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# Community must focus to keep graduates in area



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GUEST ESSAYISTS

**NEXT GENERATION**

**I**n recent months, the upstate New York region has been the focus of a series of events that initially appear unrelated.

First came the unprecedented convening of more than 100 higher education, local government and business leaders at an April conference called "Upstate Partners: Strengthening the Campus-Community Connection." It was followed closely by a roundtable discussion on the upstate economy at the April 10 Information Technology Exposition. Both sessions were attended by representatives of Rochester-area colleges and universities.

And then came the myriad graduation celebrations at our region's 17 colleges and universities. The tie? Those who participated in the high-level forums want to inspire those in the caps and gowns to start and build their careers in the region.

While data on the number of new college graduates leaving the area are not available, there is evidence we need to increase the base. The New York Department of Labor anticipates annual new job openings in the greater Rochester area for every degree level: 4,700 for graduates with a bachelor's degree; 770 for advanced degree holders; and 1,090 for those with an associate's degree. Right now, the New York Job Bank ([www.ajb.org/ny](http://www.ajb.org/ny)) lists hundreds of jobs for college graduates in fields such as computers, financial operations and engineering.

But do new graduates realize how greatly they are in demand here? Can we, as a region, encourage them to stay? What strategies are called for?

Census data show that the state's population outside the metropolitan area has been essentially level since 1990. Upstate's 12 largest cities all declined in population by an average of 10 percent. Fortunately, thousands of students arrive every year on campuses across New York. For example, 79,000 students annually enroll at the 17 higher education institutions in our region.

Against this backdrop, leaders from colleges, universities, business and the community at large are actively par-



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ticipating in efforts to increase our retention of educated young people for the upstate work force. These efforts pay particular attention to quality-of-life issues from the perspective of twentysomethings. A 2001 report from the Milken Institute suggests this element is critical: industry growth is strongest in areas with highly rated cultural amenities and perceived "coolness."

The Greater Rochester Metro Chamber of Commerce and The IMC are jointly sponsoring a program called "GR Recruits," with a focus on attracting and hiring students from our colleges. Already, placement directors for the colleges are meeting regularly with smaller local companies to learn about the firms and their hiring needs and to discuss student interests. There's also "Showcase Rochester," an informal job fair that draws attention to the region's lifestyle by including representatives from professional sports teams and museums.

This approach mirrors initiatives under way across upstate. The Syracuse, Albany and Buffalo areas also are engaged actively in programs to recruit and retain recent graduates.

County Executive Jack Doyle, in his State of the County address, also highlighted the importance of retaining recent graduates and noted his intention to develop an incentive program to keep our graduates. Projects such as the Infotonics Center of Excellence, for example, would create new job op-

portunities in fields in which graduates typically would be looking outside New York.

The Rochester Institute of Technology's cooperative education program offers another case in point. Each year, more than half of the 3,800 co-op positions completed by RIT students are with Rochester-area companies. We have a unique opportunity in this region to orient these students to the advantages of working in Rochester.

We encourage newly minted college graduates — consider this a formal invitation — to look for and accept jobs here. We also heartily welcome our region's new high school graduates who will enroll at one of the 262 colleges and universities in New York state. Those who dig in to the resources available will learn about opportunities to build their careers and lives right here.

We would like to persuade you to become involved, too. How? Take note of and actively support the creative college-student-retention programs in the Rochester region and in its sister communities upstate. List opportunities at your firm. Talk with young people you know about starting their careers here. Help make this a turning point. □

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