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Recent graduates seeking a svelte city

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After students get their degrees, they start looking for others who can share the trials and tribulations of their first job, new apartments void of roommates and bars for people who wear suits and ties instead of baseball caps and flip-flops.

Many young professionals decide to not make Tallahassee their home after graduation, but those who do are working on making it more attractive to their demographic.

Several initiatives are taking shape to stop the griping of the young professionals who have a love/hate relationship with the capital city in hopes of keeping some of the 60,000 students here after graduation.

“The graduating senior leaves because they don't think there is anything to do here personally or professionally,” said Juli Puckett, director of communication and marketing for the Greater Tallahassee Chamber of Commerce. “There is a perception among them that there is not life beyond that. It's devastating to our area.”

Many students leave because they are not willing to settle for less pay where they don't see a chance for advancement or because they think Tallahassee lacks a social network of young professionals and outlets for those who are fresh, or a few years, out of college. Yoshino Woodard, 27, consultant at Accenture in Atlanta, could have stayed in Tallahassee and worked in her company's small branch office here, but Woodard started running for the highway as soon as she finished graduate school after spending eight years calling Tallahassee home.

“It's pretty much an undergraduate town,” Woodard said. “Tallahassee seemed to be very segregated. It's not a city you can integrate into.”

She couldn't find a variety of things to do with people her own age, and she didn't see herself advancing in her career at the rate she could in a metropolitan city.

Aeleise Harris, a Chicago native, left to go to Panama City for a better job. She'd left twice before because she “just got tired seeing the same people and doing the same thing.” At 23, and a salon manager at Dillard's in Panama City, she's considering moving back.

She loves the fact that crime is low, there are more things to do and it's relatively cheap to live here.

“I think Tallahassee is trying to be a little Atlanta,” Harris said. “It's just not there yet.”

She would like a better art scene outside of the universities.

Initiatives taking shape to slow the exodus

Leon County is home to the largest number of alumni from Florida A&M University and Florida State University than any county in the United States, according to alumni-affairs reports from the universities.

Many young people don't think Tallahassee should be void of job opportunities, culture, arts and entertainment because of its size.

"We want to have a good time, and we want to progress forward," said Alan Williams, president of the Leon County chapter of the Florida A&M University Alumni Association, which has about 400 members. "It's not as progressive as some may want it to be."

Denise Drury is willing to settle.

Drury, 25, assistant director of the 621 Gallery, decided she loved Tallahassee so much that she didn't mind taking a part-time job with no benefits in a gallery with no air conditioning to stay in a city where she could “make art happen.”

She felt she could make a bigger impact in the art scene in Tallahassee than in South Florida.

Access Tallahassee, a subsidy of the Chamber of Commerce, was started to help young people build business relationships in the community that can be beneficial to their career, Puckett said. “We offer programs to help them grow personally and professionally.”

The Knight Creative Communities Initiative is working with community leaders and many young professionals to come up with innovative ways to stimulate the economy. Some of the goals include creating a small-business incubator, turning Gaines Street into an arts-and-entertainment district, starting an international film festival and spearheading Greenovation. Some say these changes will be attractions.

The Tallahassee Network of Young Professionals hopes to create a social oasis for those who are between the wonder years and a mid-life crisis.

Stacey Getz, 24, senior account executive and director of new media at Core Message, said, “There are people here who want to move it forward and want to bring it to life.”

“The young professionals are really starting to come into our own,” said Jason Welty, 28, a lobbyist for the Department of Juvenile Justice. “There is a myriad of things to do. It's just harder to find. The quality of life is equal once you find those things.”

Welty is willing to bet on the future.

"In five to 10 years, you are going to see the vision of the 18-hour downtown," Welty said of Tallahassee Mayor John Marks' often-mentioned vision for a town center where you can live, work and play. "It is a slow process. Things just don't happen overnight."