

## Higher Education Can Impact the “Turning Point” for Young West Virginians

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In order to attract and retain young talent in West Virginia, we need to affect young West Virginians’ perception of the state before the “turning point”—that moment when many decide their ambitions and dreams are beyond the Mountain State. For that future entrepreneur, nonprofit director, city mayor, accountant, lawyer, when is that “turning point” when they decide to take their talent elsewhere?

A 2012 study by WVU’s Bureau of Business and Economic Research gives us insight into when this “turning point” might be. West Virginia is attracting the college age population (18-24 years old) at a higher rate than the national average. However, West Virginia is losing 25-34 year olds at almost double the rate of the national average. This suggests that the “turning point” for many West Virginians is likely before they are 25. Colleges, universities, and community colleges have the opportunity to shift this trajectory by connecting young West Virginians’ ambitions to our state’s opportunity before this critical “turning point.”

**Higher Education needs to serve as a connector.** Many leave the state without knowing the opportunities that exist here. At the foundation is a misperception of what West Virginia communities have to offer. Apprenticeships and internships are important tools in changing these perceptions and connecting students with West Virginia businesses and organizations that offer the opportunity to stay home while achieving career aspirations. Internship and apprenticeship opportunities allow students to develop lasting relationships with potential future employers while changing the perception that young people have to leave the state to find a great job.

Lack of economic diversification is a problem in the Mountain State, so what if West Virginia does not have the career opportunity that a student is working toward?

**Higher education needs to empower entrepreneurs.** Millennials are an entrepreneurial generation, but many leave the state due to a perception that West Virginia is not open to change, innovation, new ideas, and solutions. We are missing an opportunity to empower millennials to stay and create the changes West Virginia needs. Higher education institutions need to be the state’s biggest entrepreneurial advocates to change this perception before our students come to a different conclusion. Our higher education institutions should believe in this generation’s ideas more than anyone and empower them to turn those ideas for new farming solutions, art businesses, technology startups, etc. into action.

Our higher education institutions need to exemplify everything we want West Virginia to be. In order to change the outcome of that “turning point,” young West Virginians have to see our state as a place for them whether they are a future entrepreneur, welder, teacher, or legislator. If we can connect more students with real world examples of the opportunity in the state and empower students to see themselves as part of West Virginia’s solution, we will see a different kind of “turning point”—that moment when many young West Virginians realize they can do everything they’ve always wanted, right here at home.



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