

End the local 'brain drain'

Thursday

Posted May 26, 2016 at 2:00 AM

The area can and must do better by diversifying its economic offerings.

By Our View

With graduation ceremonies for high schools in Volusia and Flagler counties beginning today and continuing through Sunday, we congratulate all seniors who are making that walk across the stage and into the next phases of their lives, be it college, full-time employment or service in the military.

Hopefully, for many that walk doesn't continue right on out of the community, never to look back.

Local business and economic development leaders have long lamented the "brain drain" that the Volusia-Flagler area suffers — the diaspora of home-grown talent to other parts of Florida or the nation in search of better career opportunities. For example, only 1 in 5 Volusia County residents over 25 years of age hold a bachelor's degree or higher, an indication that once a student enrolls in college, he or she is likely to leave.

To be sure, tourism is the primary driver of the local economy, and the industry is full of low-paying, low-skill service jobs that depress local wages. The area can and must do better, though, by diversifying its offerings, such as by attracting more manufacturing and high-tech jobs and by promoting entrepreneurship.

That's not a chicken-or-the-egg situation. Success requires convincing more companies to locate here to offer the kinds of jobs that will keep college graduates and skilled workers from looking elsewhere. But it also needs more locals to stay put and become leaders in the community to create those conditions.

A prime example is the Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University's new John Mica Engineering and Aerospace Innovation Complex, currently under construction. It will be part of the university's 90-acre research park and will feature a variety of technology labs. The facility will be used not only by faculty and students, but also by ERAU's partners in private industry, and will support research and entrepreneurial ventures in aviation, space, engineering, unmanned systems and the environment. Those are exactly the kind of high-skill, high-paying jobs Volusia and Flagler need to add.

Another example is B. Braun Medical Inc., which in April announced plans to create 175 jobs and make a capital investment of more than \$100 million in its Gambro manufacturing plant at 1845 Mason Ave. in Daytona Beach. The average annual wage for new hires is \$41,963.

Then there are people who want to be job creators. Last November, a group of locals held a three-day event called Startup Weekend that gave a crash course in how to launch a business. Among the organizers was Jayson Meyer, founder of Synergy Billing in Daytona Beach, who created his first business when he was a student at Spruce Creek High School. He plans to move his business into the former Holly Hill Middle School campus by 2021, a \$25 million project that will create 213 jobs, all paying at least \$40,000 a year.

Meyer and others behind Startup Weekend believe that fostering a culture of entrepreneurship and innovation will attract young leaders to relocate, or remain, in this area.

Graduating high school opens the door to so many different life opportunities, it can be a daunting decision which one to choose. Many grads will take several routes, accumulating different experiences before settling on one course. And that's fine. But we hope that many can find success right here at home, enriching the community and themselves.