

Brain Remain: Shifting the Paradigm of Pride

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Introduction

Volumes of research studies, surveys, and census data document the “brain drain,” the phenomenon of highly educated and highly skilled workers migrating from their hometown to an urban or metropolitan area that promises a better life. Early indications of brain drain begin with high school graduates determining where to attend college. There is a pervasive belief that it is a measure of success and part of a process of upward mobility to go away to college, and therefore an implied failure if one remains in their hometown or region while earning a degree. This mentality and encouraged brain drain behavior is reinforced by a K-12 education system that sorts students early in their academic careers and invests in the best and brightest, while paying little attention to the majority of students (Harmon, 2010). This is a skewed approach and leaves many individuals, and their hometowns, with few opportunities and stifled upward social and economic mobility.

The needs of the workforce are rapidly changing. Some form of post-secondary education is required for the majority of entry-level jobs in the United States (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Yet, higher education is being faced with increasing competition and growing skepticism regarding the value of a college degree. By collaborating and partnering with the region in which an institution exists, urban, suburban, or rural, colleges and universities can cut through higher education’s competitive noise and growing skepticism, while addressing the changing workforce needs and redefining students’ pride about where they earn a degree, and begin their careers, close to home.

We call this paradigm shift the “Brain Remain,” and it has the potential to significantly alter the way higher education, K-12 districts, businesses, and community leaders work, operate, and collaborate in the new economy. This, in turn, can create bold new opportunities for students where they least expect them: right in their own backyards.

It Is a Wonderful Life

The 1946 Frank Capra classic film, *It's a Wonderful Life*, might have been well ahead of its time in exploring the impacts of the housing crisis and corporate greed, but at its core, the poignant story of George Bailey speaks to Brain Drain at its highest level: a young man in pursuit of worldly success only to discover much more meaningful opportunity in his hometown. That is not the case for everyone, but the idea that the pursuit of happiness can materialize in a young person's own community arguably has more street cred than ever.

For example, the cost of an out-of-town or an out-of-state education is increasingly intimidating for many American families. If you can receive the same quality degree or certification without mortgaging your future, why wouldn't you? But there's an even bigger Bailey-esque picture, here: the vested interest we all have in our hometowns. Think of our own philanthropic campaigns as colleges and universities, and how we target alumni. They are likely donors because of the deep connection and pride they carry for our respective institutions. Now, expand that sentiment to the community as a whole. The more invested you are, the more likely you will get involved and give back. Researchers from the University of Nottingham in England analyzed 91 studies on the effects of gratitude and behaviors that help others, discovering that gratitude had the largest effect on peoples' willingness to give back, more than sadness, happiness, empathy, shame, and anger (Psychology Today, 2017). If students feel grateful for the education they received and the opportunities they had while growing up, from grade school through graduate school, they are more likely to give back to their communities in some capacity, helping to improve the community for all.

To achieve that outcome, however, several major hurdles must be overcome. The first, an emotional one, is the sense that staying close to home is not a sign of failure, but a sign of pride and the desire to make a real difference in the community that helped raise you. This sense of pride and connection often fades when students begin thinking about where to attend college. It is during this decision-making process where the concept that far-away college equals success begins to take root and the Brain Drain paradigm perpetuates.

Brain Drain, Brain Gain

In their book *Hollowing Out the Middle*, Patrick Carr and Maria Kefalas assert that during primary and secondary education, students are sorted into four categories: achievers, seekers, returners, and stayers (Chang, 2018; Harmon, 2010). Achievers show ability early and receive the greatest attention and investment by teachers, mentors, administrators, and counselors. Achievers perpetuate the brain drain and are encouraged to "break free of small town life," (Harmon, 2010). Much of a region's new generation of talent, intelligence, and innovation is lost through this pattern. Seekers desire to leave their hometown, but often lack the resources and

frequently enlist in the military as a means to an end. Returners leave home after high school, and eventually return.

These Returners are a form of the brain gain for suburban and rural areas. When Achievers leave their home region, the urban and metropolitan areas where they land (e.g., Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Boston, and Washington, DC) realize the benefit of brain gain by becoming home to new talent and young, eager minds. Returners are those who demonstrate the reverse migration pattern. They are those who leave home for college and return with their new skills. Returners are a small slice of the brain gain pie for many suburban and rural areas (Chang, 2018).

Finally, Stayers are those who decide to stay in place because they like where they live and enjoy being around like-minded people, or they believe they do not have the means or the ambition to leave. The Stayers often find blue-collar or service-related employment and realize limited economic and social mobility as a result. Stayers are often the students who tend to feel less-than, and are treated less-than, when compared to their classmates who leave for college, frequently treated or perceived as a deficit to their communities, when in reality they are the greatest asset to their communities. The Stayers are untapped potential for suburban and rural regions to develop a strong workforce for future growth demands. There is great opportunity for regional colleges and universities to partner with the community to better serve the Stayers and instill a newfound sense of pride in staying in one's hometown, the Brain Remain.

Changing Higher Education and Fostering Brain Remain

As the higher education landscape shifts, colleges and universities are welcoming a generation of students who are skeptical about the value of a degree. The students who are not sorted as Achievers early on are often those who rationalize that college is not worth their (or their parents') hard-earned money or worth going into debt, especially if the local jobs they anticipate accepting do not require a college degree (Harmon, 2010). Additionally, higher education institutions are scrutinized for their elitist history (especially among private institutions) and limited accessibility to those with humble resources. Couple these public perceptions with the increased competition in the higher education landscape, and there is an opportunity for colleges and universities to change their approach and to change the narrative of who should stay and who should go away to college. Now is the time to change our paradigm and the narrative. This paradigm shift is an imperative; it will serve our students and our region in ways that will benefit both.

The current landscape of higher education is one of convoluted competition. Regional not-for-profit private institutions are competing with large, state-funded public institutions for the same students. Online and distance-learning options are adding out-of-state institutions to the

competitive mix. Institutions are constantly looking for the next new program or the next new delivery method to remain relevant, distinctive, competitive, and sustainable. It is clear that most institutions can no longer attempt to keep up with the Jones's on every front. A thoughtful, strategic, and most reasonable approach to focusing efforts and resources would be to concentrate on the employment and social needs of the region in which the institution exists.

Hockey Hall-of-Famer Wayne Gretzky famously said, "Go where the puck is going to be." It is important for colleges and universities to keep this in mind, especially when determining where the puck is going to be within the region they serve. For example, among California's 10 largest counties, Riverside and San Bernardino rank first and second in terms of job growth, at 4.2% and 3.6% respectively. According to the California Employment Development Department, the Inland Empire is expected to add 242,000 jobs between 2016 and 2026, a 16% growth rate (vs. 10% for the state as a whole). Logistics, global trade, and healthcare lead the way as the region positions itself as a development and innovation hub in these key industries, and the University of La Verne is prepared to meet the puck by graduating students ready for these careers.

The majority of University of La Verne's 8,500 students come from the rapidly-growing inland Southern California region. Several years ago, university leadership looked at the projected workforce needs of inland Southern California and identified the growing demand for healthcare professionals. Many nearby institutions offered nursing degrees, but only a handful offered physician assistant programs. Having historically only offered gerontology and health services management programs, the University of La Verne decided to step further into the allied healthcare professions space and now offers a master's program for physician assistants. Each year, the university has more than 1,000 applicants for 22 seats. On average, 71% of physician assistant students are from Southern California. The university partners with local hospitals, clinics, and health organizations for lab courses and clinical rotations for the students. When the first class of physician assistants graduate in December 2020, they will have positions waiting for them and will fulfill the dream as Stayers, excited to begin working in the same region where they grew up.

From this endeavor, an excellent example of partnership and collaboration between education and industry was born. The University of La Verne created a President's Health Advisory Council (PHAC) with healthcare and community leaders from throughout inland Southern California. The group meets three times a year with the goal of sharing with the university administration the healthcare profession needs they have in their own industries and what the future portends for regional healthcare needs. By listening to the PHAC professionals and examining the data, the University of La Verne is strategically investing in and developing additional healthcare majors and programs that will graduate a skilled workforce ready to meet the needs of the region. Similar collaborations are happening throughout Southern California's Inland Empire.

Nonprofits, businesses, government, and education are working together to highlight the assets and opportunities that, properly leveraged, can transform a region of 4.5 million people into a robust social and economic hub for the entire country. A major part of that endeavor is convincing the best and brightest that promising opportunities exist in their own backyards. This is something that can only happen if the region's workforce development efforts are aligned with its economic development initiatives. In recent years, several shining examples of this alignment have surfaced, notably:

- Inland Economic Growth & Opportunity (IEGO), an intentional network of businesses and institutions throughout San Bernardino and Riverside counties, committed to creating better jobs and increasing access to them.
- Growing Inland Achievement (GIA), a collective impact effort designed to align education and increase the college attainment rate of its students, especially those who struggle the most to get into and persist in college.
- Changing the Narrative, a communications and engagement strategy designed to position the Inland Empire as an assets-rich region and an attractive place for philanthropic and economic investment.
- Inland California Rising, an expansive effort that is bringing together stakeholders, innovators and thought leaders from the Inland Empire, San Joaquin Valley, and the Sacramento metro area to increase public awareness and shape perceptions about Inland California as a place of dynamic leadership and innovation.
- The Convergence, a coalition of healthcare providers, educational institutions, and workforce development specialists who are committed to addressing the growing shortage of healthcare workers throughout the region.

In addition, a number of innovative career pathway efforts are underway, connecting education, business, and local government around a shared vision of preparing young people for sustainable career opportunities. In Fontana, a city of 214,000 people with a robust business climate, the Mayor's Education Coalition is bridging deep divides and creating a new level of trust between businesses and schools. Recently, the city's Chamber of Commerce partnered with a high school to offer professional training classes on topics ranging from workplace etiquette and showing up on time, to conflict resolution and dressing for success. More than 60 students are participating in the pilot program.

In San Bernardino County, GenerationGo! is helping to supersize career pathways at several local school districts, offering support, assistance, and a network of business partners that districts are often struggle to build on their own. At the former March Air Force Base in Riverside County, the MARS Career Promise program is creating a training platform around promising careers in aerospace and advanced manufacturing.

By putting a priority focus on the specific needs of the region, rather than solely on national or international trends, higher education institutions are able to significantly reduce the amount of competitive noise. Instead, they can focus on what will attract local students, both traditional undergraduates (i.e., Stayers), and adult learners and graduate students who are settled but looking to advance or change their careers without uprooting their lives. This approach will also improve the job placement of graduates, as colleges and universities will be educating students for professions that are known to be needed in the region.

Creating a culture of successful graduates who grew up in the region and stayed to pursue a career (i.e., Stayers) would help individuals and communities shift the paradigm to pride in their regions and the Brain Remain. Students choosing to stay close to home for college would lead to feeling that, while they had choices to study close to home or at a distance, they made the choice related to pride in their community. Communities and K-12 educators should be cultivating the talent and intellect of all their students, and rely on the students' emotional attachment and financial investment to stay close to home, ergo Brain Remain.

Colleges and universities can consciously make the shift to increase opportunities for students from the region who want to stay in the region by exploring the following options:

- Strategically position the institution as an asset to the region through internships, civic/community engagement efforts, and knowledge resources. As Portland State University says in their tag line, “Let Knowledge Serve the City.” The Brain Remain assumes this philosophy by aiming to provide knowledge resources to educate members of the region and promote increased regional social mobility.
- Meet with and listen to industry leaders in the region to create the academic and certificate programs that reflect their workforce needs.
- Partner with regional industries to offer internships, or develop pipelines and pathways from post-secondary education into employment.
- Seek every opportunity to reinforce pride in students who choose the regional university and who choose to invest and serve in their communities.
- Initiative media coverage around the Brain Remain concept and impact on the community
- Cultivate a strong alumni network to mentor and hire students who graduate from the regional institution.
- Collaborate and partner with regional K-12 districts and charter schools to establish pipelines and clear pathway options for all students into post-secondary education.

Impacts of Brain Remain

The impacts of universities and communities shifting from a Brain Drain paradigm to Brain Remain mindset are significant. Offering compelling post-secondary education opportunities for Stayers provides access and opportunity for the majority of students who are not necessarily groomed to go away to college. Those students are an integral part of the Brain Remain as they are assets to their communities, local industries, and the economic mobility of their region. By taking advantage of regionally-focused programs, Stayers will enhance their employability, lifetime social mobility, and sense of self-efficacy. These graduates will be prepared for jobs and careers that are in-demand in their hometown, and the region's workforce will be enriched. More industries will be compelled to bring their jobs to the areas with the skilled workforce, increasing prosperity for non-urban areas. The Stayers who become part of the Brain Remain are then more likely to feel a sense of gratitude for all the opportunities their hometown afforded them and will have a deep emotional investment that leads them to be involved in their communities and give back. Shifting to the Brain Remain will improve the lives of many individuals who may otherwise feel left behind, while simultaneously enhancing suburban and metropolitan communities.

The University of La Verne is working diligently to promote the Brain Remain paradigm. Recently, 24 students, largely from the inland Southern California region, were each asked why they chose to attend the University of La Verne. Their responses ranged from: (a) their coaches and teachers graduated from this university and recommended it; (b) wanting to earn a law degree from this university so they can go back to their neighborhood and advocate for those who are like them; (c) needing to work while going to school in order to help to support their parents and siblings; or (d) enrolling in the university thinking they would transfer and are now happy to be here getting a degree that will lead to a profession that will improve their future. These are the examples of why it is important to embrace the residents and the future of the region. The Brain Remain is the option that brings pride to the students, their families, and their region.

Going away to college is undoubtedly a transformational experience, but not the singular trajectory for educational transformation. It will never cease to offer incredible value for those who seek such a path. However, whether one moves away after high school should not be linked so closely with self-efficacy. With the current generation of students, the increased competition of higher education, and the changing demands of the workforce, colleges and universities have the opportunity to shift the paradigm. Through partnership, collaboration, and focused intention on serving the regions in which they exist, institutions can plug up the Brain Drain and champion the Brain Remain.

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