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BRAIN DRAIN: FACT? FICTION? OR A LITTLE OF BOTH?

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Depending upon whom you speak with in the business community, “brain drain” is either a serious problem in South Florida or a fiction that people bandy about.

In any given month, corporate executives with whom I interact will proclaim: “FIU is turning out some great MBA students. We intend to hire a lot more from your school” while others will exclaim: “We can’t find talent here; your best and brightest leave and don’t return.”

To begin with, any honest and accurate discussion of “brain drain” should dispense with the term altogether. In our 21st century, globalized and interconnected world, the more relevant term to use is “brain mobility.”

Talented individuals have more choices than ever regarding where they choose to live and work, depending, of course, on the labor market demands for their particular skills and the quality of life they wish to enjoy. Just as with the removal of tariff barriers and the continuing liberalization of trade, investment, and finance, decisions will rest with a free market, so too will the free market choices of individuals.

But what about the notion or accusation that (1) companies cannot find talent here and (2) that the best and brightest leave. The first accusation is baseless. If firms cannot find talent here, then they are not looking hard enough. If there were such a dearth of talent, would the vast constellation of companies in financial services, real estate, health care, IT, and other services be present throughout the Tri-County area, not to mention expanding their operations? Would the business community not be up in arms if our local higher education institutions were not turning out the quality of graduate they sought hire? Organizations such as the Beacon Council, through their Academic Leaders Council’s Talent Development Network and New Leaders Taskforce, are working hard to promote local talent; and Miami Dade College’s two-year technical programs along with the proliferation of non-college coding academies are testimonies to the fact that talent should not be defined as a four-year college degree.

As for the best and the brightest leaving, that often occurs in other places, as well. Many in the top 10% of high school graduating classes attend top-tier universities. There they develop connections and networks, including relationships with recruiters at prestigious companies. Not surprisingly, they do not return to their hometowns after graduation but begin their careers elsewhere. They may well return to their hometowns, however, if opportunities arise after they have achieved success elsewhere. In essence, the exodus of top talent is often less about what their communities lack than what other locales have in quality and reputation. For example, a high school graduate from Cleveland who decides to study at Columbia University because of

an interest in investment banking or management consulting will opt for a job after graduation in New York, not Miami, Houston, or Minneapolis. A Miami high school graduate interested in film and entertainment will probably make UCLA his or her first choice college and seek employment in that industry afterward. And students from the U.S. and abroad who are interested in college and a career in hospitality management, health care, and international business will rank Miami high on their list of places to study and work.

It is important to recognize, too, that as a global city with a heavy Latin American focus, Miami is a beneficiary of brain gain attracting many of the best and brightest from the Americas. (Courtesy of the late Hugo Chavez and Nicolas Maduro, I've been blessed with a continuing cadre of Venezuelan students who are among the best I have taught.)

There are many "quality of life" factors that will continue to make our community a beneficiary of brain mobility—talent coming and going. This is particularly true in the area of start-ups where Miami ranks #2 nationwide, according to the Kauffman Foundation.

Economist Edward Glaeser has produced compelling research that concludes that human capital predicts population and productivity growth at the city and metropolitan levels. Striving to become one community with one overarching goal, targeting promising industries for growth and development, Miami and South Florida in general will increase its attractiveness as a place where talent can thrive.

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