

BACK HOME AGAIN?

Brain Gain Initiative Spurs Debate

By Charlee Beasor

What happens when there aren't enough people?

Specifically, what happens when there aren't enough people in Indiana to fill the open jobs that currently exist and forecasted jobs due to future growth?

A more important question: What are we going to do about it?

The assembled panel for this *BizVoice*® roundtable discussion doesn't have all the answers – or even necessarily agree on the path forward – but brings various ideas and pertinent issues to the table.

The panel's spirited debate brings up another question: Who is responsible for ensuring Indiana has a talented workforce that chooses to stay – or return?

Participants:

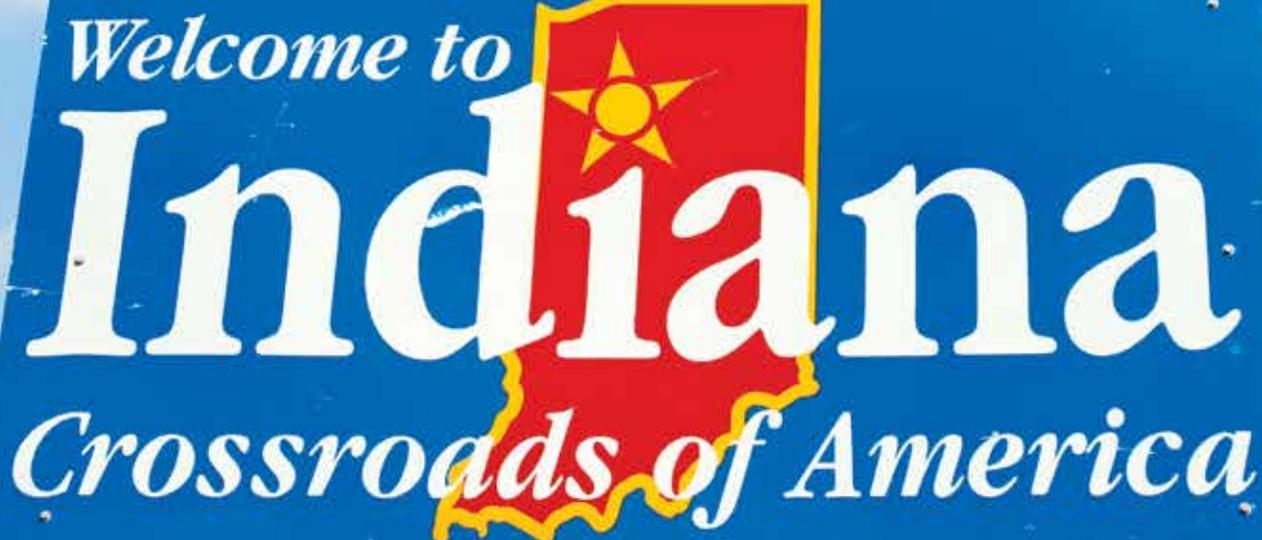
- Jason Bearce, vice president of education and workforce development, Indiana Chamber of Commerce (www.indianachamber.com)
- Dottie King, president, Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College (www.smwc.edu)
- Bill Oesterle, CEO, Tmap, LLC (www.tmap.com)
- Matt Will, associate professor of finance, University of Indianapolis (www.uindy.edu)

Setting the stage

Will offers a dose of reality, “We are beyond full employment. Our unemployment rate was 3.6% in November. Full employment is considered around 4.5%. We have a shortage of workers.

“And if you look at the want ads and you look at the number of people looking for jobs, for the first time in probably 30 years, we have fewer people looking for jobs than we have job openings. The challenge is matching skill sets with what employers are looking for.”

Oesterle presents some historical context.



SPECIAL SECTION



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– Dottie King

“It’s unquestionably true that demographics actually look a little scary. We’re about to enter 20 years of contracting workforce in this state, and that will be the first time, at least in a hundred years, maybe further, that we’ve ever encountered that. And it’s going to be a long-term trend,” he says.

Pulling back the curtain

The panel is passionate about determining the “who” and the “how” behind recruiting more people to move to Indiana, as well as inspiring students to stay here after they graduate.

For the “how,” one possibility is a new program from Purdue University – the Brain Gain Initiative, first announced by Purdue President Mitch Daniels during the Indiana Chamber’s 2018 Annual Awards Dinner.

Oesterle’s company, Tmap, has partnered with Purdue to bring the initiative to life.

“The simple notion is that Indiana is 18th in the country, or at least recently has been, in (college) degree production per capita,” he starts. “And we’re something like 40th, 41st in degrees held per capita.

“It doesn’t take too much to figure out that the good news is we’re training lots and lots of college students. The bad news is we’re not keeping them.”

Marketing a return to Indiana for the hundreds of thousands of working-age Purdue alumni around the world is the basic premise behind the Brain Gain Initiative. Oesterle’s company uses alumni data and a scoring algorithm to determine alumni “aptitude to return to the state.

“We’re working with Purdue to

communicate to its alumni and then begin to engage them and score them so that by the time Indiana businesses need to identify a job, they have a qualified (job candidate) pool (for recruiting),” he explains.

Oesterle indicates other colleges and universities around the state are showing interest in the initiative as well.

For a small, private liberal arts college such as Saint Mary-of-the-Woods, with a more localized recruiting pool for students, the approach might be different, with a heavier emphasis on graduates not leaving in the first place, King asserts.

“We recruit primarily in Indiana. Seventy percent of our students come from Indiana. We do represent 35 states, but clearly mostly Indiana,” she offers. “So, we’re very regional in our approach, but we do spend our time thinking about how we also can be part of Indiana’s solution.

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Another important point to keeping students in Indiana after graduation, according to Will, is stymied immigration.

“I have students from Nigeria. I have students from Canada. Top finance students. Anyone would be lucky to have them, and (companies) want them, but the lack of sponsorship of green cards, and now the process has been significantly slowed. So, we’re losing a lot of the international talent that we should be keeping because of immigration policy.”

Read between the lines

Bearce, with a background in education policy from the Indiana Department of Education and the Commission for Higher Education, notices a heartening trend: There is more “intentionality” behind this discussion.

“I think our institutions recognize that graduation is no longer the goal. ... There’s an increasing expectation that they do everything they can to connect their graduates to businesses in Indiana.”

Oesterle says past efforts, however, have been “passive”.

“We encourage our kids to apply to college, pick a good one. We encourage our college graduates to go talk to all the employers that they can. There is never

buried in that – it’s a little cultural with us in this state – ‘Hey, make sure you either start with opportunities here, or if you do go off and learn great things in the world, that you think about coming back.’

“That’s not an overt message that we have ever been very good at delivering, which is the intentionality (Bearce) is talking about,” he remarks.

Will points to classroom integration, to complement the emphasis on internships, as a consideration.

“One of the things that we’ve seen, starting about six years ago, is this applied business approach,” he explains. “When you’re in an upper-level course, the course gets a business partner.

“When you go in and get a syllabus and a book, half your time is spent in theory and learning, and half your time is spent with your client.”

That’s still not enough, Oesterle interjects.

“That’s great. That’s wonderful. You’re going to expose them to businesses more directly and integrating internships. Who is responsible for delivering the message to the kids that they should think about this state? Because that’s still a passive process unless that messaging is integrated.”

Who is the star?

Who is responsible for that “active” messaging?



“Businesses and communities need to take it upon themselves to say (to students), ‘Why are you going to California and what can we do to keep you here?’ ”

– Matt Will

Will: "This is something that has been going on for longer than we've been alive, which is the brain drain messaging. ... I think that message is something that has been tried and not worked. I'm not saying we shouldn't try and continue it."

Oesterle: "Here are just a couple examples to think about. We don't know where our merit scholars go. We don't know where our Lilly scholars go. We have no idea. We provide them full college educations and we don't know on an aggregate basis: Did they stick around or did they not?"

"We can start at very early stages to identify our talent and begin to give them reinforced messaging all the way through the process. But not passive messaging. Active messaging: 'You should think about sticking around.' And that should be delivered by the community and society all together. There is no way to look at where we are today and think that that's happening. It's just not."

King refutes that notion.

"I'm going to sound like the academic because something about that just troubled me a little because I think one of the best things about higher ed in America has been ... it's not a one-size-fits-all approach. Our overall message in America has always been that you can go anywhere and do anything, so dream big and don't limit yourself."

She says she believes schools should partner with the state and the business community – but that it's ultimately "not the role of a school to promote Indiana directly."

"I think it's the role of Indiana to



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promote Indiana," she maintains.

Bearce notes King's point about the "internal debate within higher education and even K-12 education about, 'What is the role?'"

"I'm going to keep repeating the same word, 'intentionality.' And I think there's more institutions can do to make sure that they're ... mobilizing that alumni network to connect our graduates to employment opportunities right here in Indiana."

Oesterle follows that up, pointing to businesses and schools working collaboratively.

"No one is going to direct St. Mary's to say, 'All right. You kids, you only go to Indiana.' That's not what we're looking for. It's going to have to be the business community in the state that actually carries that messaging.

We've got to have the private institutions in this state providing venues for that to just help. Which, I think, still fits in their mission."

"Absolutely," King agrees.

Will, addressing King, adds, "It is not in your mission and it should not be in your mission to be the Indiana poster child for staying here."

He hints at the issue of quality of place.

"Businesses and communities need to take it upon themselves to say (to students), 'Why are you going to California and what can we do to keep you here?'"

Act two

Targeted marketing would be one piece of the Brain Gain Initiative, Oesterle explains.

He points to graduates of Purdue University as part of an "affinity pool" that would be ripe for sending "highly individualized messaging to go back (to Indiana).

"That's just a matter of measuring their affinity and their likelihood (of returning to Indiana) and then looking at the skill sets that they have, so that you're scoring them and then delivering highly targeted, highly individualized messaging," Oesterle claims.

"We've been notoriously bad as a state at trying to come up with a tagline for talent. ... If we could determine the characteristics of individuals that we really want in a ranked order, we could go get them. That's a big project that involves all sorts of different institutions, but it's fundamentally achievable."

Businesses are increasingly desperate for talented workers and companies are coming up with innovative ways to get in front of students. Will points to one specific example he's seen lately.

"This is not a joke. I had two lunches last week and I've turned down more than I can



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count from employers saying, 'Wait. You're in front of the students. Can I meet with you? I have these four openings. I need them filled now.' I'm in the technical field, finance. It's not a joke to say I have two or three more job opportunities than I have students to fill them."

He mentions a recent donation to the school that was soon followed by, "Now, we'd like access to some of your students for the following fields."

When can we take a bow?

One last question: In three years, will these challenges be solved (or on the way toward a solution) or is the issue going to be just as daunting as it is today?

Bearce says he's "optimistic" things are heading in the right direction and there is more urgency around the matter.

"I was just in a meeting yesterday and a gentleman from Indiana's community college was talking about how they have companies from Silicon Valley recruiting community college students in southern Indiana. That did not happen in the past," he contends. "So, if we're not more aggressive than we've been in the past, people from outside our state are going to be."

King sees change on the horizon.

"Because of conversations like this. Because this is happening. Because Mitch Daniels initiating a new conversation that, whether or not he's successful, will change our dialogue. Because of a Governor that's just really reaching out and involving lots of people in the dialogue. Because of, in my rural area, people really are seeing the need to come together."

"There's a different wind blowing in Indiana."