically. Finally, migrants who leave because of personal motivations do so to escape the confines of the place where they grew up. They are not as disadvantaged as the employment-driven migrants but and not as privileged as the educationally-motivated ones. Jamieson (2000) talks about stayers and leavers (in her parlance migrants) and their attachments to place. Particularly, Jamieson highlights the implications of staying or leaving for class relations, and she discusses the counterintuitive groups of attached leavers and detached stayers. Our own designation is derived from our fieldwork and interviews but shares many of the characteristics of this other body of work.

really left a deep impression on me that I had been embraced by this community and kind of set forth to go do something with what I had been given.

Leaving, for Achievers like Ella, is means to an end, a way to use their talents and ambition in a way that fulfills their destiny. The town's most successful young people start out as community projects, and in a fundamental sense, future achievements belong to everyone back home. Ella describes the unique responsibilities in being a Leaver Achiever: "There's kind of a desire to help somebody from a small town make it big, and if they can be a part of that, then that would be just wonderful."

So while pursuing education and economic opportunity is a primary reason for Achievers' departure, for the next group of Leavers, the *Seekers*, personal development drives their departure.²² All Leavers, without question, are exceptional in their willingness to cut themselves off from the familiar world of their upbringing, but this is particularly true for Seekers. If Achievers leave Ellis for the more instrumental reasons of earning a degree and professional development, the Seekers' leaving represents an end in and of itself. Because leaving is not primarily to achieve success, and the Seekers have less education as the Achievers, Seekers are more interested acquiring experiences, so they often move around from job to job without a clear-cut plan. Another difference between Achievers and Seekers is that while the former are carefully cultivated by the adults to achieve, and therefore leave, Seekers feel compelled by far more personal motivations. Achievers say that their talents and abilities made them community projects and that the adults in their lives pushed and prodded them to pursue lives beyond Ellis. Seekers, in contrast, tell us how leaving was something they decided to do for themselves; it is a far more internally driven process.

Twenty-three-year-old Damaris, who works part-time as a teacher's aide in New York City, tells a typical Seeker story. Though she would like a career as a painter, for Damaris, being in New York City means she is living out the fondest dream she had growing up. She remembers laying on the grass with her friend and "talking about the lives they would have" when they left home. There was nothing wrong with Ellis, she says, "the people were all very nice." But, she explains, "I did want to get away from it. I wanted to see what it was like when I was not surrounded by Ellis."

For a 23-year-old Seeker named Jerry, leaving for school permitted him to break free of the rut of life back home. In this regard, Jerry, like so many Seekers, left because the small-town Iowa felt too safe and too comfortable.

I've had black roommates, and [racially] mixed roommates, and it opens your eyes to how naïve you really are....It's like a million things [I didn't know about]. Just like how [African Americans] do their hair. I never knew any different that you don't wash your hair everyday and that, you know, a perm isn't to get your hair curly, it's to get it straight. Just little things like that. Maybe it's not just a race thing, maybe [there's also] a

²² Stockdale (2002) op. cit.

regional thing, [like] the way people celebrate different holidays, different religions. You know, not everyone is Lutheran [laughs].

Many Seekers lack the grades or financial resources to enroll in college so they enlist in the military because the Army's marketing campaign to "be all you can be" and the Navy's promise to help you "see the world" offers a way out of Ellis. For 25-year-old Beau, serving in the Marines was his chance to escape a dead-end construction job and get beyond the life that was trapping his friends, on track to be Stayers. At the time, college seemed out of his reach, but the military promised, in his words, "a better path."

I was 20 years old, I wasn't in college, but I wasn't really happy owning the construction company that I did and so I [realized] I need[ed] to be on a good path, a better path...something more controlled. So I figured I could either go to college or join the Marines. Then I decided to join the military after talking to the town's police chief about what it takes to be a cop...

Nationally, fewer than 2 percent of "connected"²³ youth—that is 18-24-year-olds working or in school—currently serve in the military.²⁴ Yet among the Ellis young people we surveyed, 4 percent were on active duty, and another 3 percent had served at some time in the past.

To sum up, Leaver Achievers are primarily motivated by a desire to succeed, and they acquire the educational credentials they need to pursue high-status careers. Leaver Seekers are not motivated by success so much as a desire to experience the world beyond Ellis. A defining characteristic of some Seekers is that they use the military, and not college, to leave Ellis. Although Achievers and Seekers represent distinctive pathways, it is possible for young people to change tracks. Seekers might become Achievers, and vice versa, but what they share is the overriding sense that the horizon of opportunities in Ellis is too limited for them to fully realize their ambitions. If Leavers believe their options are too limited in Ellis, there are those who find life in their small town to be happily predictable. And so some Leavers join our next category, the Returners.

Returners

For some young adults in this group, life beyond Ellis did not live up to its promise, while, in other instances, personal ties and other opportunities may have enticed them back to their home town. We identified two main types of Returners: the Boomerangs and the High-Flyers. Boomerangs do not have as much education as the Leaver Achievers or the High-Flyers. Although the Achievers and most High-Flyers pursue four-year degrees, the Boomerangs who do go on to college typically graduate from two-year programs. For many Boomerangs, returning was part of their initial plan when they left: they wanted to go away for a year or two. In fact, when Boomerangs leave, they tend not to venture too far from Ellis since, for some, family obligations and serious romantic relationships give them a reason to stay close to home. While the

²³ The term connected refers to the majority of young adults aged 18-24, approximately 86 percent, who were "connected" to work or school in some way.

²⁴ Jekielek and Brown (2005) op.cit. p. 30.

Achievers view college as a primary goal, Boomerangs tell us they see the college experience, especially when they must work to put themselves through a community college program, as something they must “get through” before they get their real, adult lives started. Twenty-nine-year-old William recalls his time at a community college:

Like I said, going to your first year of school, [you] get out there and get on your own and do the partying thing... so I did that. I did really well my first semester at college. I was in the threes as far as academics. Then when I turned 19 and you can get into the 19 bars and everything down there so that just kind of went down hill. I ended up with dropping half my courses so that [semester] just went “bye-bye” and I went through my third semester down there and didn’t go to class at all and I came home and told my folks that “college isn’t right for me right now.” They said “all’s we’re doing is dishing out money for something and you’re not getting nothing out of it.”

Ultimately, many Boomerangs return home because the romanticized ideal of life outside a small town was nothing like the reality they experienced, and they find themselves longing for the familiar, comfortable routine of life back home. More often than not, Returners come home because the outside world seems overwhelming, they suffer for having too many choices and too much freedom. Other Boomerangs started out as Seekers, and sometimes a traumatic event, such as a divorce, illness, or job loss, may bring them back home. Many, like William, come home when their plans for leaving fall apart.

The second group of Returners, the High-Flyers, consists of young people who return to Ellis after completing training in a profession or to become successful entrepreneurs or business people. High-Flyers, like the Achievers, hold bachelor’s degrees and professional training in medicine, education, business, engineering, or the law. Some come home to run an established family business or start one of their own. Many are the children of the town’s elite, and so many High-flyers are poised to follow in their parents’ footsteps and take on civic leadership roles themselves. For them, Ellis is appealing because they can have a good life and a successful career back home. Some are attracted to Ellis because the community offers such a pleasant, affordable lifestyle. While \$200,000 would not purchase a starter home in the Chicago suburbs, in Ellis, this would be enough for the town’s most luxurious property. Paula, a 24-year-old Leaver Achiever, who says she might join the ranks of the High-Flyers once she completes her master’s degree and settles down, tells us how her time away has made her appreciate the joys of small town life.²⁵

If the opportunity came up to teach and coach in Ellis and I was feeling like you want to settle down, and you know I had those experiences [in larger cities] to build on, I would come back....The community, it’s very involved with the school. So if you have kids at the school, or if you’ve gone to school here and you were in activities that’s what I think is so

²⁵ It should be noted that Paula is strictly a future high flyer in that she had not actually returned to Ellis when we interviewed her, but she has since done so.

great. Right now I'm teaching at another small school but just the support Ellis gives to its kids and, you know, the activities that are going on. It's amazing, the support that they have. I'm just like working at this other school and I'm like: "Where are all the people?" But in Ellis, everybody's there, and getting involved with each other and they do develop strong foundations for young people to help them.

However, these High-Flyers who return and carve out a middle or upper-class existence are few and far between. By and large, those who remain in or return to Ellis face considerably more modest prospects when compared with both types of leavers²⁶ in terms of their social and economic background, educational attainment, and the types of occupations they hold.²⁷

The Stayers

Thirty-year-old Casey received his GED, works at a factory near Ellis, and now lives on a spread not far from the dairy farm where he was raised. Casey has never lived more than a mile away from his parent's home. When Casey talks about what keeps him in Ellis the reasons are simple and straightforward. "I like it in Ellis and it's a nice quiet town and I get along with everybody and we have our jobs established here." Similarly, 26-year-old Trevor, the mechanic we met earlier, insists "I am staying here until the day I die."

Other Stayers are more ambivalent about their prospects of remaining. Twenty-nine-year old Dave, who has a high school diploma, tells us he might consider moving to a larger city, but he feels bound to Liberty County because of his children and family. "As far as, like, the kids in school and stuff, for that reason, you know, I want to kind of stay here. But for me personally, I wouldn't. Moving would not bother me, I mean, I probably would rather move myself if it was just me..."

The lack of concrete reasons for staying in Ellis is perhaps not surprising. Other researchers note the silences among those rural young people who stay, but while some scholars explain the lack of reflection as being due to guilt or even depression,²⁸ we would suggest that in the case of Ellis' Stayers, there is a far more benign interpretation. Simply put, staying is the status quo, and as such, doesn't really require an explanation or a rationale. Some stumble into staying in that they never really consciously decide to leave, while others know that they don't want to go away. If leaving or returning requires a person to make a case for their actions and to actively do something, staying just seems to happen.

Pathways to Adulthood

We have identified five distinctive trajectories or pathways that young adults from Ellis occupy in early adulthood. The pathways crystallize around the question of whether

²⁶ Sometimes Leaver Seekers boomerang back home for a period, which is in keeping with the hopscotch pattern of their lives. However, the periods back home are always temporary and can be viewed as a type of scaffolding exercise. See L. Vygotsky, *Mind and Society: The Development of Higher Mental Processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978.

²⁷ This is similar to Stockdale's (2002) study in Scotland.

²⁸ Ni Laoire (2000) op.cit.

young adults stay, leave or return to Ellis. Table 1 illustrates who from our in-depth interview sample is in each of the five trajectories, though we again stress that the boundaries between pathways are permeable and people can shift course during their lifetime.

The pathways people take, and whether they stay, leave, or return are partly their choice and partly the result of forces that mold people and predetermine the options from which they choose a course to follow. Beyond the retrospective rationalization that people give for their choices, several forces push and pull them as they mature. To understand fully what sets a person on one of these five trajectories and what is it like for our small-town Iowans to become an adult, it is crucial to know what it is like to grow up in Ellis, the influences on these young people, and the elements that help determine whether they will become Stayers, Leavers, or Returners.

Earlier in the chapter, we explained how economic conditions, and family and community influences set young people in one direction or another. Here, we focus on just one of the central experiences of the transition to adulthood, entering the labor force.

Working Your Way to Adulthood

The belief in a distinctively Midwestern work ethic is a powerful theme in our interviews with this group of young Iowans. That work should be so important to young people growing up in Ellis is hardly surprising. Historically, the young worker had been crucial to the operation of the family farm. However, over time, the trend in most places has been to excuse and exclude children and adolescents from serious work.²⁹ Yet, surveys show that about four-fifths of teenagers work at some time during their four years of high school.³⁰

There is something distinctive about the early initiation of Ellis youth into work. Many of the people we talked with spoke at length about the summer and part-time jobs they held during their teen years. Most of the young adults believe growing up in Ellis gave them a strong work ethic, and that the high value placed on work there, especially with regard to tough physical labor, was part of the legacy of coming of age in a farming community. Perhaps a crucial difference between the work that Ellis teenagers do and their counterparts in more urban settings is that young people in Ellis hold jobs where their coworkers are full-time adult workers, not other part-time teenaged workers. The early work experience of Ellis youth seems to socialize them into the demands and expectations of full-time employment more naturally and completely.³¹

²⁹ Some accounts of the historical place of work for children include Joseph F. Kett, "Curing the Disease of Precocity," *American Journal of Sociology*, 84 (1978), pp. 183-211. Jeylan T. Mortimer also offers a synthetic discussion in *Working and Growing Up in America*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003.

³⁰ See Committee on the Health and Safety Implications of Child Labor. *Protecting Youth at Work: Health, Safety, and Development of Working Children and Adolescents in the United States*. Washington: National Academy Press, 1998. See also, Mortimer, op.cit.

³¹ Jeylan Mortimer studies how work prepares young people for adulthood by examining hours spent on the job, and the intensity, duration, pattern, and quality of work. Mortimer makes the distinction between high-intensity and low-intensity but steady work, and she defines high-intensity work as when youth more than 20 hours per week in paid employment during high school. Mortimer finds, in line with other national studies, that the average number of hours worked increases substantially between sophomore and senior year in high school. By contrast, low-intensity work describes a young person working fewer than 20 hours per week during their teen years. Mortimer demonstrates the significant consequences associated with the

Opportunities abound for manual labor in and around farms. Because the nearest mall is 25 miles and the closest McDonald's is 15 miles away from Ellis, most young people looking for a part-time job find work on the big farms. Two of the most common summer jobs are detassling corn and picking rock. Busloads of young people work from dawn to dusk removing rocks and boulders from fields or removing the seed tassels on corn to prevent carefully engineered feed corn from pollinating. In many other regions of the country, migrant workers hold such jobs. The work is dirty and exhausting, but the pay is good, especially for a teenager looking to earn money for the school year. Casey, a Stayer, recounts how work was an integral part of his days throughout his teenage years:

I worked for a service station in Ellis and I did that until I graduated. And I did that for 3 years....[And] I was always looking working for a few farmers, picking up rock and bailing hay and just odd jobs around the farm and delivered newspapers for quite a few years....I worked quite a few hours while in high school cause there was night, I'd get done with school at 3:30 and I'd work one job 'til 5:30 and then I did mowing and stuff for yards and raking leaves and stuff so there were nights I'd work 'til 9 o'clock at night.

Casey is a typical Stayer; his experiences as a high-intensity worker during adolescence laid the groundwork for the factory jobs and assorted unskilled occupations he has held since high school.

We explore below some of the implications of high- and low-intensity work for our sample of young people from Ellis, concentrating on the effect of these patterns on how young people move from adolescence to adulthood.

The Value of Work

One of the more striking themes that emerged from our interviews with young adults in Iowa was the valued place of work in their lives. Our respondents spoke proudly of their strong work ethic, something they viewed as a legacy of the small-town, farming life. For example, Mark is a 30-year-old Returner who dropped out of high school and later completed a GED. Mark has worked steadily throughout his twenties at a succession of low-paying jobs. He says, growing up on a farm taught him

that if I need stuff, I got to work hard for it, I don't know how to describe it. I think it taught me good work ethics because my dad, he don't miss work unless he absolutely has to, and I am that way too. I don't miss work unless I absolutely have to. That helped me out.

Ella, the Leaver Achiever we met previously, also speaks about the grounding in hard work she received growing up on a farm:

decision to work, she finds that young men and women with high-intensity jobs workers during high school are less likely to earn college degrees, while those who had steady, but low-intensity, work were most likely to earn a college degree. Among young women, those who did not work during high school were the most likely to finish college. Work patterns also carry implications for development. The youth who were in high-intensity jobs during high school were more likely than low-intensity workers to settle down, marry, and have children within seven years after high school

There are a lot of skills that I think I learned at home and most people never have taken lessons about you teach a really strong work ethic compared to other people's. That had a lot to do with our family and our upbringing, and even though we grew up on a farm, we didn't have a lot of toys. We were expected [to work], I helped out a lot around the house, and those are the things that I think really helped shape me and continue to shape me in ways that I think I'm not really conscious of, but that I'm really grateful of.

The central role that work plays in preparing young people to face the demands of the wider world is underscored by Larry, a 30-year-old Leaver Achiever with a professional degree employed as a software developer for a multinational company. When asked about working during high school, he said:

I mean I had a lot of my friends, lived on farms too so that's part of the nature. And then, you know, a few of my friends in town all had part-time jobs and that kind of stuff. But to me, in general, where I grew up, there's a lot of hard working people and that was kind of the work ethic. That's how you got things done. You worked to get whatever, wherever you were going.

Young people's overwhelming sense of a distinctively Iowan or farming community work ethic offers a way of understanding how young people begin their journey to adulthood. The role of work, in combination with other influences, leads young people down certain trajectories. Maye, a 30-year-old schoolteacher now living in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, says that growing up on her family's hog farm meant that work was "an everyday thing." By the time she was in high school, she knew she wanted a different life for herself.

I looked at farming and it was too much work.... My parents were probably more strapped than they let us know....But I could tell, you know at times when the family was really struggling....I always knew about the problems. And I think that's why I wanted to go to school and better myself just so I could say... "I got out."

For Maye, the experience of growing up on a farm and the realization that, in terms of farming, hard work did not equate with economic comfort, prompted her to strive for success away from Ellis. She has worked hard to be a Leaver Achiever and she explains her decision to migrate in terms of wanting to do better than her parents.

The Role of the School and Work in Preparing Ellis Youth for Adulthood

Ellis High School and the teachers and counselors working there, are crucial players in the lives of the young people growing up in Ellis. The school's teachers, administrators, and staff play key roles in setting young people on their pathways to work and school. Teachers and other school officials actively encourage and support some young people to go to college while others do not receive the same cultivation. What may be just as important as the advice that is offered are the words of support and encouragement. Such support is conspicuously absent for those young people deemed

not to be on the higher education track. For every young person who was pushed to go on to college, there are many more who are allowed to drift through high school and make the incremental decisions that result in them pursuing work, not school, and keep them on track to stay in Ellis. The Ellis guidance counselor, Leonard Tighe, who spent almost three decades in the position, worked with every young person we interviewed. During our conversations, several former students recalled how Mr. Tighe tried to steer them away or toward college.³² By his own account, 29-year-old Jacob was an average student not involved in school activities. Jacob recalls a conversation he had with Tighe back in high school:

We had to take these aptitude tests where you know [if] you should be placed here or here or here. The counselor told me, to my face, that I shouldn't go to college. I should probably get a job in the factory in town or something like that because I wouldn't make it.

Jacob did not heed this advice and graduated from a local university and now works as a police officer. Had Jacob followed the counselor's suggestion and taken a job, he may never have left Ellis.

In terms of the pathways we outlined, we can see how some Stayers are allowed, in some cases actively encouraged, to take the path to early employment. Their trajectory is often reinforced by other factors such as an unwillingness to leave the area, a preference for work over school, and a desire to earn money instead of pursue the extracurricular interests that are increasingly required for the college bound.

How much students work and the types of jobs they hold often reveal important clues about their futures, as well as what the adults in their lives expect for them. During the high school years, two broad tracks seem to emerge, one where youth prepare for college and an exit from Ellis, and another where young people start work early and ready themselves for quick entry to full-time employment. Each group comes with different expectations for what types of skills and abilities they should be acquiring.³³ Those who are college bound, both from affluent families and those who excel academically, do not generally work as much as those who have no college aspirations. For the college bound, work experience and the skills and abilities associated with it are not as highly valued as are good grades or excellence in sports, drama or music, any combination of which can ensure a smooth transition to a good college.

The converse, meanwhile, is true for those in the early work track. Though many of the young Ellis adults who did not do high-intensity work during high school were

³² This story is in line with findings from national data on high school aspirations and experience. For example, Cobb, McIntyre and Pratt (1989) report that rural students are more likely than their urban and suburban counterparts to say that their guidance counselors and teachers do not think they ought to go to college.

³³ See, Flora, Jan L. (1998). "Social Capital and Communities of Place." *Rural Sociology*, 63: 481-506
Israel, Glenn D. and Lionel J. Beaulieu (2004). "Laying the Foundation for Employment: The Role of Social Capital in Educational Achievement." *The Review of Regional Studies*, 34(3): 260-287.
The process whereby people acquire skills and abilities is often conceptualized in terms of the amassing of different types of capital. The work of Israel and Beaulieu (2004) talks about the importance of social capital in small towns, and they find that academic success depends upon the capital provided by families and communities, in addition to schools a point often missed when developing programs to ameliorate rural schools, which are exclusively school focused. They conclude that rural schools are often at a disadvantage compared to metropolitan counterparts.

from a solidly middle class, and thus financially stable, background, some were of more modest means. For the latter group, the choice to not work was more deliberate and calculated. For those young people who did not have a great deal of money at home, having a part-time job could mean disposable income to spend on clothes and going out. However, these youth deferred the immediate pleasures associated with teen spending power so they could make themselves a more attractive candidate for leaving. In our discussions with Ellis youth, the theme of a trade-off between working and resume-building extracurriculars emerges repeatedly. When we asked Casey, for example, about his interests in high school, it is revealing that he compares work to conventional sorts of school extracurriculars. "I never did band or sports or anything like that. *I was more the work type* I always had a job after high school [emphasis added]."

Other pathways from work into adulthood are less cultivated and seem to occur because young people preferred spending their time working. For example, Robert, a 24-year-old mechanic with a high school diploma and a certificate in automotive training, recalls that by the time he was a junior in high school, working at his dad's backyard auto shop structured his daily routine far more than being a student. "I usually got home from school and went straight out there [to my father's auto shop] and worked until 10 PM. I worked every Saturday from 9 to 5 PM. So I worked a lot of hours." If he had homework, he would try to take time off from work or "go in early to school and do homework there." Looking back, Robert freely admits, he "didn't put [...] much time into studying;" at the same time, Robert says his Dad never encouraged him put his job in the family's auto shop before school. On the contrary, Robert insists that his parents would have been happier to see him spend more time on academics and he acknowledges that he bears all the responsibility for his disappointing high school record. These days, Robert is employed at a large auto dealership. While he has completed an auto technician course, he has no plans to further his education. Robert was not steered into his pathway. He freely chose it, and he seems content with his life choices, and it seems fair to say that he prepared himself for his working life with high-intensity employment during high school.

Other Ellis youth have more compelling financial reasons to work long hours during high school. Twenty-nine-year-old Skyler, a truck driver with high school diploma, is a Boomerang. As the only child of a single mother unable to work full-time because of a disability, he believed he had to help his family make ends meet, so he went to work:

I worked at the bakery, well the bakery's closed now but I was, you know, early morning, I worked before school. Yeah. Like from two until six, [then] get ready to go to school. But like I said, my mom, you know, we didn't have a lot of money. I started out with paper routes and, you know, field work and then got a job. Mom wasn't going to buy me a car so.

Marie, a 24-year-old high school graduate who has never lived anywhere but Ellis, recalls how, by the time she was 12, she used her babysitting money to buy her own clothes and that at 16, she worked 30 hours per week at the nursing home caring for patients. This left her no time for sports or other extra-curricular activities, but the long hours at her job made it possible to afford "a really nice car with a really high payment" and "cool clothes." She "loved the money" and "loved the job" since working was something she was good at doing. She explains:

I took care of people who couldn't take care of themselves and made sure they were healthy and made sure they were eating and bathed and dressed them and did all that. And to me, I thought that was a pretty grown up job, so *I felt pretty grown up* at the time and I had a lot of freedom. [emphasis added]

As work started to overtake Marie's commitment to school, neither Marie nor her parents seemed too concerned. She went from being an honor student to being content just getting by. It is important to point out that not only did Marie's work and wages make it possible for her to do things many of her peers could not, but she also felt that she was a grown-up because of the independence her job afforded her. The decisions that some Ellis teens make to sacrifice education for work are easy to understand when one reckons the immediate economic and social benefits that accrue from having a job.

However, not all jobs that Ellis teens do during high school have such tangible benefits. For instance, Trevor milked cows every morning before school and the long hours he worked on a dairy farm made going to college practically impossible because he had less time to study and his grades suffered. To Trevor's way of thinking, though, holding down a full-time job more than compensated for his failing grades in school. Mike, a 28-year-old construction worker with high school diploma currently living in Ellis with his girlfriend and their young son, remembers that, by his senior year of high school, he worked 35 hours per week doing construction.

Such high-intensity work at an early age enables young people to become economically and socially independent when many of their peers in suburban and urban settings must still rely on their parents for college tuition and housing. Peter, a 29-year-old high school dropout and Stayer says he left high school because he was drawn to the freedom a job and money offered. "School, it was all right. I guess as far as what I was thinking. I thought of more important things to do than school...cars. [Dropping out] was something I just decided to do and I thought it was best to be on my own."

In Ellis, if you are a 17-year-old high student not focused on college and willing to work hard, the money you can earn from the night and weekend shifts at the nursing home or in construction can be very appealing. Offering young people the opportunity to work in such a setting gives them vocational training and socializes them for full-time work in a way that many part-time service sector jobs cannot.

Stayers maintain a strong sense of continuity between early work experiences and their later adult years. The jobs they hold at 16 or 17, particularly for many young men, are not very different than the ones they might have in another two or three decades. Sam, who spent time in the military and finished a vocational degree, notes that for his friends who stayed in Ellis,

The jobs they had in the summer was the job, or the job they always did every once in a while, they're still doing it, or something similar. Just a different look. I've had so many [different] jobs and I prefer it that way. I don't wanna be a farmhand for 40 years. I was a farmhand and I'm not saying it was a bad job, it's nice to be in nature, but [in] 40 years?

A crucial aspect of the link between teen-age work and young adult pathways derives from the local economic opportunity structure. Because some of the work

available to Ellis teens is the well-paying, blue-collar job that has become so rare in the postindustrial, global economy, news of an opening at the local ambulance assembly or the electronics plant is a carefully guarded piece of information.

Most young people lucky enough to work there first get their foot in the door through a tip from a friend or relative before the job is even posted. Twenty-three year old Stephanie, a young single mother with a high school diploma who has never left Liberty County, describes the difficulties she faced in getting a job at the electronics factory. After graduating from high school, she worked as an assembler part-time on the second shift until she was laid off. For the next year, she bounced around from job to job. She worked at Burger King and as a supermarket cashier. Looking back on all her jobs, she enjoyed the cashier position most, but with a baby on the way, she knew she had to find a job with more security and benefits. When she tried to look for work at the electronics factory again, she was told there were no openings. Her mother, however, who worked at the electronics factory at the time, spoke to some friends in human resources. "And she was like, 'She's already worked here for a year, you had no problems with her, why not hire her back?' So they hired me." Stephanie admits it was her mother who pushed her to go back to the factory. "My mom really wanted me to have a good job." With no reliable employment for more than a year, Stephanie understood that a job as an assembler meant she could afford her rent, child care, and be home by 4:00 p.m. every day. Most important, earning \$8.20 an hour meant that Stephanie and her son could stay off welfare.

There is no question a high-tech, service-sector economy is tough on the sorts of workers wearing blue-collars, but in isolated rural areas such as Ellis, things somehow seem a little worse. "Your opportunities for doing anything in a small town are zero," explains Sam, a former Seeker who became a Returner. He continues:

If you're not a farmer, then you're gonna work in some [factory]...John Deere in Waterloo was where, I swear, where half the town worked and they drove more than a hour to get there just because they knew they could get a job. And that doesn't seem very promising. When I moved back to Iowa and I had no job and I knew I'd get one cause Grandville is a larger town than Ellis. I'm smart enough, I can do stuff. I don't have to worry about it. If I was moving to Ellis, oh man, I don't know what I'd do.... I don't know how they can stay in a town like that, it's strange.

Although it is an oversimplification to claim that those who stay in Ellis are destined to do so, there nevertheless seems to be a powerful case for a social reproduction in who stays and who goes. The Stayers and many of the Boomerangs are from less well-off families, and through a combination of push and pull factors, tracking in school, available paid work during high school, and opportunities to work and make a decent living after high school, they end up in more or less the same social class as their parents. For most Stayers and for many Boomerangs, the horizon of opportunities is limited, the familial and community (including at school) encouragement to further their education is sporadic, resulting, ultimately, in a very limited set of alternatives.

There are, of course, exceptions to the straightforward class reproduction argument. The High-Flyer group is, for example, the complete opposite, where choosing to return to Ellis as a professional or successful entrepreneur is a pathway that solidifies

elite status. For the most part the High-Flyers are themselves the sons and daughters of local elites, though some Ellis High-Flyers are upwardly mobile.

Several important factors influence Ellis youth as they enter adulthood. Certainly the decision to leave, stay, or return to the town is where many of the countervailing forces converge. Chief among the dynamics that shape the pathways Ellis youth take are the support and encouragement from family members, teachers, and mentors, and the opportunity structure that exists for teenage paid employment. For many leavers the cultivation by significant people sets them up to transition out of the town, while for many Stayers and Returners early work experience becomes the primary mechanism by which they join the workforce early and gradually disengage from school. The experiences, early achievements, and aspirations of leavers differ from Stayers in some fundamental respects. Leavers are either consciously preparing to depart Ellis, as in the case of Damaris, the artist quoted earlier, or circumstances align to allow a person to leave. Leavers are either cultivated, in the sense that parents, teachers, and mentors help them obtain the necessary skills, knowledge, and experience to make a smooth transition, or they get the chance or break that they need to move on. The majority of Leavers, whether Achievers or Seekers, experience leaving as a process rather than a snap decision. Thus, there is a sense in which Ellis youth prepare themselves to move on, and in many important ways, they are aided in this preparation by parents, teachers, and community members, even though many realize that such action can have repercussions for the future of the town.

The pathway to leaving can be viewed through a similar lens as the one we used to disentangle the Stayers' trajectories. The decisions that the youth take in high school, whether they engage in high-intensity work or not, and the degree to which significant adults invest in them, all combine to set young people on a trajectory to leave Ellis. Although not all Leavers are the sons and daughters of the well-off, the Ellis youth from privileged backgrounds have a leg up, so to speak, on their peers. For example, 23-year-old Sonya, the daughter of college-educated professional parents, who herself became a Leaver Seeker and attended the University of Iowa, says she and her siblings did not work because her parents wanted them "to spend their time studying." Twenty-three-year-old Angela, a recent college graduate, who straddles the Seeker and Achiever trajectories, is the youngest daughter of working-class parents. When her oldest sister attended the University of Iowa, she says, it was just "assumed" that she and her sister would follow in her footsteps. One way her family and teachers cultivated those ambitions was preventing her from work. Angela explains:

My parents never expected [my sisters and me] to work in high school cause we were involved in so many sports, so that maybe kind of steered us a little more towards college as opposed to kids that, you know, find a job...and they stay [t]here [in Ellis] and do that.

Certainly gender is also important in these work decisions; there seemed to be less expectation from family that young women would work during high school, with one result being that they simply had more time to devote to studies and extra-curricular

activities.³⁴ The subtle steering that Angela speaks of was notably absent in the stories of many Stayers and Returners.

Work and school, leaving and staying are not the only manifestations of the transition to adulthood for Ellis youth. Pathways are also notable for the variation in behavior with respect to relationships and family formation.

Ellis Pathways, Relationships and Family Formation

With a job, and Iowa's low cost of living, many Stayers quickly take that next step on the adulthood path: marriage and family. In fact, a striking feature of Stayers is that they follow the idealized 1950s patterns for marriage and family, while their counterparts in more urban areas of America experiment with cohabitation and struggle to form relationships. In the case of Ellis, half of the young adults we surveyed were married, and the average age at marriage was just 23 (three years lower than the national average). Ellis's young people's traditional orientations toward early marriage seem almost anachronistic at a time when so many of their counterparts across the country embrace the "freedom" associated with this time of life to experiment with relationships and pursue other goals.

In fact, romantic relationships are another factor binding young people to the area. Young people who begin romantic relationships in high school may find they have been together with the same partner for several years by the time they are in their early twenties. In a town whose total population is smaller than most college campuses, young people have few opportunities to meet new people. The insular social world makes them more willing to commit to early marriage.

For Sue, a sales clerk and part-time college student who married her husband at the age of 20, the desire to marry at an early age is a "small town thing." Many relationships start during high school and if young couples can stick together until their twenties, then, as Sue explains,

you might as well marry her because you guys have been together for so long and it's not gonna make a difference. It's kind of like the concept around here. It's either you get married or you leave them because they don't see the fun in dating for a certain amount of time.

Even though Sue married her high school boyfriend, she believes that if she had taken a different path and left Liberty County to attend college, she would not have gone down this path. She explains, "If I would've went to a bigger university and went and stayed in the dorm, I would've met other people...I would've wanted to be free and just have fun and do the whole free spirit college thing."

A social context in which marriage in one's twenties is such a prominent rite of passage contributes to the practical and symbolic significance of marriage as a marker of adulthood. In Ellis, young people, especially Stayers and Returners, view marriage as normal and expected, more of an obligation than a preference.³⁵ Relationships that

³⁴ Mortimer also finds that young women are more likely than young men not to have worked during high school.

³⁵ See Kefalas, Maria, Furstenberg, Frank, and Laura Napolitano's "Marriage is More than Being Together" for a discussion the distinction between *marriage planners* and *marriage sliders*. Our young Iowans who

endure over a period of time—especially during one’s twenties—move toward marriage because it is a part of a natural progression for such relationships. If a couple has achieved financial stability and completed their education, marriage is the next step. According to 23-year-old Tom, who started dating his future wife when he was a senior in Ellis high school and she was a junior, getting married is part of a “schedule” of goals “that people are supposed to follow.” When Tom, who is a Returner, explains how and why he decided to get married at age 22, there is no mention of finding a soul-mate or of seeking personal fulfillment through marriage. After dating for five years, Tom and his girlfriend felt it was time to get married because, “I was finishing school and had a job.” He continues:

I mean it’s kind of a dumb thing, but I mean, I took pride in [the fact] that I had a schedule that I thought was a smart way to do it. I thought I would graduate from high school, graduate from college, have a job and then get married and then have kids, two, three, four years later. I took pride in that. You know, when I see a lot of people in college and [they] get pregnant and then get married you kind of have everything all messed up. So I thought [mine] was the schedule that people are supposed to follow.

Thus, Tom views becoming an adult in terms of achieving socially proscribed roles in a certain order.

In terms of relationships, Leavers marry much later than Stayers and have a less traditional view of relationships. Some young people from Ellis insisted that they fully intended to follow the more “traditional” route to marriage until they left Ellis and came into contact with the more pervasive norms about marriage. Jack, who was completing his law degree at the University of Iowa when we interviewed him, explains:

I always thought growing up, oh 22 or 23 years old [is the time to get married] and now it’s like there’s so much more that I want to do. I think that’s something about Ellis; people that stick around there tend to get married a lot quicker, a lot more quickly and we were just talking about this last night. We have a friend who came down to see us. She’s got it in her mind that she needs to be married now, or engaged because all her friends are. I’m just like, you came down here to go to school and with women getting more education now and everything, it’s not 20 year olds getting married anymore.

Some Leavers see the difference between themselves and Stayers in terms of having settled down. As Jonathan says:

When I come back home, even when I was home for Christmas, you run into people. You know, especially the people that are home, but there’s a lot of people still there. You know like I walked into Thompson’s [the town grocery] and Tina was working there in the deli. And she’s like, ‘Oh my gosh, I haven’t seen you in so long.’ It’s like, hi, what you doing? You know, and they’re married and have kids. I went to John’s, which is the bar, you know, it’s like one of the very few in town... You walk in there and

remain or return represent the marriage slider category while Leavers follow the marriage planner trend which is more prevalent.

there's Stephanie and like all these people. You know everybody I went to high school with...And they're saying, "Oh, I am married and I have a kid." Mike Conrad, I saw him, and he's married and has like two kids and lives down the street. And I was like, oh wow.

That many Leavers take time to settle down, or achieve the various markers of adulthood out of order further underscores the divergent pathways. Leaver seekers and Leaver Achievers are more in step with their peers in early twenty-first century America. Their journey to adulthood is more prolonged and they do not seem too upset by this. In contrast to Tom's story, where he is proud of doing things in the right order, most Leavers are aware that things might be out of order, but they are secure in the knowledge that such diversity is appropriate for the modern world in which they live.

The journey that our sample of Ellis young adults makes as they transition to maturity has implications beyond providing a snapshot of coming of age in non-metropolitan America. It is not straining reality to say that the very future of small towns like Ellis depends on who stays, who leaves and who returns, and what skills, abilities, and ideas they bring with them.

Young Adult Pathways and the Future of Ellis

Anyone spending time in Ellis can hear residents wonder aloud if their town will be around in 20 years.³⁶ Ellis High School has amalgamated with their counterpart in neighboring Douglas, and local leaders worry, most acutely, about the future of the town's professional class. A healthy town needs business owners, teachers, lawyers, and doctors. Thanks mainly to the Ellis nursing home and hospital, there are enough patients to keep doctors serving the community. One of Ellis' doctors quietly hopes his youngest son will find the right girl and settle down in town and ultimately to take over his practice. Although community activists have raised funds to build a new pool, library, and community theater to make Ellis attractive to homeowners, one cannot help but wonder if such efforts will be enough.

For many civic leaders of towns like Ellis the Doomsday scenario unfolds when there is an exodus of the most educated young people, which leaves the town to deal with its most troubled and disadvantaged inhabitants. The great fear is that people who remain, or bounce back to towns like Ellis, will be trapped by poverty, a lack of skills, education, and in some of the more desperate cases, by drugs and crime. In the course of our fieldwork in Ellis one teacher admitted to us that he resented how his best students "would go off and be a success some place else." Many wonder how it can be possible to keep your town healthy if the better ones continue to leave.

A dense network of social connections coupled with the high level of community involvement in education also means that talented youth with ability and ambition find support and encouragement from a variety of adults outside their family. Ellis in many important ways triages its talented youth, nurturing them and building their skills over

³⁶One strategy in Iowa has been to actively recruit immigrants to these depopulating regions. In places such as Postville, Iowa, the influx of migrant workers from Mexico combined with the Jewish workers from Israel and Russia to work in the kosher slaughterhouses has raised complex issues of integration and the meaning of community. See Stephen G. Bloom, *Postville: A Clash of Cultures in Heartland America*, New York: Harcourt, 2001.

time so that they can go out and be a success. It is this very success that leads many of Ellis' most talented youth away from the place that played such a pivotal role in cultivating these talents. According to 24-year-old Jonathan, the typical leaver achiever we met at the start of the chapter, the extraordinary efforts of one of his teachers made it possible for him to earn scholarship to study in Germany. In turn, the experience he gained abroad led to his majoring in international business and to his present career path. Mrs. Pilsen, Ellis high school's reading, English, and German teacher, recognized Jonathan's facility with languages early on, and when the high school eliminated the German program for budgetary reasons, Mrs. Pilsen tutored Jonathan privately for a year, making it possible for him to earn his scholarship. Ella, who was the valedictorian for her class, remembers: "There were a few key teachers who really seemed to think that... I was especially gifted or could do really great things." Ella's academic abilities meant she was, "treated differently." She explains:

I guess we were kind of singled out and set on a special track, which I think was really good overall, because I was able to be challenged in ways that I wouldn't have been able to in the ordinary, completely integrated setting....The teachers worked with us a little bit extra or gave us extra opportunities. I think that there's kind of a desire to help somebody from a small town make it big, and if they can be a part of that, then that would be just wonderful, but I guess I was maybe somewhat oblivious to some of the stuff that went on. I wasn't always sure whether I really deserved some of the special treatment that I got, even though people have told me time and again that they thought I did.

It is perhaps an unintended consequence of the collective endeavors of a small town that they make it easy for their best and brightest to leave, and in most respects, such fostering behavior is not likely to change in the future. That there is a strange mechanism at work in small towns is evident from the cultural practices and rites of passage that make a place like Ellis a great place to live. Homecoming, the holiday choir performance, and graduations are community events that involve the entire town. When the basketball or football team has a winning season, all of Ellis, regardless of whether they have children at the high school, follow the team and cheer them on to victory.

In a small town, star athletes and exceptional students are celebrities of sorts. The community as a whole shares in the promise of the town's best and brightest. Gifted youth not only receive attention and resources, they get special treatment. Twenty-four-year-old Abby, a member of the basketball team from her days in Ellis, admits that she consistently avoided getting into trouble because she was the Lady Hawks' leading rebounder. "I got pulled over during [basketball] season going fifteen over the speed limit. [The police officer] basically just told me, 'Oh, no. Cool it down,' and let me go. That was it." It did not hurt that the sheriff's niece was a ball player as well. "It was to my advantage to be in that many activities because you knew everybody. I was a waitress [and] somebody would come in that liked basketball, [and they would] leave you a huge tip. 'There you go kiddo. Good luck tonight.'" For the brightest students and the most talented athletes in town, in Abby's words, Ellis' local citizenry "had your back. They wanted you to go on."

Other Leavers find the help and support they need closer to home. According to 27-year-old Marcy, a graduate student now attending a prestigious East Coast university, the impetus to leave Ellis came from her parents, namely her mother. She explains:

Definitely, my mother always wanted me to [move away]. She'd always say, 'Don't stay in Ellis.' She would always tell me that. I think that for her too, she always felt confined and a little bored by her life there....I think she knew I was missing opportunities and that there was more to offer in other places.

For 25-year-old Jack, the law student we met earlier, his academic abilities identified him as someone who was destined to leave Ellis, even though his family's economic position and his siblings' experiences in school meant that they would never leave. Jack explains how he ended up on a different trajectory to his siblings:

Basically, it's one of those stories where I nailed every test growing up, and my brother struggled. So it was always kind of predetermined that, no it wasn't predetermined, it's just wherever we wanted to go, and [my family] kind of understood that my interest would take me away, while I think they understood that my brothers and sisters would stay there.

For the young people whose academic abilities and athletic achievements do not offer them a path out of Ellis, the military promises a chance to create a different kind of future. Twenty-five year old Jason, a Navy seaman with a high school diploma currently stationed in Virginia, freely admits that he never excelled in school. Back in 1995, the Navy's recruitment message of "getting some money for college" and "seeing the world" appealed to him. Jason enlisted just two weeks shy of his eighteenth birthday. Had he not found a way to get of town, he knows the turn his life would have taken. He says:

If I stayed in Ellis...I would have done the same thing [as the guys I grew up with] and married the girl down the street or one of my classmates from a grade below or above. Every time I come home to visit when I have a leave, I see my classmates doing the same jobs they were doing in high school, living in the same place—they haven't done anything. I've been halfway around the world a couple of times. I've done all kinds of different things and lived all over the United States. Been and done so many different things that these people will never do.

Opting to leave or stay are not immutable decisions as the pathways taken by some of Ellis' young adults attest. But the underlying processes that channel young people into their pathways are pretty much part of the social landscape of a small town, and as such, will prove resistant to change. The crucial part of planning for the future will be in acclimating to the immutable facts of migration and seeking innovative options for those who choose to stay or return.

If Ellis is to survive in a rapidly changing and increasingly global world economy, it will have to adapt to the reality that migration, long a fact of life for small rural towns, will mean that many talented youth leave. Moreover, the healthier and more socially organized a place like Ellis is, the more effective they will be in preparing youth to leave. Other young people who yearn to experience life beyond the confines of a small town

will also leave, or in their own parlance, escape. That some will return is a boon, but not something that can be counted upon. Ellis should not only be ready to welcome back stayers and provide opportunities for their entrepreneurship, they should seek to cultivate those who stay with the same care and attention that they accord talented youth.

Conclusion

The Ellis story is one that takes form around the decision to leave, stay, or return to Ellis. Within the broad categories of Leaver, Returner, and Stayer, we have identified five specific trajectories that these young adults occupy, and we have illustrated the influences, circumstances, and life events that act together to set these young people on a particular trajectory. Their early work histories, their family, teachers and guidance counselors, and their own ambitions, abilities, and proclivities all come together to shape these decisions. For their own lives, the decisions can mean a more traditional route through young adulthood, as demonstrated by the Stayers and their nearly lockstep path through the markers of adulthood: finishing high school, leaving home, finding a job, marrying, and starting a family, in that order. For those who leave, the decision can lead them along a more circuitous path that more closely mirrors the path taken by many young adults today, as documented by other researchers from the MacArthur Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood.³⁷ However, as the five paths themselves reveal, all of these youth, because of the many more options available to them in today's world, and paradoxically, because of the region's own economic and social traditionalism, pull and push them in different directions, along a variety of routes to adulthood. Perhaps, the complexity of the pathways that face the young Ellis adults we interviewed is best summarized by Jack, the Leaver Achiever who has recently accepted an associate position at a Chicago law firm. He concludes his own interview by saying:

It's just something drawing me out of the state, and I don't know what it is. It's not Ellis' fault, it's not Iowa's fault. It's just not for me so I'm on my way out. That's all I can say. But I might be back, who knows?

³⁷ See Richard Settersten, Jr., Frank Furstenberg, Jr., and Ruben G. Rumbaut (Eds.), *On the Frontier to Adulthood*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.