

Panel discusses student internship opportunities in Bennington County

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BENNINGTON -- Four panelists fielded questions and addressed concerns regarding internship opportunities at a panel discussion and forum at the Community College of Vermont on Monday morning.

The panel was sponsored by the Bennington County Industrial Corporation's Workforce and Education Committee and the Bennington Economic Development Partners. The four panelists, who came to Bennington from across the state, were Jan Coplan, coordinator of the Windham Higher Education Cooperative; Kevin Dailey, director of human resources at Mack Molding in Arlington; Michele Kupersmith, a former state representative who currently serves on the Workforce Investment Board in the Vermont Department of Labor; and Roxanne Vought, program manager of the Vermont Intern Program.



Bill Colvin of the BCRC, Roxanne Vought of the Vermont Intern Program, Jan Coplan of the Windham Higher Education Cooperative Internship Program, Michele

The panel was moderated by Bill Colvin of the Bennington County Regional Commission. BCIC's Workforce and Education committee, with support from the BCRC, has been preparing an evaluation report of internship opportunities in Bennington County, a draft of which was passed out to attendees before the discussion officially got underway. Colvin said that the draft would likely be finalized after Monday's discussion. The goal of the report, which contains an overview of opportunities and potential partnerships, local and national internship data, precedents and best practices, findings and recommendations, and a 2015 work plan for the committee, is to eventually establish a Comprehensive Internship Program in Bennington.

"I very much believe internships are a key piece of workforce development for this state," said Kupersmith during the introductions, "We need internship activity to be heavily embedded into school activities, at every level -- elementary, high school, and college."

The audience was made up of representatives from local businesses, the Southwest Vermont Supervisory Union, Bennington College, Southern Vermont College, CCV, and the state legislature.

Dailey spoke at length about Mack Molding's three-year-old internship program, which he lauded as a great success. "We've been pleasantly surprised at how much they add value out of the gate," he said, noting that many have come back for second or third summers with the company. "What started as just three students," he said, "when you provide meaningful opportunities, they go back to school and they talk, and the next year we have more interns." Twenty students participated in the program this summer, and Dailey said that he felt similar programs could work in smaller companies. "They do add value," he said, "We spent over \$100,000 on interns this summer, but I believe we got that value back, and I hope we'll continue to get that back in the future through hiring."

The panel and audience were largely in agreement that organizations, such as the WHEC, which works with six colleges in Windham County to connect local businesses to students who are interested in interning with them, are very useful, especially for businesses who don't have experience with internship programs, and could play a large role in expanding the opportunities for internships in Bennington. Frank Barnes, director of technology education at the SVSU, asked the panel where the money for internship

Coplan explained that her organization, which was founded in February, is grant funded, but hopes to eventually be paid for by the businesses and colleges that take advantage of their programs. Pownal and Woodford representative Bill Botzow said that all state funding sources for internship programs are being level funded or are shrinking at this point, meaning that funding for a new program in Bennington could be hard to come by. Barnes said that he loved the ideas that he had heard so far, and supported them, but expressed concern that the high school, with the increased focus in coming years on personal learning plans for students, which include internships, could bear the brunt of the costs.

The panel did caution local businesses about unpaid internships. "It's a little bit of a slippery slope, nowadays, if you don't pay your interns," said Dailey.

"A little bit of a slippery slope?" interjected Kupersmith, "It's a very slippery slope."

"Pay your interns," Dailey amended his comment.

Coplan, at the end of the discussion, put forth the idea that the entire educational culture in Vermont needs to change, to convince more students to stay in the state after graduation, and that positive internships were a way to do that. "This is a problem in the state of Vermont," she said, "where students come here for college then leave, or students who grow up here, graduate, and say, 'I've gotta get out of here, I've gotta leave.'"

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