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Nurturing future techies

Brain drain, declining IT enrollments inspire group to teach teens about career prospects

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IT is hot, and so is Greater Cincinnati.

By spreading those messages, the INTERAlliance of Greater Cincinnati hopes to combat two problems facing the region: brain drain and lowered enrollment in information technology programs.

The goal is simple, said executive director Doug Arthur: "We get them to want to stay here."

ADVERTISEMENT INTERAlliance sets the bar high, starting with bright students from good schools, and shows them the doors that a career in IT - in Greater Cincinnati - can open.

At its summer camps, teens go where even many college graduates don't get to go: inside Procter & Gamble's virtual reality store, into the Comair flight simulator, interacting with Ethicon Endo-Surgery's surgical robot.

Courtney Earls, a 16-year-old from Delhi Township, doesn't remember life without the Internet. Despite being surrounded by technology, she thought a career in IT meant typing code all day.

requisite skill in every industry.

"We went to Fifth Third and then went to Comair," said Abby Strawser, Courtney's 17-year-old junior classmate at Mother of Mercy High School. "Aviation and banking are completely two different things, and both of them use IT. It was like, I could do whatever in the world I want as long as I have IT in my background."

INTERAlliance offers IT summer camps, plus internships and activities throughout the year for high-school students.

It also offers a new mentoring program called 3GWIT, or Three Generations of Women in Technology. The long-term plans include undergraduate and graduate co-ops.

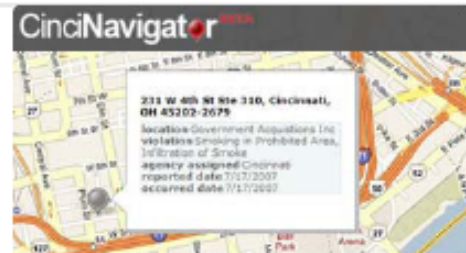
The University of Cincinnati has seen a drop in undergraduate enrollment in IT, and the region's difficulty in retaining young talent is frequently a complaint among executives and government officials. According to Census Bureau estimates for 2005, Ohio is losing people in that age group: the state had 3.9 million people ages 20 to 44 mid-decade compared with about 4 million in 2000.

Though not seeing the same losses, Northern Kentucky officials also are concerned about the trend, and Northern Kentucky University has created a whole college to address the issue.

Rather than luring young professionals back to the region, INTERAlliance is trying to retain the next generation, by turning them on to the relevance and versatility of careers in information technology.

Bob Coy, president of CincyTech - formed to spur local growth of high-tech and advanced manufacturing jobs - lauds the benefits for companies and students.

"I think this program is really a unique national model because it is so long-term - they (will) continue to be involved through college and graduate school," said Coy, who is on the INTERAlliance Advisory Council.



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IT campers in July 2006 (from left): Olivia Danenhauer, Andrew Johnson, Kaitlin Dauner, Laura Tufts and Thomas Dickman

What is the INTERAlliance?

The INTERAlliance is a collaboration between Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky businesses and educators that focuses on keeping talented young people in the region for college and careers in technology.

Businesses contribute \$5,000 to sponsor a five-student team during the camp and usually commit to a two-hour behind-the-scenes visit and a lunch with the company's IT executives.

The camp is free for students, who are nominated by their schools. The schools also form INTERAlliance chapters. Former campers are not guaranteed internships or co-ops, though they are given preferential consideration.

Membership is open to all local businesses, organizations, high schools and post-secondary education institutions.

For more information, go to www.interalliance.info, e-mail Contact@interalliance.info or call Keri Nicklen of Atos Origin at 513-779-4334.

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"The employer involvement, which is so important, ... is absent in so much of education," Coy said.

THE FUTURE

This year, the camps expanded to 16 high schools and 80 students, adding overnight programs. Fifteen former campers were paid interns at the corporations, working on the E.W. Scripps help desk or doing e-commerce research for P&G, for example.

St. Xavier High School senior Andy Johnson worked at Scripps, answering employees' questions about computer problems, installing printers and shadowing the IT staff.

"It was a lot of fun," said the 16-year-old from White Oak. "I did stuff I probably never would have been able to do without the camp."

He hopes to go back next summer before heading off to college to study computer science, robotics or video game development.

Also in 2006, UC will offer a fifth session of the camp, and Northern Kentucky University and Miami University will each sponsor two weeklong sessions. The corporate sponsorship list is expected to grow to 36, up from six in 2006.

By 2010, Arthur hopes to have students from 47 high schools participate in camps at all 14 regional higher education institutions that offer IT-related degrees. By then, he hopes to have expanded the intern program and started the co-op program.

INFORMATICS AT NKU

In 2006, NKU combined the departments of communication, computer science and information systems to form the college of informatics, created because of how those industries overlap in the digital age.

Douglas Perry, dean of the College of Informatics, has secured \$55,000 of a larger grant from the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education for the sessions his school will host.

"The reason why NKU formed the college of informatics was because they really looked at the region, where the jobs are and where the jobs would be," he said.

INTERAlliance "fits perfectly," he said.

The newest addition to INTERAlliance is 3GWIT, which partners five mentors from Cintas and Fifth Third with 10 INTERAlliance members from St. Ursula and Mother of Mercy high schools. The 10 in turn will mentor 20 third- to fifth-grade students from February through April.

INTERAlliance has received a \$7,500 sponsorship from Tech Corps Ohio, a nonprofit that promotes technology in education, and the eight-week pilot program's curriculum will be determined by the participants.

"Doug (Arthur) was always saying that by fourth grade, girls lose that interest in science and technology, so hopefully we can get more on 'our side' as they grow up," said Abby Grahek, a 17-year-old senior at St. Ursula.

Arthur hopes it creates a "see what I can do vibe" for the youngsters.

"With the decline of young people - and especially young women - choosing technology as an area of study, it's important to reach students when they begin to make choices about careers involving mathematics, science and technology," said Julie Elberfeld, vice president of growth and payment programs for Fifth Third Bank, in a statement.

THE ORIGINS

In 2005, Arthur wanted a co-op student from the University of Cincinnati to work with him at Atos Origin, the international IT corporation with an office in Kenwood.

But when Arthur, the manager of Great Lakes Commercial Support Services for Atos Origin, approached Vivek Choudhury, the chairman of the Information Systems Department in the College of Business at UC, he found that Choudhury didn't have any undergraduate students available for co-ops.

While enrollment in the graduate program was booming, the undergraduate program was graduating fewer than 50 students a year, down from a peak of 100 during the dot-com era.

Choudhury said the decline is part of a nationwide trend, so he and Arthur, along with Dilip Lillaney, an associate director of innovation at P&G, started looking at ways to promote enrollment - and devised the IT summer camp.

In 2006, 40 students who had just finished 10th grade participated in the pilot program, a day camp at UC sponsored by Atos Origin, P&G, Cintas, Fifth Third Bank, Toyota and Chiquita.

The sponsorships aren't just in name, which Coy and others say sets INTERAlliance apart.

It's too soon to say whether INTERAlliance is helping enrollment at UC, as the pilot group of students are still seniors in high school. But Choudhury said at least one INTERAlliance alumnus plans to study information technology there next fall.

"The biggest thing they gain is that most of them have no idea how wide and diverse the field of IT is," he said.

Abby, who lives in Lawrenceburg, wanted to study marketing and advertising before camp.

"Now," she said, "one of my favorite topics that I want to get involved with is MIT - you know, management information technology."



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The INTERAlliance participants come from various high schools. James Austrow (Sycamore High) and Rebecca Kim (Indian Hill High) are teammates preparing a Web presentation at IT camp. This session was held in July 2006.



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Earlier this month, at the Atos Origin office in Kenwood, Doug Arthur speaks to a group that encourages women in IT. Diane Laake (seated left), assistant principal of Mother of Mercy High School, listens with students Courtney Earls and Abby Strawser (right).

Photo: E. Baker