

# Miami Herald

## Are Miami and South Florida losing their best and brightest college grads to brain drain?

By [Andres Viglucci](#)

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Kevin Greiner, Research Fellow at the Florida International University Metropolitan Center, talks about his data analysis that shows jobs and wages lost during the Great Recession have not returned in many parts of the state. BY JOSE A. IGLESIAS

or years, leaders struggling to broaden the economy of Miami and the rest of South Florida beyond low-paying service jobs have wrestled with a vexing dilemma: Have those efforts been hampered by a crippling brain drain?

After diving into the question of whether we're having trouble keeping our college grads or providing them with rewarding work, one of the nation's leading experts suggests in [a report](#) released last week that the answer is both yes and no. But the news on balance is not great for the metro area comprising Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties.

The region, perhaps surprisingly, ranks ninth in the nation for the number of students enrolled in two- and four-year colleges, surpassing Houston and San Francisco and nipping at the heels of famously collegiate Boston. university of Toronto urbanist Richard Florida prepared the report, "Greater Miami's Talent Scorecard," for the Miami Future Initiative at Florida International University.

South Florida's total of 340,561 college students is bolstered by 55,000 at Florida International University, one of the largest public institutions in the country, and the nation's largest two-year school, Miami Dade College, with its nearly 152,000 students.

The region also does a decent job retaining those students when they graduate, with two-thirds staying at home to work, according to the report, co-authored with New York University professor Steven Pedigo. That's better than the Boston metro area and even with San Francisco, both famous anchors for science and tech hubs.

But South Florida appears to be producing too few of the highly skilled science and tech grads that underpin those hubs, and retaining too few of those who are educated here.



Local contractors are struggling to find enough skilled workers to fuel the construction boom. By Christian Colón

Overall, the Miami metro is losing grads to other cities in the state, such as Orlando and Tampa, and other Sunbelt competitors, like Denver and Atlanta, Florida and Pedigo conclude, based on an analysis of data from the LinkedIn professional social-media website. On the plus side, South Florida is also increasingly drawing talent from New York, thanks to its weather and lower taxes, and from university hubs Gainesville and Tallahassee and Latin America.

Rather than a brain drain, Florida concludes, the region is experiencing a “brain circulation.”

But whether it’s playing out to South Florida’s advantage is another matter.

The problems become clear when Florida, a part-time Miami Beach resident, dives into the details in the latest of a series of sobering reports on Miami and South Florida’s economic landscape for the [Miami Urban Future Initiative](#) at FIU.

Paradoxically, South Florida has a low share of college grads, with just a third of the over-25 population having a bachelor’s or graduate degree. That’s the 15th-lowest rate among large metropolitan areas in the country, or comparable to Detroit and Providence, R.I. In San Jose, Calif., the heart of Silicon Valley, more than 50 percent of the adult population has a college degree or higher, by contrast.

Those graduates in what Florida dubs “creative” jobs, including scientists, managers, professionals and artists and cultural workers, meanwhile, make up a smaller share here than they do in all but five major metros — and they’re paid less, too. The median pay of \$53,275 for creative workers is the second-lowest of all large metros.

And the region critically lacks in grads with degrees in the fields driving tech development, including computer, math, life sciences and engineering, in which South Florida ranks dead last — even as it has about 50 percent more lawyers than the average large metro.

The upshot, Florida said in an interview, is that well publicized ambitions to transform the region into a significant tech hub may be unrealistic, at least in the near future.

“We should disabuse ourselves of the notion that we’ll ever be Silicon Valley, or Austin or Boston,” Florida said.

That doesn’t mean there aren’t hopeful signs in the report, Florida noted. He believes the region is in a period of “transition” that could boost its economic base.

A “significant” talent inflow from New York by professionals seeking tax advantages, better weather and housing that by northeastern standards remains attractively affordable means the region is home to increasing numbers of hedge-fund managers, tech workers and entrepreneurs, Florida said. Other data suggests that Miami’s blossoming arts-and-culture scene has played a key role in luring them, Florida said.

“Miami is benefiting from the fact that people have more flexibility in where they want to live,” Florida said. The investment in arts and culture has really moved the needle.

In an unusual twist, many of those highly skilled newcomers don’t necessarily work here, he noted, but do so remotely, commuting back to their place of business

occasionally. But local programs to recruit and retain talent and businesses could piggyback on their presence to expand the burgeoning local tech sector, which could become a significant contributor to the local economy, Florida said.

The report also notes that Miami-Dade County's Beacon Council, the largest local economic development organization, is working on strategies to develop and retain talent, including a plan to make sure local colleges are training students for higher-skill, higher-paying jobs.

Another target, Florida suggested, should be retaining Miami and South Florida's brightest high school students. Florida suspects, based on anecdotal evidence, that they are now leaving town to attend top universities, but not coming back home after graduation.

"We're doing a good job of training our kids and keeping them, but we're losing the best kids from the best universities," Florida said.

And while South Florida may be losing those educated 18- to 25-year-olds, he also believes it's gaining educated young people from the Northeast who are forming families, thanks in part to relatively affordable housing and better quality of life, among other factors.

Previous reports by Florida for the FIU initiative have explored the local housing affordability crisis, how Greater Miami has 30 billionaires and the economic inequality of Colombia, giving the region the [second-worst economic inequality in the country](#), and how local tech has been [held back by low pay](#).