

Guest voice: Erie can't fall behind in educational attainment

By NICK SCOTT JR.
Contributing writer

Looking around Erie, it is difficult to see why anyone would not want to make a life here. We sit on a beautiful lake, surrounded by gorgeous countryside and beaches. People here take care of each other; they are passionate, smart and good. Overall, our standard of living is high, and it is a great place to raise a family.

As an entrepreneur and business owner, I look at my surroundings and see opportunity -- including opportunity for improvement, innovation and growth. While I see great strengths in our region, I also see lots of untapped potential. Yes, those of us who have found our niche here love it dearly, but what do recent college graduates think? What do business owners and young professionals from across the country -- across the globe -- see when they view our town, if they do at all?

Erie Vital Signs data shows where we are. A look at educational attainment, a standard indicative of an economically productive, growth-oriented population, shows that we are falling behind. Only 8 percent of those 18 to 25 and 24 percent of those 25 and older have attained a bachelor's degree or higher. On the other hand, we lead our 13 peer communities with the percent of adults reporting a high school degree or equivalent as their highest level of educational attainment. This is not the area where we want to lead our peer communities.

Education and employment go hand in hand, so it makes sense that here, too, we lag behind the times and our peer communities. Erie is struggling to build upon our successes in manufacturing and either grow or attract new industries that show promise for growth over the next century.

As an example, our high-tech business sector is 31 percent smaller than the national average for similarly sized communities. We lag in indicators such as patent applications, lack a sizable research and science sector, and show little job growth in IT, computer design and similar industries -- jobs that tend to attract the best and brightest, increase economic productivity and fuel growth.

This is not an either-or situation. Erie should continue building on our proud history in manufacturing, our strength in the service industry and in the health-care sector. But we also need new jobs for a new economy. Despite high unemployment, it is often difficult to find qualified people to fill positions in both traditional and new-age industries.

The impending retirement of the baby boomer generation calls for increased efforts to ensure that our businesses have the people they need to thrive. To do this, we must redouble our efforts to invest in early childhood education and form stronger, mutually beneficial partnerships between the business and education communities to reduce the skills gap. A community college would have been a great start.

We are a tolerant town in a beautiful area that has a great arts community. We have the smallest commute time out of our peer communities, and rank third in percentage of the workforce that can walk to work. If that isn't enough, we are within two hours of three other great metropolitan areas. All of these are factors that should and could attract the best and brightest from around the country and the world to participate in our existing industries and start new ones.

To keep our youth here and to attract new industries and professionals, we need to help those willing to create jobs and invest in our community.

We need new efforts to attract businesses in high-growth sectors with large economic impacts.



We need to build on our strengths in high-tech manufacturing, health care and higher education. On this last point, the data among peer communities is clear -- those with strong research-based universities are attracting investment, retaining talent and increasing an overall quality of life.

Erie is an incredible place, but there is always room for growth. We need to both build on our traditional strengths while also doing all we can to grow a high-tech creative class economy. That is what many of our peer communities do. It is the only way we can ensure Erie's success in the next century.

NICK SCOTT JR. is vice president of Scott Enterprises. To see how Erie's educational attainment compares to 13 communities similar in size and demographics to Erie, visit www.erievitalsigns.org.