



Thank you for attending the WVCC Barbour County Networking Event. We truly appreciate your time, engagement, and willingness to share your insights.

The conversations were thoughtful and productive, and the feedback we received was extremely valuable. We encourage you to look them over and share any additional thoughts or items we may have missed.

Common Themes

- ✓ **Strong Value of Industry Advisory Boards (IABs):**
There was broad agreement that IABs are essential for keeping educational programs current, relevant, and aligned with local industry needs. When they function well and meet regularly, they improve curriculum quality, student awareness of career options, and workforce readiness. Gaps exist where IABs are inactive or inconsistent, particularly at the high school and CTE levels.
- ✓ **Critical Need for Soft/Durable Skills:**
Employers consistently cited deficiencies in communication, professionalism, motivation, and basic workplace etiquette. These skills are viewed as essential at all levels and across all industries yet are not being adequately developed in K–12 or higher education.
- ✓ **Importance of Work-Based Learning (WBL) Opportunities and Internships:**
Internships and other WBL opportunities were repeatedly identified as one of the most effective ways to prepare students for the workforce, build soft skills, and help both students and employers assess fit. Employers expressed strong interest in expanding these opportunities.
- ✓ **Lack of Awareness and Exposure to Local Careers:**
Students often do not know what jobs exist in West Virginia or what skills are required. This lack of exposure begins early and continues through high school and college resulting in people leaving the area and schools not teaching the skills employers need.
- ✓ **Shift Toward Skills-Based Pathways:**
There is growing recognition that many regional jobs require technical skills rather than four-year degrees. Micro-credentials, technical programs, and trades were seen as important alternatives that should be better promoted and connected to industry.
- ✓ **Challenges in Workforce Recruitment and Retention:**
Employers can't find workers, and job seekers can't find the right jobs. Pay, housing, and quality of life affect whether graduates stay.

What We Learned

- ✓ **Industry Engagement Works When It's Intentional:**
Employers who have participated in IABs, internships, and WBL opportunities reported positive outcomes, including improved student readiness and successful long-term hires. These efforts are most effective when industry has a clear, ongoing role rather than a one-time interaction.
- ✓ **Experience Is the Missing Link for Skill Development:**
Many soft skills cannot be taught effectively in a classroom alone. Hands-on experiences - internships, job shadowing, and in-person learning - are critical for developing communication, confidence, and professionalism.
- ✓ **Early Exposure Matters:**
Career awareness needs to begin as early as middle school. Students need repeated exposure to both STEM and non-STEM careers available locally so they can make informed decisions about education and training pathways.
- ✓ **Internships Benefit Everyone:**
Internships not only help students confirm or refine career interests but also allow employers to shape and assess future talent. Even when an internship does not result in a job, it still provides valuable clarity and experience.
- ✓ **Degrees Are Not Always the Priority:**
Many employers expressed a preference for individuals with a strong work ethic and willingness to learn over those with degrees but limited practical skills. This reinforces the importance of technical training, certifications (such as OSHA), and employer-connected learning.
- ✓ **Retention Requires Both Opportunity and Quality of Life:**
Keeping graduates in West Virginia requires competitive wages, clear career pathways, and communities that offer housing, culture, and opportunities to "settle down." Awareness alone is not enough without viable employment and lifestyle options.

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