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Lights of the big city entice college grads

Michigan struggles to retain young, educated work force after graduation

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After he graduates from Michigan State University, Tyler Fulmer is on his way back home to Coldwater, but probably not for long.

"I just see more opportunity in Chicago," said Fulmer, who majored in advertising.

"It's a large city that offers more diverse jobs. And the lifestyle, there's millions of different people clumped up in one area, so you can diverge into all different sectors of what you want to do when you grow up."

If he goes, he'll have company. Kelley Bishop, executive director of Career Services & Placement at MSU, estimates that 10 percent of MSU's 2008 graduating class is already there.

Brain drain has been a concern in Michigan for years. As the economy has worsened, the flight of the young and educated has only increased.

In 2001, 24 percent of MSU's graduating class left Michigan. In 2007, 49 percent did.

And, while the numbers for the Class of 2008 haven't been finalized yet, it appears that an even higher number of students are leaving, Bishop said.

Which, from the perspective of the state and of local communities, is a bad thing, bad for tax revenues (educated people tend to earn more) and bad for Gov. Jennifer Granholm's efforts to double the number of college graduates in the state.

"Every student who leaves takes the Michigan economy with them," said Lou Glazer, president of Michigan Future Inc., which released a report last month emphasizing the importance of talented, educated individuals to the state's economic future.

"In an increasingly knowledge driven economy, your ability to both retrain and also attract talent, particularly mobile young talent, is going to determine how prosperous you are," Glazer said.

Big city allure

Garrett Warnell got into graduate school at both MSU and the University of Michigan. He chose the University of Maryland at College Park instead.

Warnell, who graduates today and plans to go on to a PhD program in electrical and computer

engineering, made that decision mostly because he felt Maryland was a better fit.

But the attractions of nearby Washington, D.C. and the desire to experience life outside of Michigan had something to do with it.

"I don't know that Michigan was really driving me away," he said, "but there is a desire to get a different perspective on things."

Plus, he interned last summer at Lockheed Martin in Manassas, Va., also near D.C., and the city "made a good impression on me, I guess. It's a big city. There's a lot going on. There's a lot of young people."

Students' reasons for going don't necessarily break down into neat categories. Graduating MSU seniors interviewed last week said a range of factors, from job opportunities to family ties to weather, played into their decisions to stay or go.

But, for many who are leaving, the idea of place played a role, the desire to go somewhere a little more exciting, younger, more urban than what they thought they could find in Michigan.

That's important, Glazer said. He cited a 2006 study prepared for the group, CEOs for Cities, showing that two-thirds of college graduates decided where they wanted to live first and looked for work after.

If the state is going to improve its economic fortunes, he said, politicians are going to have to take more seriously the idea that jobs follow talent and talent often follows lifestyle.

If Michigan hopes to become more successful, he said, it's going to have to become cooler, which means focusing on central cities, on creating vibrant walkable neighborhoods.

"There is no Chicago in Michigan," said Allie Osmar, a 2007 MSU graduate who moved to the Windy City to find work in advertising.

"I don't have a car here," she said. "I don't need a car. I can take public transit everywhere and I really like that. I have everything I need right here. If Michigan had that, it would be a different story."

Opportunities here

Michigan does have some of that, local leaders argue. It's just a matter of letting students know it's there.

Andrea Ragan directs the city of Lansing's "Linking Lansing & U" program, meant to connect students from the area's colleges to local jobs and to "make students much more aware of what an appealing destination we are."

For example, after a job shadow day in March, the program hosted an afterglow reception at Troppo.

The presence of MSU, Lansing Community College, Cooley Law School and Davenport University, she said, provides ample opportunities for building the region's skilled work force.

"If they're coming here for their education and they leave afterwards, we've missed that opportunity," she said. "They're leaving us because they didn't really grow roots, or they didn't really know what

was available in the community is how I see it."

Saying that place and lifestyle is important isn't the same thing as saying jobs and a solid economy aren't.

With opportunities in the auto industry vanishing, Bishop said he's not surprised that out-of-state companies are having more success recruiting MSU students.

His office isn't in the business of telling students to stay.

"We're not going to say, 'You owe it to the state of Michigan. You can't leave now,'" he said.

But he does try to let students know the opportunities available here, "to level the playing field for these other employers who are emerging in the economy in Michigan, but need help competing for students."

And at least some students say they'd stay if they could.

"I like Michigan, personally," said Vanessa Cicos, an MSU senior who is hoping to go into publishing. "I don't know why people always want to leave, but all the jobs I've applied for are out of state."

"It sucks," she added. "I hope I don't have to take one."

Additional Facts

By the numbers

21

Percentage of Michigan State University's 2001 graduating class who left the state

49

Percentage of the 2007 graduating class that did so

4,737

Number of MSU undergraduate degree candidates this year

1,857

Number of advanced degree candidates

Source: MSU
