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Grads go full circle — back to state

After 'brain drain,' many in 30s, 40s return, study says

By JOEL DRESANG

jdresang@journalsentinel.com

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After years of concern about Wisconsin's brain drain, now there's evidence of a "boomerang" effect.

Researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison have found that although Wisconsin suffers a slight loss overall of college-educated residents, the drain is mostly among graduates in their 20s. In fact, the state has net gains among college grads in their 30s and 40s.

"That's a heartening development," said John Karl Scholz, an economist and co-author of a working paper on the research. "If it continues, that's clearly a source of strength for the state, because clearly college-educated people in their thirties and forties are likely to be putting deeper roots in the community, and that's a good thing. The trend is good."

The state's chief labor economist agrees.

"To me, that's exactly what we want," said Dennis Winters, chief economic adviser in the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development. "It tells me that Wisconsin is everything we've been telling everybody it is. It is a great place to raise kids."

Not only are the older college-educated workers more likely to acquire real estate and raise

families, but they tend to bring with them higher earnings and the seasoning that comes from working elsewhere.

"The experience that people gain from seeing different perspectives and different regions and how problems and issues are handled by different corporations and by different governments is really valuable. And I think that value can really be brought home here in filling some of the talent needs that our companies have," said Gale Klappa, chairman, chief executive officer and president of Wisconsin Energy Corp. and We Energies.

Comings and goings

At issue is a sense of lost investment. Wisconsin's public universities alone graduate about 30,000 students a year. Yet, Wisconsin has less than its share of college-educated residents: just 25% of its 25-and-older population have bachelor's degrees, compared with 27.2% nationally; 30.7% in Minnesota; and 29.2% in Illinois.

By looking at population movement, Scholz and fellow researcher Yeri Lopez have found from census data that Wisconsin suffered a net out-migration of about 7,000 college graduates between 1995 and 2000. That's similar to the net loss between 1975 and 1980, but an improvement from a net exit of 18,000 between 1985 and 1990.

Breaking it down by age, the most recent figures show that most of the college graduates leaving Wisconsin were between 22 and 29 years old. The state boasts net gains among thirty-somethings and forty-somethings.

"It paints a pretty good picture," said Bill McCoshen, executive director of Competitive Wisconsin Inc. The non-political consortium of Wisconsin farm, business, labor and education leaders requested the research and is preparing strategy recommendations based on the results.

Dale Knapp, research director for the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance, also has studied the comings and goings of Wisconsin's college-educated and come up with similar findings. Not only are newly minted college grads the most mobile group, but they generally pursue different priorities, he said.

"Net pay is bigger for younger people," Knapp said, "and services, quality of life, become more important as you grow older."

Evidence of a boomerang supports anecdotal observations of Wisconsin graduates taking flight, often to circle back home later on.

"I think a lot of younger alumni do find their best first opportunities out of state," said Michael

Knetter, dean of the business school at UW-Madison. "But we do see, and I do meet, plenty of alumni who reach a stage of career where they'd like to find a way to move back to the Midwest for a combination of family and lifestyle reasons."

Bringing them back

While it's good to attract older college grads, Knetter said, more still must be done to build a cadre of fresher brainpower. He cited separate research from UW that suggests Wisconsin doesn't have enough of the sorts of jobs that attract bright young college graduates.

"I actually think we are under-represented in the right kind of jobs," Knetter said. "It's a consequence of how the state developed and how the global economy evolved that we're just not in the sectors that have been hot. There's not a lot you can do about that. Economies don't change overnight." He added that building a biotechnology cluster between Milwaukee and Madison is a step in the right direction.

Personally, Knetter says the UW post is why he moved back to Wisconsin. But it helped that he had an affinity for the state - and family here. Knetter grew up in Rhinelander, graduated from UW-Eau Claire, then went off for his doctorate at Stanford. UW recruited him from Dartmouth in 2001.

Similarly, Winters graduated from Madison East High School and UW before pursuing his graduate degree in Colorado. He worked in St. Louis and Boston before returning with his family to Madison.

"Boomerangers" is what Winters calls his ilk. And inspired by the UW research, Winters says he plans to probe deeper.

For instance, beyond age and education, there's little known about the occupations, incomes and family structures of college grads leaving the state,. And Knapp notes that it's not even clear to what degree those moving to Wisconsin in their 30s and 40s are boomerang residents.

"My guess is there's a significant number that are, but we really don't know much about those people," Knapp said.

Scholz says the number of college grads moving in and out is relatively small: a net loss of 7,000 people in a labor force approaching 3 million.

Still, he says, the net influx of older college-educated workers is a positive development to build on.

"It's a strength of Wisconsin, something that the state can and should continue to try to

capitalize on," said Scholz.

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