**Listening Session – Business and Economic Development**

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**American Indian Resource Center, Bemidji State University**

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**TOPIC:** What has been your experience in hiring BSU and NTC graduates?

* We have had a string of interns over the past few years, and they were in general well spoken, self-led and disciplined. “We offered two of them permanent jobs, “but they had opportunities they wanted to pursue before settling in Bemidji. … With some people, it’s hard to keep them down on the farm.” (Ryan Zemek, economic development director, Headwaters Regional Development Commission)
* We had an intern who was going to stay on with us as a permanent hire, but when he finished the internship, he had job offers at accounting firms elsewhere in the United States. He wanted to do some traveling. It can be hard to keep talented interns. “At some point I hope comes back. We stay in touch with him.” (Leon Kremeier, area manager, Ottertail Power Co., Bemidji)
* Most of the graduates we hire start at our call center. We have definitely been happy with the majority of people we have hired. We are open to a variety of majors and do not look for a certain GPA. We look for students are involved in a lot of activities, even if they have a slightly lower GPA, because they were active in leadership, sports teams or academic clubs and still were able to excel at a fairly high rate. Probably the biggest challenge are the people skills – it’s not necessarily BSU but more of a generational stereotype of thing, with a lack of work ethic and people skills. Another challenge has been keeping people in the Bemidji area because a lot of BSU graduates are from the Twin Cities. “They start in entry-level jobs and they want to move to the Metro. It’s a community challenge keeping people here who aren’t from the area. They’re in a hurry to make a change after three months.” (Corey Rupp, vice president of lending, Affinity Plus Federal Credit Union, Bemidji)
* We hire graduates from BSU because we believe they are more likely to stay in the area. “BSU has provided us with excellent students. They are tech savvy, amazingly so it seems, the way they pick things up. They are generally, to some extent, well prepared.” We have seen a change in that the accounting graduates are less focused on earning their CPA. When I went to school there was a focus on taking and passing the CPA exam, and that’s much less true today. “That’s important to us because we’re looking for CPAs. If someone comes out of an accounting program and doesn’t take the CPA exam, they can’t stay with the firm long-term.” It’s harder to get graduates to take the exam once they’re out of college because of the time needed to prepare for the exam. So there are both fewer who take the exam and fewer who pass it. “Otherwise, the quality of the students has been excellent. “We hire good students, so they’re intelligent people, and they learn fast and are prepared, and they have the accounting knowledge that we expect. (Glen Lindseth, retired president Miller MacDonald accounting firm, Bemidji)
* The interns I hired needed a little more direction than I thought they would. “In some ways I was surprised they knew so much about everything but sometimes not the small, little basics” such as how to write proper letters. It would appear they are not learning business etiquette, such as when they need to write structured letters to a vendor rather than sending an email. (Jennifer Johnson, owner, The Skin Company & Spa, Bemidji)
* We also did not have the greatest experience in the intern we had. It would help if they had guidance on how to be more goal-oriented and have better time-management skills. “We can’t always be there.” (Roy Harvey III, chief operations officer, Red Lake Inc.)
* When students (or new graduates?) are in the workplace, they’re used to having tasks set for them. They’re not self-led. (Justin Beaulieu, CEO/COO, Ogaakaaning Enterprises/Red Lake Gaming Enterprises)
* The biggest gap we see is in the graduates’ level of management skills. “We have to rely on their natural ability to be leaders and managers, rather than having background and training in that area. … We are not are not as satisfied about the management skills of the (BSU graduates) as we would like to be.” (Hugh Welle, vice president, First National Bank, Bemidji)
* The Bemidji area is in the biggest workforce crunch I’ve seen. Companies want to hire for character, and they’ll provide training for the skills if necessary. “It is a community issue of keeping talent here. There is a role that BSU and NTC can play.” I have seen that BSU students really aren’t aware of what local businesses are here. “There could be a more concerted effort by BSU and NTC faculty to get students out into the community. I’d be willing to be helpful with that.” He cited MARS as a program that has made a “significant move” in that direction. “The more you can do that as faculty, the better it is for our community.” (Dave Hengel, executive director, Greater Bemidji)

**TOPIC:** How do BSU and NTC contribute to the well-being of the community?

* A major way the university contributes to the university is through the performing arts and athletics that serve as forms of entertainment and activity for the community. I realize that the cost of athletics is a “tough question for some faculty members, but I can tell you it is of huge significance to me and what we do to promote the community.” Also, don’t lose sight of the importance of providing talent to the region when we need it bad. “I’m not sure what the community would look like without the university. It would be hard to have economic development activity without the university. The university is one of the critical partners in being able to pilot things when we call on them, such as the possibility of establishing a “maker space” on the campus. “That’s one that could play a pretty significant role in terms of piloting things and trying things that are different.” Specifically mentions MARS in the Mayflower Building and adds that at the Launchpad space in the Mayflower, “young entrepreneurs love to connect with students. The university is also an important partner in terms of how we promote the region and the community. “We cannot be super successful without the university being successful. We are hand in glove, if you will, in terms of the future.”(Dave Hengel, Greater Bemidji)
* Having BSU is what sets us apart from other regional centers in Minnesota such as Alexandria and Fergus Falls. (Ryan Zemek, Headwaters Regional Development)

**TOPIC:** What more can BSU and NTC do to benefit and support the Bemidji-area community?

* The college and university can do more to learn more about the opportunities in the communities and match graduates to those positions. We have jobs that are going without applicants. (Roy Harvey III, Red Lake Inc.)
* Encourage awareness of opportunities beyond Bemidji in the surrounding communities, such as Park Rapids. “I hear from a lot of those communities. They’re trying to figure out how to survive in a world where distance has been them at a disadvantage. … How can BSU and NTC be the region’s school and not just the Bemidji school? I don’t have all the answers, but it’s a question that needs to be explored.” (Ryan Zemek, Headwaters Regional Development)
* I appreciate that BSU leadership continues to be at the table in terms of local business. Keep doing that. (Dave Hengel, Greater Bemidji)
* We strongly support employees being involved in nonprofit organizations that are working to solve community problems and help neighbors who are less fortunate. Given the size of its workforce and their relatively higher than average wages, “I think the university (and its employees) could be more active in that area” of civic involvement. (Hugh Welle, First National Bank)
* BSU people could do a better job of understanding what the community’s needs are and how they can apply their different skills to issues. (Ryan Zemek, Headwaters Regional Development)
* I’d also like to see students become more involved in the community, not just BSU as an institution, because it can help them develop people skills, charisma and character. (Jennifer Johnson, The Skin Company & Spa)
* We have seen over the past several years more cooperation and involvement from faculty, not just Career Services, so when we bring up challenges we can go to BSU for help. But would also like to have more contacts and stronger relationships with faculty so we know who to reach out to when we are looking to fill a particular job with someone who is well qualified. Maybe there could be some kind of “lunch and learn” or open house event where business people could get more acquainted with faculty. (Corey Rapp, Affiniity Plus Federal Credit Union)
* Echoing the point, it would be helpful for businesses to have a clearer picture of whom they should call if they need to access university talent or resources. (Dave Hengel, Greater Bemidji)
* Echoing the point, if you don’t already know someone at BSU to call, it’s pretty unclelar where you should start. (Ryan Zemek, Headwaters Regional Development)
* Recommend BSU and NTC have periodic meetings between faculty and corresponding industries and employers so they can share feedback on what employers are really looking for in prospective hires. This is especially important at NTC because so much of the workforce skills gap “is in their wheelhouse” – “maintaining those industry groups in those areas, in those trades, is crucial to keeping those programs on target for what industry needs. ... If a program’s not relevant, it’s not going to succeed. It’s all about training people where the needs are.” (Glen Lindseth, Miller MacDonald accounting)
* Am surprised that NTC doesn’t have more of an impact in addressing the regional workforce shortage and needs. The bank works with a number of business owners who say they can’t find enough skilled employees and are forced to hire people with less than desirable backgrounds. In such things as truck driving or carpentry skills, “it seems like the college is the answer, and yet it hasn’t been. I don’t know if there’s an image issue. I do know that when the carpentry program was in place, they were not willing to teach students how to use the newest equipment because they didn’t have access to the newest equipment.” (Hugh Welle, First National Bank)
* Long course blocks at NTC, versus shorter and more frequent courses, don’t promote good workplace habits because they lack regular structure. At NTC, “classrooms are sitting empty about 90 percent of the time. You walk through there, and if you’re a traditional student, you get a weird feeling when you walk through the building.” (Notes unclear on who said this)
* NTC needs to do a better job of making sure students have the right equipment to teach students. They also need to provide good structure and emphasize the career and pay opportunities that are available to students when they graduate. When programs are relevant and students are in the building, you can develop a “sense of vibrancy.” Cites the Northland Community and Technical College aviation program in Thief River Falls as an example of one that works. Students, teachers and employers are all enthusiastic. “I think that’s missing at NTC.” (Bill Batchelder)
* “I see a vision of the technical college that’s a job center. I think people will go to technical college as a job center, as an entry point to get a real job.” I can think of many companies and employers, from manufacturing to trades to health care, that have hiring needs and would endorse that idea. The high school academies approach can be a great thing for the technical college, and it’s moving in that direction. “The vision is pretty clear of what could happen, from my perspective.” (Dave Hengel, Greater Bemidji)
* As an example of unmet workforce need, Ottertail has a chronic shortage of linemen. (Glenn Kremeier, Ottetail Power)
* Part of the challenge is in reaching out to students and helping them be prepared for opportunities that are here. “You need to look at the fact that 22 percent are under the poverty level and another 26 percent are right at the poverty level (?), and they don’t’ have the normal life skills. Mentions Boys & Girls Club as one place that children are beginning to develop a skill set so they can grow up and provide for themselves. “Red Lake has similar issues. It’s hard to get kids to go to college. They don’t have family members who are going to college, so they don’t have that as a goal.” (Justin Beaulieu, Ogaakaaning Enterprises/Red Lake Gaming Enterprises)
* Believe that of all the Minnesota State universities, BSU has the biggest percentage of first-generation college students. It seems that BSU could be building connections with students in lower-income communities. In places like Park Rapids, Mahnomen and agley, what are the needs for the workforce there? It’s not only a matter of reaching out and encouraging kids to learn a trade at NTC. “There also a huge preference there of kids who want to go to BSU, whose relatives went to BSU.” (Ryan Zemek, Headwaters Regional Development)
* As the workforce gets older, and baby boomers transition into retirement, we need to get more people trained to fill those roles. We need to create college programs in things that students may be excited about, such as walleye and forestry, focusing on the things we already have going, but also in such areas as computer circuity and computer programming that will bring more dollar into the region. (Roy Harvey III, Red Lake, Inc.)
* Following up, there are entrepreneurs who get together every Wednesday at the Launchpad space in the Mayflower Building. Most are BSU grads, and most are graduates of the industrial technology program. “We should be asking, what is it those students learned in industrial technology that leads them to start businesses, and are there things we can do, such as creating a fabrication maker lab, that people can do together that will encourage that activity.” (Dave Hengel, Greater Bemidji)
* Unclear if this was in specific reference to BSU or NTC, but notes that the university (and college) can probably do more to reach out to local businesses and appeal to their compassion for the community in terms of contributing scholarship dollars to help low-income students. “People are very generous if they are asked if they want to do more.” (Corey Rapp, Affinity Plus Federal Credit Union)

**TOPIC:** Perceived threat of loss of local control for BSU and NTC versus being directed at the statewide level by the Minnesota State system.

* We hear that there are excessive central office administrative costs for Minnesota State with duplication of functions that exist at the colleges and universities. “I’ve been told that the central office costs more to run than any one of the universities. … They occasionally come up here to visit, have coffee, shake hands and then they’re back to St. Paul.” (Bill Batchelder, Bemidji Woolen Mills)
* Echoing concern about the loss of local control, “I wonder if there’s a role for our community in that conversation.” (Dave Hengel, Greater Bemidji)
* BSU and NTC “need to be connected at the hip with area employers and workforce needs, and with some of that local control taken away by MnSCU, it doesn’t allow you to be fluid and responsive to local needs.” Because of the time and steps involved in program changes, for example, by the time you can make the change, the need or opportunity might be passed. (Ryan Zemek, Headwaters Regional Development)