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CITIES LAUNCH PROGRAMS TO LURE COLLEGE GRADUATES

To Combat Brain Drain, Cities Boost Efforts to Court Graduates; Receptions With Executives

SOURCE: Anne Marie Chaker

■As college students and recent graduates ponder what to do next, a range of midsize and smaller cities -- and even some larger ones -- are launching new programs designed to lure them there.

The programs, designed to attract and retain more young college grads, are an attempt to counter a demographic shift that is alarming some cities. Only 14 of the 50 largest metropolitan areas in the U.S. had more 25-to-34 year olds in 2000 than they did in 1990, according to an analysis by economist Joseph Cortright, who studies regional economies.

That age group is increasingly considered an economic engine because of its long-term potential impact on the community. But this same group is often drawn to the cosmopolitan allure of cities like San Francisco or New York.

As a result, new programs are emerging in cities such as Cleveland and Memphis that are designed to present themselves as legitimate alternatives. Officials in other cities, including Boston and Philadelphia, are making a new and concerted effort to hang on to more of the thousands of well-educated, ambitious grads their world-class colleges crank out every year.

Their target: people like Matthew Baker, a Maryland native and Yale University undergraduate who until recently was pretty sure he would end up in New York or Washington, D.C., after graduation. But now, in his fourth week of an ambitious new internship program in Cleveland called "Summer on the Cuyahoga," Mr. Baker says Cleveland is "definitely a possibility."

Cleveland's program, which started last year, now offers 55 interns 10 weeks of living, working and schmoozing with civic leaders. Next week Mr. Baker is attending a morning reception with the mayor.

Other cities are looking into everything from building museums and art spaces to encouraging the development of loft apartments that they believe will attract more creative types, including young people. Michigan has even embarked on a statewide "Cool Cities" initiative that hopes to help remake overlooked communities into hip neighborhoods.

For recent college graduates who still haven't found their bearings in a less-than-

welcoming job market, this could be good news -- if they're willing to live someplace that might not be their dream destination.

One of the cities' primary aims is to create better opportunities for students with local employers. Civic leaders in Philadelphia, for instance, are hoping by 2006 to add 5,000 new internships locally, and also increase the number of companies offering them. Philadelphia is also testing a pilot program this summer that treats interns like "royalty" -- for instance, organizing tubing trips on the Delaware and offering discount tickets to museums -- says David Thornburgh, lead partner of the Knowledge Industry Partnership, a year-old coalition of local leaders.

A study released by the partnership last Friday found that students not originally from the region but who intern locally are twice as likely to remain in Philadelphia post graduation. The partnership is particularly concerned with retaining "non-native" students because the study found that only 29% of Philadelphia college graduates who aren't originally from the area end up staying, compared with 86% of those who are.

Similarly, Boston this spring began a series of events to bring students and employers together, which will include job fairs and receptions with executives. It's also trying to address one of the biggest complaints among young people: It's too expensive to live there. Pending state legislation would offer funding to cities that allow for more affordable housing near town centers.

The Boston area, despite being home to tens of thousands of college students, seems to lose a lot of them. In fact, fully half of Greater Boston's graduates leave the area after receiving their degrees, according to a study from last fall titled "Preventing a Brain Drain."

Proponents of initiatives like these say the reason to attract young, single people is straightforward. "It's a benefit to have people who have relatively good jobs, are paying taxes, but using less city services," says Thomas F. Coleman, executive director of Unmarried America, an advocacy organization for single people.

And while the 25-to-34 age group is considered nomadic, the likelihood of moving across state lines declines sharply with age. Among people with a bachelor's degree, 15% of 25- to 29-year-olds moved from one state to another compared with only 10% of 30- to 34-year-olds over a one-year period, according to Mr. Cortright, the Portland, Ore., economist. So if cities and states can hook them when they're young, "Bingo," says Mr. Cortright, they are likelier to stick around.

In Michigan, the state Treasury Department is even considering offering a major financial incentive for engineering and technology-oriented students: 0% interest on student loans as long as they work in Michigan.

Still, some economists think the cool-and-hip initiatives in Michigan and in other cities are the wrong answer. "If you have to have a campaign to prove you're cool, you're not,"

says Joel Kotkin, a Los Angeles-based author who writes about cities and their economies who thinks that the 30-something demographic should be the one cities focus on instead of 20-somethings. Thirty-somethings are "making lifetime career decisions, thinking about getting married, having kids" and are likelier to stay and make bigger contributions to a community.

Some students don't seem bowled over either. Jason Mironov, the student government president at the University of Michigan, says he wants to ditch Ann Arbor for his home state of New Jersey after he graduates. While he thinks Michigan's new initiatives are a step in the right direction, "creating some lofts isn't going to attract a young crowd," says the undergraduate. "Students are going to go where there's already an established community."

SOHO ON THE MISSISSIPPI

What's happening in cities and states to attract hip 20-something residents.

Boston: Trying to create more affordable housing for college graduates as well as better job opportunities. Starting this fall, Boston-area students can expect more job fairs, receptions with employers, and workplace visits.

Cleveland: Students from Yale, Princeton, Colgate and Case Western Reserve universities can apply for a Summer on the Cuyahoga internship that pays at least \$2,800 for a 10-week period. Housing and reception with the mayor included.

Memphis, Tenn.: Setting up local college seniors with 20-something mentors who help them find jobs in the city.

Michigan: Cool Cities initiative funds art spaces and loft buildings for cities to accommodate more creative residents. In the coming months, the state expects to announce a major incentive: 0% interest on student loans for certain graduates who decide to work in Michigan.

Philadelphia: Three-year goal is to increase the number of interns in Philadelphia by 5,000 by offering students organized summer outings and increasing the number of internship fairs.

St. Louis: New internship Web site launched earlier this month (www.stpaulintern.net) aims to connect local college students with area businesses.

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