

Business leaders want to keep Michigan's talented youths

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MACKINAC ISLAND -- Michigan businesses could use more Bruce McCullys.

Raised on an Antrim County farm, McCully started a computer technology business while attending the University of Michigan a decade ago. He could have settled anywhere after leaving college, but chose his home state -- a decision too few of Michigan's well-educated young people are making these days.

How to find and retain youthful talent is a prominent theme of this year's Detroit Regional Chamber Mackinac Policy Conference, attended by about 1,700 business and political leaders -- most from the Detroit metro area.

"We don't have a strategy for recruitment and retention, which is giving us a competitive disadvantage," Tammy Carnrike, the chamber's chief operating officer, said Thursday. "What needs to happen to build a quality community that has the assets that young professionals are looking for?"

Although Michigan's overall population grew between 1990 and 2007, the number of residents in the 25-to-34 age group fell by 312,796 -- a nearly 20 percent dropoff.

In 1990 and 2000, Michigan ranked 24th among the states in its proportion of residents between ages 18 and 34. But by 2007, its ranking had fallen to 38th.

"The economy was so strong in the 1990s that we were able to hold our own, but it's really dropped significantly since 2000," said Kurt Metzger, research director for the United Way of Southeast Michigan. Metzger is among a panel of experts scheduled to discuss the problem during a Saturday session with a group of young professionals.

A survey of more than 5,000 recent graduates of Michigan's public universities between October 2007 and March 2008 found that nearly half had left the state, said Louis Glazer, president of Michigan Future Inc., a policy research firm. "That's a horrific number," he said.

McCully, 30, said he stayed in Ann Arbor because he liked the area and it was a good setting for his business.

"There's a ton of opportunity here," he said.

But he acknowledged that only a handful of his college pals had stayed in Michigan. To get them back will take a combination of better jobs and improved quality of life in larger cities -- particularly Detroit, he said.

"We need to focus on creating a place, a downtown, where people want to be," McCully said. "I don't think that's where we're at right now."

Michigan continues to suffer from a culture that puts too little emphasis on higher education, Glazer said. That's because for much of the 20th century, automakers and other manufacturers provided good-paying jobs that did not require college degrees.

Some blame Michigan's brain drain on gloomy weather or high taxes, he said. But many of the most prosperous states -- and those most popular with young professionals -- are in the Northeast, a region not known for low taxes or sunshine.

"My argument is, college-educated folks like public services," Glazer said. "Taxes are an indication of affluence and education, not a problem. They pay for public transit, arts, parks, good schools. The only way to grow an economy is with public investments."

David Joos, chief executive officer of Consumers Energy Co., said the key to attracting young people was simple: improving the business climate.

"Folks coming out of college in Michigan with good educations who are wanting to stay are having trouble finding jobs in Michigan," he said. "Until we address that issue, it's going to be difficult to keep kids here."