

FOLLOWING 'GPS2SUCCESS'

Event Assists Students, 'Mismatched' Professionals

Everyone loves a one-stop shop. And that doesn't exclude a career fair bursting with regional job opportunities and career paths.

A partnership among various players – including county school corporations – gave Kosciusko County and the surrounding region such an event earlier this year.

Driven by the Kosciusko Chamber of Commerce, the Kosciusko Leadership Academy (KLA) and the local WorkOne, the GPS2Success program took place in April with nearly 4,000 people in attendance and almost 60 employers involved, according to chamber president and CEO Mark Dobson.

Dobson explains that the organization piloted a similar program in 2014 with Warsaw Community School Corporation, with about 700 students taking part. He called the event "hugely successful," noting about 20 companies made hires and seven colleges were in attendance.

But getting the other school districts involved and working in conjunction with the KLA for 2015 took the program to the next level.

"Because we are a county-wide chamber, we wanted to expand this in 2015. Our local leadership academy was doing a white paper on this issue, and we added them into the mix and all the school districts in Kosciusko County," Dobson explains.

Colleges and universities, employers, military and Indiana State Police representatives were on hand to help students – and later in the day, the general public – learn about the various career options and job opportunities available in the region.

Nicole Sherrill, senior specialist of surgeon communications for Zimmer and a member of the KLA, shares that the KLA class was targeting the county's 4.8% unemployment rate and came up with the idea of "matching mismatched job opportunities."

"We were seeing that individuals are going into entry-level job positions – because that's all that's out there or all they're familiar with – but in reality, all that position (requires) is maybe a high school degree, but they've got a four-year degree from IU and a



Kosciusko County students and the general public had access to nearly 60 employers, higher education institutions and Armed Services representatives at the GPS2Success career fair. The annual event, with almost 4,000 in attendance in 2015, is expected to continue to grow.



focus on marketing and they're doing data entry," she emphasizes. "That's where we're trying to match up the employer with the employees in our community and surrounding counties, to (show) how great of an area Kosciusko County truly is."

A change of direction

Dobson explains that one of the county's biggest workforce challenges is "we have more jobs here than demographics can support."

"It isn't like Indianapolis with a huge population, where you can support the industry in Indianapolis; Lafayette – a similar thing. The number of jobs in this area exceeds the available workforce because of the size. It's about attracting and keeping the workforce here. This is the kind of economy that you can reasonably attain a head of household income with a high school degree and some level of advanced training," he offers.

Sherrill asserts that just pushing a four-

year degree isn't always the answer, and the GPS2Success program shows students and adults alike some of the various opportunities available in their own backyard.

"Unfortunately, college isn't for everyone. A lot of students get the push of college, college, college, you have to go to college – there are no other options out there. But you can get a decent job without having to go to college right after high school," she says. "Not every job does require a four-year degree."

Some companies attended the career fair to showcase possible career paths – even if they didn't have job openings or hire high school students. She explains that Zimmer, for example, was at GPS2Success to demonstrate what the orthopedic industry and the company have to offer those juniors and seniors when thinking about future career paths.

"It was valuable and beneficial for the students, even if (a company) wasn't hiring and was just there for informative purposes only. (To show) this is the education path I need to take, the career experience I need to take to get into a place like Zimmer or DePuy," she adds.

One tool for students was an app called Guidebook, which the KLA team created to target the "tech savvy" students and assist them in preparing for the career fair. Students could access information on the companies that were attending the fair, as well as resumé-writing tips, job postings and more.

Sherrill acknowledges that the app wasn't utilized as much as the organizers had intended but they would continue to push it for the 2016

GPS2Success. Work has already begun on organizing the next fair.

Minor roadblock

GPS2Success was also open at night to the general public (during the daytime hours, it was limited to students). Dobson and Sherrill say the evening attendance was disappointing.

"We had an excellent turnout for juniors and seniors. But the public was significantly lower. But moving forward, the biggest thing we can do is networking and advertising months in advance; getting it on billboards, over the radio," Sherrill states.

She gave an example of a success from the general public portion of the event, explaining how a recent Ivy Tech graduate was interviewed on the spot by a medical device manufacturing company and was ultimately hired. The company representative informed Sherrill that he'd had five employees in one month that were mismatched for that job opening.

Dobson highlighted the post-event surveys.

"The early indications were all very positive. Some employers felt they needed to elevate the level of engagement they had; they learned they needed to provide more information," he says.

"It's a unique delivery method. It's responding to the students' needs and trying to meet them where they are. I think this will be a hugely successful event for the next several years."

RESOURCES: Mark Dobson, Kosciusko Chamber of Commerce, at www.kchamber.com | Nicole Sherrill, Zimmer, at www.zimmer.com