

Encouraging Atlantic 'brain circulation'

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Chris Crowell knows he is part of the "brain drain" problem in his home province of Nova Scotia, but now he wants to be part of the solution.

Mr. Crowell was born in Dartmouth, but like thousands of other young people in Atlantic Canada, he decided to relocate to Toronto five years ago after graduating from Dalhousie University and weighing his job options in his home province.

With a law degree in one hand and an MBA in the other, he landed comfortably on Bay Street, but he says it was never part of his plan to turn his back on Nova Scotia, and he soon discovered that many of the Atlantic Canadian expatriates he met in Toronto felt the same way.

Through his newly launched development organization, East Coast Connected, Mr. Crowell is aiming to create a network to help Maritimers across the country keep one foot in the East by forging mentoring and business partnerships with those who stay behind.

"People have been talking about brain drain from the East Coast for ages," he said. "So we prefer to look at it as 'brain circulation.'

"Whereas maybe in our grandfathers' generation, you weren't able to stay as connected due to technology and travel limitations, today it's easier than ever to stay intertwined in the affairs of the region."

It's no secret that Canada's Atlantic provinces have suffered a steady migration of young people heading west in search of jobs and prosperity, prompting some experts to worry about a serious loss of dynamic and educated citizens.

More than one in 10 people between 18 and 24 years old left the region between 1990 and 2004, according to a recent study by the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission.

The loss of younger generations has been even more dramatic in Newfoundland and Labrador, where some communities have watched half their young people leave the province.

A 2007 report by the commission predicted the Maritimes will lose about 22,000 more of its university-aged residents by 2030.

East Coast Connected's efforts have the blessing of the provincial governments, who see the group as a welcome grassroots addendum to their own efforts to reconnect with those who have moved away.

Last year, the Nova Scotia government unveiled an aggressive campaign including billboards and television ads touting the merits of the Maritime lifestyle.

Newfoundland and Labrador is planning a similar national advertising campaign aimed at former residents in Alberta. New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia offer tuition rebates to entice university graduates to stay.

Last year, the Nova Scotia government held a series of job fairs in Ontario and Alberta as a forum for dozens of Maritime employers to reach out to expatriates yearning to return.

However, Nova Scotia's campaign drew criticism from expats who said the jobs advertised were typically for skilled labour and had little to offer university graduates.

"Our objective is to return Atlantic Canadians to Atlantic Canada," said New Brunswick Business Minister Greg Byrne, who attended the East Coast Connected launch in Toronto last November.

"There are many who have moved away because of economic circumstance or the fact that maybe there wasn't a job in their field.

"Many of these people ... they want the opportunity to return, and they will return if we create the opportunity for them."

Mr. Crowell's idea seems to have struck a chord with Atlantic Canadians both on the East Coast and in Ontario, the destination of choice for the region's university graduates, according to a 2007 survey.

More than 300 people showed up at the glitzy launch party in Toronto, with another 200 on the other end of a massive video conference in Halifax.

Since then, 1,200 people have signed up for the group's mailing list, which alerts members to events designed to connect Atlantic Canadians in Toronto with businesses and government back home.

"They may be away, and they may not plan to return, but they don't forget their roots," Mr. Crowell said.

"They are loyal to Atlantic Canada, and they want it to succeed. And they want people to have that choice for people to stay and raise their families in Atlantic Canada."

Nova Scotia MP Scott Brison recently spoke to a gathering of about 75 members at Toronto's upscale Spoke Club. Mr. Brison also knows firsthand about the brain drain phenomenon.

As a young business school graduate, the Nova Scotia native worked on Wall Street for five years before returning home to run for public office when he was 29.

"We are stigmatized as not being entrepreneurial," Mr. Brison told the well-heeled crowd. "But we are a region that has spawned some of the greatest entrepreneurs internationally and nationally. And those people have a strong loyalty to the region."

In an interview, Mr. Brison pointed to the energy sector and the Atlantic Accords as two ways to keep the best and brightest on the East Coast, but acknowledged there are no easy solutions.

"They have to see an opportunity to make a living and make a difference," he said.

Mr. Crowell said his organization isn't hoping to reverse the brain drain completely. Rather, he would like to see it reach a point where there is an East Coast Connected chapter in every province, and more internationally.

"It will be a great avenue to enhance business linkages and investment opportunities but also cultural linkages for exchange of information and policy discussions," he said.

"Perhaps people move back, and perhaps they don't. But the main point is to keep them involved in the region whether they live here or whether they live there."

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