Detroit, Bankrupt, Looks to Colleges as Partners in Recovery

By Don Troop
Detroit

A red beam of light hits the wall of an engineering auditorium at Wayne State University. Standing some 30 feet away, Dan Kinkead holds a laser pointer.

"If I move my hand 1/100th of an inch," he tells a group of economic-development professionals in the university's Detroit Revitalization Fellows Program, "the beam will play out three feet across that wall."

The dancing spot of light represents Detroit circa 2043, and Mr. Kinkead, executive director of the urban-planning program Detroit Future City, wiggles the laser to illustrate how even the smallest action is amplified when projected across time.

"This is a galvanizing moment for action," he says.

Colleges, businesses, and charitable foundations across Michigan are heeding that directive, working in ways large and small, together and independently, to pull Detroit from a downward economic spiral that began even before the city hit its population zenith of 1.85 million in 1950 (it's now just 700,000). Central to their efforts is education, both to fill the demand for entrepreneurs, small-business owners, and skilled workers and to make sense of a situation that saw Detroit proper go from manufacturing pre-eminence to postindustrial meltdown.

The city's estimated $18-billion bankruptcy filing in July turned all eyes toward Detroit, but James Jacobs, president of Macomb Community College and an expert in work-force development,
insists that the ripples of red ink will extend well beyond the borders of the city. With 48,000 students on four campuses in Macomb County, 30 miles north of Detroit, Mr. Jacobs says plenty of city pensioners pay property taxes that support his college.

"I’m viewing this potential tidal wave coming toward me, and I’m wondering, How far up the hill am I?" Mr. Jacobs says.

Any solution for Detroit, he says, must involve training people to work high-skill jobs in the entire metropolitan area—and it must be accomplished in an era of shrinking state and local resources. On the positive side, he says, the region still has a robust and viable automobile industry.

While low-skill manufacturing jobs have diminished, "Detroit can continue to maintain itself as the administrative and technical hub of this worldwide industry," Mr. Jacobs says. Colleges like his, he argues, should strive to train workers for areas where Detroit continues to be a leader, such as navigation systems, new ways of parking, lighter vehicles, and green technologies.

**Tuition-Free Degrees**

Macomb and four other local community colleges may soon be getting an influx of Detroit students. A new program called the Detroit Scholarship Fund promises tuition-free enrollment for associate degrees or technical certificates to students who graduated from any city high school in 2013. They must have attended the school for at least two years and completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or Fafsa, by June 30.

The program resulted from a pledge that Governor Rick Snyder, a Republican, made in 2011. It is supported by donations from foundations and business and is administered by the Detroit Regional Chamber. About $1-million has been budgeted for the effort.

Because the program is in its inaugural year and community-college enrollment is a notoriously soft commitment, the number of participants won’t be known until the end of September, says
Greg Handel, the chamber's senior director of work-force development.

"For decades there were great jobs for people who didn't have a lot of formal education," Mr. Handel says. "Those jobs are obviously gone, and it's kind of a slow transition to a culture and a regional educational infrastructure that really understands and acts on the notion that all kids need to have some kind of postsecondary education in order to succeed."

The scholarship effort got significant grass-roots support from a Fafsa-completion campaign led by six Local College Access Networks, or LCANs, along with teams of leaders from Detroit schools, higher education, business, government, and nonprofit groups, who strive to ensure that Detroit high-school students are prepared for college. Working with other city organizations, the LCANs got 73 percent of the members of Detroit high-schools' classes of 2013 to fill out the Fafsa, up from about 50 percent a year earlier.

"We all just collectively worked our tails off," says Brandy Johnson, executive director of the Michigan College Access Network, an umbrella group for the LCANs. It is pursuing a goal set by the Lumina Foundation to increase postsecondary educational attainment in the United States to 60 percent by 2025.

If current trends continue, a Lumina study found, only 43 percent of Michigan adults age 25 to 64 will have degrees by the target year. In Detroit just 26 percent of adults have postsecondary degrees.

Companies want to invest where there is an educated work force, Ms. Johnson says. "Right now Detroit is both not producing that work force, nor is it attractive enough yet to import that kind of talent."

**Downtown Revival**

The city's educational challenges notwithstanding, brain drain from Michigan seems to be easing. A survey this year by the University of Michigan at Dearborn's Center for Innovation
Research found that 63 percent of public-university graduates chose to remain in the state, a 12-point increase from a comparable survey in 2007.

Unlike the rest of the city, Detroit’s downtown and Midtown are enjoying a renaissance. Condo, loft, and apartment housing in those two areas are essentially sold out, and companies including Quicken Loans and Blue Cross Blue Shield have added nearly 12,000 jobs downtown over the past few years. Quicken’s founder, Dan Gilbert, has bought up more than 7.5 million square feet of downtown real estate, and this summer the company hired more than 1,000 college students as interns in an effort to spread the word about Detroit’s comeback. Mr. Gilbert has also used a portion of his $3.5-billion fortune to launch a number of tech start-ups downtown.

But Detroit is a vast city with highly visible problems, and local colleges are working to do their part.

Marygrove College, a Roman Catholic liberal-arts institution that serves largely first-generation and Pell Grant-eligible students, is midway through a three-year initiative to develop urban leaders. The program, backed by a $1.5-million grant from the Kellogg Foundation, infuses Marygrove’s curriculum, says President David J. Fike.

"There is a need for enhancing the capacity for people to tell their stories in ways that don’t become compartmentalized and stereotyped around race," he says. "Authentic, real conversations. That’s something that we believe strongly that urban leaders in Detroit can influence."

Michigan State University, Grand Valley State University, and the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor all own or lease space in Detroit, where they engage with the city in myriad ways.

Semester in Detroit is a University of Michigan program that brings students to live at Wayne State University and intern in the city with nonprofit community groups, business start-ups, museums, or
political officials. The students also take a core course in Detroit history and an elective course such as urban planning in the context of postwar Detroit.

Craig Regester, the program’s associate director, says it gives students a "multidimensional, nuanced view of what it means to be part of a community and part of a city." Of the 104 students who completed the program from 2009 to 2012, 24 went on to live or work in Detroit after graduation, he says.

One such alumnus is Rashard Haynesworth, a Detroit native and first-generation college student who interned with Racquet Up Detroit, an after-school program that combines the sport of squash with academic tutoring and mentoring for local youths. Mr. Haynesworth recently took a full-time job with Racquet Up, which runs its program in a recreation center not far from where he grew up. "I want to be the guy who kids look at and say, 'If he did it, so can I.'"

Similarly, Michigan’s Community-Based Research Program placed students with 20 local organizations in Detroit for the summer, and Michigan’s School of Education has a partnership with the Detroit School of Arts, a high school in Midtown. Students in Michigan’s master’s-level capstone course in urban and regional planning apply their newly acquired expertise to real-world problems in Detroit and the surrounding area. One student project, which sought to reform the tax-foreclosure-auction system in Wayne County to ensure that foreclosed properties were reused rather than abandoned, won a national award from the American Planning Association.

Angela D. Dillard, director of the University of Michigan's Residential College, has been working in several ways to bring her institution’s resources and scholarly heft to bear on the problems facing Detroit. One such effort is a "Michigan Meeting," which will bring scholars from a range of disciplines to Detroit next May to grapple with "the global problem of urban decline by focusing on the paradigmatic example of Detroit."
She urges those studying the city to proceed with caution. "Race is a land mine for anyone who wants to work in Detroit," says Ms. Dillard, and that includes African-American scholars such as herself.

She recalls running into problems while pursuing a community-based history project with a black church. "The whole thing fell apart. I think it had everything to do with race and place, class, and status."

Even though she had grown up in northwest Detroit, her own "racial belonging" came into question. "When you have that big 'M' traveling with you," she says, "I think the vision of the University of Michigan is that it's a white, arrogant institution and really ought not to be mucking around in the city anyway."

It was a sobering lesson, and one she says she retells often.

"So some white kid from the suburbs—how do we really prepare students to live in the city, to learn in the city, to partner with people in the city, and to learn from them?" she asks.

Ms. Dillard advises scholars and students to be responsible to the communities they work with because Detroit residents are accustomed to being exploited by others, even if it's just researchers seeking data.

"If you keep at Detroiters, you can crack through that," she says. "It's about building trust. They want to know that you're not there just exploiting the city one more time."

Comments

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As just one example (among many): UM continues to expand its land holdings in Michigan and negatively impact the State, and hence Detroit, in two ways. UM pays zero tax to the State. The more they expand the more tax revenue possibilities for the State shrink. Further, every piece of acquired land that becomes part of the UM kingdom is off the tax rolls - forever. Yes - UM and other higher ed institutions bring MUCH to our States, cities, citizens, and culture - but - when a city like Detroit gets in trouble (which is not directly UM’s fault of course) that "enhanced culture" will not be able to save Detroit from bankruptcy - but real estate taxes just might. Time to have colleges and universities pay their fair share - just like WE have to as responsible participants in all of this.