



Danville Regional Foundation

Sally Stephenson

Recruiting and Retaining Young Professionals in the Dan River Region

What would it take for the Dan River Region to be attractive to and vitally involved with young professionals? The Danville Regional Foundation interns were certainly an anomaly among the population in Danville in the summer of 2009. Currently, about twenty percent (20%) of Danville residents are over the age of 65.¹ A key element in the vision of regional transformation should include a vibrant and productive younger population. How do we get there from the present vision of the region being a stagnating retiree community?

Recruiting and retaining young people, similar to overcoming many other regional barriers, will require a shift in thinking. The “get out of town” mentality reigns as teenagers and young adults do not see opportunities locally after graduation from high school. The area is not yet attractive to young professionals on the market for a new place to live and work because of the small population of other people their age and because of a lackluster social scene. And now for the Catch 22: the area is also relatively unattractive to businesses because of a lack of clientele. Therefore, at least initially, both Generation Y and businesses will have to take a risk and invest in the area.

What is the Dan River Region lacking that would make it more appealing to remain in or move to?

Housing: The tobacco warehouse district in Danville would be an ideal location for developing affordable and centrally located apartments for a younger crowd. The downtown location would hopefully spark further entrepreneurial development and give residents an opportunity to meet neighbors their own age. The Institute for Advanced Learning and Research (IALR) and Averett University could be partners in connecting renters or buyers to the new housing so that developers would have a guaranteed audience. IALR could offer warehouse district housing to its standing group of graduate students, and Averett could include the area in off-campus options for junior and senior undergraduates or graduate students.²

Centralized Social Outlets: Aside from Wal-Mart, Buffalo Wild Wings, and Ham’s, there are not suitable spaces for groups of people to meet and socialize (“hang out” in their jargon) – at least this is the general complaint.³ The Young Professionals group sponsored by the Danville/Pittsylvania County Chamber of Commerce is a logical start to introducing people of the same age group and creating a meeting space (although the physical location changes monthly). Expanding the group’s activities beyond monthly gatherings could be an option. Developing activities or groups focused on newcomers or the ‘under 35’ population might also help. However, no matter how many organized groups exist, people still like to have options consistently available for activities with their own social group.

¹ According to the U.S. Census 2000, 19.6% of Danville residents are over the age of 65. According to 2007 data, 14.7% of Pittsylvania County, VA and 15% of Caswell County, NC, residents are over the age of 65. This compares to a rate of 11.2% in Virginia and 12.2% in North Carolina.

² Dr. Julie Brown of IALR reports that the Institute is partnering with the city of Danville to pursue the conversion of the Dan River Research facility into apartments.

³ The Danville Braves games and Carrington Pavilion concerts attract crowds, but these are seasonal events.

Populating Main Street in Danville (or Yanceyville or Chatham) with shops, bars, and restaurants will give younger people a place to gather after hours and on weekends. These businesses will compliment the current activity options. Young people could socialize over a quick lunch or dinner downtown before a concert in the park, or head to a bar after a Braves game for camaraderie and a pleasant final few hours. Even simple additions, such as outdoor patios and benches, encourage people to stop and chat.

Competitive Jobs: Until the region makes a name for itself, it will have to give young people a reason to think twice about staying or moving. With nearby hubs including Greensboro, the Research Triangle, and Richmond, the Dan River Region needs to offer attractive job opportunities in order to balance what some might consider a social trade-off in choosing this location. Such jobs would include competitive salaries and benefits as well as chances for upward mobility and networking connections.

Bars and Restaurants: We've said it before and we'll say it again. Expanded options for dining and socializing immediately increase the appeal of a town. Think trendy, local specialties, and international, not more Burger Kings and Wendy's. Encourage favorite local eateries to move downtown. Additionally, new businesses would create jobs and retain money in the local economy. The vision: for a night on the town, people will head to Main Street instead of Greensboro.

Cultural Boundary Crossing: This is perhaps the most difficult area to influence. However, by offering universally appealing events, social outlets, and housing, opportunities for people of different cultures to interact will hopefully follow.

In order for organizations and individuals to take a risk in investing in the Dan River region, they will need support and incentives. The Danville Regional Foundation should play a role in creating such a scenario.

Lead by example: DRF is already on the right track by introducing out-of-town-college students and recent graduates and reintroducing locals to the Dan River Region via the intern program. DRF should continue offering the intern program along with opportunities for advisory or staff positions for young professionals.

Be a good influence: DRF should encourage its partners to develop positions for both local and out of town interns. Also, DRF should talk to partners about incorporating younger staff or advisors.

Encourage Entrepreneurs: In grant-making decisions, DRF should be deliberate in funding innovative nonprofits that will help advance the region. Additionally, DRF should influence business friendly policy that will encourage entrepreneurs, especially in the downtown Danville area.

Initial investment in the Dan River Region may seem risky, but it is a leap that many groups will need to take in order to change the climate here. With enough partners—businesses, nonprofits, students, young professionals, and policy maker all working toward the same goals, the risk is shared. After the initial legwork and funding to improve opportunities for young people generally and young professionals specifically, more trained professionals will return to or will stay in or move to the region, supporting the entrepreneurs and perpetuating the cycle of new investments and new opportunities.