

# DOES UTAH HAVE A COLLEGE GRADUATE BRAIN DRAIN?

“Vibrant.” “Young.” “Well-educated.” These are words that have been used to describe Utah’s workforce for many years. However, recent findings show that such praise may only be deserved in part.

In 2000, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 63.1% of Utahns over the age of 25 had at least some college experience or an associate’s degree. On the basis of those figures, Utah is certainly one of the most educated states, ranking 2nd in the U.S. But looking beyond some college experience or an associate’s degree, Utah’s rank in educational attainment drops significantly. Utah ranks 15th for the percentage of adults over 25 with a bachelor’s degree or higher (26.1%) and 23rd for adults with advanced degrees (8.3%).

Further analysis of Census figures show that Utah’s rank fell from 25th in 1990 to 32nd in 2000 among 25 to 34 year olds who hold at least a four-year degree (Figure 1). Possible explanations for this trend include: fewer younger Utahns are receiving college degrees; or, more Utah students are leaving after graduation. The lower ranking in this key age group suggests that a “brain drain” phenomenon might be occurring in Utah (i.e., the most educated people in Utah’s workforce are leaving the state for better opportunities elsewhere).

**Figure 1: Percent of Population Age 25-34 with at Least a Bachelor’s Degree, 1990 & 2000**

	1990	Rank	2000	Rank	Growth
United States	22.7%		27.5%		4.8%
Utah	20.9%	25	25.4%	32	4.5%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

To try to answer whether Utah is indeed experiencing a brain drain, Utah Foundation has completed a survey of students who graduated from Utah colleges and universities in 2004. The Utah Foundation survey is the first attempt in Utah to measure the loss of Utah-based college graduates and analyze the reasons for their departure as well as Utah’s strengths in retaining its graduates. Utah Foundation conducted an internet-based survey of 900 graduates who attended college in Utah, at both public and private schools, and graduated in the spring

or summer of 2004 with degrees ranging from bachelor’s levels to Ph.D.s. The survey was modeled after similar surveys conducted in the Greater Boston and Greater Philadelphia regions.

## RETENTION: IS UTAH EXPERIENCING A BRAIN DRAIN?

According to the Utah Foundation survey, Utah retained 71% of its home-grown, or native, students who graduated in 2004 (Figure 2). In addition, 39% of those students who came to Utah from out of state (non-natives) remained in Utah after graduation. Overall, 60% of all students in Utah colleges and universities remained in the state after graduation. Because some of the non-natives decided to stay in Utah after graduation and effectively replace the native students who left, the net effect was no measurable net loss or net gain of graduates (the difference is within the margin of error).

**Figure 2: Retention of 2004 Graduates**

	Percent Retained	Utahns Retained	Non-Utahns Retained	Net Gain or Loss
Overall	60%	71%	43%	-2%
Public Schools	70%	76%	46%	-13%
Private Schools	46%	54%	42%	36%

The figures cited above include students from the public higher education system and private colleges (Brigham Young University and Westminster College were included in the survey). However, many are interested in how Utah’s public system performs in retaining graduates, since taxpayers invest a great deal of money to provide education for those in the public colleges and universities. Some taxpayers and policymakers are concerned that tax funds are spent to benefit many students who then leave the state and provide economic benefits to regions outside of Utah.

For the complete report on this topic and other reports, please visit our website at [www.utahfoundation.org](http://www.utahfoundation.org)

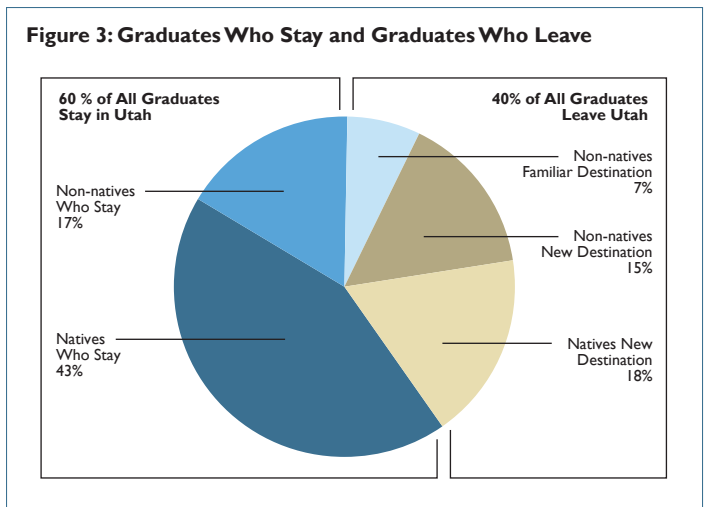
Looking solely at Utah's public colleges, Utah retained 76% of native students after graduation. Of the non-native students, 46% stayed in Utah after graduation. Overall, 70% of all students graduating from Utah's public colleges remained in the state after graduation. Considering the number of non-natives who stayed and thus offset some of the native students who left, the net effect is that the number of graduates staying in Utah equals 87% of the number of native students who graduated from public colleges in 2004.

Is Utah experiencing a brain drain from our public colleges? Seventy-six percent of home-grown students stay in Utah after graduation, an attrition rate of 24%. But as shown above, this is moderated by the non-native students choosing to stay in Utah. Add them to the mix and Utah experiences a net attrition rate of only 13%, probably not large enough to be considered a brain drain.

Private colleges contribute a net influx of graduates to the Utah economy. Utah retained 54% of home-grown students graduating from BYU or Westminster College, while 42% of non-native students stayed in Utah. However, according to the survey, 66% of the students graduating from these private schools were non-natives, which makes the actual number of non-native graduates who stay larger than the number of home-grown graduates who leave. This creates a net gain of 36% of private-school graduates retained in Utah compared to the number of native Utah students graduating from these schools.

**WHERE STUDENTS ARE GOING**

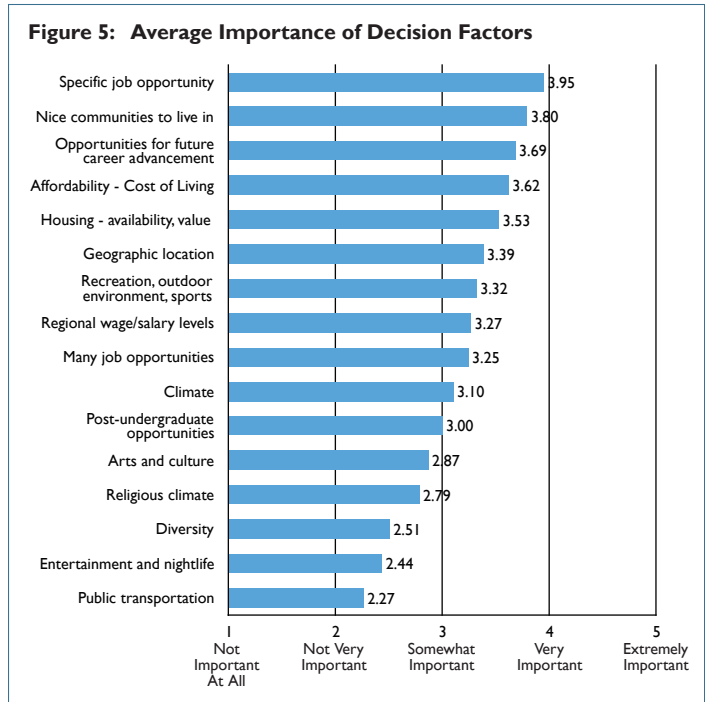
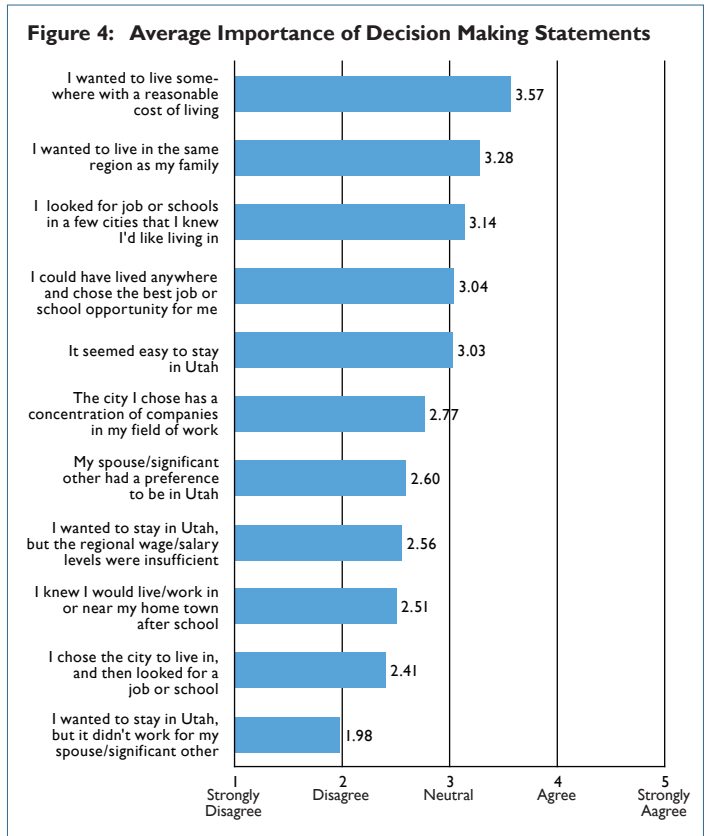
Of all students graduating from Utah-based colleges, 40% are headed somewhere new after graduation (Figure 3). Among non-native graduates, a minority are headed back home (7% of total graduates), while the majority are headed to a new destination (15% of total graduates). Also, 18% of the graduates are native Utahns who have decided to head somewhere new.



**HOW STUDENTS DECIDE WHERE TO LIVE**

The Utah Foundation survey asked 2004 graduates to rate how well some statements characterize their decision about where to live after graduation (Figure 4). These questions were asked to get a sense of the process that students went through in deciding where to live after

graduation. To further refine our understanding of their decisions, the students were also asked how important certain factors were in making their decision about where to live (Figure 5).

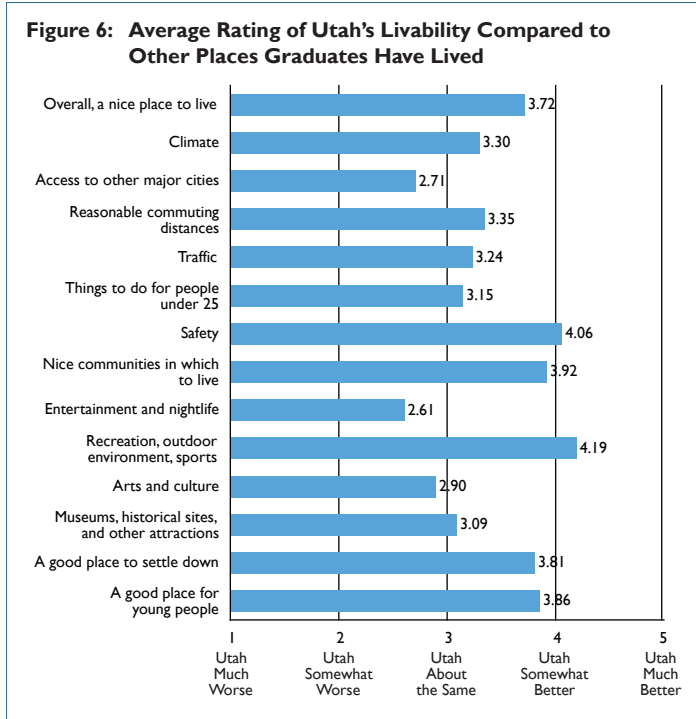


**Affordability and Livability**

First and foremost, students expressed a strong desire to live somewhere with a reasonable cost of living. However, when graduates were asked to rate the importance of individual factors in their actual

decisions, affordability took a back seat to specific job opportunities, nice communities in which to live, and opportunities for future career advancement.

Graduates also care about living in nice communities. They strongly feel that Utah has communities that compare very favorably with other states. Of course, graduates that leave feel slightly less so than those who stay (Figure 6).



### Work or Further Education

Part of the decision making process for graduates, especially those who seek the best opportunity, is deciding whether to work or further their education. Figure 7 breaks down what the 2004 graduates are doing a year after graduation. Overall, after one year, 73% of graduates have entered the labor force with the majority of them finding full-time employment. Those graduates who stayed in Utah entered the workforce at a much higher rate (82%) than those who left (61%).

**Figure 7: Status of 2004 Graduates**

Status	Overall	Stayers	Leavers
Employed full-time	64%	70%	56%
Employed full-time and furthering education	1%	2%	0%
Employed part-time	5%	7%	2%
Self-employed	2%	2%	2%
Unemployed - looking for work	1%	1%	1%
Furthering education - bachelor's degree	0%	0%	0%
Furthering education - business school	1%	1%	1%
Furthering education - master's degree or PhD	12%	10%	16%
Furthering education - dental school	1%	0%	3%
Furthering education - law school	2%	1%	4%
Furthering education - medical school	4%	2%	8%
Furthering education - professional school	0%	0%	1%
Furthering education - postdoctoral fellowship	0%	0%	1%
<b>Total Furthering education</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>16%</b>	<b>31%</b>
Homemaker	5%	3%	6%
Military	1%	0%	2%
Volunteer Service	0%	0%	0%

### Educational Opportunities

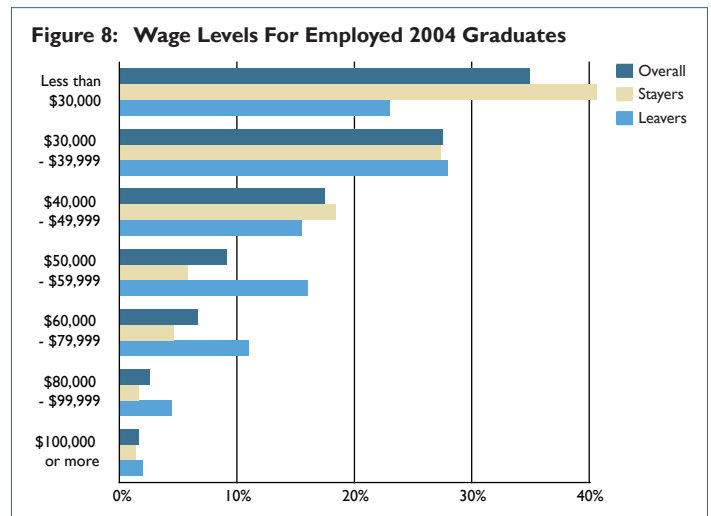
Of all graduates in 2004, 22% decided to pursue further education. With the exception of engineering graduates, the majority of graduates in the sciences left Utah to pursue their graduate degrees. Overall, 57% of students who decide to further their education leave the state. Of all the students who left Utah, 31% chose to further their education, whereas only 16% of stayers sought advanced degrees. Hence, the conclusion could be drawn that education plays a much larger role in the decision process for those who decide to leave Utah than it does for students who decide to stay.

### Job Opportunities

Opportunities for specific jobs and for future career advancement were the most highly rated factors related to job opportunities and were significantly more important than regional wage/salary levels or having many job opportunities. Overall, graduates do not have a favorable perception of job opportunities in Utah. When asked to compare Utah's job opportunities to other places they have lived, most graduates felt that Utah was at least somewhat worse than other areas they have lived.

A year after graduation, most graduates who sought work were successful in securing full-time employment. Eighty-nine percent of students who chose to work after graduation are currently employed full-time, while 10% are either employed part-time or self-employed. Overall, leavers have had more success in finding full-time employment than stayers (91% and 87% respectively of those who sought work). Only 1% of all 2004 graduates were unemployed and seeking a job.

Surveyed graduates felt strongly that local wage and salary levels in Utah were well below average, and their experience shows this perception to be true. The differences between the wage and salary levels of stayers and leavers are a cause for concern (Figure 8). Among graduates who were employed, 41% of stayers are earning less than \$30,000 in their jobs, while only 23% of leavers are earning less than \$30,000, and the percentage drops to 17% for new leavers (those out of state students who leave for a different location than their home). Also, only 14% of graduates who stay are earning \$50,000 or more, whereas that figure more than doubles to 34% for graduates who leave. Graduates who stay are clearly earning less than graduates who leave.



## IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC POLICY

The findings of this survey should alleviate some concerns that Utah is spending a significant amount of taxpayer money to subsidize education for people who then leave the state and provide benefits to economies elsewhere. In fact, since out-of-state students pay much higher tuition rates than Utah students, and many of the out-of-state students choose to stay in Utah after graduation, Utah may be receiving a greater “bang for its education buck” than previously thought.

Still, we should be concerned about highly talented, well-educated people who leave Utah because there are not enough opportunities here that are commensurate with their abilities. The survey clearly shows that students who leave Utah receive higher salaries than those who stay. Fostering an economy that provides more high-paying jobs would help in the long term to stem this flow. The survey also shows that graduates pursuing advanced degrees, especially medical and other professional degrees, are leaving the state in larger numbers than those who stay for those types of degrees. Some of those graduates will surely come back to Utah after their education is complete, but providing more opportunities for advanced education in Utah would help retain more of them.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, in sheer numbers, Utah did not seem to have experienced a brain drain among its 2004 college graduates. While the state could not retain all its graduates, the number that decided to stay after graduation was almost an exact match for the number of in-state students who graduated from college. This is due to the fact that many out-of-state students decided to stay in Utah after graduating, replacing the native students who left.

While numerically Utah might not have experienced an overall brain drain of recent graduates, it seems that Utah lost many highly motivated students to large metropolitan areas outside of Utah. Leavers were more likely than stayers to have sought out and considered the best opportunities, furthered their education, and found higher paying jobs. This is not to say that all the best graduates have left the state. However, many of those who chose to stay in Utah did so because of family considerations and the convenience of their decision to remain in Utah.

Graduates have clearly said that Utah is a great a place to live, with good, affordable communities in which to live. This strength will continue to help retain native college graduates as well as attract non-native graduates.

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