



# Career and Location Decisions:

## RECENT PITTSBURGH AREA UNIVERSITY GRADUATES

Susan B. Hansen and Leonard Huggins,  
University of Pittsburgh

Why are so many graduates leaving Pittsburgh?  
The intensive survey this article reports on tries to shed light on reasons for this out migration and suggests ways the Pittsburgh region can begin to reverse the “brain drain.”

**M**any people in the Pittsburgh region have become concerned about the low rate of population growth, the aging of the population, and the shortage of young people. The Pittsburgh region, and the state of Pennsylvania as a whole, has been experiencing a “brain drain,” with a disproportionate number of recent college graduates leaving the Commonwealth for jobs elsewhere. Such human capital is essential to the needs of a dynamic economy.

We know that college graduates are the most mobile group in our society. Universities, of course encourage their graduates to pursue opportunities to work, study, and travel throughout the world. But the Pittsburgh region is not only losing many

**Figure 1: Salary and Home Ownership for Stayers and Leavers**

		Stayers	Leavers
<b>SALARY LEVEL</b>	<b>Number of Respondents</b>	<b>735</b>	<b>890</b>
	Salary under \$50,000	59.9%	39.9%
	Salary \$50,000 – \$100,000	35.5%	44.3%
	Salary over \$100,000	4.6%	15.8%
<b>HOUSING TENURE</b>	<b>Number of Respondents</b>	<b>807</b>	<b>958</b>
	Percent homeowners	62.7%	50.2%
	Percent renters	27.1%	46.3%
	Living with parents/family member	10.2%	3.4%

of its own college graduates; it is also failing to attract many others who attended college elsewhere. And Pittsburgh ranks well below other U.S. cities in the number of immigrants who move here. So we must address both retention and recruitment issues if this region hopes to reverse the “brain drain.”

With eleven colleges and three universities in Pittsburgh alone, Southwestern Pennsylvania produces a rich lode of well-trained young workers every year. Yet many of them find jobs elsewhere. The Career and Location Decisions Project (CLD) was designed to find out why so many area graduates are leaving Pittsburgh, how more might be persuaded to remain, and how this region might recruit more of the young professionals it needs. These results are important for policy makers, for academic institutions, and for employers concerned about the “brain drain” and slow population growth in this region.

This report is based on the first systematic survey of graduates of the three major universities in the Pittsburgh region. The study, funded by the Heinz Endowments and the R.K. Mellon Foundation, is based on telephone and Internet interviews conducted in early 2001 with over 2,000 graduates from the classes of 1994 and 1999 of the University of Pittsburgh, Carnegie Mellon University, and Duquesne University. The respondents were asked why they came here for their education, what kinds of jobs and lifestyles they wanted, and how they made their decisions about where to live and work.

## Pittsburgh’s Record with Graduates

### *The Good News*

One of the most striking findings is that Pittsburgh is doing better in retaining its college graduates, with significant improvements from 1994 to 1999

across all categories. Over half of the currently-employed 1999 college graduates interviewed work in the Pittsburgh area, compared with only 40% of earlier graduates. Many more recent graduates found their first jobs in the Pittsburgh region. The proportion of graduates in scientific and technical fields who stayed on to work in this region also increased 25% between 1994 and 1999.

The study also found that one-third of the university graduates who grew up outside the Pittsburgh region are now staying on here to work, compared with only 20% of those who graduated in 1994. Of course, those who grew up and went to high school in the Pittsburgh region are most likely to remain. Yet Pittsburgh natives who graduated in 1999 are also having better luck finding jobs locally than did those who graduated in 1994. Contrary to the predictions made by labor economists, the Pittsburgh region is retaining a sizeable number of graduates with advanced degrees, especially professional degrees.

### *The Not-So-Good News*

Low salaries proved to be a key reason why many of our graduates leave the Pittsburgh region. Although the cost of living elsewhere may be higher, recent graduates are still attracted to positions with higher starting salaries. Those who left those regions are making, on average, much higher salaries than those who stayed. Although the Pittsburgh region is now retaining more of its university graduates, the region is still losing a disproportionate number of those in scientific and technical fields. The study also found that many graduates who found their first jobs here took subsequent jobs outside the region.

Salary differences are even larger for women, minorities, and international students. Concern with finding good jobs for two-career couples also convinced people to move elsewhere. But while sunbelt states

**Figure 2: Reasons for Leaving: Leavers Who Previously Held Jobs in the Pittsburgh Region**

	<b>Number of Responses</b>	<b>Percent of Leavers</b>
<b>Job-related</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>65.8%</b>
Lack of job opportunities there/better opportunity elsewhere	71	44.1
Accepted a job elsewhere	15	9.3
Higher salary	6	3.7
Job in Pittsburgh had been a temporary/part-time position	5	3.1
Job offers in my field	2	1.2
To take new job	2	1.2
All other job-related reasons	5	3.1
<b>Family</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>17.4</b>
Wanted to live with spouse/significant other	19	11.8
To go back home/to be near family/friends	9	5.6
<b>City/Region</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>13.0</b>
Didn't like climate/weather	6	3.7
City was not culturally diverse/was unsophisticated	2	1.2
Commute long distance	3	1.9
Never felt at home/didn't fit my lifestyle	1	0.6
Wanted a change/lived there long enough	8	5.0
All other city/region related reasons	1	0.6
<b>Educational</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>3.7</b>
To further education elsewhere	4	2.5
Graduated	2	1.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>161</b>	<b>100%</b>

like California, Arizona, and Florida were often mentioned as desirable places to live or work, more of the area graduates who left Pennsylvania settled in neighboring states in the Northeast than in sunbelt states. For area graduates working in high-tech fields, a desire for more challenging jobs and recreational opportunities, rather than salaries, attracted them to positions outside the region.

### What Attracts Students to Pittsburgh?

The study shows that all three schools attracted more students from outside the region in 1999 than in 1994. Pittsburgh universities drew a large number of students from outside the area primarily because of the quality of their academic programs. But graduates also cited the many cultural events, the urban atmosphere, and availability of economic opportunities as factors that led them to study at universities at Pittsburgh.

### What Makes Pittsburgh Attractive to Those Who Stay Here?

The number one factor was closeness to family (particularly for those who grew up in this area).

But other factors that made Pittsburgh attractive included:

- Affordable housing
- Convenient and low-cost transportation
- Access to the region's universities and colleges for continuing education
- Economic opportunities in the region.

While salaries of the region's graduates tend to be considerably lower here than elsewhere, opportunities for home ownership are a definite plus for the Pittsburgh region. The metropolitan area's graduates did not usually describe salary as the top priority for their choice of a job. Rather, interesting jobs with opportunities for advancement or careers that offer a chance to help others appear to be more important factors. But salary did prove to be a significant predictor for the choice to stay in or leave Pittsburgh.

### Where Can Pittsburgh Improve?

The CLD study noted several areas where improvements are needed. While a majority of first jobs after graduation are in the Pittsburgh region, fewer

subsequent or current jobs held by recent graduates are located here. The Pittsburgh region is still losing a high proportion of its graduates in science and technology to other parts of the country (although less so in 1999 than in 1994). Techies' most important job criterion is for a challenging or interesting job, and their perception is that more such jobs are available outside of Pittsburgh. Many of our minority or international graduates also leave this area, and a desire for greater cultural diversity is often cited as the reason. Area graduates most interested in amenities such as cultural attractions, recreational opportunities, geography, and climate are more likely to leave Pittsburgh than to stay. This region therefore needs to address minority concerns, and to devote more attention and resources to developing and promoting amenities likely to appeal to recent graduates.

The desire to be close to family is an important reason for staying in (or returning to) Pittsburgh, but the lack of job opportunities for one's spouse or partner was a major reason many graduates (especially women) gave for moving elsewhere. The perceived lack of job opportunities locally was a major reason our respondents gave for taking jobs outside the Pittsburgh region. Career counseling efforts by the universities were often not even considered as part of a job search strategy, and many who did use them found them lacking. The universities could also do a far better job of tracking recent graduates, both for their own purposes and to facilitate future research on career and location choices.

Clearly some of the reasons the respondents give for staying or leaving (family considerations, climate, geography) are not readily amenable to policy intervention, but other issues (salary differentials, housing costs, career counseling, internships, opportunities for women and minorities, perceptions of lack of opportunities) should be addressed by Pittsburgh area universities, employers, foundations, and economic development agencies.

However, a "one-size-fits-all" approach to recruitment and retention may not help. Efforts to retain area graduates should focus on two groups in particular: graduates who leave after taking their first jobs here, and people now working elsewhere who have considered Pittsburgh as an alternative location to live and work. In addition, the significant advantages of the Pittsburgh region — affordable housing and convenient transportation; growing opportunities in science and technology; abundant cultural, educational, and leisure-time options — need to be more effectively communicated to all recent graduates and to area employers.

Susan B. Hansen is a Professor of Political Science and Leonard Huggins is a Research Assistant at the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Pittsburgh. The report is part of the Career and Location Decision Project funded by the Heinz Endowments and the Richard King Mellon Foundation. For more information, visit [www.gspia.pitt.edu/cldproject](http://www.gspia.pitt.edu/cldproject).

