

# Growing and Keeping Your Region's College-Educated Workers

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Back in 1982, newly minted college grads like me migrated to wherever the best jobs were. Those who scored a start at P&G, Ford or GE were envied by their less fortunate peers. How lucky they were to head off to Cincinnati, Detroit and Poughkeepsie for what was sure to be a rapid rise to personal prosperity and a country club life.

Twenty-five years later, college grads have a different agenda. This is a “work hard, play harder” generation that cares deeply about how they’re going to spend their nights and weekends. And as the most brand-conscious generation to walk the earth, where they call home is as much a part of their identity as what they drive, or that newest of status symbols – which cell phone they carry.

No longer are the best and brightest willing to live just anywhere. In today’s innovation-driven and knowledge-dependent economy, the most sought-after grads are calling the shots. Smart employers are the ones now doing the migrating to ensure ready access to a quality, college-educated workforce.



SEI Investments, a financial services firm, is one of the many Philadelphia companies that provides internships for area college students.

“In today’s economy, talent is the natural resource most important to regions,” says Steve Wray, a lead partner in Philadelphia’s Knowledge Industry Partnership and executive director of the Pennsylvania Economy League. “Those regions that can increase the quantity and the quality of their workforce will ultimately prevail in the knowledge economy.”

In light of a new economic reality in which a deep talent pool trumps temporary tax breaks, smart cities are literally going back to college to ensure that they are producing and retaining the college graduates necessary to start, keep and attract knowledge-based businesses.

Case in point: Philadelphia, where affinity for the city among local college students and recent grads has climbed considerably in recent years. This trend is driven at least in part by a talent-growth strategy launched four years ago under the banner of the Knowledge Industry Partnership (KIP).<sup>1</sup>

## Philadelphia: “One Big Campus”

Led by a coalition of area leaders representing academia, government, business, tourism and the civic sector, KIP’s primary mission is crystal clear: “To grow the region’s college-educated workforce.” Those at the helm recognize that the greatest net talent gain will come from a two-fold strategy of increasing the overall student population and improving graduate retention rates.

Regarded by many as the most comprehensive, innovative regional program built around a higher education cluster, KIP is designed to increase the pull of top talent to the city at three distinct phases of what Collegia has coined the “college student life cycle.” First, when students are applying to col-

<sup>1</sup> KIP has since become a stand-alone nonprofit known as Campus Philly.

lege; then when they are enrolled; and finally when they begin the job search.

With significant involvement and investment from the region's lead tourism organization, Greater Philadelphia Tourism Marketing Corporation, a student-oriented branding platform was developed to position the region as "one big campus" and Philadelphia as "a city built for students." To date, dozens of off-campus and inter-campus activities have been created to facilitate stronger personal and professional ties to the region among the quarter-million students enrolled locally.

Among the signature tactics leveraging KIP's network of 30-plus college partners are a glossy, 48-page magazine encouraging prospects to extend their campus visit into an overnight stay; an outdoor student festival which draws more than 20,000 students into downtown Philly every September; and a college-to-career program that already has generated more than 4,500 new internships.

Indicators that the KIP strategy is delivering its intended results include:

- Over a three-year period, freshmen enrollments at partner colleges have grown by 10 percent (well ahead of both the state and national averages), and Philly's overall student population has increased by more than 30,000.
- An online student poll conducted last spring found that 64 percent of students are likely to stay in the region after they graduate, a 15 percent increase over the benchmark conducted in 2002.
- Most importantly, actual retention has increased by more than 1,000 graduates since 2004, a number that should rise rapidly as more early-stage professional positions become available.

Additional research published in 2004 by KIP strongly suggests that a winning recipe for grad retention requires much more than a regional internship strategy. This survey of 2,550 recent graduates from 29 area colleges and universities reveals other key behavior influencers, namely *personal connection*.<sup>2</sup> Positive off-campus experiences and affinity for the region proved to be especially significant for non-native students whose eventual actions are a top priority. (Philadelphia already keeps 86 percent of its locally grown grads.)

In fact, internships alone can often backfire in less competitive regions by helping their most ambitious talent (including many native sons and daughters) become more marketable to employers from hotter markets. Ultimately, this points to the necessity for a multi-tiered approach that facilitates better professional *and* personal connections to the host region.

In Pennsylvania, three other regional retention initiatives – in Pittsburgh, Lehigh Valley and Lancaster County – have since been modeled after KIP. This opens up further opportunities for statewide retention strategies that could ultimately leverage a network of parallel activities, centrally coordinated but deployed at the local level.



KIP (now known as Campus Philly) holds an outdoor student festival each year which draws more than 20,000 students into downtown Philadelphia.

### Northeast Ohio: COLLEGE 360°

Admiration for the Philadelphia model also led to the development of Northeast Ohio's ambitious COLLEGE 360° initiative. At an EDA-sponsored innovation summit held in Cleveland in November 2003, more than 220 regional stakeholders – representing a cross-section of academic, corporate and civic leaders – first learned about KIP and drew parallels to their own economic challenges.

Almost immediately, an effort led by the region's academic consortium, the Northeast Council on Higher Education, raised the necessary funds to implement a research and planning phase that eventually led to the launch of COLLEGE 360° in 2005. Northeast Ohio, as a community, would step forward and accept responsibility for "providing a complete, 360° college education; one that prepares the whole student for all aspects of life after college, not just their role in the workforce."

The initiative draws its strength from commitments by the region's top corporate, philanthropic and civic leaders. At its helm sits Hiram College President Tom Chema and Cleveland Indians President Paul Dolan, who co-direct the four-year, \$5 million initiative. Backing them up is a cracker-jack steering committee of 18 corporate CEOs, college presidents and partners from the region's top law firms.

While its mission is similar to Philadelphia's, the branding platform and related tactical plan developed for Northeast Ohio are custom-tailored. For starters, not one, but two city identities needed to be considered and carefully dealt with: Cleveland and Akron. The long history of sibling rivalry notwithstanding, here was a chance to showcase regionalism in action, a challenge Northeast Ohio had been wrestling with for some time.

While it is still too early to gauge overall success, initial reactions from students currently enrolled at COLLEGE 360°'s 17 participating colleges indicate that this initiative is hitting home. And within less than a year of the project's debut, nearly 1,900 new internships had been created in the region, well on the way to meeting the stated goal of generating 3,600 internships in the region within 36 months.

<sup>2</sup> The report, titled "Should I stay or should I go," is available as a PDF at [www.collegia.com](http://www.collegia.com).

Project co-chair Chema echoes Collegia's own research findings: "Students are looking at much more than classrooms and dorm rooms when they choose a college. They want a place that can connect them to the people and places they care about. They want a place that will open doors to new opportunities and experiences. In short, they want to go to a great place, not just a great college or university."

Under his leadership, COLLEGE 360° looks to be Northeast Ohio's best bet for growing its own college-educated workforce.

### Building Blocks: The 3 Es

The underlying strategy first deployed by Philadelphia's KIP is a belief that behavior – the graduate's decision to stay or leave – is determined by a series of personal and professional experiences during college, which are highly influenced by expectations that are formed long before they arrive on campus.



"Decisions happen long before they occur," writes Harvard Business School professor Gerald Zaltman in his 2003 book, *How Customers Think*. Ninety-five percent of thinking, he argues, takes place in the unconscious mind, which "gives the orders and the conscious mind carries them out."

With this in mind, activities are devised for each phase of the college student life cycle:

- **Enroll:** Attract more and better students to the region's colleges and universities.

*Campus Visit* magazines in Philadelphia, Boston and Northeast Ohio tell the compelling stories of each region, touching on everything from trip planning to internships. Corresponding Web sites ensure that the regions' images and key messaging are being pushed nationwide, year-round.

- **Engage:** Improve the quality and quantity of students' off-campus experiences.

The Web site [www.CampusPhilly.com](http://www.CampusPhilly.com) gives students a portal for delving into all there is to see and do in the area. Cool events – and how to reach them – are catalogued on the site, while a keychain discount tag encourages students to discover the shopping and dining gems that bring the city to life.

- **Employ:** Connect students with local employers through internships and mentoring.

Going above and beyond the traditional internship fair, Career Philly organizes fairs according to specific fields, such as business or performing arts, while also coordinating fairs geared exclusively toward minorities and international students. This personalization allows businesses and students to connect more directly, and with a greater chance of finding a perfect fit.

### Top takeaways

Any region can learn from programs like these, while tailoring messaging and deliverables to best suit the particulars of a given place. The most successful regions will be those that can look at the initiatives of a city like Philadelphia as a guide towards a smarter approach to attracting and retaining talent. Here are seven conditions and tips that we believe will foster success:

1. **Engage bold, cross-sector leadership.** Harnessing the collective strengths of a region to address collective needs is a delicate balance, but essential to transition any local economy. Those around the table must also be empowered to act swiftly.
2. **Be rooted in higher education, but not driven by higher education.** It's best to house the effort in the civic realm, away from campus, where the right balance between academia's enlightened self-interest and the region's can best be managed.
3. **Ask, don't assume.** Make sure area college students have a loud and continual voice in the process. Setting up an inter-campus council that meets regularly two to three times each semester will pay tremendous dividends.
4. **Integrate, don't re-create.** Take a full inventory of local activities that already exist and which may tie in nicely with the stated mission. Then, try to morph those programs and players into future plans and fundraising before creating redundancies.
5. **Embrace uniqueness.** Every city has a persona built up over decades, if not centuries. Vigorously fend off the natural urge to reject the past and introduce a clever new identity – it won't work. Branding is about meaning, not marketing.
6. **Align with other regional branding.** Piggyback on the existing flow of messaging that other local destination marketing efforts are putting forth.
7. **Choose your public face wisely.** As the initiative circulates through the community, it's critical that the key executive shopping it around has sufficient stature to position it near the top of the local priority pile. ★★

*Collegia is a Massachusetts-based consultancy that works with regional leaders to redefine the role that higher education plays in their local economies. Collegia also publishes the College Destinations Index, an annual ranking of the nation's top locations for college. For more information, visit [www.collegia.com](http://www.collegia.com) or contact the author at [thoffman@collegia.com](mailto:thoffman@collegia.com).*



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