

IN OUR OPINION

Get smarter about keeping grads in state

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MACKINAC ISLAND -- Here in a place that doesn't change by design, the conversation since Wednesday has been all about what Michigan must do differently. And there is a palpable sense of urgency about it at the Detroit Regional Chamber's 28th annual policy conference, spurred by a new report showing that new college graduates are fleeing the state in droves, convinced their future lies elsewhere.

There's a mix of perception and reality in this, but one feeds the other. The net effect is an export of brainpower that simply has to be slowed if Michigan is going to compete in a knowledge-based economy.

Here's what Lou Glazer, the founder and president of the Michigan Future Inc. think tank, learned in an online survey of 5,360 2007 graduates of Michigan universities, or 17.4% of all those who earned their degrees in 2007:

- 80% of them were under 30 and childless -- in other words, highly mobile; 46% of them had left the state.
- Their top destinations were Illinois, California and New York, followed by Ohio, Texas and Wisconsin, meaning, Glazer said, "weather is not a big factor in the decision-making."
- The departed split pretty evenly between those who decided where they wanted to live and then sought work there and those who took the best job they could find, wherever it was.

For its part, the chamber hopes to slow this flow with an ambitious new program -- the largest such effort anywhere -- to establish 25,000 internships for Michigan college juniors, hoping young people can turn these opportunities into permanent jobs in Michigan while businesses use the program to build a pipeline of local talent.

But the public policy issues are larger. If the current outflow continues or accelerates because of real -- or perceived -- problems in the Michigan economy, the state, even with its shrinking support for higher education, is in effect subsidizing an export of brainpower that the state cannot afford. The state needs to be thinking about incentives to retain graduates in the fields that Michigan needs, logically with some help paying for college in return for a commitment to take a job in Michigan for several years.

The other issue is the perception that Michigan is a fractious, screwed-up place that simply

doesn't work anymore, with an economy rooted in another era, that's it's a good place to be from rather than a good place to be. The conduct of public officials contributes to this perception. Their ability to work together for the common good undercuts it.

Among the messages emerging for public officials from attendees at this week's policy conference: Let's be grown-ups, folks. The kids are watching.

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