

BRAIN DRAIN IN MISSISSIPPI: WHY SOME OF THE STATE'S BEST AND
BRIGHTEST ARE LEAVING

by
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the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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Dedication:

For the future of Mississippi, a state who has so much to offer. You are my home, and I will never stop caring about you.

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I would like to thank the Mississippians who truly care about this state and its future. You are the heart of this project. You are the legs of it creating change.

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ABSTRACT

Brain Drain in Mississippi: Why Some of the State's Best and Brightest Are Leaving (Under the direction of Curtis Wilkie)

This thesis is a collection of stories in which I explore some of the underlying reasons that the state of Mississippi is experiencing a large outmigration of educated, millennial citizens, known as “Brain Drain.”

This project is not an academic paper nor is it an attempt to fix the problem of young Mississippians leaving the state but rather an examination of the situation written in journalistic fashion. It attempts to shine a light on an issue that has plagued the state for years and deserves attention. It includes stories about the social climate, economic opportunities, the state legislature, and profiles of people who have left and come back. It is driven by a sheer love for this state and a curiosity about why so many want to leave and why many come back.

In short, this thesis demonstrates that Mississippi's net loss of young and bright citizens is an issue that reaches far beyond a lack of job opportunities.

Preface

I've got Mississippi in my bones, but more than anything in this world I want to leave.

I grew up here. These are my people. I know her stories. I know her rhythm. I get nostalgic when I think about catching fireflies on her sticky nights and eating watermelon on my grandmother's front porch on her summer afternoons. I know her land and her roads. I've climbed her trees, and I've felt her waters. I am a proud product of her public schools. Mississippi taught me how to appreciate the small and simple. Mississippi gave me a sense of self and a unique lens through which to see the world.

But, Mississippi has always left me wanting more.

Growing up in the small town of Corinth, I yearned for more opportunities, a bigger city, and more diversity. I yearned for a more inclusive place. After I graduated from high school, I attended the University of Mississippi in Oxford. For the first time, I got to know and love people from every walk of life. I learned about what it meant to have social, racial and socioeconomic biases. I had hard conversations with people who were different from me, and I was better for it. I met professors who had minds that reached far beyond Mississippi. I finally had a taste of something that was bigger than the Mississippi that I had grown up in, the Mississippi known for being the "hospitality state" but with a bad habit of making so many people feel small. My time at this university only fueled my desire to leave the state after graduating. It also gave me tools and resources to do so.

While talking to many of my classmates about what I wanted to do after graduation, I couldn't help noticing that so many of them also wanted to leave Mississippi. I thought that it was interesting, but did not give much thought to it because people talking about wanting to leave Mississippi was nothing new to me. It was not until I was in Sri Lanka on an in-depth reporting trip before my senior year at Ole Miss when I realized that this epidemic of young, educated people leaving a place for more opportunity was called "Brain Drain." This is also a large problem for Sri Lanka, an island off the coast of India and after I came back to school I couldn't help thinking about the similarity to Mississippi.

So, I started talking to people and found that it was a big problem. Many people wanted to leave for the same reasons that I did. For some, Mississippi simply did not offer them the opportunities that they wanted or needed in their fields of study. For some, they had spent their entire lives fighting for equality and inclusion and just wanted to experience what it felt like to live somewhere that did not feel as much like a large social club as it did a state. Others just wanted to know what it felt like to live somewhere where they could go to the grocery store and not be known by seven people.

But something that I found as I was talking to people was that many have a deep love and rumbling pride for Mississippi. Almost all of the people that I talked to said that they would love to return to the state and bring back what they have learned from other places. They want the best for Mississippi, and even if not staying in Mississippi after graduation from college, they want to be a part of helping Mississippi become a better version of itself.

I wanted to write this thesis because I care about this state and I want the best for it. I care about Mississippi's future. I want other people to care and yearn and strive to make it better. I also wrote it because I understand Mississippi's deep-rooted issues and wanted to unpack how those affect people. I'm curious about what it is about Mississippi that haunts people and sticks with them no matter how far away they travel and brings them right back home.

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Introduction

Brain Drain: a term that has come to describe a departure of young, talented and educated citizens leaving one area for another.

In the past eight years and particularly the last three, millennial citizens, those born between 1981-1996, leaving the state of Mississippi has become a staggering problem.

According to census data via ReThink Mississippi, “Between July 2016 and July 2017, nearly 8,000 more people left the state than moved in, bringing the full outmigration tally since 2010 to 42,811.”¹

According to Mississippi LifeTracks via ReThink Mississippi, “Only half of recent graduates from Mississippi’s four-year public universities are working in the state five years after receiving a degree. Slightly more than 60% of in-state students have been retained, and a mere 7% of out-of-state students.”²

Leaving the state of Mississippi is a tradition that reaches far beyond the past eight years.

Mississippi wrestles with a rugged past that is hard to tolerate, much less love.

Mississippi Native Richard Wright once wrote about leaving America and Mississippi for Paris in a work entitled “I Choose Exile.” Wright said, “Why have I decided to live beyond the shores of my native land? It is because I love freedom, and I

¹ McGraw, Jake, Neil White, Jennifer Kirby-McLemore, and William Winter Institute. "New Census Data, Same Old Story: People Keep Leaving Mississippi | Jake McGraw." Rethink Mississippi. December 23, 2017. Accessed April 09, 2018.

<http://www.rethinkms.org/2017/12/21/new-census-data-ol-story-people-keep-leaving-mississippi/>.

² Ibid.

tell you frankly that there is more freedom in one square block of Paris than there is in the entire United States of America!”³

Many Mississippians left during the Great Migration, but some also stayed and faced the turmoil of Jim Crow and other ghosts of inequality from the Confederacy.

Issues of inequality and discrimination still creep into Mississippi policy today and the ways that it affects people goes largely without talking about at times.

This project is not a solution to Mississippi’s brain drain epidemic, but rather a lens that looks at the layers of this issue that go deep beyond a lack of job opportunity in the state. It evaluates what makes people want to leave and why they come back. The purpose is to provide different perspectives with context and personal input by different millennial Mississippians to continue and add to the conversation about brain drain and in turn yield readers to think of possible solutions.

³ Wright, Richard. “I Choose Exile.” *The Writer’s Presence: A Pool of Readings*. Eds. Donald McQuade & Robert Atwan. 4th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s P, 1951. 288-295.

What is the state legislature doing to help solve Mississippi's Brain Drain Problem?

For over six years, the state of Mississippi has been suffering from an outmigration of citizens, particularly millennials after graduating from the state's universities. State legislators have differing opinions on the issue.

Many state officials agree on the issues that Mississippi is facing, including a lack of job opportunities and the need for further developing our metropolitan areas, but have different ideas for going about solving these issues.

A recent attempt that the legislature made was House Bill 1550,⁴ which passed the House 118-0 in February 2018. The bill was pushed largely by the Mississippi Future Caucus and had a great deal of bipartisan support. The Mississippi Future Caucus is a part of a national group called the Millennial Action Project whose vision is, "to create a political environment where bipartisan cooperation is restored as our nation's governing paradigm and our elected leaders work more closely together to address the challenges we face as a generation and as a nation."⁵

HB 1550 was designed to provide tax breaks for people with bachelor's or professional degrees who decide to stay in, or move to, the state for up to five years after graduating.⁶

However, after being moved to the Senate, and died in the Finance Committee on March 13.

⁴ House Bill 1550, H.R. 1550, 133rd MS Leg., Lamar (2018).

⁵ "Our Story." Millennial Action Project. Accessed April 23, 2018. <https://www.millennialaction.org/about-us/>.

⁶ House Bill 1550, H.R. 1550, 133rd MS Leg., Lamar (2018).

Lt. Gov. Tate Reeves, who presides over the Senate, said that a big portion of the brain drain argument is not accurate.⁷

“What you’re going to find in Mississippi is that...as some of our universities have significantly increased their out of state students...a large percentage of the students that are leaving Mississippi are students that came from out of state to go to school here,” said Reeves.

According to the Office of Institutional Research, Effectiveness and Planning at the University of Mississippi, there has been an increase in out-of-state enrollment from 40.6 percent in the 2013-2014 school year to 45.7 percent in the 2017-2018 year.⁸

Speaker of the House Philip Gunn agrees that a lot of the students included in statistics about the brain drain are ones from out of state.⁹

“A lot of kids from out of state come into our state schools with no intent to ever stay here,” Gunn said. “They’re going to go back home.”

Reeves and Gunn both acknowledged that Mississippi could improve the work force in order to keep out-of-state students in the state after graduating.

Reeves also said that what we are seeing in Mississippi is virtually no different than what is happening in every other state.

“This crisis that has been created is really not a crisis at all,” said Reeves.

⁷ Reeves, Tate. Interview by University of Mississippi Press Corps and Savannah Smith, January 3, 2018. Jackson, MS.

⁸ "Office of Institutional Research, Effectiveness, and Planning." Office of Institutional Research, Effectiveness, and Planning | Quick Facts. Accessed April 24, 2018. <https://irep.olemiss.edu/institutional-research/quick-facts/>.

⁹ Gunn, Philip. Interview by University of Mississippi Press Corps and Savannah Smith, January 9, 2018. Jackson, MS.

The lieutenant governor said that one thing that sets Mississippi apart from bordering states that are not struggling with as much with brain drain is that it only has one metropolitan area, Jackson.

“I hope we can all agree that downtown Jackson has really struggled over the last 10 years,” said Reeves.

Millennials are leaving Mississippi most commonly for Texas, Georgia and Florida according to Rethink Mississippi via census data.¹⁰ Many others in Mississippi are flocking to nearby cities in Tennessee, including Memphis and Nashville.

Representative Jeremey Anderson, D-Moss Point, is a 26-year old African American and member of the bipartisan Mississippi Future Caucus. He said that brain drain in the Mississippi is definitely a problem and explained that millennials love to seek challenge and opportunity, even if this is outside of the state.¹¹

“We would rather be in a job that challenges us than to be in a job where we’re bored and just making a paycheck,” Anderson said. “We’re not so homegrown to where we’re afraid to leave the state. Millennials are all about the opportunity; if I can get paid and have fun and do my job in Louisiana or California or New York, I’m leaving.”

Reeves said that he is optimistic about the future of downtown Jackson after legislation implementing projects such as the Capital City Improvement District, where

¹⁰ McGraw, Jake, Neil White, Jennifer Kirby-McLemore, and William Winter Institute. "New Census Data, Same Old Story: People Keep Leaving Mississippi | Jake McGraw." Rethink Mississippi. December 23, 2017. Accessed April 09, 2018. <http://www.rethinkms.org/2017/12/21/new-census-data-ol-story-people-keep-leaving-mississippi/>.

¹¹ Anderson, Jeremey. Personal Interview, January 10, 2018. Jackson, MS.

he says upwards of \$8 million to \$10 million will be spent internally in Jackson for infrastructure and other improvements.¹²

“If we’re going to be successful at attracting more and more millennials to stay in Mississippi, we’ve got to do a better job at downtown Jackson of making it attractive for people to live and work,” Reeves said.

Reeves also noted that there are not as many corporate jobs available for college graduates in the state. He said that it’s not necessarily a government problem, but that it is just what has happened.

One of the hopes of the Mississippi legislature during its 133rd session is to help create a more educated work force so that companies will feel more inclined to invest in Mississippi.

“If we can’t get the right work force, our businesses will die,” said Mississippi Economic Council Chairman William Yates during the MEC Capital Day.¹³

Ashley Edwards from the Gulf Coast Business Council – One Coast was asked specifically what the Gulf Coast Business Council is doing to address the brain drain problem in the coastal region of the state.¹⁴

“Community development precedes economic development,” said Edwards.
“[Millennials] are making decisions in large part based on community assets, quality of

¹² Reeves, Tate. Mississippi Economic Council Capital Day Program. January 4, 2018. Jackson, MS.

¹³ Yates, William. Mississippi Economic Council Capital Day Program. January 4, 2018. Jackson, MS.

¹⁴ Edwards, Ashley. Mississippi Economic Council Capital Day Panel. January 4, 2018. Jackson, MS.

life and [being] in or proximity to markets like New Orleans, Mobile, certainly the coastal market [and] the beach market, we think that's a real opportunity for the Mississippi Gulf Coast."

Rep. Anderson is a leader of Mississippi's millennial caucus. He said that he's excited about the attention that this topic has been getting and that it is a problem for Mississippi as a whole. He remembers in high school being discouraged by people talking about wanting to leave the state.¹⁵

"It's definitely a problem," said Anderson. "We've been talking about this for about a year now, and I'm excited. The amount of attention that it's been getting is really, really good because it is a problem and if we don't stop it early, it's going to be too late."

He said that the brain drain issue is a large reason he chose to stay in Mississippi.

"If everybody had that same mentality [of leaving the state] and we know the reasons why, who's going to be the person to sacrifice and say, 'Enough is enough. I'm going to sit here [and] I'm going to make it better for the next class, the next generation so that when they grow up, they don't have to say, 'I'm ready to leave here,'" said Anderson. "[The new dialogue is] 'I want to stay here because there's opportunity here. I want to stay here because I love my state, it provides me and my family the opportunity to thrive.' Who's going to be able to do that?"

Anderson said that there is a lot of work to be done in Mississippi, and that he wants to be the person to do it.

¹⁵ Anderson, Jeremy. Personal Interview, January 10, 2018. Jackson, MS.

“There are a lot of things that go on in Mississippi that have to be changed,” said Anderson. “Our backwards and regressive thinking as far as how accepting we are to social issues plays a major part in millennials [wanting to leave the state] because we’re more open to that.”

Mississippi has a long history of doing the opposite of what the rest of the country is doing in terms of social policy. There are layers of racism and discrimination about sexual orientation that is only fueled by the legislature. In a world of more social connection than ever before, many millennials around the country have embraced a culture of listening and respecting many different opinions.

“It’s kind of like [this mentality of] ‘You do you, I’m going to do me, and let’s just be merry,’” said Anderson. “That’s one thing that many millennials look for in communities is diversity. You don’t really get that a lot in Mississippi.”

Another issue that some of these legislators claim to be causing a brain drain problem is the lack of priority our education systems are receiving.

The funding program that our schools have abided by, known as the Mississippi Adequate Education Program,¹⁶ has recently been under review and legislators are pushing a new approach.

Speaker Gunn filed House Bill 957 to rewrite the current formula of MAEP with one that is pupil-based rather than program-based. This program would provide students in public schools in Mississippi with a base of \$4,800 per pupil and additional weights of a multiplier of 1.3 based on elements such as gifted students, English-language learners,

¹⁶ "Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP)." Msparentscampaign.org. Accessed April 10, 2018. <http://www.msparentscampaign.org/education-funding.html?id=34>.

low-income status, special education diagnosis, and high school students, according to Mississippi Today.¹⁷ It did not pass in the 2018 session.¹⁸

Changing the environment of Mississippi public schools could change the trajectory of our brain drain because more people would have better chances of attending good colleges with more scholarship opportunities and more people would choose to move back to Mississippi so that their children would have good school systems.

“We’ve had the worst brain drain in any point that I can remember in my history,” said Attorney General Jim Hood.¹⁹

The cost for attending four year colleges has also increased and could also be another reason that students are being forced to leave the state to find jobs.

“For the first time in our history, I’ve seen where we’re at the point where we’re not trying to encourage our kids to get a four-year education because they are going to take on all of this debt,” Hood said.

“So, if they’ve got 70,000 dollars of debt for an undergraduate education, they’ve got to move out of state because you can’t get a job [in Mississippi] that [allows you to] pay that, have a house, buy a car, and have a family,” He said. “So, if you’ve got that kind of debt, what we’ve got to do is try to reduce it...

If we can reduce the cost [of going to college] and keep those kids here, that’s the biggest investment we can make other than pre-K education.”

¹⁷ Royals, Kate. "Gunn Files School Funding Rewrite Bill." Mississippi Today. January 12, 2018. Accessed April 24, 2018. <https://mississippitoday.org/2018/01/11/gunn-files-school-funding-rewrite-bill/>.

¹⁸ House Bill 957, H.R. 957, 133rd MS Leg., (2018).

¹⁹ Hood, Jim. Interview by University of Mississippi Press Corps and Savannah Smith, January 10, 2018. Jackson, MS.

Conversation continues at the Capitol about how to solve this problem of keeping educated young people in the state, and Rep. Anderson said that he hopes new legislation surrounding this issue will continue to appear on the House and Senate floors.

Social Landscape: Why Mississippi is suffocating and some people just want to breathe

With ghosts of the Confederacy and policy that tends to side with religion rather than science, Mississippi trails the rest of the nation as an inclusive environment for people to make a life.

Many millennials want to leave Mississippi because of the harsh social conditions of the “hospitality state.”

Racial Inequality

Mississippi is scorched by events like the murder of 1955 Emmett Till, a 14-year old African American boy who was brutally killed for allegedly whistling at a white woman named Carolyn Bryant,²⁰ and a number of Ku Klux Klan mob lynchings before and during the Civil Rights Movement.

Inequality is a pillar of Mississippi’s history, and these tendencies still creep into everyday life in the state.

“I want to leave Mississippi because, although I love my state, growing up here and being here is very taxing,” said Shuqualak native Terrence Johnson.²¹

Johnson, a gay African American male said that the hardest part about being from Mississippi is realizing that there is so much that needs to change about the state he loves so much.

²⁰ "Emmett Till." Biography.com. January 19, 2018. Accessed April 09, 2018. <https://www.biography.com/people/emmett-till-507515>.

²¹ Johnson, Terrence. Personal Interview, February 13, 2018.

“It’s kind of like our parents,” Johnson said. “They love us but they also correct us when we’re wrong and when they want the best for us.”

There are still Confederate monuments scattered throughout the state and rebel flags are flown from cars. In April 2016, Governor Phil Bryant declared the month “Confederate Heritage Month.”²²

"We’re supposed to be the hospitality state, unless you’re something other than what the norm is in Mississippi...and millennials don’t take that very well," said state Rep. Jeremy Anderson.²³

There has been some pushback to racial inequality in Mississippi in recent years.

One place that racial discrimination has particularly come to a head is at the University of Mississippi, largely known for its dramatic reaction to integration when the first African American student, James Meredith, enrolled in September 1962. The integration involved deadly riots, the help of the National Guard and thousands of U.S. troops, and a large number of faculty and staff members leaving the following year.²⁴

Today, the university still has a Confederate statue on campus and many other odes to the Confederacy.

²² Bryant, P. (2016, April 25). (U.S.A., State of Mississippi, Office of the Governor). Retrieved April 10, 2016, from <http://www.governorbryant.ms.gov/Proclamations/Confederate-Heritage-Month.pdf>

²³ Anderson, Jeremy. Personal Interview, January 10, 2018. Jackson, MS.

²⁴ History.com Staff. "James Meredith at Ole Miss." History.com. 2010. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/ole-miss-integration>.

In 2015, Allen Coon, a sophomore student at the University of Mississippi, proposed a resolution to the Associated Student Body Senate to ask the university to take the state flag down because of its Confederate symbolism.²⁵

The resolution caused an uproar on campus and around the entire state about the notion of Confederate symbols and traditions and how they make people feel. The student senate passed the resolution and the Faculty Senate voted for the flag to be immediately removed.

Following the removal of the state flag on Ole Miss's campus, a resolution was passed among the student body presidents of seven of the eight public universities in the state to remove the state flag from their campuses.²⁶

Coon plans to leave the state after graduating from the University of Mississippi in December 2018. He wants to leave to get master's and law degrees on the West Coast and return shortly after to help improve living conditions in Mississippi.

"I want to go learn more about how our government functions and how our laws are made so I can better help our state but also, I just need a breath of fresh air," said Coon. "This place can be stifling and if I'm going to spend the rest of my life here, then I just need to at least...just put my head above water just for a moment before diving back in."²⁷

²⁵ "ASB Senate Votes for Removal of State Flag on Ole Miss Campus." The Daily Mississippian. November 14, 2016. Accessed April 10, 2018.

<http://thedmonline.com/asb-senate-votes-for-removal-of-state-flag-on-um-campus/>.

²⁶ "Confederate-themed State Flag Lowered at 7 of 8 Public Universities in Mississippi." WDSU. October 08, 2017. Accessed April 10, 2018.

<http://www.wdsu.com/article/confederate-themed-state-flag-lowered-at-7-of-8-public-universities-in-mississippi/3610871>.

²⁷ Coon, Allen. Personal Interview, April 3, 2018.

A recent study conducted by NPR, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health surveyed members of different ethnic groups to ask them about their experiences with discrimination and proved that racism is bad for health.²⁸

The study showed that people who experienced everyday indignities such as “being treated with less courtesy than others, being treated with less respect than others, receiving poorer service at restaurants or stores” over time revealed a more likely chance for people to develop a more rapid development of coronary heart disease. It also showed that women with unborn children who experience this discrimination are more likely to have babies with lower birth weights.

According to the USA life expectancy health rankings, the life expectancy rate of African American males in Mississippi is 68.79 years, where the life expectancy rate of a white male in Mississippi is 76.08 years.²⁹

Coon said that he is interested in policy because of where it bleeds into culture.

“I understand how important [policy] is in shaping our culture but it’s just the way we decide to govern ourselves and to establish laws that quarantine other sections of our population off from one another and leave a lot of us behind and make it where it’s uncomfortable for a lot of us to live here [that is stifling],” Coon said.

²⁸ Martin, Michel. "Racism Is Literally Bad For Your Health." NPR. October 28, 2017. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/2017/10/28/560444290/racism-is-literally-bad-for-your-health>.

²⁹ "USA Life Expectancy African American." World Life Expectancy. Accessed April 10, 2018. <http://www.worldlifeexpectancy.com/usa/life-expectancy-african-american>.

Debate is continuing at Ole Miss about the Confederate statue located in the center of campus, especially in response to the traumatic riots that occurred in Charlottesville, Va., in fall of 2017.³⁰

The conversation hit a new plateau earlier in the school year when a driver ran his truck into the statue. Although the university released a statement saying that there was no way to prove that the event was purposeful, many debated if repairs should be made to the statue or if it should be moved to an alternate location.³¹

Some members of the English department published a call to action to the chancellor in the student newspaper, *The Daily Mississippian*, asking that the statue be moved rather than repaired.³²

Shortly after, the statue was quietly repaired and student groups such as Students Against Social Injustice and UM NAACP released statements speaking out about their disapproval of the university's decision to repair the monument.³³

³⁰ "How a Rally of White Nationalists and Supremacists at the University of Virginia Turned into a "tragic, Tragic Weekend."" *The Washington Post*. Accessed April 10, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/local/charlottesville-timeline/?utm_term=.ef9ea1316265.

³¹ Apel, Therese. "Truck Rams Confederate Statue at Ole Miss." *USA Today*. September 17, 2017. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2017/09/17/truck-rams-confederate-statue-ole-miss/675509001/>.

³² "Members of English Department Call for Action from Chancellor regarding Confederate Statue." *The Daily Mississippian*. August 31, 2017. Accessed April 10, 2018. <http://thedmonline.com/english-department-calls-action-chancellor-regarding-confederate-statue/>.

³³ "UPDATED: Student Groups Respond to Ole Miss Announcing Repairs to Confederate Statue, Plaque." *The Daily Mississippian*. November 20, 2017. Accessed April 10, 2018. <http://thedmonline.com/maggie-student-groups-respond-ole-miss-announcing-repairs-confederate-statue-plaque/>.

Also, a group of students from Students Against Social Injustice, a campus organization, protested the statue, standing in front of it with a banner that read, “Chancellor Vitter Who Do You Protect Statues or Students?” The organization also held a “March Against Hate” in support of removing the statue from campus.³⁴

A contextualization committee was put together at Ole Miss in 2015 to try and give context to the buildings on campus named for people who were notoriously racist or who supported slavery as a part of the 2014 Action Plan at Ole Miss.³⁵ Six plaques were installed at various locations around campus giving context to these buildings in March of this year.³⁶

Symbols of the Confederacy continue to be a place of disagreement around the state, while many work to preserve their “heritage” and many also work to dismantle discrimination in the state.

“I know that there are things and places around the world that have oppression or are melting pots or swamps of oppression or micro aggression or whatnot, Mississippi’s just like the haven,” said millennial Shuqualak-native Terrence Johnson, who plans to leave the state after graduating from Ole Miss. “It’s like the breeding ground. That’s

³⁴ "Students Against Social Injustice - SASI." Facebook - Log In or Sign Up. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.facebook.com/sasilikesassy/>.

³⁵ "Chancellor's Advisory Committee on History and Context." Chancellor's Advisory Committee on History and Context | The University of Mississippi. Accessed April 24, 2018. <https://context.olemiss.edu/>.

³⁶ Gibbs, Anna. "Ole Miss Unveils New Contextualization Plaques." The Oxford Eagle. March 02, 2018. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://m.oxfordeagle.com/2018/03/02/ole-miss-unveils-new-contextualization-plaques/>.

something that I really want to change because we're running some of our best people away and we are definitely making ourselves look really bad."³⁷

"I want to go to a place where I don't see Confederate flags at events and I don't see rebels and stalks of cotton," said Johnson. "I don't want to see that. I want to be in a place where that's not even tolerated. I wish that Mississippi would get to that point."

LGBT Discrimination

Another issue that plagues Mississippi is LGBT rights and a general acceptance of this culture. After a long dispute about allowing same-sex marriage to be legal, Mississippi was forced to accept it when the United States Supreme Court ruled it legal nationwide.

"I know for me personally, being a queer male of color, I experience different forms of oppression and micro aggression and people shouldn't have to experience that just because of being who they are," said Johnson.

In 2016, House Bill 1523 was introduced in the Mississippi legislature, passed and was signed into law by Governor Phil Bryant.

The purpose of the act was "to provide certain protections regarding a sincerely held religious belief or moral conviction for persons, religious organizations and private associations," (H.B. 1523). It allowed businesses to deny service to people based on their sexuality out of respect to certain religious beliefs.³⁸

³⁷ Johnson, Terrence. Personal Interview, February 13, 2018.

³⁸ "House Bill 1523." HB1523 (As Sent to Governor) - 2016 Regular Session. Accessed April 10, 2018. <http://billstatus.ls.state.ms.us/documents/2016/html/HB/1500-1599/HB1523SG.htm>.

Also, gay and lesbian couples have faced limited certain rights, such as being able to adopt children for quite some time after same-sex marriage was legalized in the state.

“It’s policies like that that really make it mind boggling and feed into the individual bigotry that make it that much harder for people to get about their day to day life,” said Allen Coon.³⁹

Mississippi ex-patriot and Washington, D.C., native Alex Martin does not agree with the discrimination in House Bill 1523.

“There’s no need to codify discrimination that wasn’t even a problem in the first place,” said Martin. “I just think that Mississippians don’t need to hide behind the fear of people who aren’t exactly like them, you know that are really just their neighbors. That’s hard. I can’t defend that side of Mississippi, and I don’t.”⁴⁰

The bill received a great amount of pushback around the state and the nation. Mississippi in the Park, a longstanding tradition in Central Park each summer, was canceled because the New York Mississippi Society did not approve of the discrimination that the state was writing into law.⁴¹

Some businesses in Mississippi, specifically in Oxford vocalized that they would serve any customer despite the new legislation.

Many are still fighting for support of LGBTQ culture in the state.

³⁹ Coon, Allen. Personal Interview, April 3, 2018.

⁴⁰ Martin, Alex. Personal Interview, February 12, 2018.

⁴¹ Clark, Jeff. "Mississippi New York Picnic Canceled - Forever." The Clarion Ledger. January 04, 2017. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/2017/01/04/mississippi-new-york-picnic-canceled-forever/96148876/>.

“I want to be able to embrace [myself] freely without it being a question or a thought,” said Johnson. “I want to be able to go out on a date with a guy and it be like, ‘Ok, that’s a normal thing.’ I don’t want it to be something that people have to whisper about and question because no one questions it when a guy and a girl go out. We’re all people. We should all be the same.”

In 2015, Mississippi had its first gay pride parade in Oxford. In 2016, Jackson held its first pride parade.

Recently, people in Starkville tried to start their own pride parade but their effort was denied by the City of Starkville’s Board of Aldermen, who voted 4-3 to deny a permit. It was later over turned by a vote of 3-3 by the aldermen and was broken by Mayor Lynn Spruill.⁴²

The parade had a great deal of support and according to LGBTQ Nation, 3,000 people showed up to march in the parade.⁴³

Other areas around the state, including the Gulf Coast have events in support of Mississippi pride. The Gulf Coast Association of Pride’s “Pride Day” had over 800 people attend its inaugural festival last year.⁴⁴

⁴² Campbell, Larrison. "Starkville Approves Pride Parade, Reversing Earlier Vote." Mississippi Today. March 08, 2018. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://mississippitoday.org/2018/03/06/starkville-approves-pride-parade-reversing-earlier-vote/>.

⁴³ Bollinger, Alex. "3000 People Showed up to Celebrate Pride in the Mississippi Town That Banned It." LGBTQ Nation. April 03, 2018. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2018/03/3000-people-showed-celebrate-pride-mississippi-town-banned/#.WrkRH7AIIInI.facebook>.

⁴⁴ "Gulf Coast LGBT Pride Association." Facebook - Log In or Sign Up. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.facebook.com/gulfcoastlgbtpride/>.

There are resources for LGBT community members in Mississippi, such as Unity Mississippi, which is an online directory for people in the LGBT community to connect for jobs.

23-year old Horne Lake native Malik Pridgeon is a gay African American male who plans on leaving the state after graduating from college.

“There was no doubt that I knew that I wanted to leave the state,” said Pridgeon. “It’s important for me to leave the state because I am tired of dealing with the same issues.”⁴⁵

Pridgeon said that religion in the state is a problem that reaches beyond code.

“Religion is something that is such a big driving force here whereas culture is important, that’s how we form our identity and everything like that,” said Pridgeon. “I think the drawback to that is that if that’s how we’re viewing the world, if that’s our world view, it really complicates matters for how we can progress.”

Pridgeon said that he was kicked out of his family home twice for coming out as queer because of religion and social perception.

“My hope for the state is that we will become more driven by scientific knowledge as opposed to religion,” said Pridgeon. “That’s the first thing because that would fix so much.”

Johnson said that he also faced discrimination and was asked to not sing in several church choirs because of his support of LGBT rights.

“I don’t see people with progressive mindsets usually leading the torch for the state, so that’s kind of a red flag to me,” Johnson said. “I definitely want to be in a place

⁴⁵ Pridgeon, Malik. Personal Interview, March 28, 2018.

that's forward thinking because the world is ever changing. I definitely want to be in a place that recognizes all people from various backgrounds and allows them to embrace themselves without opposition.”

Other Mississippians share the same desire to have grown up in an environment with more diversity. Although Mississippi does have a racial and socioeconomic diversity, it has not addressed the culture of discrimination against marginalized groups.

“Although I am so appreciative of how I grew up in Mississippi and my childhood there, I do wish I had been exposed to more throughout my childhood,” said Murray Miller, a Jackson, Mississippi ex-pat living in Madrid, Spain. Miller is a white female who attended Jackson Preparatory school and Ole Miss. “I was surrounded by those who looked like me, talked like me, believed the same things I believed, etc. I wish I had learned as a child some of the lessons I have learned later in my life: that not all people do things the same way, that people can be different and it is OK, that people can have different opinions and still get along.”⁴⁶

Other ex-pats of Mississippi say that the state's gaping holes in equality and equity have followed them far after leaving the state in more ways than one.

“I do think that for Mississippi, a lot of times people make assumptions that you don't always have the chance to talk about and have the context to,” said Miller Richmond, another Mississippi ex-pat living in D.C.

⁴⁶ Miller, Murray. Email Correspondence, April 5, 2018.

Another ex-pat William Wildman is a Laurel native living in Denver, Co. He said that the hardest part for him about being from Mississippi is the historical and political shortcomings of the state.

“It’s hard to feel like I have to justify the good parts of our state simply because I know that the bad parts are so internationally visible,” said Wildman. “Knowing the dense racial history of our state puts knots in my stomach, and trying to navigate that conversation with someone who did not grow up here has proven more and more difficult...”

I also think of our governor and his dedication to halting any type of progress in our state. I worry, too, about his ever-growing fan base, but these are bigger issues that are for some other day.”⁴⁷

“I think for the most part people who are from Mississippi are defined by Mississippi’s failures, whether that is a belief that people think you have racist or have been a victim of racists beliefs or that because of Mississippi’s low testing results that you are not as smart,” said Austin Powell, ex-pat studying in Oxford, England.⁴⁸

Alex Martin said that she is grateful for growing up in Mississippi because she understands the layers of racial and socioeconomic differences from an up-close perspective knowing people in Mississippi’s public schools.

“I feel like that taught me how to talk to anybody. Mississippi has its bad reputation for race relations and it deserves some of that, but I think that what I gained from living there and the way my parents raised me to respect people no matter where

⁴⁷ Wildman, William. Email Correspondence, April 12, 2018.

⁴⁸ Powell, Austin. Personal Interview, March 16, 2018.

they came from or what they looked like or what their skin color was,” Martin said. “I’ve talked to and lived next to and been friends with people from all across the socioeconomic divide.”

Starting a dialogue about this culture of discrimination is something that some Mississippians want to start.

Allen Coon said that that was his goal.

“I think we have a hard time talking about issues frankly and honestly,” said Coon. “I think we’re honest people, but we don’t talk and if you’re not talking then it’s easy to commit a lie of omission. I don’t think we have conversations surrounding race, gender, class, issues that have been affecting Mississippi since it was born like we need to. And so, I hope that maybe by making people uncomfortable that we’ve forced some people to have conversations that weren’t necessarily being had previously.”

“My hope is that any person that lives in this state or grows up in this state doesn’t have to feel anything like I felt like I experienced or that I know I experienced,” Johnson said. “I want all people to be able to love who they want to love. I want all people to be able to find jobs and careers in their profession. I want all people to have an adequate educational system. I want all people to not have to worry about being ostracized for their inherited traits. I want people to be able to freely embrace their culture without it being seen as a shot or a stab at another culture. I want there to be some time of exchange between different groups, just an exchange of understanding, because what I’ve noticed is a lot of people don’t know the other side.”

The Economy and Opportunities: What is Driving Graduates Away

A lagging economy and lack of funding for essential programs are pushing many millennials out of Mississippi because of a lack of opportunity the state has to offer.

According to U.S. News, Mississippi's economy is nationally ranked 48th.⁴⁹ Mississippi Labor Market Data reveals that Mississippi's statewide unemployment rate has fluctuated from 6.1 percent and 4.5 percent in the past year. At 4.5 percent, 56,700 Mississippians remain unemployed.⁵⁰ Mississippi's is above the national's average of 4.1 according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.⁵¹

Some Mississippi millennials are leaving the state not because they want to, but because they have to.

"I didn't want to leave the state," said Mississippi ex-pat currently living in Washington, D.C. resident Miller Richmond. Richmond is a white male who attended Madison City Schools and Ole Miss before moving to D.C. "I think I needed to leave the state for educational and professional opportunities."⁵²

Now, Richmond, who wants to pursue a career in medicine, is working in an Asthma Clinic in a hospital in D.C. and says that he would have never had this opportunity if he were in Mississippi.

⁴⁹ "Where Does Mississippi Place in the U.S. News Best States Rankings?" U.S. News & World Report. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/mississippi>.

⁵⁰ *Mississippi Labor Market Data*. PDF. Mississippi Department of Employment Security, February 2018. <http://mdes.ms.gov/media/23357/labormarketdata.pdf>

⁵¹ "Bureau of Labor Statistics Data." U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Accessed April 16, 2018. <https://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LNS14000000>.

⁵² Richmond, Miller. Personal Interview, February 21, 2018.

“The reason that I can do that is because D.C. has a really good Medicaid program, fully funded,” said Richmond.

According to Ballotpedia, Mississippi did not fully fund Medicaid, which provides medical insurance to groups of low-income people and individuals with disabilities under the Affordable Care Act in June 2017, causing the state to receive less federal funding.⁵³

According to Ballotpedia, in 2016, the federal government was covering 74.4 percent of Mississippi’s Medicaid costs while the state was only covering 25.6 percent.

“[D.C.] has really good hospitals, not that Mississippi hospitals aren’t great but they’re not always as fully funded as hospitals or institutions in [D.C.],” said Richmond. “I needed to go somewhere that would give me opportunities and give the funding to support someone like me...in my perfect world, I’d be able to do the things I do here in Mississippi...but it’s not always there.”

Many students are overqualified for the jobs that are available in Mississippi. In many cases, even if the job were available, the salary would not be as good as some other states could offer.

According to the Department of Numbers, per capita income in 2016 was \$41,754, trailing the national average at \$57,617.⁵⁴

⁵³ "Medicaid Spending in Mississippi." Ballotpedia. Accessed April 10, 2018. https://ballotpedia.org/Medicaid_spending_in_Mississippi.

⁵⁴ "Mississippi Household Income." Department of Numbers. Accessed April 10, 2018. <http://www.deptofnumbers.com/income/mississippi/>.

Another Mississippi ex-pat and D.C. native, Alex Martin said that she also had no choice but to leave the state to pursue her career in economics.

“When you pick a pretty specialized field, you really can’t move anywhere and be an economist at least with the level of education that I have right now,” Martin said. “One day, maybe I could move back as a professor or something after I get a PhD and that would be different, but the main reason that I left was that there were literally zero job opportunities for the field I’m interested in.”⁵⁵

Economics is not the only field that has limited employment opportunities in Mississippi. One large gaping hole that Mississippi has is a lack of technology jobs.

According to Forbes Magazine, Mississippi is ranked 50th in innovative states.⁵⁶

The U.S. Census Bureau via Forbes Magazine states that Mississippi “also got the lowest share of science and engineering graduates in the nation (it ranked 51), the lowest projected STEM job demand by 2020 (51) and the lowest number of invention patents per 100,000 residents (51).”⁵⁷

C Spire is a telecommunications and technology company in Mississippi that has helped combat this in several ways. ⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Martin, Alex. Personal Interview, February 12, 2018.

⁵⁶ Bloom, Laura Begley. "The 10 Most (And 10 Least) Innovative States In The U.S." Forbes. October 03, 2017. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/laurabegleybloom/2017/03/28/the-10-most-and-10-least-innovative-states-in-the-u-s/#6d0c427310a6>.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ "WIRELESS." C Spire. Accessed April 10, 2018. http://www.cspire.com/company_info/about/more_info.jsp.

C Spire has made efforts to provide tech jobs to hundreds of people in the state of Mississippi, and has recently started targeting recent graduates of the state's leading public institutions.

The company has an onsite office in Oxford in hopes to recruit STEM majors at the University of Mississippi to work with them part time while in school and full time after graduating.

C Spire has also started a high school program called BaseCamp to encourage Mississippi students to consider professions in STEM and provide them with opportunities to do so.

In March of 2017, C Spire had a coding challenge hoping to pique high school students' interest in pursuing a career in information technology.⁵⁹

According to Mississippi Today, having high speed internet is crucial to having a good work force. In a statement via Mississippi Today, Senator Roger Wicker said, "Connecting more Mississippians to high-speed internet is essential to our state's economic future."⁶⁰

Another large project that C Spire has taken on is its new Tech Movement, which is an extension of the Fiber-to-the-Home effort that was launched in 2013. C Spire said

⁵⁹ "WIRELESS." C Spire. Accessed April 10, 2018. https://www.cspire.com/company_info/about/news_detail.jsp?entryId=27800002.

⁶⁰ Facebook.com/KendraAblaza. "Rural High-speed Internet: White House, State Lawmakers Push to Expand Access." Mississippi Today. January 10, 2018. Accessed April 24, 2018. <https://mississippitoday.org/2018/01/09/rural-high-speed-internet-white-house-state-lawmakers-push-to-expand-access/>.

that with this project, it plans to deliver broadband internet to 250,000 residents in underserved communities in Mississippi.⁶¹

The purpose of the movement is to, “transform the Magnolia state by making affordable, fiber-based broadband internet access widely available to businesses.”⁶²

Infrastructure and a more educated workforce were two buzzwords that circled the state legislature’s 133rd session this year.

According to the 2016 U.S. Census Bureau, only 21 percent of Mississippians have a bachelor’s degree or higher.⁶³

U.S. News says that Mississippi is ranked 25th in annual growth of young population, with 1.8 percent.⁶⁴

In order to bring larger companies to Mississippi, the state must have the infrastructure to support them. This includes quality roads but also quality workers.

At this year’s Mississippi Economic Council’s Capital Day, state officials listened to the concerns of members of the business world who want better infrastructure for the

⁶¹ "WIRELESS." C Spire. Accessed April 10, 2018. https://www.cspire.com/company_info/about/news_detail.jsp?entryId=27800002.

⁶² "WIRELESS." C Spire. Accessed April 10, 2018. http://www.cspire.com/company_info/about/news_detail.jsp?entryId=29800002.

⁶³ "QuickFacts." U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Mississippi. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/MS/INC110216>.

⁶⁴ "Where Does Mississippi Place in the U.S. News Best States Rankings?" U.S. News & World Report. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/mississippi>.

state. One of the key issues that the MEC pushes for is adequate, feasible transportation funding.⁶⁵

MEC Chairman William Yates said that 95.4 percent of the council said that they would be willing to help fix the state's infrastructure.

Just before Capital Day at the beginning on January, the Mississippi House of Representatives passed Bill 354 which set aside state funds to help repair roads and bridges in the state. However, at the end of March, the bill was discussed again and died in conference.

This issue is still plaguing the state and on April 10, Gov. Bryant ordered 83 bridges to close because the federal government said they were in bad shape.

Legislators and business leaders alike described the importance of an educated workforce to the future of the state of Mississippi.

"If we can't get the right workforce, our businesses will die," said Yates.

Secretary of State Delbert Hosemann shared findings from his nine-question survey that showed that 75 percent of 1,800 business in Mississippi found it difficult to assemble an educated workforce.⁶⁶

The educated workforce is an issue, similar to Medicaid, that linked to funding issues.

⁶⁵ "MEC 2018 Priority Issues." Mississippi Economic Council. Accessed April 10, 2018. <http://www.msmecc.com/mec-2018-priority-issues>.

⁶⁶ Bragg, Ko. "Businesses in Mississippi Need Educated Workforce." Businesses in Mississippi Need Educated Workforce | Jackson Free Press | Jackson, MS. Accessed April 10, 2018. <http://www.jacksonfreepress.com/news/2017/dec/28/businesses-mississippi-need-educated-workforce/>.

The state has been fighting a lack of funding of both K-12 schools with the Mississippi Adequate Education Program, or MAEP. MAEP was created in 1997 to help low performing schools and to even out the inequity of Mississippi's schools.⁶⁷

However, since its implementation, MAEP has only been fully funded twice.

During the 133rd session of the legislature, officials tried to come up an alternative to funding education in Mississippi with House Bill 957. The bill was proposed as a more efficient way to fund public education in Mississippi rather than work to allocate money towards the current program.

The bill died in disposition. However, strides to solve inequality in opportunity that Mississippi students are offered is still a pressing issue that many see as detrimental to the state.

"I think Mississippians have to be more honest with ourselves about the ways in which we are allowing some people to have more access to more opportunity and we have to follow that up with action," said Alex Martin. "I think the very first thing that we absolutely have to do is that we can't say that we're trying to fix racial or socioeconomic inequality in Mississippi or even just a complete lack of opportunity if we don't fully fund our schools...Every child in Mississippi should receive a good public-school education."⁶⁸

Other millennials agree that the problem has to be fixed in our K-12 schools.

⁶⁷ "Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP)." Msparentscampaign.org. Accessed April 10, 2018. <http://www.msparentscampaign.org/education-funding.html?id=34>.

⁶⁸ Martin, Alex. Personal Interview, February 12, 2018.

“I would definitely like to see our educational system improved, specifically public education,” said Terrence Johnson. “I think that it needs drastic funding. I think that a lot of funding should go to education, primarily because education is fundamental to any type of life that is thriving and successful.”⁶⁹

“I would love for the government leaders to make a commitment to something big, whether that is a big educational push or a big healthcare push,” said Miller Richmond. “Just something that says, ‘We recognize this problem in Mississippi. We realize we could be doing better. We believe in our people more and we would like to roll this out and try to see if we can improve this.’”⁷⁰

However, K-12 schools are not the only ones who faced hardship over not receiving adequate funding. Mississippi’s public universities are facing a funding cut that will likely hurt students in years to come.

Since 2016, public universities have lost \$106 million of their funding. According to the Daily Mississippian, the universities have received \$667 million before budget cuts in the 2018 fiscal year.⁷¹ In the coming year, the Joint Legislative Budget Committee’s recommendation is that universities receive a \$19 million cut next year, according to Mississippi Today.⁷²

⁶⁹ Johnson, Terrence. Personal Interview, February 13, 2018.

⁷⁰ Richmond, Miller. Personal Interview, February 21, 2018.

⁷¹ "University Lobbies State Legislature for Additional Funding." The Daily Mississippian. February 19, 2018. Accessed April 24, 2018. <http://thedmonline.com/university-lobbies-state-legislature-additional-funding/>.

⁷² Ganucheau, Adam, and Kayleigh Skinner. "University Presidents: Future of Mississippi Is at Stake." Mississippi Today. January 25, 2018. Accessed April 24, 2018. <https://mississippitoday.org/2018/01/22/university-presidents-future-of-mississippi-is-at-stake/>.

Mississippi university leaders have tried to combat this by lobbying for \$85 million more, saying that the future of our state is in jeopardy of losing this funding.

Raising tuition prices is an option that many schools are being forced to move towards, which is discouraging students from attending state schools and encouraging them to go where they are offered more money.

Educational incentives are one way that universities are getting students to stay in the state after graduating college.

One program designed to keep bright minds in the state is the Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Program, or METP, which had its inaugural class in 2013 with help from the Robert M. Hearin Support Foundation. METP is a collaboration between The University of Mississippi and Mississippi State University that recruits top performing students to teacher education programs with full scholarships and professional incentives.⁷³ The goal is to recruit these students to teach in Mississippi, and a requirement of the program is to teach in Mississippi for a minimum of five years after graduation. Each of the schools will accept up to 30 students per year.⁷⁴

METP student Sara Valentine said that she has learned a lot about education in Mississippi because of the program.

“If anything, I've learned so much more about education in Mississippi, how it ranges from places like Oxford to places in the Delta,” Valentine said. “Money is a big issue and so is the fact that most poor schools are predominantly black. Teachers are

⁷³ "About." Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Program | A Collaboration to Attract Top-performing Students. Accessed April 10, 2018. <http://metp.org/about/>.

⁷⁴ "Foundation News." The University of Mississippi Foundation. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://umfoundation.com/home/news.php?id=527>.

desperately needed in these schools and I've realized how passionate I really am about education in Mississippi.”⁷⁵

Valentine said that sometimes she's afraid that having to stay in the state after she graduates may hold her back from other opportunities, but that she hopes she will be able to make a difference.

Another large issue that Mississippi is facing is the large outmigration of young professionals in the medical profession.

According to the AAMC, in 2016 Mississippi had the lowest number of physicians per capita than anywhere else in the nation, with 186.1 physicians per every 100,000 people.⁷⁶

For thirty years or so, the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning (IHL) have offered incentives for medical and dental professionals to stay in the state after finishing school. These programs were called State Medical Education Forgivable Loan (MED) and State Dental Education Forgivable Loan (DENT).⁷⁷

Most recently, the state came up a solution to combat the outmigration of medical professionals with the Rural Physicians Scholarship Program that the Mississippi Legislature authorized in 2007.⁷⁸ The program would provide scholarships to Mississippi

⁷⁵ Valentine, Sarah. Personal Interview, April 3, 2018.

⁷⁶ *2017 State Physician Workforce Data Report*. PDF. Association of American Medical Colleges, November 2017. [https://members.aamc.org/eweb/upload/2017 State Physician Workforce Data Report.pdf](https://members.aamc.org/eweb/upload/2017%20State%20Physician%20Workforce%20Data%20Report.pdf)

⁷⁷ "State Medical Education Forgivable Loan (MED)." State Medical Education Forgivable Loan (MED) | RiseUp! Mississippi. Accessed April 24, 2018. <http://riseupms.com/state-aid/smel/>.

⁷⁸ "Mississippi Rural Physicians Scholarship Program Home." University of Mississippi Medical Center. Accessed April 10, 2018. [https://www.umc.edu/Office of Academic](https://www.umc.edu/Office%20of%20Academic)

residents who were willing to practice in underserved rural areas in the state for four years after graduation.⁷⁹

When the program started in 2008, 10 students were awarded \$30,000 to complete their medical school educations. The number doubled the next year and in 2016, 64 people were awarded the scholarship.

Rural Physician Program member Kaleb Barnes said that the program opened his eyes to the need for physicians in his own backyard.

“I have always wanted to leave Mississippi, but I also wanted to pursue a career in health care,” said Barnes. “Since my intent in pursuing a career in healthcare was based off of my desire to serve the sick, I think it would be selfish for me to leave a state that is in the middle of a health care crisis. I think this program has really opened my eyes to the great need for quality health care access in Mississippi...Through this program, I do believe I have gained a deeper love and appreciation for Mississippi.”⁸⁰

Rural Physician Program member Cal Wilkerson also said that the program has changed the way he looks at staying in the state to practice medicine.

“Coming from a rural place myself, there is also the sense of paying back Mississippi for the incredible opportunity it has given me to be a doctor,” Wilkerson said.

“I never really dreamed that I could be a doctor, coming from small town Woodville, [a

Affairs/For-Students/Academic Outreach Programs/Mississippi Rural Physicians Scholarship Program/Mississippi Rural Physicians Scholarship Program.html.

⁷⁹ "Rural Health Information Hub." Funding Details: Mississippi Rural Physicians Scholarship Program. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/funding/3324>.

⁸⁰ Barnes, Kaleb. Personal Interview, April 3, 2018.

town with a] population less than 1,000 people. To have not only this opportunity but also to get my tuition completely paid for is a double blessing and gives me a sense of loyalty and duty to stay in Mississippi that I might not otherwise have.”⁸¹

Some legislative proposals have been made to provide incentives to keep students who want to study fields other than medicine and education in the state after graduating.

Most recently, the legislature debated passing House Bill 1550, which would provide tax incentives for people in any background to stay in the state or move to the state for five years after graduating with a bachelor’s or professional degree.⁸²

However, the bill died in the Senate Finances committee and there are still no solutions for programs to keep people from all fields in the state on a large scale.

“I think one of the hardest parts of being from Mississippi is knowing that you are from Mississippi,” said Austin Powell, an ex-pat studying in England. “My friends and I always say, ‘comparison is the thief of joy’ and to know that there are better state governments providing better social goods like public schools, health care systems, etc., is discouraging. I wholeheartedly believe that Mississippi has more charisma and authenticity than a lot of other states, but the potential is lost when government officials have hidden agendas that impact our marginal communities and potential corporate partnerships.”⁸³

⁸¹ Wilkerson, Cal. Email Correspondence, April 5, 2018.

⁸² House Bill 1550, H.R. 1550, 133rd MS Leg., Lamar (2018).

⁸³ Powell, Austin. Personal Interview, March 16, 2018.

What Millennials want, Where They're going and why Mississippi is limited

A lot of the reason that millennials want to leave the state is to be in an urban environment that Mississippi does not have.

According to The Neilson Company, "Millennials are the social generation, both online and in-person. As the founders of the social media movement, they're never more than a few clicks away from friends and family. And offline, they prefer to live in dense, diverse urban villages where social interaction is just outside their front doors."⁸⁴

According to Rethink Mississippi, "only 46 percent of Mississippians live in an area with more than 50,000 residents, compared to 85 percent nationally and 75 percent in the Southeast. To put it in perspective, Jackson, which has a population of around 169,148 according to the 2016 census data⁸⁵, would only be the fifth-largest city in Alabama."⁸⁶

NPR said, "This may be the most 'bright lights, big city' generation in history."⁸⁷

⁸⁴ " ." Millennials Prefer Cities to Suburbs, Subways to Driveways. Accessed April 10, 2018. <http://www.nielsen.com/content/corporate/us/en/newswire/2014/millennials-prefer-cities-to-suburbs-subways-to-driveways.html>.

⁸⁵ "QuickFacts." U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Jackson City, Mississippi. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/jacksoncitymississippi/PST045217>.

⁸⁶ McGraw, Jake, Neil White, Jennifer Kirby-McLemore, Jackie Mader, and William Winter Institute. "This One Map Illustrates Mississippi's Greatest Challenge | Jake McGraw." Rethink Mississippi. June 26, 2015. Accessed April 10, 2018. <http://www.rethinkms.org/2013/11/11/this-one-map-illustrates-mississippis-biggest-challenge/>.

⁸⁷ Dure, Beau. "Millennials Continue Urbanization Of America, Leaving Small Towns." NPR. October 21, 2014. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/2014/10/21/357723069/millennials-continue-urbanization-of-america-leaving-small-towns>.

As of 2015, Mississippi had the fourth-largest rural population in the United States according to GenFKD⁸⁸, making the state less appealing to millennials who are looking for a place to go after graduating college.

According to AOL.com, “Other southern states, including Alabama and Arkansas, also saw millennial declines, but Mississippi's more than doubles Alabama's 1.8% decrease, making it the state with the most millennial flight.”⁸⁹

According to Governing, Washington D.C. has the highest percent of millennial population per capita in the U.S.⁹⁰

According to a study by Time magazine, the top 5 smaller cities that saw an increase in millennials from 2010-2015 were Virginia Beach-Norfolk-Newport News, VA-NC, Richmond, VA, Riverside-San Bernadino-Ontario, CA, Memphis, TN-MS-AR, and New Orleans-Metairie, LA.⁹¹

⁸⁸ "Millennials (Still) Don't Want To Live In Rural Areas." [FKD]. July 25, 2017. Accessed April 10, 2018. <http://www.genfkd.org/22691-2>.

⁸⁹ Huang, Chelsea. "Millennials Are Fleeing One Southern US State in Droves." AOL.com. July 13, 2017. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.aol.com/article/finance/2017/07/13/why-millennials-are-fleeing-mississippi-and-flocking-in-droves/23028461/>.

⁹⁰ "A State-by-State Look at Where Each Generation Lives." Governing Magazine: State and Local Government News for America's Leaders. Accessed April 10, 2018. <http://www.governing.com/topics/urban/gov-generational-population-data-maps-by-state.html>.

⁹¹ Johnson, David. "Millennials: See the Top 25 Cities Where They're Moving." Time. June 02, 2017. Accessed April 10, 2018. <http://time.com/4797956/cities-millennials-moving/>.

The economies of cities are often more capable to provide a greater number of jobs than rural communities.

According to US News, the top ten destinations that millennials are migrating to based off of economy opportunity in the United States are North Dakota, Rhode Island, Delaware, Colorado, Florida, Hawaii, Alaska, South Carolina, Washington and California.⁹²

Something that is particularly appealing to young people about large cities is the sense of immediacy.

For instance, a millennial may want to order something on Amazon and have it shipped to them in hours, but this feature is only available in certain larger cities such as Chicago, Nashville and Atlanta.

More than just material resources that larger cities with malls and chain stores offer, larger cities provide cultural opportunities that aren't available in rural areas.

"I love movies and art house cinema and it's not in Mississippi," said Petal native Allen Coon. "You have to travel to Memphis or wherever to go see certain kinds of films."⁹³

Urban Areas also have a great deal of restaurants and nightlife for young adults. There are only a handful of places to experience nightlife outside of Mississippi's college towns, especially in Jackson.

⁹² Leins, Casey. "Young People Are Moving to These 10 States." U.S. News & World Report. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/slideshows/young-people-are-moving-to-these-10-states>.

⁹³ Coon, Allen. Personal Interview, April 3, 2018.

In 2013, Wilson Hood opened up a bar called Fondren Public.⁹⁴

“The craft beer laws changed, and there was a lack of places I saw to hang out and a bar scene in Jackson...I think that people are just looking for places to hang out and I think more than anything, it’s a place to foster community.”

The Fondren area of Jackson has been a developing community that has provided a cultural hub for many young people in the city. There are coffee shops and boutique restaurants.

“Fondren Public was created from our love for a bar in Nashville called Twelve South Taproom, that almost single-handedly changed the twelve-south neighborhood in Nashville,” Hood said. “That bar and a coffee shop turned that [small, quiet area] into what’s now the highest demand, urban areas in all of Nashville.”

Hood has also had a number of business ideas be successful around the state, including South Depot Taco Shop that is a large landing spot for young people in the college town of Oxford.

“I’ve spent a lot of time in Nashville, Chattanooga, Atlanta, Birmingham and Little Rock and a lot of these places have a handful of neat, local restaurants and bars that people really like, so I think in a lot of ways I’ve drawn my inspiration and some of the concepts that have worked in these other markets around the southeast that are probably just a little bit ahead of Jackson culturally and in a lot of ways have just mimicked what has worked in those markets,” said Hood.

But, the reality is that Jackson will never be a Memphis, Nashville or Birmingham and Mississippi will continue to suffer from that.

⁹⁴ Hood, Wilson. Personal Interview, February 14, 2018.

“There’s not like night life,” said Coon. “There’s a certain kind of energy in urban communities. I always enjoyed those when I went to Atlanta, so that was probably the most glaring absence.”⁹⁵

Urban areas provide millennials with more diverse populations.

“I think there’s much more a diverse group of people that live here that I work with on a daily basis, mostly just culturally in general,” said Miller Richmond. “They come from all over the U.S. and different backgrounds...Particularly in D.C. I get to interact with people from all over the world all the time and I really appreciate that and I think that’s something that I didn’t realize that I appreciated as much as I did while growing up in Mississippi.”⁹⁶

Most larger more urban areas have funding to devote to certain resources.

“I’ve really enjoyed living in a place [D.C.] that has fully funded institutions, that where the community and tax-payers say, ‘All right, we believe in certain levels of public housing, we believe in certain levels of health care for children, we believe in making sure that no family has to sleep on the street at night,’” said Richmond.

In addition to wanting a more diverse culture and job opportunities, many millennials want to leave the state because they want to experience the rest of the world outside of the Mississippi bubble.

“I needed a bigger city, a more diverse environment, which are things I didn’t think I could find in Mississippi,” said Murray Miller, the ex-pat living in Madrid. “I

⁹⁵ Coon, Allen. Personal Interview, April 3, 2018.

⁹⁶ Richmond, Miller. Personal Interview, February 21, 2018.

needed a springboard, not a landing board, and that's how I viewed my home state – as a place to land when I was ready to be settled.”⁹⁷

Coon said that experiencing other places around the world was important to him.⁹⁸

“I do believe in the notion of global community and I do want to be able to call the world my home and move from place to place and experience other cultures and see what this big place has to offer, but I have to come back,” said Coon. “There's an obligation here and there's no reason that my home should be something that anyone should ever be ashamed of and too frequently I think we let our leaders make that the case.”

The state simply does not have the urban infrastructure to support millennials, which will continue to drive young people toward other states with more opportunities and resources.

⁹⁷ Miller, Murray. Personal Interview, April 5, 2018.

⁹⁸ Coon, Allen. Personal Interview, April 3, 2018.

Conclusion

Mississippi has a large brain drain problem. Young, educated people want to leave the state for a number of reasons, from lack of opportunity to a perception that state policies encourage discrimination.

Mississippi has to be honest with itself about the number of millennials leaving and how this is going to affect the economy and well-being of the state for years to come.

This thesis is not a solution to the problem of brain drain, but rather a challenge to people to think beyond the reasons on the surface of the issue and evaluate its many layers. The intent is that it would make people think and spark conversation that will hopefully lead to change and solutions.

It is my hope that this thesis made people think about the severity and rippling effects of the decisions our state legislature makes.

Perhaps the greatest finding of all in my exploration was that nearly every person that I spoke to desired deeply to return to the state and carried a sense of pride with them for being from the state.

That was a question that I really thought about myself, what is it about Mississippi that makes it so hard to love and so hard to walk away from?

Allen Coon posed a good reason. “It can be hard to stay here and I don’t blame people that want to leave, but for a lot of people, honestly, they can’t,” said Coon. “So, that’s a reason to stay because there are some people who will never have the opportunity to even leave even if they want to.”

Murray Miller did too. “I wanted to learn more about the world, meet people from other places, and live in a diverse environment so that I could bring that back to

Mississippi,” Miller said. “A well-rounded view of the world is incredibly valuable and important, and that is something that Mississippians could improve.”

“For any person who can learn how to breathe in Mississippi, because sometimes it is suffocating, they can exhale anywhere,” said Terrence Johnson. “That’s how I feel. I’ve learned how to take deep breaths and breathe here and from the experiences I’ve had, from the people I’ve met, from the things I’ve grown from, I know that I can exhale freely anywhere else.”

“Being ‘Mississippian’ is something that you carry with you wherever you go,” Miller said. “I feel like some people are ashamed of where they come from, but I am proud.”

“I want the world to know Mississippi for her positives: her kind people, her hospitality, her resilience and ability to get back up when knocked over, her universities that are educating young Mississippians to create a better future for the state, her culture, and her people,” Miller said.

This thesis shows the heart of an issue that many Mississippians are wrestling to combat, and I hope it makes people lean in and wonder what it is about the state that resonates.

This thesis revealed that people have a deep love for this place that does not always love in return. It also showed that young people who have left care deeply about the state and want to return to invest in it.

I found that Mississippi needs real solutions and people who are going to step up and lead, and that leaving the state for a while may be the best way they can do that for now.

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