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Losing Ohio's Future:

Why college graduates flee the Buckeye State and what might be done about it

Ohio's best-and-brightest college students may love the Buckeye State, but too many can definitely live without it, according to a new survey from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

According to the survey, 88 percent of native Ohioans attending seven top universities in the state are proud of Ohio, but most—51 percent—plan to leave after graduation. Among non-Ohioan undergraduates, 79 percent believe their future lies outside the state.

The survey, *Losing Ohio's Future: Why college graduates flee the Buckeye State and what might be done about it*, fleshes out the idea of the "brain drain" that has been buffeting Ohio for at least a quarter century. However, the survey results are especially disturbing given the state's recession-battered economy, 10-percent unemployment rate (more than 600,000 people on unemployment rolls), the loss of 235,000 jobs in the last year, and attempts to boost not only the state's education system but its high-technology future with massive Third Frontier spending and a focus on green technologies.

"We need our best and brightest to invest their energy and future in Ohio to generate the economic vigor, new technologies, and other economic developments that will spur the progress we need to modernize and prosper. They are the key to the state's ability to pay its bills and meet its future promises," said Terry Ryan, vice president for Ohio programs and policy for the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. The institute is an education-policy think tank based in Ohio and Washington, D.C.

The challenge is great, but—among the many challenges that Ohio faces in 2009—this one contains the possibility for reasonable and feasible response, starting with Ohio's higher-education system. The state is blessed to have 75 four-year institutions of higher education serving more than 620,000 students. Three of these institutions are ranked in the top-100 universities nationally by the *U.S. News and World Report*.¹ Ohio also has 49 two-year institutions of higher learning. Institutions of higher education in Ohio awarded more than 110,000 degrees in 2008.

The FDR Group, a non-partisan opinion-research firm in New York City, conducted the survey for Fordham. It is believed to be the first study to utilize an Internet social networking site to reach respondents. Using Facebook and random samples provided by colleges, the FDR Group interviewed 811 sophomores, juniors, and seniors at Case Western Reserve University, Kent State University, Miami University, Oberlin College, Ohio State University, Ohio University and the University of Dayton. The results, however, could probably be extended to graduates of all of Ohio's four-year public and private colleges and universities.

Here are some findings:

- 89 percent say good jobs will be very important in deciding where to live after graduation. Only 11 percent give Ohio excellent prospects.
- Among all students surveyed, 58 percent plan to leave the state (51 percent of native Ohioans and 79 percent of non-Ohioans). Most plan to live where they believe job prospects and cultural and leisure-time activities are better.
- Students are more concerned about success and money than about public service and the environment.
- The ideal job should have good opportunities for promotion and pay increases – 74 percent say this is very important, while 53 percent want work that regularly involves new challenges;
- 14 percent say union protection is very important, yet 61 percent say it will be very important to them to find a job with good pension and retirement benefits.

There are practical steps Ohio can take to improve the odds of keeping more of its best and brightest here. The survey offers insights into how they might be convinced to remain:

- 60 percent say they like the idea of a state cash grant for a down payment on a home as an enticement to remain in Ohio after graduation;
- More than half are very interested in internships in local businesses and organizations (59 percent), co-op programs (53 percent), and opportunities to meet with local companies (52 percent);
- 65 percent say a state income-tax credit for those who stay in-state for 10 years would be appealing.

The Fordham Institute became interested in Ohio's brain-drain issues because of its work to improve public education. "We often hear school district officials, especially those serving needy children, lament the difficulty they face in finding and recruiting talented principals and expert teachers in fields like math and science," Ryan said.

In fact, the survey indicates there is opportunity on this front:

- 37 percent of the students surveyed would consider being a public-school teacher, and another 18 percent would consider other careers in education;
- 29 percent of science and math majors would consider teaching in a public school;
- 61 percent of students surveyed like the idea of forgiving student loans for graduates who spend a certain number of years in education.

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The Thomas B. Fordham Institute (www.edexcellence.net) is a nonprofit organization that conducts research, issues publications, and directs action projects in elementary/secondary education reform at the national level and in Ohio, with special emphasis on our hometown of Dayton. It is affiliated with the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. The Institute is neither connected with nor sponsored by Fordham University.

ⁱ “Best Colleges 2009,” *U.S. News & World Report*, <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/college/>.