

## **Is Wisconsin's Brain Drain the Problem or Just a Symptom?**

**by Benajmin Artz**

Recently the University of Wisconsin's Two-Year College system set up a committee to improve its overall education and relationship with the four-year institutions. Instead of accomplishing this, the committee hatched a bright new idea to fix a problem that has plagued Wisconsin for quite some time: the seemingly large exodus of Wisconsin college graduates to other states. Their scheme is quite simple. College graduates will stay if they are paid to stay by granting them free tuition at any of the UW institutions they attend. Although this idea is certainly in its infancy, I do hope the state thinks long and hard before committing to a plan of this scale.

First of all, it may be that the committee has it backwards. According to previous studies done by the UW system and consulting firms, Wisconsin is one of the better states at keeping its college graduates at home. In fact, only a few years ago, Wisconsin held on to 82 percent of its graduates. I doubt that percentage has changed much since. The real problem lies in this state's inability to attract graduates from other states or to keep out-of-state students here after graduation. Therefore Wisconsin is, not surprisingly, ranked very close to the bottom of the country in attracting out-of-state skilled workers. This is what causes the net brain drain of talent and skills from Wisconsin. The brain drain is not necessarily what most people think it is. It is not the problem itself, but merely one symptom of a series of underlying issues that are currently taking its toll on Wisconsin.

Rather than focusing on keeping home-grown students in Wisconsin that are likely to stay here anyway, the government should focus on improving the image of Wisconsin to out-of-state investors and venture capitalists as well as skilled workers. Wisconsin does indeed have many image problems to fix. For instance, income-per-person in Milwaukee is roughly 2% less than Chicago and a whopping 10% less than Minneapolis, both of which are just as cold if not colder than Milwaukee. Oftentimes in movies and on television, Wisconsin is more a target of humor than anything else and of course the high taxes do not help the situation in the least.

If the state does choose to treat the symptom of brain drain rather than the disease, the results hinge upon whether or not new firms in growth industries will be attracted to Wisconsin and hire all of the captive workers. This could happen, but only after a number of years have passed. Until this increased number of skilled workers get high-paying jobs and consequently pay higher taxes, the funding for the free tuition must come from increased tax rates on current taxpayers or from cutting other budgets. Without a doubt, economic growth and stability does not stem from higher tax rates.

Even so, the number of college graduates this will actually impact is questionable. As I noted earlier, most graduates remain in state right now, even after paying full tuition costs. The graduates that do leave most likely receive generous job offers that persuade them to leave family and friends behind. If tuition is free, the job offers will still be there, but will have to be just a bit more generous to still entice the student. So the number of students this tuition remission will actually affect is likely to be a small number. That is NOT worth millions of taxpayer dollars.

Wisconsin's brain drain is not the problem at all; it is purely a symptom that is receiving much attention. Surely one of the state's priorities must be to increase the number of college graduates in our workforce, but the free tuition idea is not the way to go. The government should focus its efforts on creating an inviting and attractive image for the state to growing and prosperous companies. It should reach out to investors and venture capitalists looking for new homes by showcasing Wisconsin's beautiful landscapes and high quality-of-living rankings. The leadership must work to lower taxes in Wisconsin and maintain the high quality of education in its four-year institutions that is world-renowned. Free tuition will not make the brain drain go away. Only a new and successful policy will cure the disease and relieve the symptom at the same time.