

The Detroit News

Thursday, April 16, 2009

Lansing

Keep college grads to grow Michigan

Lou Glazer

Reversing Michigan's alarming population decline hopefully will rise to the top of the state's agenda. Particularly retaining and attracting recent college graduates. They are the key to restoring Michigan to high prosperity.

Why? Because employment growth and high wages are increasingly knowledge-based. Primarily in five broad sectors of the economy: information, finance and insurance, professional and technical services, health care and education. These industries, all of which have at least 30 percent of their employees with four-year degrees, are concentrating in the regions of the country with the greatest concentrations of college educated adults.

Unfortunately Michigan ranks 34th in college attainment. In a flattening world where work can increasingly be done anyplace by anybody, the places with the greatest concentrations of talent win.

Michigan Future Inc. asked the 2007 graduates of the state's public universities where they decided to live after college and why. Of the most mobile -- those in their 20s and without children -- who entered the labor market, about half left the state. Their top 10 destinations: Illinois, California, New York, Washington, D.C., Ohio, Texas, Wisconsin, Washington state, Minnesota and Virginia.

In fact, more went to Chicago than any state.

The pattern: They are moving to those places where the economy of the future is most concentrated. In those states, they are moving to big metropolitan areas anchored by vibrant central cities.

These clearly are the places we should look to when we develop an agenda for Michigan's future.

Now these are not the states where foreign automakers are locating their new factories -- states that many want us to emulate. The seven that have won those plants from 2003 to today are Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, South Carolina, Texas, Indiana and Georgia. These lower-tax states may compete successfully for new factories, but except for Texas they are not where our

college graduates are choosing to live and work. And except, for Texas, they all have low per-capita incomes and now unemployment rates above the national average.

Why would we want to be like them?

To recreate a high prosperity Michigan -- a place with a broad middle class -- we need to build the kind of knowledge-based economy that is growing in the places our college-educated kids are moving to. The focus of that agenda should be on preparing, retaining and attracting talent.

Specifically our priorities should be:

- Creating a state that is welcoming to all. If our communities are not welcoming to talent from all backgrounds and any place on the planet, talent will go elsewhere.
- Transforming teaching and learning so it is aligned with the realities of a flattening world.
- Ensuring the long-term success of a vibrant and agile higher education system. This means increasing public investments in higher education -- particularly the major research institutions.
- Creating places where talent wants to live. For an increasing portion of mobile young talent, that means high-density, mixed-use, walkable and safe neighborhoods, especially in and around central city downtowns.

So as political and business leadership develop an economic growth agenda, one suggestion: Talk to your kids and their friends. Nearly all will be or are college graduates. Where they decide to live and work will, in large part, determine the future prosperity of the region and state.

Lou Glazer is president of Michigan Future Inc., an Ann Arbor think tank that focuses on how the state can succeed in a knowledge-based economy (michiganfuture.org). E-mail: letters@detnews.com.