

# Bitterroot College hosts workforce meeting

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Pilot projects, apprenticeships, certification training and specific education were a few of the ideas produced by area business owners who meet at the Bitterroot College Monday.

They shared their need for quality employees and discussed their frustrations in recruiting and retaining them with leaders from the Montana University System (MUS), the Montana Department of Labor & Industry (MTDLI) and the Montana Legislature. The focus group meeting “Partnering to Build a Better Workforce in the Bitterroot” is just one collaborative meeting being held across Montana.

In Hamilton, participants discussed how local and state education, government and business partners can develop pre-apprenticeships, apprenticeships and customized education programs to meet workforce development needs in the Bitterroot Valley.

“As Montana employers continue to struggle with significant workforce supply and skill gaps, there is an urgent need for new and innovative partnership approaches to address these growing labor force challenges,” said Roch Turner, director of program development at the Bitterroot College.

Clayton Christian, commissioner of higher education in Montana, said at every focus group meeting that he has attended businesses owners tell him they need more apprenticeships and internships.

“Internship opportunities create a lot of street smarts that’s hard to replicate in the classroom,” he said.

Christian said the Department of Labor and Higher Education collaborated to create a position to work for both and bring about stronger communication, a step that has received national recognition.

Kirk Lacy is the Montana Director for Industry Driven Workforce Development Partnerships.

“We need to focus on what are the workforce needs in the Bitterroot and collaborate,” he said. “We’re here to discuss how to build a better workforce and how do we partner together? There is a growing sense of urgency.”

Lacy said the challenges including finding skilled workers to help businesses grow and expand.

“The significant projections show extensive workforce shortages across industries throughout Montana,” he said. “We want to approach that challenge in a different way. We want to indentify tangible actions that we can take in partnership.”

Lacy promoted career readiness by a “Cream of the Crop” model where there are employer partners and apprentice sponsors, structured on-the-job training, related instruction, rewards for skill gains and state and national professional credentials.

Lacy also presented a work based learning career readiness ladder where at level one there is career awareness brought about by workplace tours, guest speakers to classrooms, career fairs and field trips. Level two has career exploration with job shadowing, career research, interviews and career interest assessment. Level three is career preparation with pre-apprenticeship, service learning/group project, class integrated internship and student-run enterprise. Level four is career training with apprenticeship, paid internships, on-the-job training, incumbent worker training and clinical experience.

Lacy said this career ladder can be one path to “build a career pipeline” by using the different suggestions and strategies.

“This instruction process goes from ground zero to highly proficient in that career occupation,” he said. “Incremental wage increases happen when employees gain knowledge and time on-the-job. It is an incentive program to provide skills and build quality employees.”

Local business owners shared the successful steps they have taken to recruit, train and retain quality workers.

DJ Lengyel, owner of DJ's electric, said his company has relied on the apprenticeship program since 1994 and has trained over 20 apprentices.

"I was against it initially," he said. "I changed my tune when I realized we could get quality people. Today if we put an ad in the paper for electrical contractors, we get no response. But, if we put an ad for apprentices we get dozens of responses. It lets us choose the crème of the crop."

Lengyel said his employees are paid to learn, earn quality wages and receive great benefits.

"My advice is that the return on investment is huge," he said. "We keep employees, they earn while they learning without amassing a huge college debt and it benefits the local economy."

Lengyel said employees work their way up in the electrical trade earning a larger paycheck.

Dual credit, early college, dual enrollment and certification programs like welding, culinary arts, medical tech, pharmacy tech and certified nursing assistant are great responses to schools listening to the labor industry and responding to their needs.

Lacy encouraged intrigued business to try new methods and continue expressing concerns.

"If you have a workforce need and are looking to try something different contact me," he said.

Reach Dr. Kirk Lacy at [klacy@mt.gov](mailto:klacy@mt.gov) or call 406-850-1405.

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