

Come for a diploma, stay for a life

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PHILADELPHIA - Drexel University vice president Joan McDonald has just made her final pitch, playing up the school's renowned co-op program, its gleaming fitness center, its "long tradition of educating leaders."

Now, the composition of this fall's freshman class rests in the hands of the 3,000 or so students and parents who have filled the campus athletic center to capacity on this afternoon in April, the month most students who received multiple offers of admission must decide which they'll accept.

About 500 students already have put down deposits to Drexel. As for the undecideds, this carnival-like event, with peppy cheerleaders, photo ops and Philadelphia cheese steaks, either will give them a feeling that Drexel is where they belong, or it won't.

"It's a critical day for us," McDonald says. But the festive mood belies the stakes, both for Drexel and beyond. Because when it comes to attracting the best and brightest, colleges and universities aren't the only stakeholders.

Civic, business and government leaders here also want prospective students to fall in love with their college experience — so much so that they'll stay in the area after they graduate. To that end, a regional coalition this month announced a nearly \$8 million three-year initiative to attract and keep college students in the greater Philadelphia area. Other areas of the USA, too, are rolling out the welcome mat. Pittsburgh now markets itself as "The College City." Last year, St. Paul adopted the slogan: "A City of Colleges and Universities." Montreal a few years ago boasted of having the most university students per capita among large North American cities. Milwaukee, Memphis and Cleveland are among cities exploring ways to attract the college-going crowd. Even Boston, that quintessential college town, has a Web site to attract more visitors to its campuses.

It's all part of a push, primarily in large metro areas, to become more competitive in a rapidly changing economy fueled increasingly by the ideas, knowledge and talent produced inside the ivory tower."

Civic leaders are increasingly recognizing that colleges and universities are major enterprises in their own right," says Jim Rooney, a director of CEOs for Cities, a Boston-based non-profit aimed at revitalizing urban areas. And, he adds, "In this age of corporate mergers and

acquisitions, colleges and universities are obviously that much more enduring components of the urban economy. They're not going anywhere."

Consider, for example, that colleges and universities added 300,000 jobs nationally in the 1990s, says a report last year by CEOs for Cities and another non-profit, the Initiative for a Competitive Inner City. It said U.S. colleges were spending \$200 billion a year on salaries, goods and services in the late 1990s.

It's no coincidence that Philadelphia aspires to be grouped with places like Silicon Valley, the greater Boston area and the Raleigh-Durham area in North Carolina. All are leading centers for what experts call the "knowledge industry." All are home to well-known research universities which have served as incubators, their discoveries and innovations spun off into start-up companies. And to run those entrepreneurial ventures, all have produced — or attracted — a young, skilled workforce.

Home to more than 80 institutions, including the research-intensive University of Pennsylvania and top-ranked Swarthmore College, "Philadelphia has the same raw material," says Penn president Judith Rodin, who chairs the regional coalition, the Knowledge Industry Partnership, or KIP.

Together, institutions in the five-county area anchored by Philadelphia enroll more than 213,000 full-time students and produce some 55,000 graduates each year. Yet because there's no pipeline to funnel fresh talent toward rewarding careers, brain drain has set in. The region's 20- to 34-year-old population has dropped 18% in the past decade, according to a 2000 report by the Pennsylvania Economy League. And, it says, a "surprisingly low" 40% of the area's working-age population has a college degree or is in college. In contrast, 60% of the Raleigh-Durham population fits that description."

Cities get so focused on attracting companies, they forget that young people want to be in a city that not only has jobs but is also a fun place to be," says Richard Florida, professor of regional economic development at Carnegie Mellon University and author of *The Rise of the Creative Class*.

West Philly, where Penn and Drexel are located, has recognized the value of a strong university presence. Since Rodin became Penn's president in 1994, she has worked to revitalize the neighborhood. Today, many homes in the area have been restored, crime is down, and the bustling commercial sector boasts dozens of new businesses. A few years ago, Rodin and several other college presidents joined with tourism officials to launch a marketing effort persuading more kids and parents to spend the night in Philadelphia during their college search.

Now, local leaders want to broaden and deepen those initiatives. Soon, Rodin says, banners that identify the area as student-friendly will hang from airport and train station walls. Visitors

who stay in participating hotels get discounts, along with campus maps, a disposable camera and a "report card" to record their impressions.

The outreach is to continue once students enroll. Brochures and magazines featuring young faces against vibrant backdrops urge students to explore a dozen "student zones," including South Street, Chinatown and Fairmount Park. This fall, the city plans to lure students downtown for its fourth annual college festival, featuring live music and other entertainment. Other promotions offer discounts to museums, clubs and restaurants. And a Web site (campusphilly.org) lists events off campus.

Finally, the coalition is developing plans to entice new college graduates to stick around. A KIP team is working with businesses to create 5,000 internships over the next three years. In May, it will sponsor a minority internship fair, and a Web site with career information is in the works.

Early signs of the initiative's progress are promising, though hardly conclusive. Annual hotel bookings have jumped more than 300% to 1,700 rooms this year, says Campus Visit president Todd Hoffman, whose Wellesley, Mass., company is involved in campaigns in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Boston.

But other trends are helping, he says. More students are going to college. Urban campuses are enjoying a boom; since 1996, Drexel's undergraduate student body has ballooned from 4,500 to 9,200.

Yet proximity to Philadelphia may not resonate equally from campus to campus or even among students. Biomedical engineering junior Jeff Dugger, 22, who grew up in Martinsburg, W. Va., says the opportunity to live in a city factored into his decision to come to Drexel. And Tim Kramer, 19, a freshman architecture and civil engineering major from Myerstown, Pa., says moving to Philadelphia, "with all of (its) historical architecture, was like heaven to me."

But 14 miles northwest of Drexel, at Bryn Mawr College, the city connection seems a non-issue to four prospective students taking a break from their activity-filled visit. Yes, the city center is just a train ride away, but two of them heard the same pitch at Wellesley and Mount Holyoke, near Boston.

Meanwhile, Lauren Faber, 18, of Bel Air, Md., is weighing admission offers from Bryn Mawr and Columbia University in New York.

"Philadelphia seems to have exactly what I like," Faber says. But she also says she thinks the challenge of living in Manhattan "would be good for me. So do I want four years of summer camp or four years of boot camp?"

Therein, perhaps, lies the test facing Philadelphia and other regions competing with the knowledge industry's biggest players.

"We're not the only ones who have figured this out," says David Thornburgh of the Pennsylvania Economy League and a KIP manager. To catch up with the San Francisco Bay area, Philadelphia would have to add almost 100,000 full-time students; to achieve a student concentration similar to Boston's, it would need more than 60,000.

"We've got to do something a little more dramatic and a little different," Thornburgh says. "Philly is right at the edge; it's our game to win. But we need efforts like this to get us through."