Policy wonks love buzzwords, and no term generates more buzz these days than "brain drain." In state circles, it has become the current cause celebre.

And it's not just policy types with brain drain on the brain. State politicians have picked up the mantra as well. In fact, other than perhaps taxes, no subject has occupied the attention of the state's politicians lately more than the brain drain many think is occurring in Pennsylvania.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. A definition is in order. A leading dictionary defines brain drain as "the departure of educated or professional people ... usually for better pay or living conditions." More informally, brain drain is generally understood to be the steady migration of young, college-educated graduates who attend the state's colleges and then move out of state after completing their schooling.

Indeed, the available data suggest that Pennsylvania's brains are high-tailing it out of state at alarming numbers. The most widely cited study completed at Penn State concluded that "between March 1995 and March 1997, Pennsylvania had a net migration loss of 13,500 labor force age adults with professional, executive and managerial occupational skills and an additional loss of 15,000 persons with technical, sales and administrative support expertise."

And these losses were only the tip of the proverbial iceberg. According to the study's author: "The cumulative first and second-generation migration losses over the decades since World War II have been staggering...Pennsylvania's brain drain migration has a corrosive effect on the economic and social well-being of the state, and it is time for public policy to address the issue."

And public policy has indeed started to address it. The Ridge-Schweiker administrations weighed in with "Stay Invent the Future," which emphasized connecting students with employers, linked to online features. Now, Gov. Rendell wants incubators and start-ups along with urban development near college campuses to halt the drain.

Ordinary Pennsylvanians are concerned about the brain drain as well. In a survey done for the Pennsylvania Economy League last year, one in four Pennsylvanians cited the brain drain as an important problem for the state to solve. More and more people are coming to believe that the choice, as one study put it, is for states like Pennsylvania to either "turn into retirement homes or to retain their college graduates."

But as we begin to make policy choices, it seems worthwhile to consider what we really know about the causes of the brain drain. A realistic understanding of the nature of the problem is essential if we are to have much chance to solve it.

First, some historical perspective: mobility in America is neither new nor unusual. Americans have always been a people on the move - and today, probably no group of people in society is more mobile than traditional age graduates of our colleges.
Many of them initially leave their homes to attend college. After college, young graduates often move again. Financial rewards are a major motivation for them moving, but the sojourn is not always just for a better paying job. The lure of cultural amenities, life style, and other non-economic incentives are also important factors inducing migration.

Nor is Pennsylvania the only state with a brain drain. At least 20 other states and many cities have identified their own brain drain. For some states--neighboring New Jersey is an example--the brain drain starts at high school graduation. According to the Census Bureau, almost one in five high school graduates nationally leave their state to attend college in another state.

When states acquire students who have been educated elsewhere, they obtain a highly valuable economic asset--an educated worker for whose training the beneficiary state paid little or nothing. Not a bad deal if a state can get it.

Pennsylvania's situation is a little different.

In Pennsylvania, higher education is a big industry--and Pennsylvania is a very big producer of college graduates. Between 1989 and 2000, some 750,000-bachelor degrees--to use one indicator--were generated, making the state the nation's fourth largest producer of college grads.

Unfortunately, substantially more of these graduates move out of Pennsylvania than move into Pennsylvania. The numbers are disturbing. In the period referenced, Pennsylvania higher education graduated about 750,000, but only about 600,000 remained in the state. So, a net of about 150,000 more graduates--one in five of all graduates produced--were exported to other states.

But describing Pennsylvania's brain drain may be easier than prescribing what to do about it.

Paul Gottlieb of Case Western Reserve University has offered one of the most penetrating insights into the nature of the brain drain. According to Gottlieb, "Brain drain is a symptom of an economic development problem, not the problem itself."

Gottlieb's point is profound. Simply exporting surplus graduates is not itself a policy problem if there is not a demand for those graduates. Indeed, keeping them here would only increase unemployment.

The policy problem then really is a lack of demand for the work those graduates can do and not a problem of increasing the supply of graduates that remain in state.

Simply trying to keep more graduates here is a tempting solution, but it's a temptation to be resisted. A focus on supply is tackling the wrong end of the problem.

This has enormous implications for how we understand the brain drain problem and what policies we adopt to resolve it. If we see brain drain as a narrowly construed problem of increasing the supply of college graduates and technically trained, then we will formulate policies to increase supply regardless of what the demand may be.
But if we more wisely understand brain drain to be at bottom another symptom of Pennsylvania's continuing economic development malaise then we will more likely focus on the root causes of the brain drain. Clearly, one root cause is Pennsylvania's urgent need to provide greater opportunity for growth in employment and entrepreneurship - in short, to create more demand for college graduates.

Alas, none of this is likely to be easy. Treating symptoms instead of deeply rooted causes is sometimes politically attractive. Bad policy, unfortunately, can be good politics.

But if we do that here--if we trade good policy for good politics, if we treat the symptoms in lieu of the causes--both the symptoms and the underlying causes are going to get worse. We are going to continue to lose our graduates and the economy is going to continue to decline. In the end, we are going to get the worst of both worlds--bad policy and bad politics.

And that's a no brainer.

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