

NINA MOINI: This summer and fall, Minnesota's most recent high school graduates have been starting whatever comes next. That's different, of course, for each individual. But researchers found some patterns in the education and employment records of hundreds of thousands of people who graduated from 2008 to 2023 in greater Minnesota. Kelly Asche led this work for the Center for Rural Policy and Development, and he joins me now to tell us more about it. Thanks for being here, Kelly.

KELLY ASCHE: Thank you so much, Nina. Appreciate it.

NINA MOINI: What were you hoping to learn from analyzing where greater Minnesota's graduates went after high school? Why is it important to zero in on this population of folks?

KELLY ASCHE: Well, it stems from a long term trend that we've seen, starting before the pandemic, even, which is labor force shortages across rural Minnesota. And we're projected to have those shortages for many decades. Obviously, everyone knows the Baby Boomer generation is retiring. We don't have quite enough people to fill those positions.

And so workforce development, and employers, and educational folks are kind of sitting there thinking, like, OK, how do we fill some of these positions? How do we increase our labor force? And there's strategies as resident recruitment is being talked about quite a bit, or maybe popping into some of those populations that have high barriers to employment.

And then this is that third group of just the folks that they are investing in, and raising, and educating right in their region. And so it was important to figure out, yeah, where they're going, what are the numbers behind this. We have a lot of narratives around young people tend to leave the rural regions to go to metropolitan areas for university and opportunities. And we wanted to put some numbers to those, as well as trying to figure out if there were some characteristics related to these choices that these students are making to either leave or stay in the region. And so we took a look at these records and did some modeling to try and figure that out.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. I think that's such a great point, right? Because people can say things anecdotally for years, and that ends up having a real impact. So it's good to know what's really going on. And then maybe the hope is, then, people can do something differently to do something about that or try to work with that. Could you explain a little more about where the data does come from over all these years? We're talking 2008 to 2023.

KELLY ASCHE: Yeah. The main data source is actually from the office of higher education, who collaborates with the education department as well as DEED here in Minnesota. And they have all of the Minnesota high school records, individuals that went to high school, graduated high school in Minnesota. And then we're able to pair that up with Minnesota employment records from DEED. And, keep in mind, it's only Minnesota employment records. So if somebody leaves the state and works, we don't have those records-- as well as post-secondary records.

So we're able to follow the students after they graduate high school. And if they decided to go to post-secondary, we were kind of able to see where did they go? Where did they graduate? What year, what they graduated in, their majors, things like that. So it was a really robust, really nice data system.

NINA MOINI: Cool. And so I understand you divided graduates into three categories-- people who finish college, people who go straight into the workforce, and people who don't show up in education or employment records in the state. Can you talk about that? What does that mean, people who don't show up? How do you account for that?

KELLY ASCHE: Yeah. Really, what we were doing is, again, we're doing some modeling to try and figure out what are the main pathways. And those were the three. So folks that completed college were one group, where they were significantly related to having sustained workforce participation either in the region or somewhere in Minnesota. And then there was a workforce first, where they did not complete college and were heavily related to having sustained workforce participation in their region.

And then this last group, we kind of call them disconnected, but it really does have two different. So it has folks that have a Minnesota employment record but don't meet that kind of threshold that we would consider to be sustaining workforce participation, as well as folks that just kind of disappeared from our data set, meaning they didn't have a Minnesota employment record. They weren't going to college, and so just were kind of gone.

And, again, that group was non-college completers as well in our reports. Because if you don't go to college and you're not showing up in our employment records, it's likely that you are either not participating in the labor force just because of the way-- national statistics kind of bears that out in research that if you don't complete college and you're not showing up in our employment records, you may have started your own business, but it's unlikely.

NINA MOINI: There's been a lot of discussion, too, in recent years about how women are completing college at higher rates than men. What did the data show about how gender might be influencing these pathways?

KELLY ASCHE: Yeah. So being a female was highly related to completing college-- significantly higher. Off the top of my head, across all the regions, it was about 50% to 60% higher probability that they would complete college than their male peers.

NINA MOINI: Wow.

KELLY ASCHE: Yeah. Which was quite interesting. On the flip side, they were also related to being kind of in the non-sustained workforce participation too, obviously due to life circumstances and things like that. So it was interesting how females kind of went into both pathways there.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. And we tend to say, oh, "greater Minnesota." But we know that that is so much diversity within that and the different regions of greater Minnesota. Can you just describe the different regions and just maybe some key differences you might have seen?

KELLY ASCHE: Yeah, absolutely. So I will actually start with the, I call them, border state regions-- so Northwest and Southwest Minnesota. So they border North Dakota, South Dakota, and little bit of Iowa. And the patterns were pretty similar across the board. But where we would see these differences is when you got to those border regions, the percentage of high school graduates that would have no Minnesota employment record or go to college outside of the state was significantly higher. And that just points to that competition that those regions are facing.

North Dakota and South Dakota also are having labor force shortages. And so very competitive atmosphere or environment in which everybody's trying to get each other's young people to come to their state and participate in their labor force and college. Those were some of the big differences. In Northeast Minnesota, even though that's next to Wisconsin, did not see that very much.

Northeast actually was really interesting in that they had, I think, the highest percentage of their high school graduates complete college and do it in the region-- so either UMD, Scholastica, or the two-year colleges that are scattered throughout the region there. So that was really interesting. Northeast, we talk about a lot in terms of their economy and what are the opportunities up there. But there were some really good signals coming from the data that I think they'll be surprised by and happy about.

NINA MOINI: Wow.

KELLY ASCHE: Yeah.

NINA MOINI: Yeah.

KELLY ASCHE: And in Southeast Minnesota, again, even though they're bordering Wisconsin and Iowa, you didn't see as much pull into those states as Northwest or Southwest. And, again, I think you got that anchor of Rochester, and Winona, and health care just keeping the high school graduates in place a bit more.

NINA MOINI: Sure.

KELLY ASCHE: So Northwest and Southwest were definitely a little bit more of an outlier.

NINA MOINI: This stuff is really fascinating. And it's really important, right, because it can signal to these regions where to go next. I understand that you have events scheduled around the state to present these findings, along with panel discussions. How do you hope this information gets used, understanding it's a pretty high level analysis, right? But what are you hoping people take away from this?

KELLY ASCHE: Well, I really hope we just have a better conversation about what it means to retain our youth. We're not going to sit here and say, oh, we got to keep as many young people in our rural regions as possible. That's not the point here. But it is, I think, valuable to point out certain populations that maybe would benefit from more engagement.

So one of the big takeaways we saw in this report in our research was the role that, well, career and technical education, or CTE, which we use as a proxy for career awareness, regional career engagement with high schoolers-- the role that that's playing in not only keeping high school graduates in the region to work, but also keeping them into the regional college system-- so they're less likely to leave the region. They're more likely to attend and complete college in the region if they had higher CTE engagement.

And that makes you think, then, about these disconnected groups-- the ones that if you're disconnected, you barely took any CTE, if any at all, and you weren't engaged academically. And so that raises some questions about how do these programs approach these particular pathways or these students that fall into these pathways. And that's a great conversation. And I'm hoping it will raise some questions about how are we investing in some of these programs as well.

Because they're a little bit outside of the more traditional academic framework or institutional structures, and they play a pretty good role for our rural, regional labor force. And so I'm hoping that conversation will just strengthen those programs in investment and have better conversations around it.

NINA MOINI: Kelly, this is really fascinating and important stuff. Thanks for sharing it with us.

KELLY ASCHE: Yeah. Thank you so much for having me on. I appreciate it.

NINA MOINI: Kelly Asche is a senior researcher with the Center for Rural Policy and Development.