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The Brain Drain/Gain Issue: Residential Expectations of Young Adults in New York's Southern Tier

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What is the Issue?

Much has been written about young adults leaving the upstate New York region over the past decades, often labeled the “brain drain” issue. However, the rates of out-migration of young adults from Upstate do not differ significantly from most other areas of the U.S. What is different, however, is the rate at which young adults migrate to the region, an issue of “brain gain”. While leaving one’s home community for college, work, or adventure seems to be a path chosen by many young people today, once these young adults have finished their college education, worked for a number of years, have married and are ready to start a family, another path commonly sought is to return to one’s home community or region for the next phase of life. Given the economic conditions of upstate New York over recent decades and in particular in recent years, however, even those young adults wishing to return to the region face significant challenges. We explore how recent high school graduates in the Southern Tier region of upstate New York form expectations about where they will live in future years.

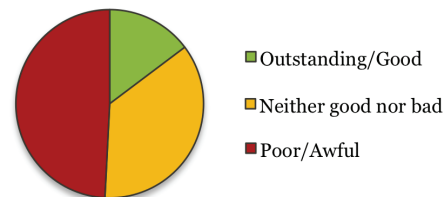
Residential expectations of young adults

Research funded through the EDA University Center at Cornell University explores how community attributes affect the residential expectations of recent high school graduates from the Southern Tier region of upstate New York. The research used multiple methods of key informant interviews of local school officials and business human resource managers, focus groups with high school seniors, and a survey of high school graduates from the class of 2008 from four high schools located in urban and rural communities throughout the region.

Not surprisingly, the results of the interviews and focus groups indicate that economic conditions and the availability of jobs are major factors shaping the residential expectations of young adults. But what was striking was that many of these young adults are making residential and educational decisions with little input from their families, schools and local employers. Ideally students are making educational and residential decisions with information about local educational and employment opportunities. However, findings from our focus groups suggest that links between students and regional employers as well as schools are weak, and play a limited role when students make these important life decisions.

Most recent high school graduates surveyed anticipate moving away from the community where they attended high school, with more than half expecting to live outside the Southern Tier region at age 30. These graduates also have a pessimistic view of regional economic conditions with a majority reporting that they view the region to have “poor” or “awful” economic conditions and job prospects

Figure 1: Perceived Economic Conditions & Job Prospects in Respondent's Region



(Figure 1). Over 60% of graduates with a favorable perception of economic conditions in the region expect to live in the region at age 30, while almost 80% with a negative perception of the local economy expect to reside outside the region.

The perception that local leaders are trying to improve the economic conditions of the region has a positive effect on recent graduates’ expectations of living in the area. About half the respondents who perceived that local leaders are trying to improve the region expect to stay in the Southern Tier, while over 90% who feel local leaders are not trying to improve the region expect to live outside the region. These findings highlight the important role that local leaders and the economy play in shaping the residential expectations of recent high school graduates.

While local economic conditions, job prospects, and the perception that local leaders are working to improve these conditions certainly contribute to recent graduates’ residential expectations, our research also suggests that residential preferences are not entirely based on economic factors. Community characteristics, like proximity to family and quality of schools, can help to anchor and retain young adults closer to their communities of origin. For example, almost 70% of the respondents expect to live in the Southern Tier at age 30 if they are highly satisfied with their community’s characteristics and consider those characteristics to be as important in their decision-making process..

Regional organizations, like the Pipeline for Progress (P4P - <http://www.p4pnetwork.com/>) in the Southern Tier are dedicated to attracting and retaining skilled and educated individuals. This group has a special interest in the 40-below demographic and strives to keep them connected to their community, business and political leaders. P4P is also a partner in Project ION (www.Project-ION.com), a paid summer internship website, which helps to raise awareness of employment opportunities for young adults in Upstate New York.

