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Monday, September 7, 2009

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Timothy J. Shaffer

Guest column: UD certainly isn't missing the boat(s)

By the Dayton Daily News | Monday, September 7, 2009, 08:00 AM

This column was written by Douglas "Dusty" Hall, manager of program development at the Miami Conservancy District and a former assistant city manager in Dayton.

It's no secret to the University of Dayton that young adults are full of talent — the kind of talent that businesses lust for.

Young talent is an increasingly sought-after commodity, and tens of thousands of young people are products of the Dayton area's universities and colleges. So, where is our flood of new businesses? Or, more important, where are all the new young grads?

A recent report from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute suggests that about six out of every 10 of Ohio's college students will leave, or are leaning toward leaving. This "brain drain" is not good news for a state with an aging work force and stagnant population.

The Fitz Center for Leadership in Community at the University of Dayton understands that a young, talented work force is essential to businesses, and it doesn't believe Ohio's and the region's losses are inevitable. It's working hard and smart for change that is altering the course of dozens of UD graduates.

Although some graduating students may still leave Ohio, for many that decision will be tougher. And, while a few dozen students staying here won't trigger an economic windfall, the philosophy that underlies the early success of these efforts can be copied. What is the Fitz Center's secret? It's the students themselves — with a little water and a few canoes and kayaks mixed in.

Today, the Fitz Center and the College of Arts and Sciences are basking in the admiration of the McGregor Fund, a private foundation that has committed \$180,000 to UD. That money will help develop a multidisciplinary curriculum geared to developing new civic leaders who are committed to the Greater Dayton community and who are good stewards of rivers and our other natural assets.

They can — and should — be new members of our work force.

The cornerstone of this effort is that students are not only leading the process, but teaching and learning in collaboration with Dayton public- and private-sector partners. Connect these dots:

talented, civic-minded students; supportive host and collaborating institutions; leaders and leadership; the river; and a growing work force contributing to the economy.

Sound fishy? Maybe not.

Founded more than 60 years before the great flood of 1913, UD is home to a relatively young Rivers Institute. What sets it apart from similarly named institutes around the world is that students have been largely responsible for its birth and evolution. Just like the curriculum development project, the Rivers Institute is a product of student leadership.

Today, the Rivers Institute promotes the mutual interest of more than three dozen river stewards earning degrees in 15 different academic areas. The stewards are enormously talented, and they share an interest in our river.

They are inspired to their cause by the river. In addition to their annual 17-mile two-day river trip, this year's senior stewards paddled 50 miles from near Indian Lake (the headwaters of the Great Miami River) to just north of Dayton. Elected officials and other dignitaries greeted and welcomed them during their passage.

River trips bring these talented young adults one step closer to the compelling grip of our river cities. In the words of Nolan Nicaise, a 20-year-old biology major: "We've formed connections with our place, our city, our Dayton."

Because the stewards are connected to the community, because they've learned to love the river, they will be more likely to stay here after they graduate.

They will be more likely to be an economic force and new civic leaders. Already they are leaders within the university, and some are contributing to policy discussions in city government.

The Fitz Center has discovered a recipe worth copying. Take talented students from a supportive institutional framework, put them in kayaks and canoes, add water, mix in some community partners, and let the creativity flow.

For those of us in local and regional government, the message is clear.

There is a reservoir of local university and college students, many of whom have a desire and the capacity to add value to our communities.

Our challenge is to actively and creatively engage them; to share our experiences, listen to their ideas, provide constructive input, and then to break down barriers so they can do their work.

Although it will take time to quantitatively assess the impact of the Rivers Institute, one thing is for sure, UD and its Fitz Center have not missed the boat(s).