



Tuesday, April 11, 2006, 12:00 AM

Permission to reprint or copy this article or photo, other than personal use, must be obtained from The Seattle Times. Call 206-464-3113 or e-mail resale@seattletimes.com with your request.

Seattle ranks as nation's best-educated big city

By Eric Pryne

Seattle Times staff reporter

College graduates are flocking to Seattle, lured by a captivating combination of work and what's available after work.

It's the best-educated big city in America, according to Census Bureau estimates: 51.3 percent of all Seattle adults 25 and older hold bachelor's degrees or better.

Between 2000 and 2004, according to the bureau, the number of Seattle residents with college degrees increased by 11 percent — three times the rate of the city's overall population growth.

What's happening in Seattle is part of a national trend, according to an Associated Press analysis. Educated Americans are gravitating to the country's big cities, chasing jobs and culture and driving up home prices.

Though many of the largest cities have lost population in the past three decades, nearly all have added college graduates, according to the analysis.

"The largest predictor of economic well-being in cities is the percent of college graduates," said Ned Hill at Cleveland State University. To do well, he said, cities must be attractive to educated people.

The numbers suggest few cities are more attractive than Seattle — especially to young grads, said Karin Zaugg, spokeswoman for the city's Office of Economic Development. "They're looking to challenge themselves intellectually, and then go play hard," she said.

They come for the jobs at cutting-edge companies such as Microsoft and Amgen, she said, but also for the city's diversity, international flavor, outdoor recreation opportunities and arts scene.

Her colleague Brian Surratt, the office's industrial-sectors manager, is an example. He moved to Seattle six years ago, after getting his degree in Oklahoma, with no job lined up.

"I picked up a magazine and read that Seattle was the most livable place in the country," he said. "I was young and single ... It was definitely a lifestyle choice."

Cities that want to increase their pool of skilled labor need to foster an environment that welcomes

outsiders, including immigrants and people from elsewhere in the U.S., said Richard Florida, professor of public policy at George Mason University.

Nationally, a little more than one-fourth of people 25 and older had at least a bachelor's degree in 2004. By comparison, in 1970 only a bit more than one in 10 adults had a bachelor's degree.

The AP analyzed census data from 21 of the largest cities from 1970 to 2004. The AP used every-10-year census data from 1970 to 2000, and the Census Bureau's American Community Survey for 2004.

The 21 cities were chosen because of their size and location to provide regional balance. The analysis was expanded for 2004, the latest year for data, to include all 70 cities with populations of 250,000 or more.

In Seattle about one in six adults in 1970 had at least a bachelor's degree, among the national leaders for big cities then. By 2000, that figure had jumped to nearly one in two adults. And over the next four years, according to Census Bureau estimates, the number of college graduates in the city increased from 193,000 to about 215,000.

The increase is "quite remarkable, even extreme for a large American central city," said Richard Morrill, University of Washington geography professor emeritus. "I doubt many other large cities experienced an increase like that."

He attributed the surge in part to a change in the city's economy. Many manufacturing firms and warehouses have moved to the suburbs, he said, and been replaced by software and biotech companies, drawing "the intellectual types who like the excitement of the city and deliberately locate there."

What's more, Morrill said, many workers at Microsoft and other suburban tech firms choose to live in the city and "reverse commute."

But he questioned how many young, educated city-dwellers will flee to the suburbs once they become parents. Just 62 percent of the number of children born in Seattle enroll in Seattle public schools, according to school-district research. An additional 18 percent attend private schools in the city.

After Seattle, big cities with the highest percentages of college graduates among their adult populations in 2004 were, in order, San Francisco; Raleigh, N.C.; Washington, D.C.; and Austin, Texas.

At the other extreme: Santa Ana, Calif.; Newark, Detroit and Cleveland. Cities with few college graduates have a hard time generating good-paying jobs. That, in turn, makes it hard to attract more college graduates, said Richard Vedder of Ohio University.

Seattle ranked second among the nation's 70 largest cities, behind Washington, D.C., in 2004 in percentage of adults with advanced degrees — 21 percent, according to the Census Bureau. But 10 percent of Seattle's adult residents lacked a high-school diploma, a slightly higher share than Snohomish, Pierce or suburban King counties.

Material from The Associated Press was included in this report. Eric Pryne: 206-464-2231 or epryne@seattletimes.com

Copyright © 2006 The Seattle Times Company