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Quad 136

Go Home Again: Implications for Admissions

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Pace Thomas Wolfe, Americans Can and Do Go Home Again: Implications for Admissions



I recently had a conversation with an alumnus who told me of his pleasure and surprise that both of his adult children had recently decided to move back to the Twin Cities. He and his wife were delighted at the prospect of spending more time with their children, children’s spouses and any grandchildren that might arrive on the scene in the future. The surprise came from the fact that these young adults, the children and the spouses both, are very well-educated, with bachelor’s and graduate degrees, earned in places far from Minnesota. Furthermore, the spouses had no family or geographic ties to the state of Minnesota.

This Johnnie alum had every reason to expect that his talented children would be part of the middle and upper-middle-class educational

diaspora—living and working in far flung locations where their talents and education took them, unrelated to where they were raised or where their parents lived.

Yet at the same time, there is strong evidence that family ties still bind. Jon McGee, the Vice President for Planning and Public Affairs at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University, shared a [recent article](#) entitled, “How Far is it to Mom’s? For Many American Adults, Not Far.” The article was originally published in the *New York Times*, but it was widely reprinted across the country, including in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*. The article looked at recent demographic data and concluded:

The typical adult lives only 18 miles from his or her mother, according to an Upshot analysis of data from a comprehensive survey of older Americans. Over the past few decades, Americans have become less mobile, and most adults — especially those with less education or lower incomes — do not venture far from their hometowns.

The article does note the data reveal important differences by income and education:

The biggest determinants of how far people venture from home are education and income. Those with college and professional degrees are much more likely to live farther from their parents than those with a

high school education, in part because they have more job opportunities in big cities, and especially if spouses are juggling the career aspirations of two professionals.

But the authors note some common threads across demographic groups, including “multiple generations leaning on one another for financial and practical support,” “baby boomers need more care in old age” and a “growing number of two-income families seek help with child care.”

I think there is a further demographic phenomenon that plays a role in this trend: smaller family size. I may be too influenced by my Catholic upbringing, but when I was growing up it was not at all unusual for families to have five, six or even more children, while for families of my generation and younger, three seems to be in the upper bound, with only rare exceptions.

This changed family dynamic can affect little decisions, “Should I go home for Christmas if there will be no one else to celebrate with mom and dad?” as well as larger ones, “Where should I make my professional life?”



This changing dynamic for adults was on Jon’s mind in part because he also knows something about how college students make their college choices. The empirical **evidence** on college choice reveals that “58 percent of high school graduates attend college within 100 miles of their hometown, while 72 percent stay in-state, according to Niche Ink. Only 11 percent of students venture more than 500 miles from their hometown.”

In this matter, students at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University are similar to their national peers. About 80 percent of our students are from Minnesota and many of those are from

Central MN and the Twin Cities. We are working hard and have had some success at becoming more national (when I was a student in the late 70s, coming from Iowa was considered exotic), both as the demographics of the Midwest become more challenging and because a more geographically diverse student body provides a better education for all our students.

If Americans, even highly educated ones, are becoming “less mobile,” this presents an additional challenge in attracting out of state students to Minnesota. If a young person thinks that in the long run they will ultimately make their professional and personal life near their parents, they may be less inclined to go out of state, to say nothing of across the country, for college.

If a college’s networks tend to be local, as they are for all but the most national schools, and the possibility of a romantic entanglement might lead to a couple being forced to choose between two geographically distant sets of parents, it can be perfectly rational to stay close to home, even if there might be an educationally better fit further afield.

One way that alumni can help with this challenge is to let the Johnnie and Bennie network expand geographically. This already happens when our California or Chicago alumni assist our students with job searches in those areas, but it also happens when our local Minnesota alums who work for national organizations help current students connect with the right person in their Texas or New York or San Francisco offices.

There is no easy solution to making our job networks more national, but the generosity and support of our great alumni is a good start. As the alum I mentioned at the beginning of this post discovered, it is not impossible for students to get a great education far from home yet still make a satisfying and successful professional life near family, if that is their wish.

About the Author: **Michael**

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).