

WV Career Collaborative Networking Events County Feedback Comparison: Key Differences in Workforce & Education Insights, 2025-26

Whitepaper by Tracey Kennedy, Director of Economic and Workforce Development, Fairmont State University, May, 2026

County networking events hosted by the WV Career Collaborative (WVCC) in partnership with local economic development authorities and/or school systems provide valuable local perspectives on internships and other work-based learning opportunities, highlighting successful experiences and strong support for expanding these efforts. These events also create opportunities for industry representatives to build relationships and develop partnerships that support work-based learning experiences. Discussions surface concerns and barriers faced by both K–12 schools and employers, helping WVCC better understand what is working, where challenges exist, and what support may be needed to make internships and work-based learning more accessible and effective.

Networking events summarized below were held in Barbour, Lewis, Calhoun-Gilmer, Upshur and Preston counties between January 15 and April 9, 2026. Detailed notes from each event are linked on the WVCC website (<https://www.wvcareercollab.org/events/>).

Why This Matters

- Identify differences in county perspectives
- Highlight unique challenges and ideas
- Inform more targeted, localized strategies
- Avoid “one-size-fits-all” solutions

IAB Differences (Industry Advisory Boards)

Unique IAB Insights by County

- Lewis: The right voices aren’t consistently at the table (lack of youth representation, mismatch of industry reps)
- Calhoun-Gilmer: Use creative, local solutions to fill workforce exposure and support gaps (simulated workplaces supported by IAB members, retirees as a resource)
- Upshur: Curriculum changes need to adapt to respond to workforce needs, IABs are about opening and strengthening communication and cooperation (Forecasting, benefits for all sides)
- Preston: Educator outreach to industry to better understand workforce needs (“cold calling” companies directly to ask about hiring needs (skills, certifications, etc.)
- Barbour: Strong belief in IAB value, but gaps in consistency and participation (strong support for IABs, but inconsistent participation and follow-through, specifically for the local HS CTE programs)

Takeaway: No single shared gap, each county sees different priorities

WBL Differences (Work-Based Learning)

Unique WBL Insights by County

- Lewis: WBL success stories should be actively shared to highlight impact and build support (Lewis Co. EDA intern obtained full time employment in field as result of WBL opportunity/experience)
- Calhoun-Gilmer: Federal hiring barriers (FCI Gilmer), liability insurance (Concerns about insuring students/minors in workplace settings make employers hesitant to participate)
- Upshur: Workplace legal restrictions (regulations (e.g., safety rules, privacy laws) limit what students can do in real work environments)
- Preston: Student career exploration behaviors, how students' approach (or don't approach) exploring careers (The students that aren't the "highfliers" are the ones that need the help the most).
- Barbour: Strong employer interest, lack of exposure to K-12 teaching positions (specific examples from industry of successful internships, shortage of teachers in county, specifically math)

Takeaway: Experiences vary widely—policy, logistics, and perception all differ

Upshur County Highlights - What Stands Out

Participants: College/University Faculty, Staff or Administrators (11), Government (local, state, or federal) (4), Industry (6), Non-profit (4), K-12 (1)

- "Leave and return" *can* be seen as positive
- Global mindset (local companies operating globally)
- Early entrepreneurship (starting as young as 2nd grade)
- Ongoing legislative engagement
- Unique cultural barriers ("Negative Nancies")

Calhoun-Gilmer Highlights - What Stands Out

Participants: College/University Faculty, Staff or Administrators (6), Government (local, state, or federal) (1), Industry (3), Non-profit (2), K-12 (11)

- Housing shortages impacting workforce
- Startups struggling with bidding/contracting
- Social media outperforming traditional recruitment
- "Bimodal workforce" (new hires + near-retirees)

Lewis County Highlights - What Stands Out

Participants: College/University Faculty, Staff or Administrators (8), Government (local, state, or federal) (11), Industry (6), Non-profit (2), K-12 (0)

- Hiring processes too digital (limits soft skills visibility)
- Counselor capacity crisis (not enough bandwidth to help with career/education readiness)
- Teachers unaware of workforce resources to help students
- Focus on retaining/attracting talent
- Emphasis on communication skill gaps

Preston County Highlights - What Stands Out

Participants: College/University Faculty, Staff or Administrators (5), Government (local, state, or federal) (5), Industry (4), Non-profit (4), K-12 (7)

- Strong use of structured career prep tools (PHS Career Connections Class)
- Financial literacy simulations (“real-life budgeting”)
- Promoting trades using salary data (~\$60K)
- Youth motivated to improve their communities/more youth involvement

Barbour County Highlights - What Stands Out

Participants: College/University Faculty, Staff or Administrators (7), Government (local, state, or federal) (6), Industry (7), Non-profit (2), K-12 (1)

- Emphasis on learning soft skills through experience, not classroom instruction alone
- Strong support for internships, apprenticeships, and WBL as primary solutions
- Employers prefer attitude and willingness to learn over degrees alone
- Growing recognition that many jobs require technical skills—not 4-year degrees

Most Unique Ideas (Across All Counties)

- Corridor H as workforce driver (Upshur)
- Employer preference for attitude and willingness to learn over formal credentials (Barbour)
- Housing shortages (Calhoun-Gilmer)
- Over-digitized hiring (Lewis)
- Counselor burnout (Lewis)
- Financial simulation programs (Preston)
- Career professionalism gaps (Preston)

Takeaway: Some of the most valuable insights are highly localized

Key Themes Across Differences

What the Differences Tell Us

- Workforce challenges are not uniform
- Local context drives priorities
- Solutions must be region-specific
- Both strategy and detail are needed