

Utah is changing in demographics

I recently saw Pam Perlich give a presentation that every decision maker and opinion leader in the state should see. Perlich is a senior research economist at the Bureau of Economic and Business Research.

Her presentation was titled "Utah's Demographic Transformation: A View into the Future." In many ways Perlich's presentation looked like a typical economic presentation. It had a lot of charts and graphs and was based on statistical models. In other ways, it was an atypical economic presentation. It was easy to understand and it contained some important implications for policy makers. Here are some key findings from Perlich.

Utah, along with the rest of the country, is undergoing a dramatic demographic change. Native-born Utahns are getting older and living longer. During their childbearing years, they are having fewer children. This means that Utah's population is aging. You may find it interesting that the fastest-growing age group in Utah is 60

years and older. Soon, those 60 and older will outnumber Utah's school-age population.

This may come as a surprise because it certainly seems like there are lots of young people when you walk through a Wal-Mart or visit one of Utah's primary schools. Where are all these children coming from? A big part of the answer is immigrants.

In the prior century, the proportion of Utah's population composed of those classified as racial and ethnic minorities increased fivefold. This common classification considers all nonwhite populations and all Hispanic populations as minorities. This trend is especially pronounced among younger Utahns. Today, more than 30 percent of Salt Lake County residents under the age of 35 are classified as minorities.

If you look forward a generation or longer, what you see is a growing number of older, retired folks. You also see the proportion of the population in the workforce declining. This will be true across the nation and Utah will not escape the trend. The ratio of working-age population to retirement-age population will decline.

This means that those in the workforce are likely to carry a heavier tax burden than those of prior generations. Recent decisions being

made in Washington, D.C. are not going to alleviate this situation.

Will future generations of Utah workers be up to the task? There is cause for concern because of the changing demographics of Utah's labor force. More than 90 percent of native-born Utah females have a high-school degree. The number is only three-tenths of a percent less for males. Slightly more than 30 percent of native-born Utah males have earned a college degree. In contrast, well over a third of foreign-born Utahns do not have a high-school diploma.

This means that, with a few notable exceptions, Utah's foreign-born workers are disproportionately concentrated in low-wage jobs. Among the most popular jobs for foreign-born workers are: maids, fence erectors, sewing machine operators, packers, dishwashers and baggage porters. It almost reads like a list of job titles from the 19th century.

However, there are notable exceptions. Medical scientists, astronomers and physicists also top the list of Utah jobs held by foreign-born workers. Consider two specific examples. Utah's Nobel Prize-winning geneticist Mario Capecchi is a foreign-born worker. The chair of the Utah Science Technology and Research Initiative, Dinesh Patel, was born in Zambia, Africa. Patel is an entrepreneur who has founded more than 20 high-tech companies.

If Utah and the nation are going to be more dependent upon foreign-born workers, it should be apparent that everyone will be better off if more of these workers are scientists, engineers and entrepreneurs, and fewer of these workers are maids and dishwashers. It should also be apparent that the path to this result is paved by education. Utah needs to take steps to provide foreign-born residents, and especially their children, with the highest levels of education possible.

On occasion, dramatic changes strike unexpectedly. Yet, in most cases major demographic changes may be anticipated by those willing to examine the available information. Perlich has provided Utah policy-makers with the information. Those interested in Utah's future should take the time to consider the implications.

Top of Utah Voices



Michael Vaughan

■ Commentary

Michael Vaughan is Weber State University's provost. He accepts e-mail from readers at MVAUGHAN@Weber.edu