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Stopping 'brain drain' goal of scholarships

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One of the missions of the Greater Hazleton Area Civic Partnership is to try to stop the exodus of young people out of the area.

So the partnership established a scholarship program, which is aimed at providing financial assistance for local students who want to pursue a post-secondary education that leads to training for jobs available in the Hazleton area.

In return, the recipients must pledge to stay in Greater Hazleton for three years after they graduate.

Jack St. Pierre, chairman of the scholarship committee, said the "brain drain" this area is experiencing is hurting local industries, because there are not enough technical personnel available to keep the industries in our area and to attract new, high-tech industries.

"There are technical and manufacturing type skills, electrical, technical and maintenance skills, that are needed," he said. "A lot of the manufacturing is computer assisted, and someone has to maintain that equipment."

St. Pierre said jobs available in those fields are paying up to \$15 per hour.

"At any time, there are 30 jobs open," he said. "We've channeled out efforts to meeting those needs. We are soliciting applications (for the scholarship) from people pursuing two-year technical programs and heating, ventilating and air conditioning and elevator technology."

St. Pierre said the whole idea behind the scholarship program was to get young people to stay here and stop the brain drain.

"We are trying to get people to come back to Hazleton to work after graduation," he said. "We are trying to fill a need, and at the same time, help some students achieve their goal of pursuing an education.

"There are a lot of young people who don't want to move, or want to move back. But they've got to find a good job."

When the scholarship program began, the partnership surveyed local industries to find the types of positions that were hard to fill from the local job market. Once those skills were identified, the committee started raising money by soliciting local industry, individuals and foundations.

Those eligible for a scholarship must be pursuing a degree or certification in a two- or four-year accredited program of study. The committee wants to assist students who are pursuing an education in a field in which there are job opportunities available in the Hazleton area.

Some of the typical two-year programs include industrial maintenance technician, manufacturing technology, electronics technology, computer technology and industrial technology.

Typical four-year programs include computer engineering, manufacturing engineering and production technology.

Candidates must reside within the boundaries of the Hazleton Area or Weatherly Area school districts, must achieve a minimum 2.75 grade-point average, must demonstrate employability and the desire to satisfy local employer needs.

Candidates must also demonstrate a sincere desire to return to the Hazleton area to begin their employment careers. They must sign a contract with the partnership to remain in the area for three years after graduation.

Applications are due annually by May 1.

Those interested in applying can contact the partnership's executive director, Bob Skulsky, at the Greater Hazleton Chamber of Commerce office, by phone at 455-1508 or on the Internet at www.hazletonchamber.org.