



PROFILE OF EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT
Genesee Valley Educational Partnership
LeRoy, New York

About the Genesee Valley Educational Partnership

Genesee Valley Educational Partnership (GVEP) is a BOCES¹ located in Batavia, west of Rochester NY. It serves twenty-two school districts within Genesee, Wyoming, Livingston and Steuben Counties, providing both instructional services and instructional support services to their partner districts.

GVEP works within a rural area with a large agricultural base; in fact, according to Bernadette “Bernie” Harwood, one of the BOCES’ Work Experience Coordinators, Genesee and Wyoming Counties are among the top agricultural counties in the state, with Wyoming ranking as the third most productive in the country for dairy production. The region does have a manufacturing presence, with national and international manufacturing firms such as Graham Manufacturing in Batavia and Oxbo International in Byron.

The BOCES serves approximately 1,000 students at its two campuses, one located in Batavia and the other in Mount Morris (the administrative office is in LeRoy). While their service areas may be different, with the Batavia campus having access to the manufacturing base in that city, their program offerings are relatively similar, with programs including animal science (particularly appropriate for this rural setting); auto technology; building trades, including HVAC, electrical, and carpentry; computer information systems; conservation programs; heavy equipment operation; cosmetology; criminal justice; culinary arts; graphic design; health dimensions (for nursing); human services (for childcare and other care positions); and metal trades.

In addition to these programs, GVEP also runs two academies, one focused on health careers and one on legal careers, in partnership with Genesee Valley Community College. Most academy classes take place at the college, and students leave the program with up to 15 college credits. They expect to open two additional academies next year, one focused on agricultural business and the other focused on information technology.

Partnerships: Advisory Councils and Community Groups

One way that Genesee Valley Educational Partnerships engages with the community is by working through both internal and external partnership structures. These include not only their own advisory councils (each program has their own), but also through BOCES-initiated independent groups called Business Education Alliances as well as through community groups such as Workforce Investment Boards.

Like many BOCES, Genesee Valley has active advisory councils associated with each of their programs, made up primarily of industry professionals who are able to advise them on curriculum and keep them informed of changes in the industry. In addition, GVEP encourages principals of their career centers to sit on the boards of local Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs) to hear what is going on in their communities, and discuss how the organization can adapt to community needs.

In addition, the BOCES has created county-level Business Education Alliances for Livingston, Genesee, and Wyoming Counties, with GVEP work experience coordinators holding a board seat along with district superintendents and business professionals who work together to find ways to integrate education and business within their respective communities.

Partnerships: Role of the Work Experience Coordinator

At GVEP, the role of the work experience coordinator is a critical link to local businesses. According to Harwood, "Our entire job is to create partnerships between business and our schools." A lot of times this includes old-fashioned footwork, identifying prospective business partners, calling to set an introductory meeting, and working to establish links to new partners and strengthen links with existing ones. She notes that she has sent more than 150 students into local businesses in the past year, and has also helped prepare students by spending time in the classroom teaching them how to interview, create resumes, and strengthen other kinds of employability skills.

Of course, while work experience coordinators play an important role in the partnership process, Harwood is quick to note the critical role that instructors play in the process. "Many of our instructors are proactive, identifying new businesses in the community and asking us to make contact," she says. "They're also great at building the relationships once they start, accepting feedback from industry partners on what they're doing and what individual students need in order to be successful, and also making good connections between qualified students and the businesses that offer the best fit."

Partnerships: Working with Graham Manufacturing

While Genesee Valley Educational Partnership has strong relationships with several area businesses, their partnership with Graham Manufacturing stands out as a particularly strong example.

Graham Manufacturing is headquartered in Batavia. With a total of 350 employees, the company is recognized as a leader in the design and manufacture of vacuum and heat transfer products for energy industries worldwide. Approximately half of the company's sales are to international markets and half to the U.S. market.

The relationship between GVEP and Graham has existed for some time, but it became more active over the past few years due to the company's pressing need for qualified welders.

One major contributor to the relationship is the fact that the welding instructor came to GVEP from Graham; his existing relationships within the company made it easier to establish trust and have honest and direct conversations about what was needed, and which students were a fit with the company and which needed to work in specific areas. Bernie Harwood noted that "One of the biggest lessons for me has been that when educators have a personal relationship with their business partners, and they believe in the instructor's ability to do what they do, the door just flies open."

Graham has mostly been interested in working with students from the Batavia campus, solely due to the closeness of the location. They have set up a sort of "pipeline" for students, going through the following steps:

- Graham representatives come into the classroom and do a classroom presentation, talking about the welding profession, employability issues, and about careers with their company.

- Students visit the company's production site for a field trip, during which company staff members take students through their entire facility, telling them what they do, what they pay, and what their expectations are.
- If students express an interest in the field, they may be invited to participate in a job shadowing experience or co-op opportunity. To earn the right to go on a job shadow or beyond, students have to have demonstrated a good work ethic, a decent GPA, and aptitude in the classroom.

Students who participate in the co-op experience are paid and get course credit, and also go through Graham's training process to develop better welding and machining skills. Graham provides the GVEP instructor with targeted feedback, like the need for students to spend more time with diagrams or have a better understanding of welding symbols..

On average, Graham hires six students per year on a full-time basis. In the past year, Harwood has seen seven students participate in job shadows and has four students participating in the co-op program, all of whom are likely to receive full-time job offers.

In addition to connecting students with the workplace, Graham participates in school efforts in other ways, including having their production manager participate in the program's advisory council, and supporting GVEP by attending career fairs to introduce students to the program.

Advice on Building Partnerships

Bernie Harwood had two pieces of advice for work experience coordinators or BOCES leaders interested in building strong industry partnerships:

- Involve your business partners in your programs as much as possible. Encourage them to provide strong input into program, invite them to come in and see how the program operates, give them representation on the advisory council, invite to all of their events, and bring students out to their places of business. The key is to maintain lines of communication, keeping them actively involved, letting them know that they do have input into what happens at the programs. As they make suggestions, let them see the changes being made on what students are doing and learning.
- Try to market your relationship as much as possible. For example, when GVEP does career fairs, they make sure their partner logos are present at the booth. This shows students that GVEP is working with business, and validates what they do in the program; not only is it gratifying for your partners, it is also good for students and parents to see who you are working with, and how you ensure they are entering a valid current relevant program.

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ⁱ In 1948 the New York State legislature created Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) to provide shared educational programs and services to school districts within the state. Today there are 37 BOCES, incorporating all but nine of the state's 721 school districts. BOCES partner with districts to provide a broad range of services that help meet the evolving educational needs of students. Retrieved from <http://www.boces.org/>.