

Gray Matters

YOUNG MINDS FUEL TRANSFORMATION IN IOWA

[by MARY GOTTSCHALK]

Amidst the dreary headlines about Iowa's brain drain — the loss of college grads to Chicago, Minneapolis, and other out-of-state urban areas — it's easy to miss the positive news about Iowa's brain *gain*. The landscape of Iowa is being transformed — economically and culturally — by a cadre of young professionals who are choosing to build a career, a home, a life in Iowa. While there are no current data on whether in-migration offsets out-migration, a 2009 statewide survey conducted by Young Professionals of Iowa (YPIowa) — a statewide network promoting engagement and leadership — reports that 49 percent of the young professional (YP) respondents were “transplants” (non-Iowans) and 25 percent were “boomerangers” (Iowa natives who have returned to their home state after cutting their professional teeth elsewhere).

Zach Mannheimer, the inspiration behind the not-for-profit Des Moines Social Club, investigated nearly two dozen U.S. cities before selecting Des Moines for his brainchild. The ex-East Coaster says he noticed a different and appealing atmosphere in Iowa's capital city. “You can pick up the phone and call any corporate or community leader, and they'll respond. That doesn't happen in New York.”

Mary Cownie, who recently returned to Iowa after 4 years in Washington, D.C., and now owns Des Moines-based media consulting firm Goldfinch Strategies, describes a similar experience. “People are so willing to make introductions and offer advice.”

Such accessibility and guidance are noteworthy assets, explains Marshalltown Area Chamber of Commerce's Director of Membership and Marketing Lynn Olberding. “Our members tell us that it's so much easier to make business connections here than in Chicago.”

Increasing the number of 20- and 30-somethings in Iowa has been the 10-year goal of corporate, state, and municipal leaders who want to position the state as an attractive place to pursue a career and raise a family. A common strategy — typically under the auspices of a chamber of commerce — has been to facilitate social and professional networks for the YP age group. Today there are more than 100 of these around the state. Most link to YPIowa (YPIowa.com), enabling YPs to reach out beyond their immediate community.

Additional approaches highlight YPs who have leadership potential. The Cedar Rapids Chamber of Commerce created Leadership for Five Seasons (LeadershipForFiveSeasons.org) to introduce 35 YPs each year to influential business and community leaders, educate them on key issues, and engage them in community service. The 2010 class, for example, spent a day planting some 2,000 bulbs to create a natural-grass field at a Cedar Rapids elementary school.

At a statewide level, Leadership Iowa (sponsored by the Iowa Association of Business and Industry Foundation, LeadershipIowa.com) provides a similar program, grooming dozens of “emerging leaders” from across the state each year.

Another program, the Forty under 40 awards, emphasizes visibility rather than education, explains Janette Larkin, publisher of central Iowa's *Business Record*, the program's sponsor. “We want to celebrate high-achieving middle managers, creative entrepreneurs, and future philanthropists.”

Momentum in the effort to attract YPs to Iowa is shifting, increasingly fueled not only by corporate and community players but by YPs themselves. Volunteer activities cater to specific member interests. Some, such as exercise, travel, and wine-tasting groups, are primarily social, but the breadth of interest in and depth of commitment to the state these YPs now call home stretches



COURTESY BARKLEY PHOTO

**Lunch and leadership:
A recent Network@Noon
event brought together
YPs and area CEOs in
the Quad Cities area.**

much wider. Myriad volunteer networks across Iowa focus on the human capital that makes a community thrive, propelling technology, entrepreneurship, the arts, and community service.

In 2005 the community-minded Sioux City Growth Organization (SiouxCityGO.com) set out to increase pedestrian activity in the downtown area. The YP-driven initiative spawned Sculpt Siouxland, a separate nonprofit that sponsors a yearlong exhibit of 15 to 20 works of art displayed on downtown streets. At the end of each exhibition year, one work is purchased by Sculpt Siouxland for permanent display; the rest are sold at auction.

The volunteer arm of The Network (TheNetworkQC.com), eNgage connects YPs in the Quad Cities to a variety of volunteer opportunities and provides training and development for board and other leadership roles.

Young Variety (YVIowa.org) in Des Moines uses YP-driven events such as telethons to raise money for the Iowa Chapter of Variety Club — The Children’s Charity. Brian Hemesath, a Des Moines entrepreneur and past president of Young Variety, lauds the opportunity to give back to the community. “We can make a real impact through our time, creativity, and dollars raised.”

YP networks facilitate vital professional connections as well. Sioux City’s Innovation Market provides a forum for YPs to trade ideas and find advice and support for hopeful entrepreneurs. “It keeps the momentum of new ideas going,” observes Virginia Anderson, past president of both SCGO and YPIowa. In a similar vein, Des Moines’ TechBrew (TechnologyIowa.org) provides a monthly forum for YPs in the IT field.

“This is an entrepreneurial generation,” says Doug Reichart, CEO of Holmes Murphy in Des Moines and a frequent mentor of YPs. “They’ve grown up with constant technological and social change, and they thrive on it. They don’t want to spend their lives working in a cubicle. They want to get out and make things happen. They are key to Iowa’s future.” ✎

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coming 1/21