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Making Marion a place to stay

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MARION - The concept of rural brain drain, young people going off to college and not returning to rural areas, isn't unique to Marion. Communities across the country are grappling with similar issues.

While not purely a local issue, it is getting attention.

Community leaders launched two groups, the Marion Area Leadership Program and Marion Young Professionals, to encourage young people to build leadership and give them a chance to network. Area schools are focusing on skills in demand in Marion and surrounding areas in the hopes that people both go to school here and stay.

Meanwhile other areas have taken extra steps to draw graduates to their communities.

Building leadership

A concern about a lack of new leadership in Marion led to the creation of the Marion Area Leadership Program in 1991. The program continues today under the Marion Area Chamber of Commerce as companies sponsor employees to attend and get an extended lesson in both leadership and the community.

Participants meet with area professionals and community leaders. They also are expected to put together their own community service projects and carry them out.

Past graduates recently talked to this year's newly started class to offer encouragement and support.

"I just think Marion needs all you guys," Doris Schwartz of Avocare Nutritionals said. "It needs people to grow and stay in Marion. We need people to come and help us make Marion even better."

The graduates spoke of pride for the community but also talked about needing more job opportunities as one said her children went elsewhere to find work. They also talked about a need for more people to volunteer in the community.

"We just don't have the volunteers, people willing to invest," said Terri DeTano, who works at Marion General Hospital. "It has been a struggle at times to find that leadership."

"Your eyes are going to be opened up to a lot of opportunities," Schwartz told the graduates. "We need people to step up. Marion can be so much more if everyone's willing to step up."

A more recently created group, the Marion Young Professionals, is offering networking opportunities to people 21 to 45 years old. The group holds cash mobs, in which members all go to a specific store or business and spend money to support it, and started mentoring high school students this month.

"We don't do a good job of getting our young people networking," said Van Creasap, owner of Shamrock Vineyard and a member of the MYP board.

He said keeping young people, both high school students going off to college and young professionals like himself, takes engaging them more and encouraging them to take on more leadership roles.

Creasap said things Marion needs to help draw people include more culture and entertainment opportunities. He said it also needs to draw more industries similar to RobotWorx that are offering jobs in technology, one of today's hot fields of employment.

"They get it because they are building for the future," he said.

He and other young professionals also talk of pride and responsibility.

"The people of Marion have to want it and work for it," said Jennifer Croskey, a Marion resident who works at the Ohio Attorney General's Office. "You have to have the vision that Marion is a good place to live, work and raise a family. Beyond the vision, you also have to believe it, speak it, and make it happen.

"While I recognize that we cannot be naive, I also think that this process starts with having a more positive outlook of our community."

Building jobs

Along with leadership, Marion educators are trying to build jobs.

The Ohio State University at Marion added a second year to its engineering program this school year, which means students can go to the Marion branch for two years before going to the main campus in Marion. Ohio State at Marion also is working with Tri-Rivers Career Center and Marion Technical College to build a sort of "educational corridor" that will help students continue their education and get into jobs in demand.

The three schools are also working together to launch the Robotics and Automation Manufacturing Technology Center, which will help train Honda workers and offer training to area residents who want to go into auto manufacturing and other careers dependent on robotics. The center will be built at Tri-Rivers.

Tri-Rivers Superintendent Chuck Speelman said the center builds on Marion's proud history of manufacturing by connecting it with today's manufacturing demands.

"We want to create ourselves as the hub of robotics in the state of Ohio," he said. He is hopeful that potential employers choose to locate in Marion to be near the training opportunities.

Both Tri-Rivers and Marion Technical College officials say most of their graduates remain in the area, which they partly attribute to offering programs focusing on skills and careers in demand in Marion and central Ohio.

Other solutions

Marion is not the only community that is seeking out ways to encouraging college graduates to call it home. Other communities are trying a variety of solutions to both draw graduates and offer them opportunities.

The Grant County Economic Growth Council, located in Marion, Ind., worked with the Affordable Housing & Community Development Corporation to launch a Grant for Grads program. The program gives grants to college graduates locating to the county to either help buy a house or reduce the cost of renting.

Erin Wheeler, the council's marketing and communications director, said the grants range from up to \$2,500 for rentals to up to \$5,000 to help graduates buy a home. She said the housing assistance is distributed in a "forgivable loan amount," which means grantees have to stay within the area for a certain amount of time. In the case of the Grants for Grads program, if they stay at least five years they do not have to pay anything back. The rental assistance is paid monthly.

"We are trying to develop a workforce," Wheeler said. "This program we hope will attract people with college degrees."

The program launched in May and will accept up to 20 applicants this year. A news release stated it was among decisions for Paul DeLaVergne, a 2001 Indiana Wesleyan University graduate, to stay in Marion, Ind.

He stated in the release that it helped reduce his monthly bills and let him make larger payments on his student loans.

"It's going to keep me in town longer," he stated. "It helps with living expenses enough that it's incentive to stay in Marion."

Wheeler said area businesses also have praised the program.

She said many of the applicants are either employed in education or healthcare.

While not operated locally, the Ohio Housing Finance Agency offers a similar program that will help graduates who are first-time home buyers pay up to 2.5 percent of their home's purchase price. Among requirements is obtaining a mortgage from an OHFA-approved lender. More information is available at 888-362-6432.

The Central Michigan University Research Corp., in Grand Rapids, Mich., is attempting to help people in rural areas have opportunities to start up their own companies.

The center is a business incubator and accelerator. It helps emerging businesses build up their ideas and bring them to the market.

It is a designated Michigan SmartZone, one of 11 technology-oriented centers in Michigan meant to support research, development and commercialization of new technology in the hopes of promoting economic growth.

CMU-RC president and CEO Erin Strang said the center employs many young people while encouraging others to become entrepreneurs.

"We try to shift their mind-set to, 'I might be able to start my own company,'" she said.

Rather than moving to another community, Strang said, they can consider staying where they are and

working toward being their own boss.

"The approach we take is a very hands-on approach," she said, referring to the benefit of being in a rural area. "We don't have a million people coming in the door. You can help accelerate them quite a bit."

CMU-RC helps fill a variety of needs including office space, a conference room if needed and help developing logos and other graphics. It links budding entrepreneurs to regional experts who can help with business plans, finances, intellectual property rights, training and other needs.

It also works to link them to potential funding sources.

CMU-RC includes a 350-acre technology park, fully-developed real estate where companies can get their start.

Strang said the center also pulls together focus groups to identify what these potential entrepreneurs consider needs as far as the communities in which they live.

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James Miller/The Marion Star

Art caption: Liz Schneider attacks 10 pins during the Marion Young Professionals' weekly bowling league held at Bluefusion on Wednesday nights. The fledgling social and networking group has about 40 members.

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