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Inspire grads to stay in Michigan

New internship program can help turn tide on state brain drain

MACKINAC ISLAND -- Lou Glazer hears it all the time.

The president and cofounder of the Michigan Future Inc. think tank will often be talking with an audience about what's right and wrong with the state economy when a parent in the crowd will complain that his or her newly graduated son or daughter had to leave the state to find work. Later in the same session, a business owner will gripe about not being able to find qualified young employees.

There's a disconnect here, and it's not the only reason, but certainly a factor, in the very real "brain drain" that Michigan is experiencing. Early results from a Glazer survey of 2007 graduates of Michigan universities show about half leaving the state. The expats are pretty evenly split between those who decided where they wanted to live and went there to find work and those who went wherever the best job was.

It's the latter group that the Detroit Regional Chamber hopes to do a better job of retaining with a big new program, largest of its kind in the country, that aims within a few years to establish 25,000 internships at southeast Michigan companies for juniors at the state's universities. The plan is for the first of them to be available by this fall through a portal Web site where employers can post openings and college advisers can recommend student applicants.

Did you know that eight of 10 people who successfully complete an internship end up taking a full-time job with the same company?

"It's just a statistical fact that when a student gets an internship, they tend to stay," said Dan Little, chancellor at U-M Dearborn and one of the architects of the program on the academic side. "Especially in times like these, an intern can be a tremendous help to a business, and it creates a natural talent pipeline."

On the one hand, cheap help. On the other, an opportunity structured around completing degree work. And, really, an audition, too, for a post-college career.

The chamber is launching the program with \$500,000 from a federal grant under the WIRED (Workforce Innovation in Regional Economic Development) program. It was one of the few concrete steps announced this week at the chamber's annual policy conference on Mackinac

Island, where many discussions were dominated by fretting over the exodus of educated young people from Michigan.

Glazer produced the first real data on the departing, and it landed with a thud on the gathering.

It's not just that Michigan people are saying good-bye to their sons and daughters, which is depressing enough. It's also that smart young people are a necessary component of economic rejuvenation for Michigan -- and they're leaving. Other Glazer research draws a bright line between education levels and personal income.

In the heyday of American manufacturing, Michigan, with its good-paying factory jobs, was at or near the top of states in personal income. That ended around 2000, Glazer said. Hmm, didn't we have a recession starting about then? Or was that a tectonic shift in the state economy?

The wealthiest parts of the country now are those with the highest percentage of college graduates -- Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York.

"The places with the greatest concentration of talent win," Glazer said. "And smart people tend to be mobile. Watch where they go. Robust economic activity will follow."

Right now, Michigan is watching too many of them go away.

Some will always be leaving, no matter what shape the state economy. That's just what young people do, and it's the right time to do it.

But for others, the choice is wrenching. It means striking out on your own, leaving friends and family and a state that, with all its problems, can be pretty comfortable, like that old couch that just lulls you to sleep during a Tigers game.

I would hate to think that some of the young people in whom the state has made an investment through public support for higher education are leaving against their will not for lack of opportunity but for lack of knowledge of the opportunities available.

The chamber's internship program is one way to address that.

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