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To stay or go a complex decision for WKU graduates

By HUNTER FRINT Special to the Daily News Mar 10, 2018



Where to live, where to work, where to apply for jobs – the life of a college graduate is full of decisions. Local officials hope that when it comes to making those decisions, they choose Bowling Green.

According to the Western Kentucky University Fact Book, there were 20,277 students enrolled for the fall 2016 semester, and of those, only 3,384 were originally from Warren County.

Workforce Development Board CEO Robert Boone has been collaborating with WKU, Southern Kentucky Community and Technical College and Bowling Green city officials to work on a plan for student retention.

At a Feb. 22 Bowling Green Daily News town hall on improving Bowling Green and Warren County, Boone said retaining WKU students was one of the workforce board's top objectives.

“One underserved area in the past has been young people of college age,” Boone said. “We want to make sure that young people understand there are career options in this area.”

Most students move to Bowling Green from other towns and cities to pursue their undergraduate or graduate degrees. But, which factors draw these students to continue their life in the city post-graduation? Which drive them out and into other locations?

Leah Smith, 22

Leah Smith, 22, of Burkesville, said the decision to attend WKU was an easy one for her. She spent many summers in Bowling Green attending summer camps and participated in study abroad opportunities in high school offered through WKU.

Smith said she had a wonderful experience throughout her four years living in Bowling Green and attending WKU. With Burkesville only 1 1/2 hours away, she felt it was still close, but far enough away to experience something new.

“It was a big move from my one stoplight town, but not so big that it felt overwhelming,” she said.

However, after she graduated in 2017 with a degree in advertising, Smith packed up and made the even bigger move to Nashville where she now works for TEKsystems, an IT staffing and services provider. While Smith said she was sad to move away from her friends, she wanted a change of scenery after graduation.

“I was ready to make a move and try living in a larger city, which I love so far,” Smith said. “I love that there are more opportunities in a larger city. If your first job in Nashville doesn’t work out or isn’t a fit, there are a lot more places with opportunities to pursue than somewhere like Bowling Green.”

There wasn’t anything in particular that Smith said she disliked about living in Bowling Green – in fact, the small-town feel that some are turned off by genuinely appealed to her. But Smith said she thinks of the city as a place for people to attend college or raise a family.

“I’m not opposed to moving back to Bowling Green one day, but as a recent grad in my early 20s, a bigger city is just where I want to be right now,” Smith said.

Thomas Murphy, 22

Thomas Murphy, 22, of Louisville, resides on the opposite end of the spectrum when it comes to preference of city size.

“I like the size of Bowling Green,” Murphy said. “I’m not a fan of bigger cities, even though that’s contrary to what I’ve done.”

Murphy came to WKU knowing he wanted to study horticulture. He said the smaller program and the beautiful campus are what drew him to Bowling Green initially. Over time he found a close-knit group of friends and said he enjoyed the walking and biking accessibility of the downtown area and campus.

“I thought I was going to live in Bowling Green,” Murphy said. “That changed over time when I realized how limited my very specific career I wanted to do was.”

So, he graduated from WKU in May 2017 and moved to Massachusetts to work at the Polly Hill Arboretum. Located on Martha’s Vineyard, he spent nine months there as a curatorial intern.

Murphy is now making plans to move to Clarksville, Tenn., where he received the Fellowship of Eastern North American Botany at Austin Peay State University. He will pursue a master’s degree while working as a research assistant.

Like others who leave, Murphy said his main reason for moving is a lack of career opportunities in his field. He said he is interested in experiencing what other cities have to offer in the botanical field.

“I liked my friends, but also it’s hard because my job – anyone’s job – basically turns into your life,” Murphy said. “I’m willing to follow a job anywhere.”

Nate Morguelan, 31

It’s the people you surround yourself with that make a place home, according to Nate Morguelan, 31, partner of local advertising agency Yellowberri. Originally from Louisville, Morguelan graduated from WKU in 2009 with a psychology degree and blended right into the Bowling Green community.

After graduation Morguelan said he contacted Yellowberri because he was interested in creating a short film and eventually obtained an internship.

“I forced my way into a free internship, and brought a camera around, and was useful,” Morguelan said. “Now fast forward about eight years, and I’m a partner.”

Although he stuck around and got a job, he said the people were the deciding factor for putting down roots in Bowling Green.

Morguelan said he sees himself staying here for the foreseeable future. He likes to travel and plans to spend a third of the year elsewhere, such as Thailand and other places in Southeast Asia.

“I think Bowling Green makes for an excellent home base,” Morguelan said. “Everyone here could do what they’re doing somewhere else and make more money, but it’s definitely the people. For sure.”

Along with the people, he said the food and the music scene are two other facets to his decision to build a life in Bowling Green. He described the community surrounding Tidball’s, a local bar and music venue, as a huge family.

“When you have really great local music like this it’s easy to stay around this town,” Morguelan said.

While Morguelan had a plethora of nice comments about Bowling Green, he also said he sees why some people would decide to move. A major factor he described was “a frustrating lack of social progression.

“That will drive people away, for sure,” Morguelan said. “It will also make some people fight harder to try and help any cause they see fit.”

And he said he sees those people who care about the city’s future, and that they have the power to eventually make a difference.

Dallas Dowell, 23

Dallas Dowell, 23, graduated from WKU in May 2017 and said she has found a home in Bowling Green. Coming from New Hope, Dowell lived 30–45 minutes from almost any destination, so when she came to Bowling Green she said she fell in love with the new opportunities.

“I had never experienced any sense of community before and Bowling Green feels like a community,” Dowell said. “That’s what made me want to stick around, especially after graduation.”

Dowell came to WKU because it was a more affordable option than the University of Louisville. She studied international affairs as well as Asian religion and culture. Dowell said she stuck around after graduation for a multitude of reasons including friends, personal ambitions and a job opportunity.

“I had a year to work on myself and my goals and save money,” Dowell said.

While these things drew Dowell to stay, she said it is likely her career path will factor into moving away. Dowell, who currently works at PetSmart as an associate, is planning to apply to the U.S. Air Force.

Both Dowell’s father and brother are in the military, so that is a component behind her decision to join as well. Dowell said she is drawn to international opportunities within the Air Force, but mentioned the possibility of moving back to Bowling Green after her time in the military.

“When I move it will have nothing to do with any other state or city looking better,” Dowell said. “This is the first place that I’ve felt very connected to a lot of people, so I definitely would consider coming back.”

Daniel Salami, 22

Daniel Salami, 22, of Lagos, Nigeria, came to WKU in 2014 to study computer science. Salami did not think that once he graduated he would be looking for a job here, but when WKU offered him an opportunity to complete his graduate degree for free he decided to stay.

When he first arrived in Bowling Green he said the people here seemed genuinely nice, and the size wasn't intimidating considering the population of Lagos is 21 million.



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“The city itself didn’t make it too intimidating,” Salami said. “Although I did feel insecure about my accent at first.”

And although he describes himself as a “city guy” he said he is now very comfortable here. The fall 2017 graduate is currently going through the process of searching for a job because he said he would like to stay.

His reasons for enjoying Bowling Green include the food, his friends and the fact there is a fairly large international community.

“I’m actually really glad I’m here,” Salami said.

Kiefer Adkins, 27

Keifer Adkins, 27, of Somerset, made the move to Bowling Green when WKU offered him a scholarship, and when he took a tour of campus he said knew it was a good decision.

Adkins said he enjoyed his time as a college student, making friends and getting involved on campus with groups like Happy Gas, WKU’s improv troupe. After graduating in 2014 with degrees in history and theater, he eventually moved to New York City to pursue

acting.

When his mom passed away, Adkins moved back to Somerset in 2015 to be with family. Ultimately, Adkins said he ended up moving back to Bowling Green because it had better job opportunities, and he wanted to be somewhere familiar.

“I wasn’t really thinking about anywhere else but Bowling Green,” Adkins said. “I went to school here, and I knew it.”

So he packed up, moved down and rented a house with a friend. Somerset is only a two-hour drive away, so Adkins could go there to tend to investments like the house he owned and to check on his dad. Adkins says it was both friends and job opportunities that brought him back to Bowling Green, but the people were the most important factor.

“I had friends here still, so I had that support group and community more so than in Somerset,” he said. “That was probably the most rewarding aspect because I was going through a lot during that time.”

Initially, Adkins worked at a factory and several restaurants in town. He said he enjoyed the music scene and nightlife in Bowling Green for a while, but that he has slowed down since he works 50–60 hours a week. He currently works for GNC and Bowling Green Parks and Recreation.

Although Adkins doesn’t necessarily plan on living here permanently because a lack of acting opportunities, he said he sees why a lot of people choose to stay or come back. He listed the perks of living in Bowling Green as a continually developing community, the fact that it is close to larger areas like Nashville and Louisville and a close-knit feeling among the people.

“I think what makes Bowling Green a really good place to live is that sense of community,” Adkins says. “We really take care of our community here.”

What next?

Several initiatives are underway for retaining college graduates, especially when it comes to job opportunities.

Ron Bunch, CEO and president of the Bowling Green Area Chamber of Commerce, said he hopes Bowling Green could see an increase in the retention of graduates.

Bunch said that although there is data out there about what interests young professionals and what their needs are – what is likely to make them stay in an area – the chamber wants to have that conversation in a much more detailed way with the young professionals themselves.

“We want to integrate their needs into our community for the future,” he said.

According to the chamber of commerce, there are about 7,000 jobs currently available in the region, and Bunch said that number is expected to grow exponentially in the next 5-10 years.

Bunch said these are the reasons they are working with the Workforce Development Board, encouraging the hiring of Boone to reach out to this demographic. The board not only provides general career counseling, but also has access to companies regionally, as well as statewide, to help find suitable openings for students and walk them through applying.

“We will continue to work to cultivate job and career opportunities for graduates coming from the university,” he said.