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Study show students don't perceive career opportunities in Wisconsin

Wisconsin's brain drain problem may primarily be one of perception, according to a survey of more than 1,000 college-age students in the state.

Results of the two-year study come at the start of what will be the last several months in Wisconsin for many college students — those who graduate and, as part of the brain drain phenomenon, will leave the state to launch their careers or who will not return to their native Wisconsin after getting an education in other states.

“There has been a lot of talk about the brain drain issue in Wisconsin, but much of that talk has been focused on what business leaders and lawmakers think,” said David Niles, co-owner of Productive Knowledge Inc. in Elm Grove, which directed the study. “We wanted to find out what students think about the issue, because it really is about them.”

The study, “College Students' Career Preferences Survey,” partially revealed that “college students are listening closely to the perceptions that each state has developed over time and, based on those perceptions, some states quickly take a back seat when career destinations are considered,” said Jim Weiss, partner at Productive Knowledge.

“While our focus was mainly on Wisconsin students, we also wanted to learn what students from other states think about career opportunities here – those who are attending college in Wisconsin and those who are not,” Weiss said.

Many of the respondents said they simply do not see career opportunities for them in Wisconsin, but many also said they had not looked closely at what state businesses have to offer.

“The research found that many students don't think Wisconsin has opportunities for them to launch well paying, challenging careers,” said William E. Lowell, CMC, who directed the survey in conjunction with Productive Knowledge. “This study indicates that, despite all the discussion of the brain drain issue, Wisconsin's college-age students are still not getting the message that this state does have what most of those students are seeking to start their careers.”

Lowell, president of Business Development Directives in Eagle, Wis., is also an instructor at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater and engaged three of his Public Opinion classes to conduct the survey.

“I wanted to give the students real life experience conducting an opinion poll,” Lowell said. “The brain drain issue arose during a discussion with the people of Productive Knowledge regarding Wisconsin business conditions. It seemed to be a good fit for the survey.”

While the overall research results show a perception of a lack of opportunity in Wisconsin, many of the students who conducted the survey came away with a more positive outlook as a result of their work, Lowell noted.

One of those students was Josh Silldorff, currently a senior majoring in advertising.

“Before the survey, I didn't believe there were many career opportunities for me in Wisconsin when I graduate,” said Silldorff. “I thought that the only way I would be able to stay in Wisconsin and still pursue my desired career in advertising/marketing would be if I were to get into one of the few companies around here. I soon found that there are many job opportunities that pertain to advertising and marketing right here in Wisconsin.”

His comments were echoed by Megan Reyenga, who said, “I have thoughts of leaving Wisconsin to find a career, but after conducting this survey and doing some research about what Wisconsin has to offer, I found that there are a lot of opportunities for graduates in this state; you just have to go looking for them.”

Another student who worked on the survey, Kathryn L. Miglautsch, said she already was aware of Wisconsin career opportunities, but found that others did not share her insight.

“My perception of career opportunities did not change, but I'm in the minority I think because I already knew of the vast opportunities Wisconsin had to offer,” Miglautsch said. “As far as working on the survey, it was interesting to see where people's priorities were and it was even more interesting to see the surprise when people learned that Wisconsin has more to offer than they thought.”

When students were asked how they form their opinions on career opportunities, most said it was based on information from friends (61%) and the Internet (56%), rather than from businesses or through job fairs and related job placement services. Only 23% said job fairs were a good source of information.

But many students do no actual research on job opportunities. Only 32% of freshmen reported having conducted any amount of research, while only 14% of that class said they did “significant” or “extensive” research on job opportunities. As students advance, the percentage of students doing any career location research rises, but only to 63% for seniors.

“Freshmen are not being urged to look into Wisconsin’s job opportunities, thus they often believe that opportunities only exist elsewhere,” said Kelli Danielski, a graduate student who helped conduct the study.

Respondents perceive Wisconsin to be a state with opportunities primarily in agriculture and manufacturing, and incorrectly as a state with few Fortune 500 companies, Niles noted.

If Wisconsin businesses are seeking well-educated students to join their workforces, students here don’t seem to be getting the message that they are wanted.

“This generation that makes such regular use of the Internet and such communications tools as Facebook and MySpace is not hearing the full story of Wisconsin career opportunities,” Weiss said. “More robust connections need to be made by the business community with juniors and seniors in our state colleges,” Weiss said.

The survey found that 70 percent of college students and recent graduates believe career prospects in Wisconsin are good. But the majority also believes that employers outside of Wisconsin offer better pay.

When students and recent graduates were asked to list the most important factors in making a career location decision, the top three responses were “opportunity in my field,” “affordable housing,” and “low crime.” Respondents also cited “a good place to raise a family” and “opportunity for nightlife” as other favorable factors.

Size of a community also is important to students, the survey found, with 61% of respondents saying they would prefer a city of more than 100,000 people.

Other factors, such as the weather and the presence of professional sports teams, would not weigh heavily in their decisions, the respondents said. Only 45% said weather was an important or very important factor in selecting a career location while only 22% said the presence of a professional sports team was an important or very important factor.

While the respondents see Milwaukee and Madison as offering the greatest career opportunities, they also said that crime in Milwaukee is a concern that could affect their career decisions. Milwaukee also was pegged by survey respondents as lacking opportunities for minorities.

Other than Wisconsin, the leading locations cited for career opportunities were California, Chicago, and New York.

When survey participants were asked why they would leave Wisconsin to launch their careers, responses varied from the simple desire to experience different places to concerns that the state does not have enough opportunities for all the students who graduate each year.

The study's findings support University of Wisconsin-Madison research conducted in late 2006. That study found that the brain drain mostly involves college graduates in their 20s, and that the state realizes a "brain gain" among graduates in their 30s and 40s, with many of those older graduates presumed to be people returning to Wisconsin for the state's quality of life.

The brain drain issue is not unique to Wisconsin. Subsequent research conducted over the summer found it to be a problem that most states are addressing. Several states are addressing the situation by attempting to get more high school graduates to enroll in state colleges. Proposals to offer incentives for graduates to remain in a state regularly have been rejected or are currently in discussion stages. Other responses have included marketing and economic development campaigns.

The study found that Arizona, Colorado, Minnesota, Nevada, Oregon and Washington have been seeing a brain gain.

About the Survey

The web-based "College Students' Career Preference Survey" consisted of both close-ended and open-ended questions. For the close-ended questions, participants were asked to respond to check-off boxes indicating the state where they attend college, their home state, the top five states they feel offer the best career opportunities in their line of work, their sources of information about potential career destinations, whether or not they have researched job opportunities in Wisconsin and to what extent, their academic year, their gender and their age.

Other close-ended questions asked participants to rate factors regarding the preferred characteristics of their career destinations, their overall perception of Wisconsin businesses, how likely Wisconsin employers were to offer certain benefits and working conditions, the likelihood they would stay in Wisconsin to pursue their careers.

The open-ended questions allowed participants to respond at length to questions relating to career destination characteristics and their perceptions of states.

A total of 1,748 students and recent graduates from throughout the U.S. participated in the second phase of the study in the 2006-2007 school year, which followed up with initial research in the 2005-2006 school year. Of the 1,748 participants, 1,351 were from Wisconsin. Additional research was conducted this summer.

A full executive summary and more details of the study are available from Productive Knowledge Inc.