



Study: Young workers leaving New England

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Catherine Williams

Imagine the year 2020 in Massachusetts. The number of 40- to 64-year-olds living in the state drops by 96,000. The number of young workers who hold baccalaureate or higher degrees is down 3 percent, and technology businesses are clawing for fresh recruits.

Now imagine it's an election year, and six gubernatorial candidates have opinions, but no statewide solution exists for the problem.

The worry is, technology companies will leave the state if they don't have access to a skilled work force. Because it is an election year in the Bay State, a chorus of voices is offering opinions about how to target work force development. But experts say turning an ocean liner may be easier than shifting existing work force trends.

A study commissioned by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation and released last week predicts that Massachusetts will continue to see a net outflow of young college graduates over the next decade. In fact, New Hampshire may be the only New England state not expected to lose its young college graduates, according to the study released last week.

"The precipice is clear, and the fall will be mighty. We need to figure out how to fight it," said Stephen P. Coelen, a professor of economics at the University of Connecticut who headed the study.

Coelen supports a dynamic response to the problem - one that combines state, business and higher education resources. He suggests states offer business loans with tiered interest rates that become more attractive if business development stays in the region.

On the campaign trail, work force development is such a scorching topic that it lured all six 2006 gubernatorial candidates to attend a work force forum at Roxbury Community College hosted by SkillWorks of Boston last week. SkillWorks is a nonprofit organization with a mission to improve work force development. It is funded by 14 entities, including the state. One project funded by SkillWorks trains workers in health care research.

Democratic candidate Chris Gabrieli said he would create a secretary of labor and work force development. Republican candidate Lt. Gov. Kerry Healey said she supports student-loan forgiveness for science and math students heading into careers in those fields.

Stagnant growth in the number of students choosing science and math careers is real. The number of high school seniors planning to major in computer, engineering or information science in college has remained flat at 12 percent in Massachusetts from 2000 to 2004, according to the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative.

Independent candidate Christy Mihos is advocating to direct \$300 million through the University of Massachusetts for investment in technology industries in the Springfield region.

Democratic candidate Deval Patrick said he supports adjusting the funding formula for community colleges to give greater access to low-income students.

But such efforts, on their own, may not be enough.

In fact, Massachusetts was the last of nine technology-focused states, including California and North Carolina, in higher education expenditures. In 2003, Massachusetts spent \$8,100 per student -- while top-ranked Connecticut spent \$30,197 per student, according to the MTC's Innovation Index study.

Democratic candidate Attorney General Thomas Reilly supports a statewide science, technology, engineering and math education initiative for elementary through high school students. Green-Rainbow party candidate Grace C. Ross said investments in retooling energy supplies to alternative sources would create jobs and spawn new technologies.

While lawmakers, educators and officials debate tactics, grass-roots efforts to fill the gaps have sprouted statewide.

One example is the South End Technology Center in Boston, whose director, Mel King, a former Massachusetts state representative, has joined with MIT to train youths and adults in teaching science and technology.

"We have an answer that leads young people into these fields, but we need to be able to get it broadened," said King.

King supports engineering classes beginning in the third grade and free tuition at community colleges. He said getting students interested in science and math early on will propel work force development.

Women and people of color are untapped sources for the work force, he said.

Technology companies need to get involved, King said. He was disappointed with the lack of support after giving a tour of the tech center to Boston Scientific Corp. officials.

University of Connecticut professor Coelen says growing education efforts is the key.

"I think that education is the crying investment that needs more money," said Coelen.