

## “Brain-Train Not Brain-Drain”

The workforce issue looming large for our local economy is not “brain-drain”, but rather “brain-train”. The U.S. population as a whole is aging. With the aging workforce comes an exit of skilled labor which will leave vacancies in many industry sectors. We must encourage our young men and women to fill this increasing void in skilled jobs if our economy is to remain robust. Communities across the country that are successful at replenishing their skilled-labor will be more competitive and will thereby achieve a greater degree of economic development success.

People between the ages of 25-39 typically constitute the largest share of the migratory population because young, single, college-educated adults may be more willing to relocate than married individuals who are sometimes constrained by location preferences of a spouse. Further, they may benefit from the broader range of job opportunities made attractive by larger markets. When this age cohort leaves a community, it is seen as “brain-drain” because of the human capital they take with them.

However, our current and future regional workforce demands will not be driven in large part by the skills obtained from a four-year university. This does not mean students shouldn’t pursue higher education. It simply means the skills our local economy needs today are Math, English, and Science to be used by welders, machinists, manufacturing, call center agents, construction trades, machine operators, government, healthcare, media etc., and the “soft skills” that some employers say are lacking especially at the entry levels (i.e. customer service skills, etc.).

It is evident that the region is making gains in the “brain-train” arena. Enrollment at Vernon College’s welding school has almost tripled in recent semesters, and all of these students are finding employment swiftly and at significantly increased wages. Both Vernon College and MSU’s nursing programs continue to be among the most highly coveted degree programs on both campuses. Entrance into degree programs in skilled professions at MSU, from accounting to the health sciences, is highly competitive among the students because these skilled professional paths continue to be in increasingly high demand.

Yet, it is our responsibility to educate our future workforce of the opportunities available to them within the local economy. Young people should be encouraged by the above average compensation for careers available in the skilled-labor sectors of the region. Nurses, machinists, welders and plumbers in the region can expect to earn in the neighborhood of \$20/hour, which equates to annual earnings of over \$40,000 per year.

Age Group	1990 Census	2000 Census	2006 Estimate	2011 Estimate	% Change 2006-2011
0-19	30.3%	29.9%	28.5%	26.9%	
20-24	7.5%	8.2%	8.5%	7.7%	-12.2%
<b>25-34</b>	<b>17.0%</b>	<b>13.1%</b>	<b>13.2%</b>	<b>15.2%</b>	<b>11.8%</b>
35-44	13.3%	15.5%	13.2%	11.8%	-12.5%
45-54	9.6%	11.9%	13.6%	13.6%	-3.0%
55+	22.3%	21.3%	23.0%	24.9%	

Source: DemographicsNow, January 2007.

Population projections show the Wichita Falls region stands to gain in the portion of the population so vital to our workforce and the economy, the 25-34 age group, in the upcoming five years. This means the region has the available potential labor force to fill the needs of local employers. Educating this age group about the career opportunities available to them in skilled-labor fields will create a win-win situation for the Wichita Falls region. The workforce will fill the needs in skilled-labor sectors creating secure financial futures for themselves and economic success for the region.