

Student Focus Groups: 2001

Graduating Students' Attitudes About:

Work

Key Issues Relating to:

- Self-fulfillment
- Economic Considerations
- Work Environment
- Opportunities
- Stability/Company Philosophy

Community

Key Issues Relating to:

- Economic Considerations
- Opportunities
- Stability
- Amenities
- Community Approach

Recommendations

North Dakota State Data Center
Department of Agriculture Economics
North Dakota State University
IACC 424
Fargo, North Dakota 58105-5636

FORWARD

This report is part of a series of labor force studies sponsored by the Fargo-Cass County Economic Development Corporation, Moorhead Economic Development Authority and the Valley City-Barnes County Economic Development Corporation through the cooperation of a locally driven regional Labor Availability Council. An important goal of the Council and the economic development organizations involved in these studies is to identify key information regarding labor issues for the growth and development of the area. A generalizable survey of post-high school students was conducted in 2000. Data from this study highlighted the need to gain a better understanding of the decision making process of students. In addition, it demonstrated the need for better insight into their perceptions/attitudes regarding careers, factors driving their decision making, incentives, and residential preferences. As a result, a series of focus groups were conducted with students graduating from post-high school degree and certificate granting institutions within 60 miles of Fargo/Moorhead. This report details the findings from that study. A second research effort undertaken was a survey of the major primary-sector employers in the greater metropolitan area. The purpose of this research was to explore employers' attitudes and perceptions regarding current and future labor issues.

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North Dakota State Data Center Authors

Dr. Richard Rathge, Director
Ramona Danielson

North Dakota State Data Center
Department of Agriculture Economics
North Dakota State University
IACC 424
Fargo, North Dakota 58105-5636
Ph: (701) 231-7980
URL: <http://www.ndsu.edu/sdc>

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

- ❑ The purpose of this study was to gain insight into students' career goals and the motivational factors that aid them in selecting employment and their community of residence. The study focused on three general topics: perceptions of the Fargo/Moorhead area, what graduating students want in their careers, and decision-making factors.
- ❑ Nine focus groups were conducted with 56 students participating from post-high school degree and certificate granting institutions within 60 miles of Fargo/Moorhead.
- ❑ Discussion revolved around two basic themes, work and community, with the sessions lasting from one to two and one half hours.

Focus Group Findings

❑ Work

Students' discussion of work centered on five broad themes: a) self-fulfillment, b) economic considerations, c) work environment, d) opportunities, and e) stability and company philosophy.

Self-fulfillment: Students find work rewarding if it offers variety, challenges and opportunities for responsibility and leadership. They want to be engaged and feel that their activities are contributing to a larger goal. In turn, they want to be recognized and respected for their contributions.

Economic Considerations: Salary and wages dominated the discussion of work. With few exceptions, students felt salary and wages in the area are not competitive. However, various incentives can be successful in attracting and retaining students despite low wages and salaries. One approach is through flexible benefits that extend traditional packages to include such things as childcare, maternity leave, dental care, and spousal benefits (e.g., assistance in locating work, educational assistance). Another approach is through "innovative hooks". One example is student loan repayment programs.

Work Environment: Students felt the work environment was key in their selection of employers. They were interested in places that were "people-oriented" and "family-friendly". Thus, employers that were sensitive to extensions of the employee (e.g., spouse, children, significant others) with policies such as flexible work hours were viewed more favorably. The type of work atmosphere students wanted varied greatly with those attracted to structured environments and others wanting fast-paced or unstructured formats. Nonetheless, themes that dominated the discussion included flexibility, progressive approaches, casual atmosphere, and diversity of work. In general, students wanted an environment that stressed mutual respect and employee appreciation.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY (continued)

Opportunities: Students felt that many factors are limiting opportunities in the area. Advances in technology are demanding greater needs for skills development and experience. In order to remain employable and marketable they recognized the need for cross-training. In addition, they expressed frustration with the lack of diverse opportunities and lack of an international focus among existing employers. Discussion about what could improve this situation included greater opportunities for networking and closer linkages between educational institutions and employers.

Stability/Company Philosophy: Students are looking for stability in both their career and their employer. They are attracted by mobility within the company, the desire to be challenged, and the reputation of the company. Most students mentioned a desire for long-term stability. However, others were less concerned about longevity and more concerned about advancement potential. A common concern among students was their perception of the area's resistance to change. They wished leaders were more visionary and willing to take chances with regard to new ventures.

□ Community

Students' discussion of community centered on five broad themes: a) economic considerations, b) opportunities, c) stability, d) amenities, and e) community approach.

Economic Considerations: The cost of living was an important concern among students. In addition to their concerns about low wages, students were quick to point out the need for affordable housing. Fargo is dominated by rental units and needs more moderate income housing. Moorhead has a lack of both rental and moderate income housing.

Opportunities: Students were quick to point out the array of opportunities that exist in the area. The three colleges/universities provide good educational opportunities for advanced skills training. However, students in general felt there were limited employment opportunities in the area. They criticized a conservative atmosphere which was resistant to change and diversity. Highlighted were issues of limited opportunities for advancement, too little diversity in types of job opportunities, and too few entry-level positions for new graduates who lack experience.

Stability: A key issue driving students' decisions regarding employers is stability. They are interested in both companies and industries that can grow for the long-term. Additionally, they are interested in advancement opportunities. They are skeptical of companies that have a history of laying off employees in time of economic uncertainty. Likewise, they are attracted by companies that are visionary. This same philosophy translates to community leaders. Students voiced concern about the resistance to change they see in leadership. They feel diversity and an expanded vision will promote long-term stability.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY (continued)

Amenities: Much of the discussion with the students focused on the topic of amenities. Students voiced concern about a lack of diversity in activities. They cited limited recreation, cultural events, and social activities as examples. Although the area is growing, they felt there was too much unplanned growth as illustrated by limited green space and concentrated housing. In contrast, most students agreed that the area is very family-oriented with attention given to schools and neighborhoods.

Community Approach: A common criticism by students is their perception that the area is not “young adult-friendly”. There is a strong feeling that the leadership is conservative and not progressive. This was illustrated by statewide legislation restricting cohabitation and local ordinances that restricted youth activities (e.g., the juice bar controversy). Nonetheless, most agreed that the community is stable and friendly. It can be improved through diversity and greater sensitivity to the needs of young adults (e.g, recreation, entertainment, and housing).

Recommendations

- Re-evaluate legislative barriers
- Create a more young adult-friendly community
- Focus on making the college experience for students a positive one so they are more likely to feel a commitment to the community after graduation
- Address housing issues in the community
- Renovate downtown and create more of a sense of community for Fargo/Moorhead as a whole
- Better market recreation and job opportunities
- Address pay issues and benefit packages
- Examine availability of job opportunities
- Address conflicts between entry-level labor force and employer’s needs and expectations
- Recognize and celebrate diversity
- Examine infrastructure issues
- Pursue opportunities with respect to technology and demonstrate an openness and willingness to change

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Introduction

Study Objectives

The major objective of this study was to gain insight into students' career goals and the motivational factors that aid them in selecting employment and their community of residence. The study addressed three general topics: perceptions of the Fargo/Moorhead area, what graduating students want in their careers, and decision-making factors.

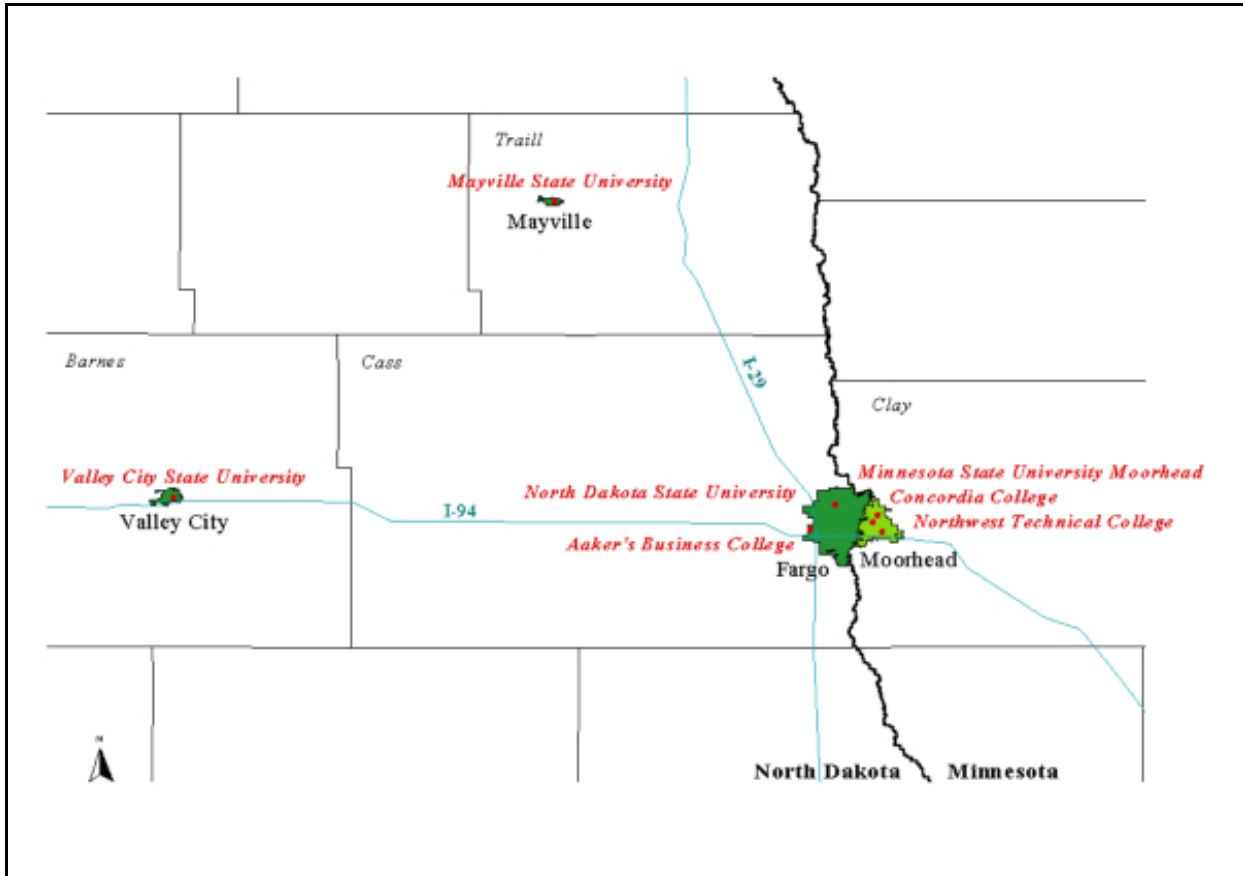
Methodology/Focus Group Design

A series of focus groups was conducted with students attending post-high school degree and certificate granting institutions within 60 miles of the Fargo/Moorhead area. A multi-stage approach was used to identify students interested in participating in the focus groups. First, a list of institutions was identified, including Northwest Technical College, Minnesota State University Moorhead, and Concordia College in Moorhead, MN, Aaker's Business College and North Dakota State University in Fargo, ND, North Dakota State College of Science in Wahpeton, ND, Mayville State University in Mayville, ND, and Valley City State University in Valley City, ND. Second, senior administrators at each of these institutions were contacted and asked to recommend students from a variety of disciplines for participation. Third, students from each institution were contacted, and convenient times and places were established for each focus group. One focus group was held with students from each institution, except for North Dakota State University and Aaker's Business College, which each had two focus groups. No focus group was held at North Dakota State College of Science because their academic term was disrupted during the time focus groups were conducted due to spring flooding of the Red River. A series of ten questions were asked of the students. Focus groups varied in length from one hour to two and one half hours. A total of 56 students participated in nine focus groups conducted between March 13 and April 9, 2001.

Focus groups are planned discussions designed to investigate perceptions and feelings about a specific topic of interest. A focus group leader known as a moderator or facilitator asks questions and serves to create an open, non-threatening environment in which participants can voice honest responses to questions. For each of these focus groups, the facilitator asked questions relating to the students' perceptions of the Fargo/Moorhead area, what they want in their careers, and decision-making factors. Students were asked about what they wanted in a job, what types of jobs/careers they wanted, what drawing forces would keep them in the Fargo/Moorhead area, what employment opportunities were available to them in the area, how they found out about employment opportunities, their perceptions of the Fargo/Moorhead area, what they find attractive about the area, what incentives were driving their decision-making about work/careers, perceptions of housing and recreation opportunities in the Fargo/Moorhead area, and their salary expectations. Students' responses were recorded by a note-taker on a laptop computer as well as an audio recorder.

STUDENT FOCUS GROUPS: 2001 (continued)

Focus Group Locations



Focus Group Findings

WORK

The focus group questions prompted students to discuss their attitudes about work and community and to investigate how they are making their decisions about their careers and where they plan to live. Of the 10 questions asked, seven of them elicited information about graduating students' attitudes toward work. Specifically, students were asked to explain what they want in a job, what types of jobs/careers they want, how they find out about employment opportunities, and their salary expectations. Students' approach to work could also be seen in students' discussion of drawing forces that would keep them in the Fargo/Moorhead area, the employment opportunities they see available to them in the area, and the incentives that are driving their decision making about work/careers. Five primary themes relating to work were discussed by the graduating students: the need for self-fulfillment, economic considerations, expectations about their work environment, the desire for opportunities, and concerns about stability and company philosophy. One student who is considering the "variety of work, atmosphere, and stability and growth of the company" in her decision-making demonstrates how these themes are all interrelated.

Self-fulfillment

Students expressed the need for self-fulfillment in their careers as a primary interest for them in what they are looking for in a job. One student says she wants a job she "personally enjoys" or that provides her "personal satisfaction." Another student wants happiness, stating "I want to go to work everyday and be glad I'm there and not get sick of the job." The discussion of this theme centered on ideas like feeling that they are contributing in an important way through the work they do and they achieve happiness through their work. Students also spoke about receiving respect and recognition for their work, as well as a need for feedback. "I want to be treated with respect. And tell me if I'm doing something wrong." Many students expressed a need for responsibility and challenge and an interest in leadership roles. One student in the computer field was looking for a "fast-paced, high tech job where I get to directly help people and interface with people on a continual basis. I think being responsible for keeping a system online would be an exciting challenge." Another student indicated, however, that he "wouldn't be happy with lots of pressure." Variety was another common theme. One student wanted a job where "Nothing is the same from day to day. There is no typical day; everyday is different. I want a career that has options and is always changing. Could be in different areas within the company. Could be human resources, or marketing; anything that keeps the interest alive."

Students also wanted to be able to achieve fulfillment by participating in projects from the beginning to the end. Students expressed a need to be allowed to work with some personal freedom, so they can complete projects in a way that best utilizes their skills and assets. As one student describes, she wants "Challenging tasks, not too many rules and regulations concerning how to get the job done, and a flexible environment where I can set my own hours as long as I get them all in. If I need some training, they give it to me." A growing company, and long-term opportunities were also very important. Some students also expressed a desire for independence, discussing their current career goals as gaining experience that will eventually allow them to own their own business or work as a consultant. Continuing education was a common theme. Several students indicated interest in getting a master's or doctorate degree or other advanced degrees like law, and some were delaying any inquiries into employment because they were beginning another degree immediately. Some

specific career examples included teaching children, adult education or teaching at a college, banking, insurance, computers, engineering, pharmacy, nursing, accounting, management, social work, law, and human resources. Students' discussion of self-fulfillment related closely to economic considerations and what students want in their work environment, which all combine to describe what students are looking for in their work/careers.

Economic Considerations

Issues surrounding economic considerations focused on pay and benefits. A primary concern was that pay is too low in the Fargo/Moorhead area. A variety of benefits, incentives, and innovative "hooks" were considered very important when deciding on employment. One student stated, "They can compensate me in other ways, not just through money. Recognition, more time off, making me feel good about accomplishing something or making a difference." Another student commented on pay, stating "Salary is not as important as what comes with it. A company can't say their salary is higher than industry average if they don't offer benefits or opportunities." Students felt that certain benefits would be a standard part of any employment offer they considered, frequently citing health insurance, vacation time, and retirement benefits. Other benefits which many students expected to receive from their employer include maternity, access to childcare, dental insurance, employee recognition, and programs to assist employees with continued education. Some students discussed their interest in more innovative offers, many of which they felt could offset lower pay. Students' suggestions included bonuses, profit sharing, assistance with moving expenses and finding a place to live, providing daycare on site, spousal benefits, networking opportunities, and student loan forgiveness or repayment programs. Several students discussed the need to earn enough to pay back student loans, indicating this was a significant addition to basic living expenses and a cause for concern.

Students discussed additional innovative solutions. One suggestion centered on recreational opportunities and a desire to experience arts and diversity. Students indicated that they could be satisfied staying in the Fargo/Moorhead area if they were able to travel. They suggested that more vacation time in an employment package would help them to fulfill their need for adventure, excitement, and culture without having to move away from the area. A related suggestion emphasized the need for less expensive airfare from the Fargo airport. Many students indicated they regularly drive to Minneapolis to fly out of there and avoid the extra expense of flying out of Fargo. Students indicated that decreased cost and greater ease and access to places they want to visit would remove one of the barriers against them remaining in the community. Other suggestions encouraged business leaders to "recognize and respect diversity" by allowing employees of various religions to take their religious holidays off, as well as extending benefits to domestic partnerships. The discussion of maternal benefits, childcare needs, and spousal benefits was a central focus for students older-than-average, younger students who were parents (mainly mothers), and married students. Many of the other students in the focus groups referred to their plans for family as not a primary concern for them for at least five years, and tended to not contribute to discussions of family benefits. Among the married women, a central issue was their spouse's employment opportunities in the area, and the most widely accepted solution was to move to whichever city provided the best opportunities for the spouse. The need for continuing education and strong interest in the work environment were among other very important considerations when evaluating pay offers.

Many students graduating from two-year institutions expressed frustration at feeling undervalued because of the low pay scales available to them, regardless of prior experience. They also felt that the reputation of the area as having a low cost-of-living is unfounded, and expressed opinions that the lower pay being offered here compared to other cities they were considering could not be justified in that way. Some graduating students from four-year institutions seemed more optimistic about the pay they would receive when graduating, but almost everyone agreed that they would be paid more for the same degree if they move out of North Dakota and the Fargo/Moorhead area. Several graduating students from four-year institutions expressed dissatisfaction that many of the best-paying positions they saw available to them did not require a four-year degree. One student said that she currently works in a position that does not require a degree and that she will take a drastic pay cut to accept a job in her field when she graduates. Several students cited acquaintances who had graduated from college and now work as bartenders, blackjack dealers, and servers in restaurants. One student said, "Most of the jobs I look at don't need a degree. What a waste to not use the degree I have. I am looking for out-of-state jobs because you need a job that needs the degree. I want to use the degree I paid for." Regardless of the type of institution from which the students were graduating, opinions expressed about the low pay in the area reflected a feeling of being undervalued. One student expressed frustration that she can go to a fast food restaurant and "get paid the same amount that an administrative assistant gets, but you need schooling to be an administrative assistant." Another student commented that the national reputation workers in this area have of being dependable and hard-working goes unrecognized within the region. The same student was not surprised that people move to other areas with better pay. One student stated simply, "I would like to get paid what I'm worth."

Students at two-year institutions generally responded to the question about salary expectations in terms of dollars per hour. Figures ranged from \$9.50 an hour to \$16 an hour. A student training to be a human resources assistant expected between \$13 and \$14 an hour. Other general figures included one student who was hoping for \$11 to \$13 an hour, but did not believe she would get it here. Another student expressed a desire for \$18 to \$20 an hour based on her past experience and the level of responsibility she would have in her new position, but believed she would not get more than \$13 to \$15 an hour in this area. A student training for a management position expected between \$25 and \$30 thousand a year. A student studying to be a surgical technician indicated that she would expect between \$12 and \$16 an hour in this region, between \$14 and \$16 an hour in the Minneapolis, MN, area, and between \$15 and \$17 an hour in the Rochester, MN, area.

Students expressed general flexibility on the amount of pay they would accept depending on the benefit package, as well as a willingness to work their way up into higher paying positions. "You can work your way up, so it doesn't matter what you start off at. I wouldn't mind starting off lower if you get an evaluation every now and then and get a raise." Other students commented on this, questioning why employers seem to prefer to hire new people than give their current employees with "the experience and the degree" the pay raises they deserve. Another student clarified, "If you want to keep me, it will cost. I would like to see that the raises are coming. If my paychecks aren't showing it within two years, I will need to move on." Another student clarified his approach, saying "I want to start in the middle, not at the bottom. That's why I'm in college, so I can start in the middle and work my way up." Some students were pessimistic about salaries. General comments included the desire to earn enough to pay bills, live independently, afford children's activities, and afford recreation. One student said, "I'm looking for enough to get bills paid and get a new car."

Right now I have to have a roommate, and I would like to have my own place without having to live with someone else.” As one student put it, “I don’t have any expectations. I’m not going to put myself way up there to get knocked down. I’ll start off small, but not too small, and go from there.” Another student stated simply, “I want to make enough to live on without eating sandwiches everyday.” Another wants to not be living “paycheck to paycheck.” Students indicated they want “to be able to put some money away for savings and unexpected things.” One student said she would like “to be able to put away some for her kids who could use it for schooling.”

Students at four-year institutions expressed their salary expectations in terms of thousands of dollars per year. Figures ranged from \$20 thousand a year to \$70 thousand a year. Education majors reflected on the low salaries that are available to them in North Dakota, starting between \$15 and \$20 thousand a year. Though teachers in Fargo might be able to expect more than the North Dakota average, there are many more applicants than there are positions. The general sentiment among education majors was that they could move across the river into Minnesota to earn as much as \$10 thousand more a year, and they would earn significantly more than that elsewhere in the country. A social work student indicated she would expect \$26 thousand a year with her current education, but is pursuing a law degree which would put her expectations at \$50 thousand a year. Other expectations for specific fields include \$28 to \$30 thousand a year for communication, \$30 thousand a year for management, \$30 to \$35 thousand a year for economics, mid-\$30 thousand a year for mechanical engineering, \$30 to \$40 thousand a year for business, \$37 to \$40 thousand a year for construction management, and \$50 to \$60 thousand a year for physical therapy. Other general salary figures cited included ranges of \$28 to \$30 thousand a year and \$35 to \$40 thousand a year. One student majoring in computer science indicated that he would work for no less than \$35 thousand a year, but would prefer to find a job in a range between \$40 and \$50 thousand a year. An accounting student indicated that the going salary for new graduates is \$20 thousand a year, but that he would not be willing to work for less than \$24 thousand a year. A pharmacy student indicated that she would expect \$70 thousand a year here but could earn \$80 thousand a year in other places. One student who interned with a local computer firm said she would stay in the area to work for that company for no less than \$30 thousand a year. A student with a minor in hotel/motel management has been offered a position in another part of the country with his current employer for \$29 to \$32 thousand a year. He indicated that a similar position in this area would pay closer to \$20 thousand a year. General salary comments revolved around the idea that pay for the same work is higher elsewhere in the country than in the Fargo/Moorhead area. The Minneapolis, MN, area, frequently referred to as “the Cities,” served as a frequent point of comparison.

Work Environment

Topics pertaining to work environment were a common theme for students when responding to inquiries about what they want in a job, what types of jobs/careers they want, and the incentives driving their decision making about work/careers. Students detailed the kind of work environment they want and emphasized the importance of the work environment in their choice of employer. One central topic was that of flexibility. Students want a casual environment because they “wouldn’t like to dress up at work every day” and “don’t like to have to wear suits.” One student wants a non-strict work environment where she “wouldn’t have to wear dressy clothes, no nylons, and it would be okay for tattoo to be showing.” Though casual dress was important for many students, one student emphasized that she did not mind more formal dress requirements. Flexibility in hours was

also very important. One student suggested a company where the office hours are set, but employees have the flexibility to “make their own decisions regarding office hours” within that time frame. Other suggestions included the option to work four, 10-hour days a week and being allowed time during the day to take a class when pursuing continuing education. Another common description for the type of environment students wanted was “laid-back.” As one student explained, “I want a place where its fun and a more relaxed atmosphere. “Family-friendly” was important, too. One student said, “I’m not looking so much at a flexible schedule but if my child is sick, they understand that I’ll be home with her. I want variety, challenge, and a family-oriented schedule.”

The idea of working in a “personal atmosphere” was stressed by students who want to be more than “just a number.” Students also desire a work atmosphere where teamwork is emphasized, where they get to work with people, and where employees feel valued. They want to get along well with their co-workers and to be in an atmosphere where gossip is minimized. One student is concerned about this atmosphere when considering a job, stating “I want to know what other people are working there. Are they nice? Do they look like they’ll accept some young girl coming out of school?” Another student who really wants to work with people and is looking for friendliness is not looking forward to “politics.” Another student echoed these sentiments, saying “I’m looking for a friendly environment and co-workers that work with you, not against you.” Yet another student said, “I want an atmosphere that is friendly and comfortable where you like to go to work and you’re not intimidated by what you do or what you say.” Students going into teaching expressed concern about working in a school that is physically safe. One student was detailed about her ideal school environment. She said, “I want to be in a school that is culturally diverse, not scared of other cultures, that is integrated with others. I never want to quit learning, I want to have that diversity. Some people in education are scared of that.” Students also want variety in the work they do, as well as to participate in projects from beginning to end. They desire responsibility and some personal freedom in accomplishing tasks, as well as feedback about how they are doing. They want a work environment that is family-oriented, people-oriented, and fast-paced, but also structured. They want a good corporate culture that expresses values with which they agree. They also want a progressive atmosphere. Certain external factors were expressed as having an impact on their perception of their work environment as well, including the size of the city in which they work as well as the commute time to their place of employment.

Opportunities

Students were asked questions relating to what types of jobs/careers they want and what incentives are driving their decision making about work/careers. They were also asked about the drawing forces that would keep them in the Fargo/Moorhead area and the employment opportunities that they see available to them. Much of the discussion revolved around issues of opportunity. As one student explained, she wants to be building up to “something better” and have advancement opportunities. Another student explained, “I want advancement to where I see myself in 10 years. If a job doesn’t help me progress to that, I won’t take it.” Students are concerned about remaining employable and marketable. One student said, “I feel like I have to market myself more because I am a business major. The largest issue is to be able to grow into the company and cross-diversify.” Students viewed networking and becoming cross-diversified in their skills as a strategy for remaining employable. Students also expressed much interest in professional skills training and opportunities to advance and grow with a company. As one student stated, “I want good opportunity for

experience, opportunity for growth within the company, long-term opportunity.” Issues about opportunity are intertwined with issues of self-fulfillment for students as they decide where to work. One student “would like to be with a company where I could travel and go to other places.” As another student states, “I will look at what kind of future they provide in the company. I need good opportunities, I need to be able to progress. I want to move up the ranks and take on different tasks and jobs, and eventually have my accomplishments lead to a certain amount of freedom.” Some students expressed interest in being employed with small companies, indicating they anticipated many challenges and opportunities in smaller firms. One student explained, “I would like to go to work for a smaller firm. There is not as much room for advancement, but I feel like this would lead to a more diversified workplace.” Other students expressed a preference for big companies, where “growth in the company” could provide opportunities for them “to grow in the company.” Students also indicated they want leadership opportunities and responsibility.

Students feel the need to be in a community that offers opportunities for both jobs and education. Many students made general comments like “There’s a lot of things for business, it is just a matter of finding what you like,” and “There are all kinds of opportunities. Just pick one.” However, while the Fargo/Moorhead area was generally praised for having many educational opportunities, it was criticized for not having a diverse enough offering of jobs. Fargo/Moorhead was seen to have many factors that limit opportunity in the area. Examples included lack of daycare, an unenthusiastic approach to new technologies, and an unbalance in available jobs when considering the area’s booming retail sector. Legislative barriers were also cited as a limiting factor. Nursing barriers centered on the fact that North Dakota is the only state that requires an LPN to have the intent to go back to school to get an RN. This has a major impact on graduates from two-year institutions, who must get a four-year degree within a certain period of time to remain eligible to work in North Dakota. Pharmacy barriers included legislation that requires a pharmacist to own 51 percent of his or her business, and while recognizing this helps protect small businesses it makes practicing pharmacy in the state expensive for new graduates. Students indicated that certain careers in the area were unstable, such as education and nursing, and expressed hesitancy to put confidence in gaining long-term employment in those fields in this area. Other comments focused on the lack of international opportunities and limited opportunities for advancement.

Students expressed frustration that there are too few entry-level positions for new graduates who lack the experience which they feel is currently being requested by employers. One student said he is finding out by word-of-mouth that “companies in Fargo want experience, not new graduates.” One student elaborated that, “It feels like you need experience here and that is an obstacle. The organizations I want into here just want trained people and don’t have many entry-level options.” One business major in a four-year institution outside of the Fargo/Moorhead community said “there’s nothing really, unless you have five years experience working in a large town.” Another student suggested a solution could be found in job descriptions. His major was business, but he said, “That doesn’t mean I have to go into ‘business.’ As long as you have a four-year degree, you can get in somewhere. Companies need to open up and focus broader. Don’t have such defined job descriptions.” A student at a two-year institution expressed frustration about how her associate degree is valued relative to a bachelor degree in the community. “I feel that I should be treated with the same respect as a student graduating from MSUM or NDSU. I feel I should have the same opportunities as those with a BA.” Students commented on internships, also known as “co-ops”, saying that they are an excellent way to get experience. Some people think they play an even more

significant role. One student commented, “People who planned it and did the internships are sitting good right now. If not, you’re in trouble and jobless.” One student commented on a friend who “had a goal to graduate in four years, so he didn’t do a co-op. Now he doesn’t have a job.” Students said “you have to go do it before you can get hired,” but “colleges fail at getting people out there into internships.” As one student stated, “It is key that companies build relations with universities. That leads to better placement and greater resources for professors to market to students.”

There was a great deal of similarity in the methods students used to find out about employment opportunities. Ten primary methods were discussed. Internet sites, the Fargo Forum on-line, and media such as newspaper classifieds and radio advertisements were mentioned as ways students find out about employment opportunities in the area. Career centers at their educational institutions as well as networking through word-of-mouth, e-mail, faculty, advisors, and other students, were other important methods. Conferences, temporary agencies, and company listings were methods used by a few students as well. Job fairs were an additional method students used. A final method students said they used to learn of employment opportunities at companies was through doing internships with them.

Students discussed the various methods they used to find employment. Job fairs were generally viewed by students as unsuccessful ways to learn about opportunities. They are “not giving much promise for the future.” Comments centered on conversations students had at the job fairs in the region this spring with employers whose companies did not have any openings, or openly expressed skepticism about the students finding positions in their fields. One business major was told “good luck” because “there is very little out there.” One student said the employers at job fairs led attendees to believe their companies had positions and then announced hiring freezes. Students in the arts, humanities, and social sciences majors expressed frustration that job fairs did not include opportunities for them. Career centers also received mixed reviews from those students. Career centers were not perceived to invest themselves in finding opportunities for them. One student also noted that his career center did not seem to offer local jobs, only jobs out of the area. Another student was excited about the career center but said, “I wish I went to the career center earlier to build relationships and learn of the contacts. You can put your resume online, set up interviews right on campus. But a person needs initiative to go do it.” Students expressed general feelings of discouragement, and commented on the recent economic downturn the nation has faced which they feel contributes to a lack of job opportunities for them as they graduate. The methods that were generally viewed by the students as most useful were resources on the Internet and networking. One student commented, “If you don’t know someone or network a lot in North Dakota, you can’t get a job.” Another student commented that “You need networking to get the interview. You still have to prove yourself, but networking helps you get your foot in the door.” Another student commented on internships. She feels that, “The person who does put in time doing an internship deserves the job. And they can really see what companies are like and get good experience.”

Stability/Company Philosophy

Issues of stability were a central focus addressed by graduating students discussing what they want in a job and what incentives are driving their decision making about work/careers. As one student summed up, “I will look at the salary and benefits of the company and the job I’d be most happy with. And the company itself, if it’s growing and stable.” While students are looking for variety in

their day-to-day responsibilities, they are looking for stability in their career, in their company, and in their industry. Students view diversification in job duties and continued professional skills training as methods to assure employability and marketability, which they equate with providing more stability in their careers. One student stated, “Companies may be scared they will invest in training and the person will leave. Personally, I would stay with someone who trained me and took the time.” Another student approached her first job as a stepping stone, saying she is “not expecting it to be the job I keep for the rest of my life. Maybe I’ll move within the company, or to a new location as a promotion. Right now, I’m basically looking for experience and finding out what I really like.” Another student was concerned that he could be fired as an employee with most companies in North Dakota because he is gay, and does not plan to stay in a state that “does not protect me from getting fired from my job.”

Students are concerned about the stability of their company, and are interested in the reputation of the firm as well as the company’s culture and values. They want to work for companies with which they can grow for the long-term. They are also looking for opportunities for advancement. Students are skeptical of companies who have histories of laying off employees in times of economic uncertainty. One student stated, “I will do background research to see if the company is an industry leader or has a cloudy background. I need a company that doesn’t lay off when times get bad.” Another student stated simply, “I want a stable job, so I don’t have to worry from year to year that I’ll get fired or not get tenured.” One student stated “Salary is the last thing you look for when taking a job. I’m looking for a cultural fit within the company. If the salary is within a competitive range, then fine.” Students are also concerned about the stability of their fields. Nursing students tended to describe their field as “unstable and unpredictable.” One student said, “There are many different types of nursing opportunities in the Fargo/Moorhead area, but it is unstable. That scares me, because I don’t like job hopping and I want to stay where I have stability.” Comments from students in the computer field indicated they are “trying not to make too many long-term plans” because they are going into a field “which is changing constantly” and the future is “uncertain.” Some students feel the current national economic downturn affects the availability of opportunities for them as they graduate. They see a resistance to change in the leadership of the Fargo/Moorhead area, and feel that an expanded vision for the area will promote long-term stability.

COMMUNITY

The focus group questions encouraged students to discuss their attitudes about work and community. Of the 10 questions asked, six of them elicited information about graduating students' attitudes toward community. Information regarding students' attitudes about community came through the questions posed about drawing forces that would keep them in the Fargo/Moorhead area, the employment opportunities they see available to them in the area, and the incentives that are driving their decision making about work/careers. In addition, students were asked to discuss their perceptions of the Fargo/Moorhead area, what they find attractive about the area, and their perceptions of housing and recreation in the area. Five primary themes relating to community were discussed by the graduating students: economic considerations, the desire for opportunities, concerns about stability, amenities, and community approach.

Economic Considerations

When discussing the Fargo/Moorhead area, economic considerations were a central focus for students, with discussions revolving around the idea of affordable living. Cost-of-living, pay scales, the cost of housing, and the cost of recreation were among the topics addressed. There were generally two contrasting groups when discussing economic considerations, those who were satisfied with conditions in the area and those who were dissatisfied. Some students felt that the cost-of-living in the area is very reasonable. They indicated that there are plenty of job opportunities and plenty of housing, while costs in the area are relatively inexpensive. One student explained that you have to find the "best pay relative to the community." Another student made a similar comment, stating that his expectations for salary would depend on what benefits and other incentives come with it. He also commented that, "My expectations for Fargo would be lower than in the Cities. Minnesota is much more expensive to live. Income tax is incredible. Commutes and other stuff add up." His comments were echoed by another student, who said that when considering salaries "You can't compare apples to oranges if cost-of-living is different. You need to find out how to weight it." One student said, "I have been around the world and realize this is the best place to live. Just because you could make more money somewhere else doesn't mean you'll be happy."

Other students discussed the idea that the cost-of-living in the Fargo/Moorhead area is too high, especially when considering the pay scales. Students' comments included "Rent is too high and wages are too low," and "The community has grown quite a bit since I moved here, but the pay hasn't grown a lot." Another student commented, "The wages offered at a hospital in another town are better while the rent is cheaper, the gas is cheaper, and the heating costs are cheaper because it is warmer there." One student said, "The pay is so low, and the cost of living is as high as large cities. I have worked while continuing on with my education. I couldn't survive without moving home." Some students felt they would be able to live comfortably on the income they will earn after graduation. Others indicated the pay in the area is too low and is not balanced by a cost-of-living that they feel is only average when compared to other cities, even of the same size, elsewhere in the country.

Many students believe that there is plenty of housing available in the area at reasonable cost for purchase or rent, stating comments like "pricing of homes is great in this area." One student noted,

“In the Cities, there is one to two percent open apartments, so I had problems finding apartments there. I never have had a problem finding apartments here.” Other students viewed the housing market with more pessimism. These students generally felt there were not many affordable homes available for purchase in the area. One student commented, “Salaries here are either dropping or staying the same, but housing is going up. There is no recreation to do because you’re too busy paying off your house.” Students were also discouraged by rental costs. One student said, “Those living in apartments are the ones who have less money. And if you don’t have a roommate, you can’t afford a nice two bedroom for yourself.” One student said, “Prices here are not that much different from rent prices in Minneapolis, but they get paid a lot more.” One student who said she had checked into apartments in other cities echoed that sentiment, saying prices “are about the same as here, and some places are less. And they include more amenities, like security, public transportation nearby, heat paid. Fargo/Moorhead really doesn’t offer a whole lot like that.”

Students with children expressed frustration at trying to find apartments suitable for their families, citing too few three or more bedroom apartments and not enough access to recreation areas for children in apartments. Students at institutions in Moorhead were generally critical of the availability, high cost, and quality of Moorhead rental units. Several students, especially those attending two-year institutions, expressed frustration with the cost of entertainment in the area. Even among those who were satisfied with the variety of entertainment available, students indicated that the pay was not high enough for them to afford entertainment after paying for basic living expenses. For students with children, the issue of entertainment was important. They indicated that many of the activities available to young children are very cost-intensive, and they struggle to afford to keep their children active at the expense of their own entertainment.

Opportunities

When asked to examine the drawing forces that would keep them in the Fargo/Moorhead area as well as what employment opportunities they see available to them in the area, students generally viewed the availability of opportunities as an important factor in their choice of where to live. Students are concerned about remaining employable and marketable within a company and an industry, but they are also very interested that the types of jobs and careers they desire and options for continuing education are available to them in the community. One student indicated he “would definitely consider leaving, but he would stay if he found the right job here.” Other students echoed that sentiment, saying “a good job would keep me here, too.” One engineering student felt there were not enough opportunities, and “there needs to be more diversity than just agriculture companies.” Another engineering student echoed that sentiment, saying that there are “zero opportunities” for him in Fargo because he doesn’t “want to have to make a living in ag engineering.” Though the general perception among students was that opportunities are not available in the community, this student admitted, “I didn’t even know of a manufacturing company until I heard about a pacemaker being made here.” He says the community needs to educate students about what is here.

Students were generally complimentary about the number of educational opportunities available in the Fargo/Moorhead area. Students were more concerned about the availability of jobs, and Fargo/Moorhead was seen to have many factors that limit opportunity in the area. As one student explained, “It doesn’t feel like there are enough job opportunities here and the market is not as open. It takes a special person to say ‘I want to stay in North Dakota.’ I am open to moving anywhere for

more money and more benefits. North Dakota doesn't compare." Several married students or other students in committed relationships indicated that they would have to move because their spouse or significant other could not find employment in Fargo/Moorhead. They made comments like "I can't find a job here so my spouse and I have to move," and "I need jobs that my husband and I can enjoy in the same area." Employment opportunities were not a problem for one student, but she was not happy about that. "My boyfriend has a job here; otherwise, I wouldn't stay here. I just came here to go to college."

Some other topics addressed include the negative impacts of resistance to new technologies, lack of daycare, an overabundance of jobs in the retail/service sector, and legislative barriers. One student stated, "The biggest problem with the area is there are a lot of jobs here, lots of money, but lots of farmers, sugar beets, insurance... These people make serious cash. But there is also a lot of retail and fast food that don't make much money. There is no middle area." Legislative barriers included things like specific requirements for people in nursing and pharmacy. Nursing barriers related to requiring graduates from two-year institutions to get a four-year degree within a certain period of time to remain eligible to work in North Dakota. Pharmacy barriers included legislation that requires a pharmacist to own the majority of his or her business, which makes practicing pharmacy in the state difficult for new graduates. Other legislative barriers included insufficient pay raises for teachers, and the unwillingness to extend the discussion of student loan repayment programs to students in other fields like business. These were all criticized as part of a larger context of conservatism and resistance to changes that would benefit the area. One student said he focused on the Cities area right away for employment because he felt there were not enough employment opportunities here. He explained, "The accounting firms here are company specific and don't allow movement. There is too much tunnel vision here." Another student who stated "The ability to network is important," indicated that he was attracted to the Cities because of groups there who assist with networking. Students also expressed concern that certain fields in the area, such as nursing and education, are unstable, and were hesitant to commit themselves in a community that did not seem promising for long-term security. Other comments focused on limited opportunities for advancement, too little diversity in types of job opportunities available, and too few entry-level positions for new graduates who lack the experience for which employers are looking. As one student who grew up here summed up, "I will definitely choose to leave Fargo/Moorhead because it is not diverse enough to provide an abundance of jobs. It needs more opportunities, more levels of entry, more opportunities for advancement."

Stability

When graduating students were asked to discuss what they want in a job and what incentives are driving their decision making about work/careers, issues of stability were a central focus. Students are looking for stability in their career, in their company, and in their industry. For teachers, there is one prominent concern. As one stated simply, "I don't want to have to worry about being scared to go to school." Student in other fields want to work for companies with which they can grow for the long-term, and are looking for opportunities for advancement. Some students feel that the current national economic downturn affects the availability of opportunities for them as they graduate. They feel that the market in this area is particularly difficult, as one student commented, "The thing to keep people here is job opportunities and the market is tight. There are three universities here and everybody is applying to stay here, but there aren't enough companies in

Fargo.” One teacher stated simply, “I would love to stay in Moorhead, but there is no stability.” Another said, “There are schools all over Fargo/Moorhead. It just depends if they are cutting or hiring. This year they’re cutting.” Students are skeptical of companies who have histories of laying off employees in times of economic uncertainty. They see a resistance to change in the leadership of the Fargo/Moorhead area, and feel that an expanded vision for the area will promote long-term stability. One suggestion for offering tax breaks to help get companies here was countered by another student who said that Fargo did not have the population to support a large company.

Amenities

Amenities were a common theme for graduating students when describing their perceptions of the Fargo/Moorhead area. They examined housing, recreation, drawing forces that would keep them in the area, and what they find attractive about the area. Discussions centered on three primary topics, with students focusing on things to do in the area, the natural environment, and physical community characteristics. Many students were satisfied with recreational opportunities in the Fargo/Moorhead area. A general theme indicated that there is lots to do, but that you have to be willing to look for it. One student said, “If you have a good intuition or creative thinking, there’s a lot to do here. You just have to have an open mind.” One student who was less enthusiastic commented, “There is not much for cultural stuff. Mostly sports, not leisure arts, theaters. There is stuff here, but not enough.” Criticisms of recreation centered on cost, variety, and diversity. Students mentioned a variety of things they did for entertainment in the area. Going to bars, exercise clubs, concerts, and restaurants, as well as playing pool, bowling, and going dancing are all opportunities the area offers. They also mentioned playing golf, going fishing, hunting, camping, and driving to the lakes. Other amenities mentioned included the West Acres Mall, the Fargodome, and going to Redhawks games, the motor speedway, and the Red River Valley Fair.

Many students were very critical of the Fargo/Moorhead area. One student summed up, “Some people are looking for adventure, something the Fargo/Moorhead area does not have. It’s flat, it’s boring.” Students were dissatisfied with the area for lacking in variety and types of recreation as well as not being young adult-oriented. Students felt that the area needed more diversity of activities as well as entertainment of a higher caliber. Students suggested having more community celebrations, more concerts aimed at the college student and recent graduate age range, more professional theater events, and more arts. One student said, “Arts and music is a big one. I love concerts and theater arts. I end up driving down to Minneapolis every other weekend to do this stuff.” One said, “The community needs a large performing arts center and a conference facility to host business conferences.” Another student commented, “The civic center and community theater do well with what they have to work with. But you don’t hear about it if you’re not looking for it and it’s not enough. Last week they had a concert that was pretty cool. Lots of people our age would go to things at the civic center, if they brought concerts every other month.” Other comments focused on age, saying “If you’re not 21, there is nothing to do after 10:00 or 11:00 pm, besides go to 24-hour restaurants,” and “Things like the FM Beez and the zoo, people our age don’t go there. It’s for older people with kids.” One student explained, “There is not a lot of activity for a single adult. It is a good place to raise a family. If you’re not into the bar scene, you don’t have a lot to do. I’m looking for more of a culture scene, coffee house, entertainment opportunities that involve more than a smoky bar or smoky bowling. Fargo/Moorhead doesn’t have a lot to offer people in their 20s.”

Fargo/Moorhead was praised for having a nice natural environment, with students citing grass, trees, and breathing clean air as particular benefits. While some students “don’t like North Dakota, it’s too cold,” and “might stay if it wasn’t so cold,” other students “like the cold and wouldn’t move away because of it.” Another student said, “We have snow and cold, but no hurricanes or earthquakes. Everywhere you go, you’ll whine about something. What’s the difference if it’s here or somewhere else.” Some students spoke favorably about the natural environment. One student said, “Fargo/Moorhead has nice golf courses, lots of nice neighborhoods. Along the river is nice.” Other students were negative about the natural environment. One student commented, “One thing I don’t like about Fargo is there is not much for scenery. It’s so flat. There isn’t any skiing or hiking.” Others said they “miss scenery” and wish there were “more trees.” Many students were pleased at Fargo/Moorhead’s proximity to lake areas, indicating they took advantage of this in the summer. Other students who thoroughly enjoy winter for its recreation, were critical of the Fargo/Moorhead area for preventing them from participating in common activities. The lack of snowmobiling parks or paths in the community was given as a specific example.

Students commented that the natural environment causes a phenomenon which detracts from a sense of community in the area. They noted that while everyone stays inside during the winter, everyone leaves for the lakes during the summer. One student praised Fargo/Moorhead because he liked being “close to lakes, good hunting, and close to the Cities.” Another student made a similar comment, saying “If you want to drive to the country, it takes five minutes. Camping is 45 minutes away. The lake is one hour away. Versus Minneapolis, where you just sit in traffic.” Outdoor recreation within the city was discussed, as well. The area was complimented for its bike paths, but students offered suggestions for improvement. One student who wanted to use the paths for rollerblading indicated they are not kept clean enough to be safe. Another student indicated the paths are improperly advertised, commenting on his own experiences of coming to what he thought was the end of a bike path that he, years later, learned picked up again only a few blocks away. He also relayed conversations he had with community residents who were unaware of the bike paths in general. Other suggestions were to “make the community more feasible for pedestrians and make it aware that sidewalks are for walking, and bikes go in the road.” One student wanted to see the community focus on the parks, maybe organizing an activity that “promotes the two communities in one environment, like a family picnic day.”

Many students generally liked the size of the Fargo/Moorhead area. One student from a small town said, “It’s the right size. If you go out, you probably won’t run into people you don’t want to talk to.” Students’ preferences varied, however, from one student who wants to return to Bismarck because she “wants to stay somewhere smaller” to another student who plans to go to New York City after law school because she is from a small town and wants “a bigger city and more diversity.” Another student said, “Fargo is a good-sized town, but my real dream is to go to Minneapolis or somewhere bigger. I’m looking for something bigger, but if I stay in Fargo/Moorhead, it won’t be a total loss.” Students praised Fargo/Moorhead for having low crime, friendly people, and good schools. “You can still walk on the street and not worry about who is walking behind you.” Many students considered the community a great place to raise children. One student described Fargo as “a fairly quiet town. There is some crime and violence here, but not to the extent you get it in the Cities. I feel safe letting my kids play in the backyard. There is a variety of things to do, like movie theaters, stores, dancing, pool clubs, theater, and arts. Fargo/Moorhead pretty much has a little that everybody will be interested in.” Driving and transportation were also discussed. One student said,

“It’s nuts driving in Minneapolis. I want to stay in Fargo for that reason.” Several students, however, were frustrated with “bad driving” here. One student expressed general dissatisfaction with driving conditions in the area, stating “Drivers are bad, particularly the elderly. Streets are not taken care of. Speed limits are too slow. Infrastructure is lacking.” Students generally praised Fargo for other factors relating to driving, such as close access to businesses across town and shorter commute times. One student commented that “It takes two minutes to go to Target, instead of waiting to go only once a week.” Another student said, “It isn’t a fight or hassle to go to work; commuting is 15 minutes on any day.”

When discussing visual appeal, Fargo was described as being more attractive than Moorhead. Discussions of housing ensued, and while students were not excited about the lack of variety and character in Fargo’s new rental units, Moorhead was criticized for not having new apartments at all. Students appeared to equate Moorhead’s older buildings with being “dirty” and Fargo’s newer developments with being “clean.” Fargo is considered to have more housing available at less cost, and many of the students at institutions in Moorhead indicated they currently rent in Fargo. Many said they would prefer to rent in Moorhead if proper housing was available, in part to reduce commuting to and from school. They saw this as a missed opportunity on Moorhead’s part. Many of the students at two-year institutions voiced negative opinions about housing in Fargo/Moorhead. However, students in general criticized housing in the area for lacking individual character, providing too little green space, and too few opportunities for families. Those students with children expressed frustration at finding apartments large enough for families and would like to see more neighborhood parks to provide positive outlets for children living in apartment complexes. One student said, “I would like to see the housing developers have more parks for children to play in. Where are the kids supposed to go? They are inside playing Nintendo.” Another student echoed that “Especially when there are lots of apartments, it’s nice where there’s a park in the middle of a bunch of buildings.” Comments generally indicated that students feel Fargo/Moorhead needs even more green space. One student from Minneapolis, however, commented that “you see pavement and buildings when you look out the window, but here you see grass and trees.”

Other comments were directed toward the issue of growth. In general, the Fargo/Moorhead area is seen as a growing community but it is considered to lack proper infrastructure and to have too much unplanned growth. Growth in this urban area is seen to be taking place at the expense of rural areas, which students feel is unhealthy for the state of North Dakota as a whole. As one student commented, “Fargo/Moorhead is growing partially through natural growth and partially through everyone from rural areas looking to retire or young people to find jobs. North Dakota has a problem with decay of the rural areas. Fargo/Moorhead is getting a little big, and I worry about that. It is maybe hitting some of the bigger city problems. It does have low crime, but it is attracting gangs.”

Students at four-year institutions in smaller towns outside of the Fargo/Moorhead community were more critical of Fargo/Moorhead. Some of these students, after visiting bars or shopping areas, described community residents as “snobbish” and as having a “superior attitude.” Others criticized the growth in the area for seeming unplanned and felt like neighbors in the Fargo/Moorhead community would be unlikely to help strangers in need. Students were concerned about schools, as well, feeling that the larger classroom sizes negatively affected the amount of learning students experienced, while requiring too much discipline. They also preferred to have their children in smaller schools so they could experience a variety of extracurricular activities without the

competition that excludes many children in larger schools like those in Fargo/Moorhead. Students who indicated they came from larger cities, many from the Minneapolis, MN, area, had opinions that directly contrasted students from the smaller towns. One student summed up, "You can say 'hi' to people in Fargo, and they aren't wondering what you're doing that for." One student said that she was attracted to the area when looking for a college because the area was so friendly. Another student referred to the community's response to the flooding in the spring of 1997. "This felt like a close-knit community in the flood of '97. It is warmer and friendlier than in the Cities." The same student commented that the community is clean and that he often hears good news in the community, instead of only bad news. Other students' comments centered on feeling safe to go out at night and that the schools are smaller in size and offer a good education. In general, while most students described Fargo as a safe place to live, some students were concerned that Fargo is beginning to have some of the same crimes that are problems for larger cities.

Community Approach

Topics concerning the drawing forces that would keep students in the Fargo/Moorhead area, as well as incentives driving their decision making about work/careers and perceptions of the area's employment opportunities, attractiveness, housing, and recreation opportunities revolved around the theme of community approach. The community was described as being friendly and, as many students agreed, a nice place to raise a family. However, many students indicated that they are not currently interested in having families, and that slogans announcing "low crime" and "clean air" were not meaningful to graduating students in pursuit of careers. Many students indicated they could see themselves returning to raise a family in Fargo/Moorhead after some years away. One student said, "This is a great community. I would want to travel, but raise a family in North Dakota. I wouldn't want to stay here as a 21-year-old, but I would come back to North Dakota to raise a family." Another student echoed this sentiment, but was a little more negative. She could see herself "raising a family in this area, coming back to the area, but right now, it doesn't matter. That is 5 to 10 years away." Some students suggested that even if they could see themselves coming back, they would probably grow roots in the meantime in other communities, which will prevent them from returning.

Many people grew up in the Fargo/Moorhead area and want to remain here because their "roots are buried here." They "like the area, and grew up not far from here." Some students from small towns perceive the community as offering more opportunity. One student said she "doesn't want to be a lifer" in her small town. Another student, who indicated she would be willing to move away from the area completely, said "I grew up in a small German community that is very conservative. The community is going to die. They want me to come back, but I won't die with them." The proximity of family and friends was an important issue for many students. One student said that if he could find a better job in Fargo/Moorhead than in Minneapolis, that would keep him here because it would keep him closer to his family in West Fargo. Another student who was exploring employment opportunities in other communities said, "I would like to have friends and family around, and that makes my decision difficult." For some who grew up in this area, however, it would be necessary to move to other communities in nearby states so they can remain close to their families but not "too close." While a portion of the students, many of whom grew up or currently lived in small communities, were pleased or satisfied with what the Fargo/Moorhead area had to offer in terms of job opportunities and amenities, another portion of the students had mixed feelings about the area.

The same student who said “Family, that’s the main thing,” also indicated that “there is nothing exceptional about the area.” Many other students were very critical of the area. These students responded negatively to questions about the drawing forces that would keep them in the area. They implied or openly declared they would not stay in Fargo/Moorhead under any circumstances. They also indicated they had no confidence in the ability of the community to make the changes required for them to stay here.

Legislative barriers were one area that students targeted as having a negative impact on the community. Specifically, students pointed to barriers in certain fields like nursing, education, and pharmacy that exist in North Dakota but not other states, as well as restrictions against snowmobiling which some students viewed as the best part of winter. Students criticized the cohabitation law for alienating North Dakota residents, especially younger people. They expressed disappointment at the state for not doing more about low salaries for teachers and others, and for failing to look at enough majors when discussing innovative strategies like student loan repayment programs. Students also felt that college students as well as other renters were being exploited by property owners in the community, and felt not enough was being done to inform renters of their rights. As one student described, “Landlords capitalize on students rent, and with students who don’t know their rights, landlords take advantage.” Another stated, “College apartments are not nice places. They look run-down, because they think college students will trash the place, so they don’t fix them up.” Several Moorhead students indicated that the selection is so poor there they rent in south Fargo instead.

The students at institutions in Moorhead believed that the city is missing opportunities by not building more rental units on the Minnesota side of the Red River. They encouraged Moorhead to take greater advantage of the college students attending its higher education institutions by building more apartments. As one student commented, “I would live in Moorhead if there was something to choose from.” Another student commented that “Fargo has done a really good job of making it affordable for students, while Moorhead has done a terrible job. You’d think they’d want to capitalize on the fact that MSUM got rid of one of the dorms, plus the 108 units they’re tearing down by the Holiday Mall.” Students also suggested redistributing subsidized housing to prevent isolation of renters in particular neighborhoods. One student stated, “Decentralize places like Romke park. We’re a segregated community.” Students felt that this change, along with providing newer and less expensive apartments, would improve the image of Moorhead overall. As one student summed up, “You have to change the perception of Moorhead. Start promoting it and make it less dependent on Fargo.” Another said, “Moorhead is more residential. Fargo is where they go to work and play, and then they come home to Moorhead.” Another Moorhead student stated, “Moorhead is a dependent community on Fargo. Most everybody who lives in Moorhead, works in Fargo. Moorhead needs more businesses. It is the largest city in western Minnesota, but there are no benefits that come from that.” Students generally indicated that they drive to Fargo to do business, though there have been some improvements with new centers like the Brookdale Mall in Moorhead.

An important concern that was discussed was the Fargo/Moorhead community’s approach toward diversity. One student expressed frustration that the ethnic minorities in the community were a burden to other residents, and that “the work force is getting burnt out from paying for everyone else.” Another student indicated that this type of opinion reflects the general ignorance that exists in the community about diversity. She felt that recognizing and celebrating diversity will be one of Fargo/Moorhead’s greatest and most important challenges. She said, “We need to be sensitized

about other cultures, maybe in the classroom, and they need to be sensitized to this culture as well. There's a lot of misconceptions about other cultures, but they're not that different." A student in a different focus group commented about the community's attitudes toward minorities, saying that "There is fear in the community, and they don't accept diversity. There are a lot of different cultures here, and the people contribute financially to the community. They aren't dragging society down. They're not living off the system anymore than any other people. They're actually working harder to survive, but don't seem to get the same respect as others." He said that the company he is interning with right now allows a Bosnian coworker to take her religious holidays off, which he feels shows that "they recognize and respect her diversity." Students who were familiar with various ethnic groups in the area said the community seems to be generally unaware of the different cultures that can be found here. There is also ignorance about the cultures themselves. Students want to see this diversity recognized and celebrated.

One student said they like the Cities because it is "more of the artsy type of place." The student continued, saying that for Fargo/Moorhead, that diversity "is out there, but it's hidden. The Cities show more diversity through art and food. Fargo/Moorhead has that, but it is not shown." One student said, "All there is here are bars and restaurants. There are not movie theaters and bike paths like in the Cities." Though this comment contradicts other students' perceptions of the community, several students indicated they have become aware of recreation and job opportunities by accident. Students indicated the community would benefit from better promotion of the resources that already exist, and said others would respond to a concerted effort to focus attention on what the community has to offer. Expanding the opportunities available, as well as drawing attention to those in the community already, would have an additional benefit. Students commented that they want more of a distinct personality to the area. One student said, "I like diversity, but it seems like everyone is the same around here." Another student stated, "There is no culture here. We are in a community that is big enough to have it's own culture, but we don't." Another comment encouraged the community to promote diversity and better promote itself because, "We're in a tough situation with the rural North Dakota and Minnesota people who come here. We need to find a culture, and celebrate the community. We are an All-American city, but there are not benefits to that. Do some PR work." One suggestion said, "Focus on downtown. Revitalize the older district for unique opportunities." Students said there needs to be "something that brings the Fargo/Moorhead area together. They need to span the river to bring the communities together."

Many students expressed feelings of frustration that the Fargo/Moorhead area is not young adult-oriented, which some described as not young adult-friendly. Students felt that a community of this size should have more recreation geared toward high school, college, and young adults. One student suggested having more "social places like clubs; somewhere youth can hang out without worrying about the older community's opinions." Another student said, "They don't do a good job of keeping people in their 20s here. Lots of people go to college here, some people leave and move back, but there's a gap of people in their 20s who aren't here." Another student echoed, "It's just the college kids, then all the people in the work world are 35 plus." Students also voiced frustration that the Fargo/Moorhead area does not have a "college culture" like those in many other communities of similar size, even those with fewer educational institutions. They also see this as a way to promote the community for people in their 20s and early 30s. Some discussed this phenomenon in terms of variety or appropriateness of activities for young adults, and others in terms of the lack of a physical area of town geared towards college students. However, two major concerns seemed universal.

Firstly, students felt that their presence as college students was, at best, not valued, and at worst, feared or resented. Students said they are treated like “nuisances” in the community, despite the economic contributions the colleges and their attendees make to the community are essential to its viability. As one student stated, “Celebrate the college students. They’re a big part of the community. Fargo and Moorhead don’t celebrate the fact that there are four colleges here. You’d think they’d be so happy to have all these kids come in and spend money in Fargo/Moorhead.” Another student commented that “If the colleges were to shut down, the town would shut down. Between the faculty and staff, even how much the students spend in their first week in the dorms, the community doesn’t realize the financial impact the college students bring. They just don’t realize how much they benefit from the colleges.” Students also felt that strategies like the Party Patrol were ineffective and served to further isolate college students. They indicated that consuming alcohol is a popular recreational activity in the community, but it is a reflection of too few interesting and positive alternatives for young people. As one student summed up, “North Dakota has one of the highest alcohol rates because there is nothing else to do.” Another student explained the barriers he experienced when trying to find a place in the community to hold an event for people, 18 years and older, that would allow alcohol for those 21 and older. He said, “Our organization’s chapter in Grand Forks did not have those problems at all.” Other students expressed frustration about the resistance toward new alternatives, like a juice bar. Another suggestion was to improve public transportation, especially between colleges and shopping areas, because “it is hard to get to businesses in this town if you don’t have a car.” Secondly, students think that the experience people have as college students in the community has a major impact on their decisions about where to live and find employment after graduation. Students expressed concern that a community that does not make its college students feel welcome cannot expect them to remain in the community after graduation. One student felt very strongly about this, indicating that “Some people do, but not a lot of people have a connection with the area. When I move from here, I’ll never have the feeling of missing Fargo. I’ll just drive right by.”

Other comments were directed toward the leadership at all levels. Students think the leadership has demonstrated short-sided vision, and continues to prevent the state from taking advantage of opportunities that would benefit everyone. Resistance to technology was frequently cited. One student stated, “With the e-commerce, it’s frustrating that North Dakota isn’t getting more involved. We don’t even have the fiber optics yet to do it. How long before it gets done?” In general, students said that leaders could “Push technology to attract people to North Dakota,” because “It’s a good state for technology.” Students also commented that we are limited by other people’s perceptions of the state. As one student summed up, “Every other person’s expectations of North Dakota are low.” Other students said, “People need to know what it is like to live in North Dakota. The state doesn’t do a good job of attracting people here.” Another student thought there should be greater understanding between rural and urban residents within the state as well because it “inhibits growth.” She said, “People don’t understand farms, even within their own state.”

Other student comments relating to community approach centered on the ideology of the community, which students described as “conservative” and “not progressive.” One student commented that “Fargo/Moorhead wants to become a big city but wants to keep the small town values. I don’t think that will work.” Students questioned why it seems like Fargo/Moorhead “is really behind everyone else.” Students comments about attitudes toward change, which they viewed as general resistance, were directed toward the state of North Dakota as much as the Fargo/Moorhead community in

particular. One student, who is a member of an organization for gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transsexuals in the community, said “The community as a whole is conservative. They handled the hate-crime issues against the 10% Society okay last fall. But businesses in this area are not willing to support differences. Here, I can be fired from any job because I’m gay. Why would I stay in a state that allows that?” Other comments addressed how people in general were not open to change, and demonstrated “close-minded” attitudes. Students asked the community to “change its conservative outlook” and “create more opportunities for kids.” Students describe the conservative atmosphere as stifling, and indicate that they want to have new experiences and try new things. One student said, “I’m just faster paced than Fargo people.” Students expressed that a sense of adventure is not being fulfilled for them in North Dakota or the Fargo/Moorhead area at this time. As one student summed up, “We need to build stuff and do things in the community that are new, that haven’t been here before. Ideas, parks, something. Expand the possibilities. Fargo/Moorhead needs to keep growing the way it has been. It is going in the right direction, but it’s not there yet.”

Recommendations

RECOMMENDATIONS

❑ ***Re-evaluate legislative barriers***

Students drew attention to specific legislative barriers. Nursing barriers center on the fact that North Dakota is the only state that requires an LPN to have the intent to go back to school to get an RN. This has a major impact on graduates from two-year institutions, who must get a four-year degree within a certain period of time to remain eligible to work in North Dakota. Pharmacy barriers include legislation that requires a pharmacist to own 51 percent of his or her business, and while recognizing this helps protect small businesses, students think it makes practicing pharmacy in the state very difficult for new graduates. Other barriers include laws that prevent snowmobiling enthusiasts from enjoying this form of winter recreation in the Fargo/Moorhead area. Students criticized the cohabitation law, and expressed frustration at the resistance shown to new ideas like having a juice bar in the community. They voiced dissatisfaction at the low salaries for North Dakota teachers. They suggested student loan repayment programs for students in a variety of majors. Suggestions also included seeing a greater commitment to diversity. Provisions for domestic partnerships and encouragement for businesses not to discriminate against employees based on sexual preference were also encouraged.

❑ ***Create a more young adult-friendly community***

Students think the community is not young adult-friendly. They would like to see more recreational opportunities geared toward high school, college, and young adult residents as well as a more progressive approach to changes and diversity.

❑ ***Focus on making the college experience for students a positive one so they are more likely to feel a commitment to the community after graduation***

Students would like to see more of a “college culture.” This suggests an open exchange of ideas as well as a physical section of town devoted to businesses and entertainment for college-age students. They see this as an investment in the future of the community, because as long as students feel like a “nuisance” in the community, they will not feel strong ties to the area after graduation. They also see this as a way to promote the community for people in their 20s and early 30s.

❑ ***Address housing issues in the community***

Students voiced concerns about affordable living in the area. Homes for purchase are viewed as too expensive when the area’s wages are taken into consideration. Apartments are seen as plentiful, but lacking in character and variety. Students would like to see more education on renter’s rights, and many would like to see more apartments in Moorhead. Students with families expressed frustration at finding suitable apartments, referring to apartments with three or more bedrooms, as well as availability of suitable recreation for children.

RECOMMENDATIONS (continued)

- ❑ ***Renovate downtown and create more of a sense of community for Fargo/Moorhead as a whole***

Pursue ways to improve recreation and a sense of community for Fargo/Moorhead. Students would like to see a focus on downtown. Specifically, they want older districts revitalized to create unique shopping, dining, and entertainment opportunities. They would also like to see some activities that “span the river to bring the two communities together.” Moorhead students encouraged efforts to improve the image of the community, and to make it less dependent on Fargo. Suggestions include making the area more pedestrian and biker friendly, which would require educating drivers about laws. This effort could be combined with an effort to improve driving in the area in general. Improved public transportation and promoting existing park and bike trails are additional suggestions.
- ❑ ***Better market recreation and job opportunities***

Promote resources that already exist. Some students indicated they have become aware of exciting recreational and job opportunities by accident. Others said they would benefit from a concerted effort focusing attention on what the community has to offer.
- ❑ ***Address pay issues and benefit packages***

Overall, students think the pay in the Fargo/Moorhead area is too low. They are clear they will accept positions that offer competitive benefit packages, opportunities for advancement, and a positive work environment over positions that offered high pay alone. Many students plan to accept positions with employers who offer the best overall packages, and are prepared to relocate. However, they indicated they would stay locally if competitive opportunities were available.
- ❑ ***Examine availability of job opportunities***

Students are concerned about the variety of jobs available in the Fargo/Moorhead area. Many would like to see larger businesses that could offer career advancement opportunities as well as travel opportunities. Some engineering students feel they are at a disadvantage if they want to stay in the area but are not interested in working in agriculture. Students in computer fields indicate they see few opportunities at non-competitive wages. Education majors indicate they cannot afford to teach in North Dakota. Other students expressed concern that there is an overabundance of jobs in the retail and service sectors, and feel future growth in the community will require diversification of employment opportunities.

RECOMMENDATIONS (continued)

- ❑ ***Address conflicts between entry-level labor force and employer's needs and expectations***

Several students were concerned they do not have the experience employers in the Fargo/Moorhead area are seeking. Students who would like to stay in the area indicate they are at a disadvantage because positions here require previous work experience, which students feel is difficult to gain as new graduates. Students suggested schools pursue closer relationships with companies. They believe increased emphasis on internships beginning early in their college careers will improve their employability upon graduation.
- ❑ ***Recognize and celebrate diversity***

This was a central topic of conversation among students. Students are interested in learning about other cultures. They feel there is a great deal of diversity in the community already, but it needs to be recognized and celebrated. Students would like to see increased education about diversity in the classroom (for themselves and their children) as well as events that showcase and celebrate the different cultures that exist in the community.
- ❑ ***Examine infrastructure issues***

Students perceive Fargo/Moorhead as a growing community, but there is too much unplanned growth taking place. While they recognize Fargo is an important community in North Dakota, they think unplanned growth will not benefit the area or the state in the long-term. Major symptoms include the decay of the rural areas, the number and similarity of apartment complexes, poor driving, decreased use of green space in neighborhood design, and an imbalance in the types of job opportunities available.
- ❑ ***Pursue opportunities with respect to technology and demonstrate an openness and willingness to change***

Students think the “conservative” and “non-progressive” attitudes of older residents and leaders are damaging to the area. They would like to see greater acceptance and openness to young people, ideas, and diversity. They view technology as a tremendous opportunity for North Dakota’s future. They think continued growth in the Fargo/Moorhead area will depend on taking advantage of opportunities in technology, while attracting people to the state.

Focus Group Questions