

EFFORT TO KEEP BRAINPOWER HERE RIGHT ON THE MARK

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Opinion Article

■The time is ripe for the Knowledge Industry Partnership. The collaboration between the Pennsylvania Economy League-Eastern Division, Philadelphia and other entities seeks to capitalize on one of Greater Philadelphia's greatest assets — its universities.

In the national and increasingly global competition for knowledge workers, regions have too often resorted to poaching from other areas. In better economic times when innovation was booming, economic developers sought to lure workers with the right education from other areas.

The partnership, rather, sees attracting new students to the area as a beginning rather than an end unto itself. It seeks to use location to its advantage. Once the prospects are already here, in most cases for years, it seeks to teach them about opportunities that exist in the region, increasing the likelihood that they will establish professional lives here.

The reasons behind the partnership are sound. More than 80 universities attract talent to the region, bringing an estimated 3,000 freshman from outside the area each year. The schools help create a skilled work force, awarding 54,000 degrees annually while addressing a key factor companies consider in deciding where to set up operations. Educated young adults, with many coming out of the local master's in business administration programs, are the entrepreneurs of tomorrow.

The question is not whether these students will contribute to an economy. The question is where they will contribute.

The entities that make up the partnership have the right expertise, with the Greater Philadelphia Tourist Marketing Corp. leading efforts to attract students to the area, the Philadelphia Commerce Department heading up efforts to get students to explore the city once they are here and Innovation Philadelphia working to retain students after graduation.

Strong backing from Judith Rodin, president of the University of Pennsylvania, and initial funding of \$2 million from the state of Pennsylvania and some of the colleges involved will get the project through its first year. But backers are seeking additional state, federal and private funding of \$7.8 million over three years. They hope they can establish the partnership as a national model, winning support from nontraditional funding sources involved in furthering components of the effort, such as entrepreneurship, for example.

This isn't an idea that comes out of nowhere. It rather builds on efforts aimed at student attraction and retention, including the state's "Stay and Invent the Future" initiative, which provided initial funding. Innovation Philadelphia, a public-private partnership, is already seeking to build upon university-business connections that will spur the region's economic growth. And it builds on a goal of Gov.-elect Ed Rendell, who emphasized the importance of an educated work force during his campaign.

Philadelphia has too often been for too many students a place to learn and leave. If this partnership is successful, it will become a place that students can learn to love. The ramifications would be felt for decades to come. ■

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