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Michigan doesn't fare well in latest national education statistics

By Diether Haenicke
November 05, 2008

Each year, I look forward to the Almanac issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education, the statistical lodestar for college administrators.

The Almanac projects trends, state by state, including general population growth and many other subspects such as racial breakdown, gender divisions, education funding etc. In addition to presenting future trends, the Almanac Issue also provides statistical insights into the current distribution of students and faculty, faculty salaries, educational attainment of students, graduation rates and much more. To me, it makes fascinating reading.

The first numbers I usually study are the general demographics. The United States is experiencing significant growth: Our total population is now more than 301 million. Since our notoriously absurd national immigration policies do not allow us to determine with any certainty how many people are in this country illegally, there may be anywhere from 10 million to 20 million additional people inside our national borders.

We are not really a nation of youngsters: 34.3 percent of the population is under 25 years of age; 27.8 percent is between 25 and 45, and 38 percent is older. Given the modest birthrates in our country, we are graying slowly but surely, and the young people of today will have to shoulder greater tax burdens than their parents to pay for the social needs and entitlements of an aging population.

Some of our states have grown explosively. The largest state is California with almost 37 million inhabitants. That equals roughly the total populations of Greece (11 million), Belgium (10 million), and the Netherlands (16 million) combined. California is followed by Texas (24 million), New York (19 million), Florida (18 million) and Illinois (13

million) -- each of our five largest states is bigger than many foreign countries. One wonders how much room is left in the United States for ever-expanding immigration. The demand for immigration into Europe and the U.S. will increase in time from those parts of the world -- mainly Asia and Africa -- where birthrates are extremely high, with often five or more children per woman.

Michigan, with a population of slightly more than 10 million, is the eighth largest state. The smallest in terms of population are, in descending order, Alaska, North Dakota, Vermont, the District of Columbia and Wyoming -- each with fewer than a million inhabitants.

The educational attainment of a state population is often measured by the number of residents holding a baccalaureate or higher degree. This number has meaning for work-force development, particularly for industries that need highly educated and sophisticated employees. The national average is 27 percent. Michigan, with 24.5 percent, falls below the national average while all the above-mentioned largest and smallest states in the union, with the exception of Wyoming, exceed it.

The Michigan numbers do not bode well for attracting to our state new high-tech or sophisticated service industries, and the continuous chronic underfunding of education, particularly higher education, in our state does nothing to improve this picture. Languishing about 24 percent makes us uncompetitive with states such as Colorado, Connecticut, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Vermont or Virginia, all of which have educational attainment indices ranging from 31 to 37. It is in our state's self-interest to improve these figures, and fast. The so-called "good-paying" jobs are in the new industries.

In this context I also note that the increase in state appropriations for Michigan higher education from fiscal years 2006-07 to 2007-08 at less than 1 percent was the lowest of any state in the union. Compare our figure with those of Texas (+11.2 percent), Arizona (+14.6 percent), North Dakota (+19.1 percent), Wisconsin (+8.2 percent) and numerous other states with double-digit increases. Wise, future-oriented investments are made all over the country, but not in Michigan.

Another alarming trend appears in the projected number of high school graduates in the next 10 years. In Michigan, their numbers are expected to decline by 12 percent, as they will in neighboring states such as Ohio (-10 percent), Wisconsin (-3 percent) or Illinois

(-5 percent). Big increases are projected for Texas (+19 percent), Nevada (+33 percent), Arizona (+29 percent), Georgia (+20 percent) and Florida (+17 percent). If true, the numbers indicate a massive future shift away from the Midwest and from Michigan in particular. High time for Michigan to plan and fund a different future!

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