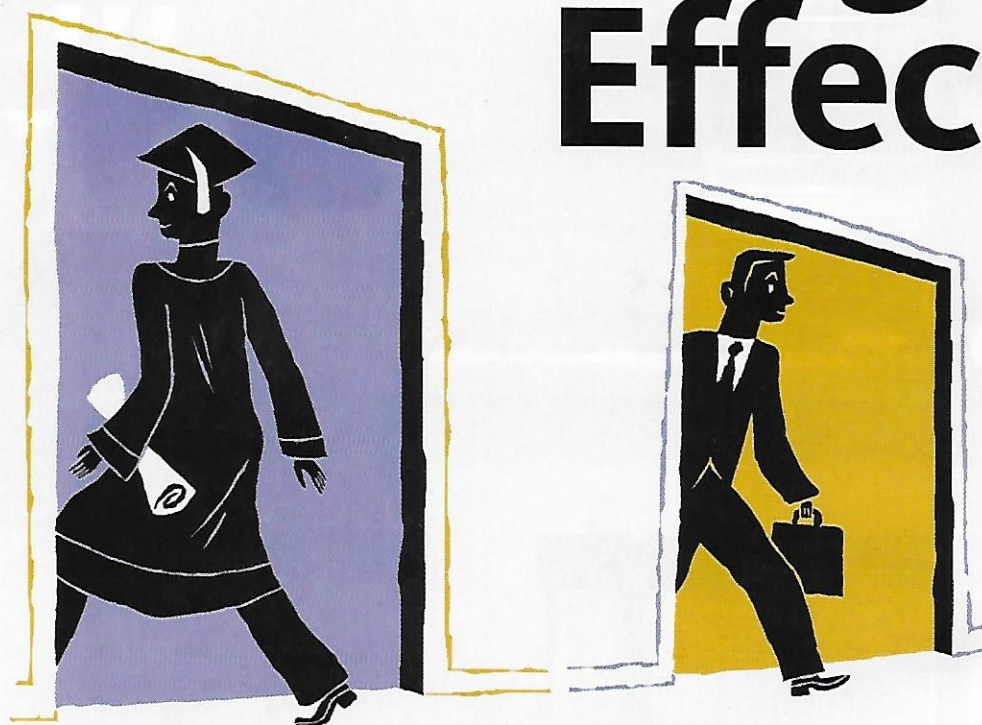


BY RENEE WILMETH

The Boomerang Effect

Yes, brain drain exists.
And it's our best hope for the future.



It was déjà vu all over again. As we finished dessert, the luncheon speaker stood at the podium reciting the familiar facts: Nearly 40 percent of our best and brightest college graduates leave the state as soon as they flip the tassel across their mortarboards. Indiana's mass exodus of graduates—our brain drain—is slowing our state's economic development. Heads nodded in agreement all over the room. And indeed, the speaker was basically right. According to a study by the Indiana Fiscal Policy Institute, 36 percent of graduates from Indiana colleges and universities leave the state after graduation for bigger cities and jobs.

But he is also absolutely wrong. Yes, the Indiana brain drain is real—but it's good for our state, not bad. Brain drain isn't hindering our state's economic development—it's driving it. Allow me to explain.

A few weeks later, I found myself at another lunch meeting looking around the table at colleagues, peers, and friends. They were entrepreneurs, lawyers, executives, philanthropists, and even an educator, almost all born and raised in Indiana. All had left Indiana after graduation. They had lived and worked

in Chicago; Washington, D.C.; New York; San Diego; and San Francisco—and then moved back, returning to higher-profile jobs, better salaries, and a satisfying cost of living. Brain drain may have prompted many of these graduates to leave Indiana, but it also created opportunities for them to return as talented young professionals. This growing population group—some call them “boomerangers”—is driving Indiana's new economy. If it weren't for brain drain, many of us wouldn't be here at all.

SOME OF THE NUMBERS ARE GRIM. The Indiana Fiscal Policy Institute study, conducted in 1999, found that Indiana produced 30 percent more college graduates than the national average but retained 20 percent fewer of them than other states. According to the report, technology- and knowledge-sector job candidates represented the greatest portion of the loss.

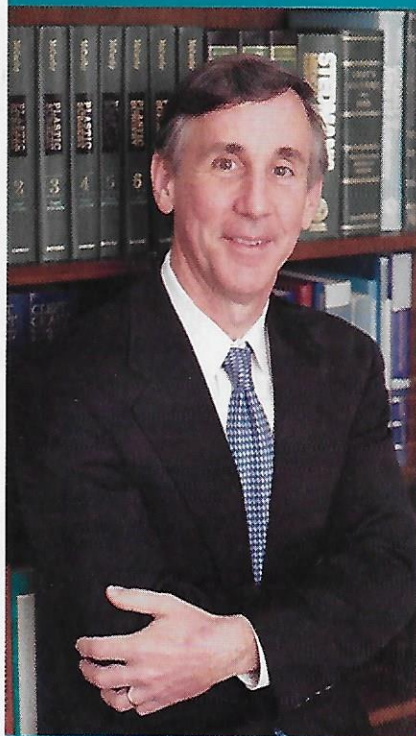
But the good news is compelling. According to the 2004 U.S. Census Bureau report, Indianapolis ranks 23rd out of 276 metropolitan areas growing in population of young, college-educated adults ages 25 to 39. We're in the top 10 percent. And according



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to a Brookings Institution study from the same year, we rank 25th out of the top 100 largest metropolitan areas. That means we have more young professionals returning to Indianapolis than 75 percent of the country's largest cities. These professionals are educated and young, with workers ages 25 to 34 making up 31 percent of the workforce in Indianapolis—above the national average. Many of these young people graduate from Indiana colleges and universities, move away, gain job experience, and boomerang back, bringing their new expertise with them.

But don't just believe the numbers—look around. The boomerangers are everywhere, and everybody knows one. Who are these people who have left the state and then relocated back to Indianapolis? And why did they return?

Like so many, Kostas Poulakidas began to want something that D.C. couldn't offer—opportunity. He wanted to make a difference. He wanted, he says, “a seat at the table.”

Kostas Poulakidas, an attorney at Krieg DeVault, grew up in Muncie, the grandson of a Greek Orthodox priest. After graduating from Ball State University in 1992, he left for graduate school at American University in Washington, D.C. He came back for a summer campaign job and ended up with a senior-level position with then-Governor Evan Bayh. “I was 25, and I couldn't think of another place in the entire world where they would have given me an opportunity like that at such a young age,” Poulakidas says. Then he left again, moving back to D.C. for a federal clerkship and life in a law firm. He thought he was in the nation's capital for good.

But like so many, Poulakidas began to want something that D.C. couldn't offer—opportunity. He wanted to make a difference. He wanted, he says, “a seat at the table.” In 2003, he decided to move back and landed a job as Governor O'Bannon's deputy commissioner of the Department of Local Government Finance. He says he felt welcomed back with open arms.

“Indianapolis is a city where you make it happen,” Poulakidas explains. “In D.C., you're boxed in. Financially, you're locked out of the game. Here, I can invest my own personal money in real estate or be a part of an entrepreneurial business.”

Mary Beth Reffett, principal at Crooked Creek Elementary School, graduated from Purdue University in 1998 only to leave for points west with her then-fiance, now husband, as soon as she walked across the stage. Today, at 32, she's one of the youngest principals the Washington Township school system has ever had. She says she firmly believes she wouldn't be where she is if not for the three years she and her husband spent living in Las Vegas and Los Angeles. “The cultural experience gave me a great perspective when we

came back,” she says.

That was in 2002, and the draw demonstrates one of the core reasons the boomerang effect is so powerful. “We wanted to buy a house and be closer to our support network,” Reffett says. “All of our family and friends live in Indiana.” Now the mother of a 2-year-old, Charlie, Reffett says they feel supported. “Indianapolis is a great place to raise kids. It's a little big town. And it's enough of a city that there are lots of opportunities for culture and activities.”

Other boomerangers have returned reluctantly but then grown to love Indiana. Greg Geller, a New Yorker, calls himself a “brain-drain addition,” having moved to Indiana from Seattle with his Indiana-native wife, Jane Boatman Geller, in 2003. “We moved for family,” he says. “I never grew up around my cousins, and it's great that my kids get to grow up around theirs. Being here now, I understand.”

His wife has 32 first cousins, 70 percent of whom live within a 40-minute drive of Indianapolis. She graduated

from DePauw University in 1989 and left for New York City, starting at Elizabeth Arden in the mailroom and spending lunch hours with the designers, learning the trade. After she worked her way up through the design department, she met Greg, married, moved to Seattle, and started her own company, custom stationery wholesaler Boatman Geller. Jane and Greg moved the company to Indiana in 2003. The move was personal but made good business sense. "From a company standpoint," she says, "we can serve our customers so much better with a central location for shipping." Now a mother of three, Boatman Geller says she counts her time away from Indiana as important in shaping who she is today. And she's right. Support networks of family and friends, affordable housing, a low cost of living, job opportunities, and

WHAT WILL IT TAKE to sustain this growth? Many state leaders say high-paying jobs are the only solution, but that's only one part of the puzzle. Other pieces include cost of living, low crime rates, and good housing value. But the biggest and most important puzzle piece? Those three little words every young professional wants when they leave the office for the weekend: quality of life.

It's a sunny spring morning, and light is streaming through the window in John Clark's book-lined office. Clark, senior fellow at the Indianapolis-based Sagamore Institute for Policy Research, acknowledges that Indiana has a brain drain but says he sees change coming. Young professionals are making more moves based on quality-of-life issues, which include ethnic and cultural diversity, a thriving arts scene,

such as Carmel's Arts & Design District, Indianapolis' Greenways trail system, the Monon Center at Central Park, and the newly begun Cultural Trail all contribute to drawing young people to Indianapolis to live and work. Public art like recent exhibitions by Tom Otterness and Julian Opie showcase Indianapolis as a place that cares about the people who live here.

What can go wrong? Indiana sometimes seems to be stifling this growth by failing to foster the cultural and lifestyle diversity needed to attract today's young professionals. Rising crime rates, a lack of hate-crime legislation, loss of arts funding, and troubled public schools can all still put the brakes on the boomerang effect. Corporate giants Cummins and Eli Lilly and Company weren't just making a public-relations move when they opposed Senate Joint Resolution 7, a measure seeking to amend Indiana's constitution with a strict definition of marriage: They knew it was good business to do so.

Aside from the economic benefits, Hoosiers who welcome the boomerangers will find they bring the best of both worlds with them—Midwestern ideals and national expertise. In Poulakidas' opinion, the Midwestern openness is a huge benefit as young professionals get the chance to be mentored by experienced members of their fields. "In D.C., it's survival of the fittest," he says. "Here, this mentoring has been invaluable in terms of long-term success. Opportunity is made, but it's also given."

YES, IT'S TRUE: 36 percent of our college graduates leave the state for jobs almost immediately upon graduation. But next time you're at that luncheon, or lecture, or forum, and the speaker begins to complain about our youth packing up and hitting the road, think about what they're not telling you.

You may call it brain drain, but as an employer of talent, an enjoyer of culture, and a lover of affordable living, I call it terrific. Quit complaining about the brain drain. Let these kids go (push them out the door if you have to), and then be ready to catch the boomerang. ●

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an improved quality of life drive these returns, and Indiana gets the benefit. "Leaving after graduation is like going to sleep-away camp, except you go away for 10 years and you come back," she says.

And like returning campers, these young professionals come back walking a little taller. Many say they return with a desire to drive change. "You don't have to go very far before you're interacting with people at a high level here," says Boatman Geller. "It's easy to get involved. It's easy to get recognized. It's easy to be a part of the big picture."

Poulakidas agrees. "I've found there's a change in people who have left and come back—they have new ideas about what they want to accomplish," he says. "There's an opportunity to shape things here." Whether serving on boards, volunteering, or starting businesses, boomerangers are shaping the city around us, making enormous contributions to the growing state economy. All with expertise, knowledge, and experience they wouldn't have acquired if they hadn't left Indiana in the first place.

and even outdoor areas for fitness and recreation.

"There's not a sharp line between the importance of the job and of the quality of life anymore," says Clark. "A lot of people expect to have a job, but it isn't like our parents' generation. It isn't the only part of their life. Work and quality of life aren't separate the way they used to be." Clark says the "circulation," the cycle of graduates leaving and returning, is natural and necessary to a growing economy: "You not only expect, but you want them to leave and come back." Brain drain, then, is a problem only when they don't want to come back. And while more high-paying jobs for 23-year-old college graduates is important, improving and sustaining a high quality of life for luring grads back is critically important, too.

According to the International Downtown Association Conference, trends show successful downtowns contribute to high quality-of-life factors. Museums, restaurants, art galleries, and music venues all play a role. Projects