Fighting brain drain: Where do all the good grads go?

By Tanya Brown

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Christine Schroeter graduated from Purdue University in May with a vibrant Hoosier future.

But the full benefits and plentiful perks at Michigan's Ford Motor Co. lured her across state lines.

Schroeter illustrates the phenomena known as brain drain – a problem so profound that the percentage of Indiana's population over age 25 with a bachelor's degree is just four places away from last in the United States.

"Indiana is not a bad place, but it seems kind of ordinary," Schroeter said. "I had some offers in Indianapolis, but I had to go where the best package was."

As Purdue welcomes a new class, the question isn't just how to graduate students. It's how to stop this mass exodus.

Stan Jones, Indiana commissioner for higher education, said the problem isn't that students don't attend college.

"We're educating students at a higher rate, but we can't keep them, primarily because we don't have the jobs in Indiana that require four-year degrees," he said.

"Students are drawn to big-name companies because they're familiar. IBM, Boeing -- those are more attractive for students than working for a smaller Indiana company."

Take Angela Nelson, an incoming Purdue freshman who was born and raised in Lafayette.

Nelson admits that she already sees herself leaving her home state after graduation.

"I never really thought about how it would affect Indiana," she said. "I don't want to do what's easiest just to make the money, but not everyone wants to start their own business. That's a lot of responsibility."

It's a complex question for an 18-year-old who is still unpacking boxes at her rental home.

"It's easier to work for other people," she said. "And Indiana is such a farming state. If I could get a good job here, I guess I'd stay, but I still want to travel."

Purdue is out to show Nelson and students like her that opportunities can be as plentiful as corn in this state, provided you know where to look.

One year after Purdue's Opportunity for Indiana program began, using a $3.5 million grant from the Lilly Endowment, progress is slowly being made.
Kimberly Shea, intern coordinator for the Discovery Learning Center, also keeps tabs on the interns for Indiana program, one leg of the Opportunity for Indiana platform.

Shea helps match juniors, seniors and graduate students with Indiana companies in a variety of fields.

Luring with internships

During the school semesters, students work 200 to 300 hours, while summer internships typically encompass 400 hours.

The students are paid $3,000 for a semester’s work in the academic year and $4,500 for a summer.

“It’s a competitive process, both for the students and the companies we match them with,” said Shea. “We had three times as many students apply this summer as we could take. We only take the older students, because they are closer to graduating and could go on to work.”

The National Association of Colleges and Employers reported this year that college students who have participated in an internship are more likely to stay with their employer than students who lack that experience.

Richard Bowerman would like to.

The 21-year-old worked at Griffin Analytical Technologies in West Lafayette during his internship.

“This works,” said the Purdue senior. “Now I’d really like to stay in Indiana. I’ve got roots here and it lets me realize that there are opportunities in Indiana for people with computer science degrees. I would’ve bet against that before the program.”

Closer to home

Ivy Tech Community College is another piece of the complicated stopper for brain drain leakage.

David Bathe, chancellor for the Lafayette region, said 90 percent of Ivy Tech-Lafayette graduates find work within 50 miles of their homes.

Two-year degrees from a school where enrollment has grown nearly 120 percent since 1999 give those students the confidence to transfer to four-year institutions, Bathe contends.

“If you look at the economies of places like Massachusetts, Florida and California, with these extended community college systems that were developed 50 years ago, you see that that’s where industry goes. That’s where they build the high-tech and service industries.”

Building industry is also a goal of Purdue’s Opportunity for Indiana program.

The Big Ten school has instituted business plan competitions to encourage entrepreneurs to take risks.

The three competitions, held on Purdue campuses, have a prize package of $50,000 each. First place wins $25,000.

“If I gave you $25,000 and told you to start a business, you’d be hard-pressed to do it,” said Don Blewett, associate director for the Burton D. Morgan Center for Entrepreneurship in Discovery Park.

“But if you come to make it into the final five, you can be assured that you’ve done a good job with your business plan, and you can take it to a local lender or venture capitalist for help.”

Slow climb

And while every little bit helps, commissioner Jones said nothing is going to work overnight.

“Indians is still heavily dominated by manufacturing and agriculture,” he said. “This has been going on for probably 25 or 30 years.”

Statistics back him up. Since 1999, U.S. Census statistics show that Indiana has been ranked as high as 33rd and as low as 49th in bachelor’s degree attainment, but it hasn’t consistently gotten better.

Real progress, he cautions, could take 10 to 20 years.

“This is moving a rock up a mountain,” Jones said. “It’s going to take a lot of work and a lot of time.”