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FEATURED   EDITOR'S PICK

Education, workforce subcommittee peers ahead to future

By Steve Keenan The Register-Herald
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BECKLEY — As workforce needs sometimes shift in an economy that continues to evolve, people behind the scenes must assess trends and opportunities and plan for the future.

That includes employers, educational leaders and economic development and research experts.

The New River Gorge Regional Development Authority on Tuesday hosted a working group session of the NRGRDA Higher Education and Workforce Subcommittee at the Beckley-Raleigh County Convention Center. The session's aim was to help researchers and economic development leaders match workforce skills with employer needs throughout the southern West Virginia region.

According to Jina Belcher, executive director of the NRGRDA, the focus of the workforce skills development project centers on the counties served by her organization — Raleigh, Nicholas, Summers and Fayette. Among those participating Tuesday were representatives of educational institutions serving southern West Virginia, in addition to employers and organizations who support full employment in the region.

Led by West Virginia University and Carnegie Mellon University — with support from NRGRDA, West Virginia State University's Economic Development Center, the TEAM Consortium and IN-2-Market — a data-driven tool is being created to identify the skills Appalachian workers already possess, match those skills to good-paying, future-focused jobs in the region and pinpoint training and education needed to fill skill gaps.

The research is funded by the Appalachian Regional Commission's ARISE planning grant: "Data-Driven Approaches to Support Workforce Skills Matching and Resilient Careers in Appalachia." Additionally, the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation provided funding.

Among the goals of the subcommittee are:

• Strengthen communications and collaboration among partners in PreK-12 education, higher education, economic development and private industry

• Promote opportunities for young people that allow them to remain in the region

• Support programs which promote confidence and perseverance at young ages

• Address gaps to help students and families understand more about what career pathways are available and affordable.

On Tuesday, Belcher said the project was kick-started around the time of the designation of the New River Gorge National Park and Preserve. The NRGRDA was challenged by U.S. Sen. Shelley Moore Capito and then-Sen. Joe Manchin to "work together to figure out how to elevate infrastructure and quality of place in the New River Gorge region," said Belcher. Funding was committed to create a working group concept involving subcommittees focusing on various concepts, she said.

The higher education and workforce subcommittee was one of the early projects targeted, said Belcher, who commended Lauren Weatherford, an extension agent for Fayette and Nicholas counties for WVU Extension (also represented in the project by Daniel Eades), for spearheading that working group. That included discussions which broached the possibility of implementing a tool to help higher education and workforce partners understand how skills match in a region toward achieving economic development goals, Belcher said.

"We cannot emphasize enough how important this research is to our current and future efforts to educate, train, retrain and retain the workforce needed to enhance our community and economic development efforts," Belcher said in a press release ahead of Tuesday's gathering.

Highlighting the Tuesday discussion was a presentation by Dr. Heather Stephens, director and professor of the Regional Research Institute at WVU, who presented the project's findings and discussed how the research tool could assist communities, employers and educators in their mission to connect workers to career opportunities.

"The goal of this project is to match occupations based on the skills, ability and knowledge associated with each occupation to develop a tool to help support workforce transitions and economic development strategies focusing on West Virginia's New River Gorge region, including Fayette, Nicholas, Raleigh and Summers counties," Stephens said.

Caroline Welter, graduate research assistant at the RRI and a Ph.D. candidate in the WVU Department of Economics, delivered the presentation with Stephens.

Stephens thanked funders for making the project possible, and she said it has evolved to the phase "where we have some results."

In addition to working with the NRGRDA directly and with partners such as West Virginia State University and Workforce WV Region 1, WVU officials are engaging with the New River Gorge Regional Working Group Higher Education and Workforce Subcommittee, Stephens said. Through the ARC funding, the team is also working with Carnegie Mellon University and partners in southwest Pennsylvania.

From a research standpoint, she said, "We're creating matches between occupations based on occupation skills and creating what we're calling similarity scores. How similar are two occupations? Thinking about these as source occupations to destination occupations."

Providing a hypothetical scenario in her case as a university professor, for example, Stephens queried, "What could I do if I leave my job? What other occupation could I transition into easily" based on her skills, ability and other factors?

In response to a question from the audience, Stephens said the research tool will include a filter that accounts for job loss when it comes to transitioning into a target occupation. "We're trying to develop something that can be used in a lot of different ways, and make it relatively simple," she said.

Answering another question, Stephens said the ideas include identifying individuals who have been misplaced from their job or are currently working and might be in the process of — or at least amenable to — transitioning to another career.

The tool might also be able to help identify what might or might not be a good fit career-wise for a student preparing to enter the workforce, she noted.

Among the industry sectors featured in the mock-ups presented Tuesday were aerospace products and parts manufacturing and wood products.

While industry goals were a big part of the equation, Stephens also said the research includes focus on individual job opportunities. For example, she discussed seasonal work in the region, such as in the tourism-related economy.

"Are there ways for us to help people who work in the seasonal occupations find jobs that are more permanent or year-round or, even maybe more important, capture some people that come and work here seasonally by helping them find jobs they can do in the offseason or that would keep them here permanent?" Stephens asked.

The workforce participation rate is always a consideration, Stephens stressed. "We have a really low labor force participation rate in the state and in some of the counties in this region, and we need to think about careers (people may not have considered in the past)," she said.

"We see this tool as being used in two main ways: 1) To support regional economic development strategy. By linking potential industries and the occupations in those industries, the tool could identify what current workers or recently displaced workers might be in the region who could relatively easily transition into those new jobs. 2) To support individual job transitions or return to the labor force. Displaced workers, seasonal employees or those simply looking to change jobs can use this information to explore other occupations with similar skills to which they might transition without requiring extensive retraining. It also enables these workers to think outside the box about the possible jobs they are qualified to do."

The ultimate goal, Stephens said, is "to provide practical guidance to both individual job seekers and regional economic development authorities by leveraging existing worker skills to support emerging opportunities and attracting potential business investors into the region. However, the skills matching tool is only one tool in the toolbox that will be needed to support these transitions."

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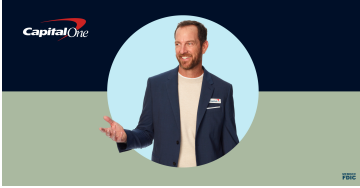
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