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Thomas P. Foley // September 26, 2024 // 5 Minute Read

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A study released in spring 2024 found that more college-educated workers moved here than left in the last year, a key turning point for the Keystone State.

This new "brain *gain*" is a step in the right direction for jobs and the state's economy, potentially reversing the tide of previous losses. PA welcomed a 51% net gain over the previous year in the number of [new residents with a college degree](#), making Pennsylvania the [8th](#) top state in net gain of

college-educated workers in the USA (DC holds the top spot, while California and New York continue to see losses and “brain drain”).

Perhaps an even more surprising sign of Pennsylvania’s brain gain is the fact that our state leads in shaping *Nobel Prize winners*. More than 1 in 10 of all American Nobel Prize winners are affiliated with one of the 85 independent nonprofit colleges and universities of Pennsylvania (16% to be exact, or [66](#) of the 409 total American Nobels awarded since the prize began in 1901).

Magnet for talent

Pennsylvania has the [second highest](#) positive net migration of college students in the US, attracting both out-of-state and international students who want to study here. Counterintuitively, the federal government actually describes these *inbound* students as economic “[exports](#)” because by studying here, their spending is considered a net gain for the region. That’s especially great news for the local economy, because the [ability to attract](#) talent plays an indispensable role in innovation and even security.

Independent nonprofit schools lead the sector in attracting these out-of-state students to PA, enrolling 2 in 3 of all first-year out-of-staters who study in PA. Each of these out-of-state students is a potential future resident. The scale of the sector might surprise you, as the [85](#) independent nonprofit colleges educate more than 275,000 students annually, representing 52% of all four-year degree-seeking students in Pennsylvania.

Wealth of knowledge

Everyone gains from this brain gain, including those without a degree, because the local economy is strengthened and diversified when local tech firms and hospitals are able to fill critical work needs. “States which retain and attract highly-educated adults stand to reap substantial economic benefits,” was the conclusion of a Congressional [Joint Economic Committee](#) study. Everyone reaps the rewards when new research innovations and technology breakthroughs move the curve of what’s possible. In fact, products and services that you will probably use today – like WiFi and the Java computer code used to power Google and Netflix –were [invented](#) by alumni from one of the independent colleges of Pennsylvania.

Brain gain creates a “knowledge spillover” that gives local companies access to “[important knowledge sources to introduce innovations at a faster rate than rival firms located elsewhere.](#)” There is a well-researched [correlation](#) between education and wealth creation, not just at the [individual](#) level but also at the societal level. A [Federal Reserve](#) study found that, “Most educated people tend to earn higher paychecks than the least educated. This is also true for countries: Rich countries tend to have the most educated workforces.” A study in the journal *Nature* published in April 2024 found that “[the population segments with higher education had a significantly positive impact on GDP growth.](#)” You might say that a “wealth of knowledge” can also lead to financial wealth. In fact, the school that graduates the most [billionaire](#) alumni in the world isn’t Harvard or Stanford, but an independent university right here in Pennsylvania, credited with minting 19 billionaires.

Higher education helps us all to do more with less. Consider how America, which represents only 4% of the world population, still manages to represent [27%](#) of the world economy (top GDP at \$29 trillion), [45%](#) of all Nobel Prize winners, and is home to [65%](#) of the world’s 20 highest-ranked

universities. In other words, the US is a wealthy country *because of* its colleges, not *in spite of* them.

Filling critical workforce needs

Independent nonprofit colleges are expanding their programs and facilities to respond to the most pressing workforce needs. For example, Pennsylvania is projected to experience the [worst nursing shortage in the nation](#) by 2026 according to the Hospital and Healthsystem Association of Pennsylvania, and in responding to that need, independent colleges already educate 7 in 10 of the nursing students in PA. In Central PA, [Messiah University](#) in Mechanicsburg placed [100%](#) of its nursing graduates in jobs in 2023, Harrisburg University's [vertical campus](#) accommodates 1,000 students in nursing and allied health programs, and [Alvernia University](#) in Reading expanded its nursing school with a new [55,000 square foot](#) lab space and healthcare simulation center. Besides nursing, the independent nonprofit colleges also make up 45% of all teacher certification candidates and 55% of all the STEM degrees ("Science, Technology, Engineering, Math") in the Commonwealth.

These schools are looking outside the classroom for bold innovations and partnerships in the community. They work with hundreds of employers to make the graduation-to-workforce transition seamless, and many employers even promote their employee's education by offering discounted tuition at partner universities. For one example, LeadingAge PA of Mechanicsburg promotes its [partnerships](#) with Marywood, Chestnut Hill, Carlow, Harrisburg, Drexel and Messiah. PA's independent four-year colleges account for 300 transfer agreements with two-year colleges across Pennsylvania, and they offer dual enrollment and three-year programs to help students to finish school affordably and fast.

Higher education is PA's economic partner

Higher education has been called the "[5th largest industry](#)" in Pennsylvania (and independent nonprofit colleges represent more than half of that sector). The independent nonprofit colleges contribute [\\$24 billion](#) annually to the state economy, a figure that even [rivals the GDP](#) of nearly half of the world's economies.

The buzzing economic energy of a campus employs local residents and sustains the shop down the street, benefitting neighbors whether they have a degree or not, and these colleges embody a role that the Federal Reserve of Philadelphia describes as a community "[anchor](#)." Local examples here in Central PA and Lehigh Valley include Albright, Alvernia, Cedar Crest, DeSales, Dickinson, Elizabethtown, F&M, Gettysburg, Harrisburg, Lafayette, Lancaster Bible, Lebanon Valley, Lehigh, Messiah, Moravian, Muhlenberg, Pennsylvania College of Art & Design, Saint Joseph's University of Lancaster, Wilson, and York College.

200,000 jobs, or about 1 in 32 jobs in PA, are supported in whole or in part by PA's 85 independent nonprofit colleges and universities. These schools are the [top employer](#) in 3 counties, among the top 10 employers in 14 counties, and among the top 25 employers in 20 counties.

With advances in LLMs and AI, retraining the workforce will only increase the value of education. One study found that by 2031, [72%](#) of jobs in the U.S. will require postsecondary education. These schools have already demonstrated their role in reversing Pennsylvania's brain drain into a brain *gain*, and it would seem that the best is still yet to come.

Thomas P. Foley is the president of the nonprofit Association of Independent Colleges and Universities of Pennsylvania (AICUP), based in Harrisburg. In previous roles, he was a Pennsylvania college president, he was Pennsylvania's Secretary of Labor and Industry, and he led the United Way of Pennsylvania and the Red Cross of Southeastern Pennsylvania.