

Andy Larsen: Is Utah at risk of losing some of its smartest residents thanks to its lawmakers?

Surveys suggest fewer doctors, teachers, and students might choose to live in Utah, but the data is not wildly concerning — yet.

By Andy Larsen

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<https://www.sltrib.com/news/2024/02/10/andy-larsen-is-utah-risk-losing/> Gift

It's a phrase I've heard a few Utah lawmakers use over the years: the law of unintended consequences.

The idea is that the world is a complicated place, and that enacting restrictions on it tends to make something happen that you didn't expect to happen.

And I'm worried that we're going to see another one here. You see, over the past couple of years, Utah lawmakers have enacted a number of bills that I suspect will lead to a reduction in some high-quality minds either coming to or staying in our state.

In other words, I'm concerned we're going to see a brain drain. In the marketplace for students, teachers, doctors, and tech professionals, I think Utah's at risk of losing out. If you look really hard at the data, you can see a difference already — a trend that I think could expand over the coming years.

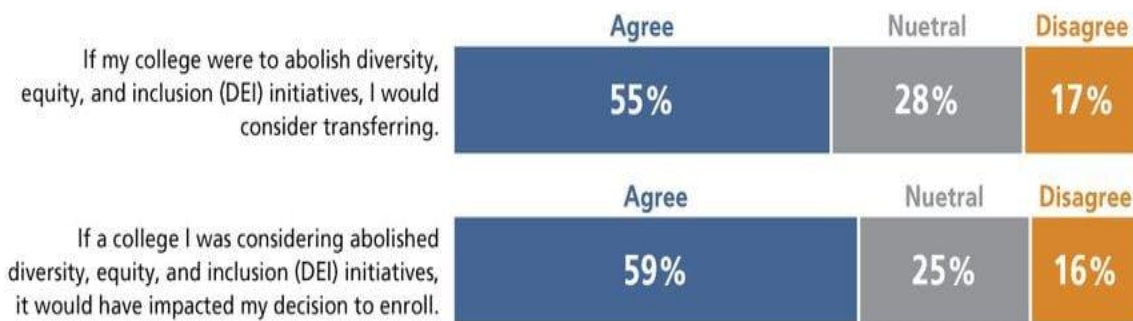
Let me show you what I mean.

Students

Of course, there's significant legislation that's passed that impacts the quality of education in Utah — [the voucher program](#) among the leaders there. But in particular, I've been thinking a lot about [the Legislature's recent passing](#) of the anti-DEI bill and its effect on Utah's colleges.

The survey data is pretty darn remarkable. Fully 59% of students interviewed in a BestColleges poll said that if a college they were considering had abolished DEI programs, it would have impacted their decision to enroll there. And 55% of college students said they would consider transferring if their current school abolished DEI.

How students would react to their institution abolishing DEI initiatives



Source: BestColleges.com

GRAPHIC BY CHRISTOPHER CHERRINGTON | *The Salt Lake Tribune*

(Christopher Cherrington | The Salt Lake Tribune)

Do I really expect Utah's colleges to lose half of their students overnight? I do not. Do I expect this decision to have an impact on the quality of the student body Utah colleges are able to attract and retain? I do. The University of [Utah](#) (accepting 90% of students) and [BYU](#) (accepting 66% of

students) for example, have already seen acceptance rates jump as they try to admit enough students to achieve their financial goals in a post-pandemic world. What happens when the number of students interested in joining those schools drops?

That's also notable because Utah already loses more college graduates than it produces. There's [a 19.6% gap](#) between the college graduates Utah produces at its colleges and the percentage of college graduates that live here, according to the Washington Post. Meanwhile, Colorado, New York, Washington, California, Illinois, Texas, Minnesota, and Massachusetts gain college students. Just over 25% of Utah college graduates choose to move elsewhere. Among Western states, California, Washington, Colorado, and Oregon [retain more of their graduates](#), while Arizona, Wyoming, Idaho, and New Mexico see more graduates leave.

Teachers

What about teachers? They're impacted by laws that interfere in the classroom, like [the proposed administrative rule](#) that prohibits teachers from including any lessons about diversity, equity, or inclusion. While Utah's banned book laws are already causing consternation, educators are especially concerned by [a proposed Utah law](#) that threatens to charge them if they find banned books in their classrooms.

Again, there really could be consequences. In [a survey of 2,000 teachers nationwide](#), 37% said they were more likely to leave their profession if "a push for laws that prevent honest teaching and conversations reaches their classrooms."

Those percentages rise within states that have already enacted some of the laws Utah is considering or has already passed. [One survey](#) interviewed professors in only four red states — Texas, North Carolina, Georgia, and Florida — that have passed significant education-related culture-war bills, and found that 31% said that they planned to seek employment in another state. In Florida, that was 47%.

Again, do I predict half of Florida teachers and professors to resign? Not really. But there is a real-world experiment that showed that this can be damaging.

When Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis took control of Sarasota's New College's board of trustees and began changing programs and policies there, Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts, offered an exchange program of sorts. They said students and teachers could transfer to Hampshire at the same tuition they were paying New College — 12% of students and 40 faculty members [made the move](#). New College's ranking fell from No. 76 in the U.S. to No. 100.

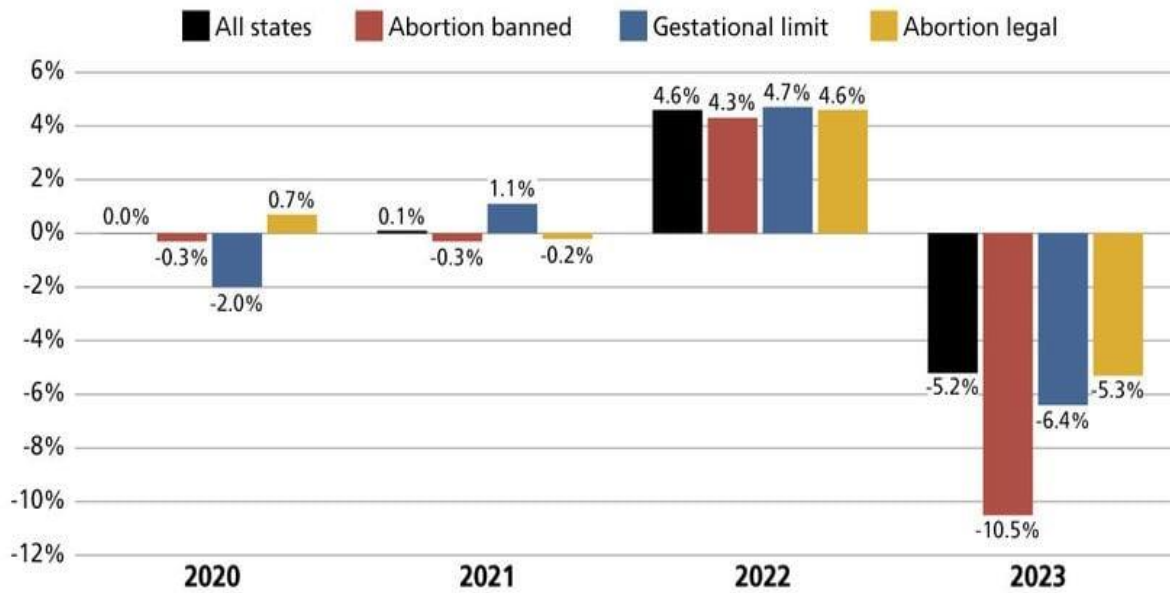
Doctors

My colleague Emily Anderson Stern had a great article on this already [in October](#), and I'd encourage you all to read it. Since the *Dobbs* Supreme Court decision, a significant number of OB-GYNs are avoiding abortion-restrictive states like Utah.

The percentages vary depending on the surveyed group. Stern's article details the research of OB-GYN Alex Woodcock, who surveyed 349 graduating obstetricians and gynecologists from training sites around the country. While that number doesn't sound like a huge sample size, it represents roughly a quarter of all graduating OB-GYN residents in the country overall, so it's an impressive get. She found that 17% of students changed where they applied as a result of state-by-state legislation.

And indeed, the number of MD senior applicants in OB-GYN fields fell in 2023 when compared to 2022 by about 10% in abortion-banned states.

Percent change in U.S. MD senior applicants from the previous application cycle by state abortion-ban status, by year



Source: The Association of American Medical Colleges

GRAPHIC BY CHRISTOPHER CHERRINGTON | The Salt Lake Tribune

(Christopher Cherrington | The Salt Lake Tribune)

We should note that Utah isn't included in the abortion-banned category, thanks to the current court stay of the trigger law that largely bans abortion in the state. Instead, it's currently categorized as a "gestational limit" state, where OB-GYN applications have fallen 6.4% nationwide. That being said, other states with abortion bans have had larger consequences. In Idaho, [a recent survey](#) of OB-GYNs said about 40% were considering leaving the state, [in Oklahoma](#), 75% said they were either planning to leave, considering leaving, or would leave if they could. The wording of that question does reveal a truth: there are a lot of doctors upset about the changes, but only a percentage of those are actually leaving.

This zooms in on OB-GYNs, though. What about doctors in general? Again, there's a gap in the survey results and applications so far — [one survey](#) of 2,000 current and future doctors saw 75% respond they wouldn't apply to work or train in states with abortion restrictions. But the Association of American Medical Colleges says it's seen a 3% decrease in residency applications overall in abortion-banned states, compared to a 2% decrease overall.

Utah does have a doctor shortage, though, so even individual percentage points matter. Utah has [the seventh-fewest physicians](#) of any state per capita.

Tech

There's less research here than in the other three categories above, but I did want to touch on Utah's tech industry given the influence it has on our state. In this category, there's not a ton of data that Utah's legislative choices are hampering growth. Indeed, the opposite, a ton of folks are moving to Utah and in particular Utah County for the tech industry.

But some notable voices within that industry note that Utah's legislative policies have had an impact on recruiting talent. For example, last June, Cloudflare CEO Matthew Prince said: "I think Utah has some real challenges, it's a place that I love, but also is a place that still has the highest LGBT teen suicide rates in the country, has an incredible challenge around some still very misogynistic practices, and can be in a very exclusionary place," he said. "For this to be a true tech hub, we absolutely need to put in place the infrastructure that supports a more diverse community and we do not have that."

It's a conversation I've had with Utah Jazz owner and Qualtrics founder Ryan Smith, who does acknowledge the gaps and has worked in his businesses to bring those diverse perspectives to Utah.

Business Insider interviewed women employed at tech companies at Silicon Slopes and found that Utah in terms of culture and legislative choices made for tough sledding in the workplace. "Laws to promote more opportunities for women have been diminished because of that focus on how women should focus more on families rather than careers," Robbyn Scribner, a cofounder of Tech-Moms, a group that helps women move into the tech industry, said.

Utah has bottom-in-nation gender gaps in educational attainment and salary equality.

One has to wonder: if those gaps didn't exist, and more people found Utah welcoming, what more could Utah's tech scene accomplish?

Final thoughts

I conclude the column with a look at the tech scene because I think it's a bit of a microcosm of the whole state. To be sure, far more people are migrating to Utah than away from it. Even when you look at just those with Bachelor degrees or above in Utah, as I did when I examined the most recent Census estimates from 2022, the numbers are well short of terrifying — Utah gained 37,345 degree-holders but lost 37,848, a difference of just 503 people.

It's within the rounding error, frankly. The differences in doctors, teachers, and students are more stark, but not wildly concerning at this point.

Yet.

What I'm concerned about is that as we get more recent data, and as we see more stringent legislation become law in Utah, the beginnings of a trend will become a landslide. That those surveys of a huge plurality of students, teachers, and doctors who are considering moving will actually do so, or just avoid Utah in the first place.

And that would be a real shame. That would hurt those of us who live here, love this state, and want the best for it. We need great students, teachers, doctors, and working professionals to make the most of our potential, to deliver what Utah can promise in terms of quality of life for decades to come.

That's at risk if we lose some percentage of our best and brightest. Yes, even if they're liberals. To the extent that we can, we should make Utah a welcoming place for all of the big brains we can hold.

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