Employer Engagement Pilot Project Brief

CENTER OF EXCELLENCE
HOMELAND SECURITY-EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT
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Background

Employer engagement is critical to building successful pathways. Engaging employers produces benefits at every stage of the educational process and requires close cooperation with industry as well as public workforce agencies to ensure that pathways and supporting curriculum and instruction align with the labor market. Successful employer engagement and activities supporting it are part of a continuum and each step is important in deepening the relationship with an employer.

This is the first in a series of employer engagement briefs designed to capture key information that will inform community and technical colleges around industry demands and trends, skills and competency gaps, and needed curriculum updates.

There is a recognized value in matching employer needs and worker skills particularly in today's economic climate as organizations that design and deliver education and training have few dollars to waste. Regular employer engagement is one building block in establishing strategic, long term partnerships with employers. If you recognize employers as key customers of the CTC system, it is important to regularly talk directly with the customer base in order to fully identify and then retool academic programs to meet their changing demands.

Phase One: Program Design

The methodology used for this first employer engagement pilot project began with development of a set of questions designed to guide discussions during one-on-one employer engagement interviews. HSEM Collaborating colleges program managers and Administrators were asked to review the draft set of questions (see attached Discussion Guide) and provide their input. Three collaborating colleges (Big Bend, Peninsula, and Skagit Valley) in addition to Pierce College that offer the HSEM AA program reviewed the discussion guide and provided input. Two additional colleges (Edmonds/Renton) were in transition due to staff turnover and consequently did not have staff in place to review and provide input to the discussion guide. Only one college (Big Bend) suggested two additional questions to add to the draft discussion guide. Those questions added to the Discussion Guide as per the college request were:

1) Does your organization offer a pay preference for those with BAS versus AA degrees? What is the differential/scale used?
2) Does your organization offer tuition reimbursement program for current employees? If so, describe your program.

Phase Two: Employer Outreach

One on one discussion meetings were held with industry professionals. It should be noted that special care was taken to select participants for this pilot project that functioned as hiring managers in their organization. Informal discussions were held over coffee or lunch with both private and public sector organizations. The Discussion Guide (included with this summary document) was the main reference used during the meetings but due to time constraints set by participants it must be noted that not every question in the Discussion Guide was covered with every participant.   A total of 20 different organizations participated in the pilot project. The majority of the

participants in the pilot were provided with a copy of the discussion guide prior to the meeting. One-third of the participants chose to treat the discussion guide as a survey and provided written answers to the majority of the discussion questions either prior to the meeting or during the meeting. The list of organizations that participated in this employer engagement pilot include:

1) Premera Insurance
2) Pierce College Emergency Management
3) City of DuPont Emergency management
4) South Puget Sound American Red Cross
5) Northwest Region of the American Red Cross
6) Intel Corporation
7) Amtrak
8) Thurston County Emergency Management
9) Pacific Northwest Economic Region
10) Washington Department of Transportation
11) Washington Department of Enterprise Services
12) Mason County Emergency Management
13) Walla Walla County Emergency Management
14) Association of Washington Business
15) Amazon
16) Microsoft
17) Grays Harbor Emergency Management
18) Starbucks
19) Kent Emergency Management
20) Washington Military Emergency Management Division

Phase Three: Share Employer Engagement Findings

The findings of this pilot project and a summary of the data collected is provided in the "Key Findings" section of this report. A copy of this report will be provided to all HSEM AA program collaborating college program coordinators and college administrators so that they might gain insight on how their existing courses and outcomes could be retooled to better meet employer requirements. The HSEM Center of Excellence will look for opportunities to bring together HSEM AA program Collaborating College representatives through future curriculum review meetings and through one on one discussion to further pinpoint where existing curriculum in the HSEM AA and certificate programs can be strengthened. Also Pierce College has a future HSEM Bachelor's of Applied Science program under SBCTC consideration with a projected start date of fall 2016 which if approved could benefit greatly from these pilot project findings.

Key Findings:

Employers were asked to indicate the five most important skills that recent college graduates should have to be successful in the HSEM field. The five ranked highest in order of preference by employers were:

1) Written and oral communication
2) Strategic thinking
3) Flexibility and adaptability
4) Collaborative
5) Analytical/research skills and decision making/problem solving (tie)

Employers were also asked to identify the two skills that they consider lacking in most recent college graduates seeking positions in their organizations. The ability to deliver high quality written and oral communication was

chosen consistently as the skill/competency that most employers wanted to see strengthened. In general many of the hiring managers identified a lack of basic people skills and an increased need for hands on operational experience working in a fast paced, high change environment as area lacking in new hires.

Universally employers participating in the pilot supported the idea of increasing the number of on-the-job opportunities through placement of students in both internships and volunteer positions. Employers clearly recognize internships as a direct pathway to future employment and all endorsed internships as way to ascertain if a student would be a good fit for their organization long term. In addition, employers agree that increasing on-the-job acquired time is the only way to meet work experience requirements common in entry level positions.

Overall the majority of employers indicated their organization's hiring preference for those with Bachelor's degree but many of the participants emphasized they looked for the right fit regardless of degree. There was not a clear consensus on preferred degrees. Because Washington State does not currently have a university that offers a HSEM bachelor's degree, the idea of having a student with a HSEM BAS degree did not come up often in the preferred degree discussions. However, when a mention was made that Pierce College was pursuing offering a HSEM BAS degree in 2016, employers readily to add HSEM on the list of required or preferred degrees.

Employers easily shared ideas of areas where investments in developing or adding curriculum to the existing AA program would be welcomed. Private sector employers emphasized that HSEM AA program recent graduates seemed overly public sector centric with an abundance of knowledge on the Incident Command System (ICS). They noted that unless a student had previous private sector work experience recent graduates generally lacked a basic understanding of the drivers of for-profit organizations. Employers suggested including a Basic Business 101 type course in future HSEM degree programs. Other common recommended areas where course work could be increased or added included:

- Cyber security non-technical
- Project Management
- Financial/Grant Management
- Public Policy
- Public Speaking/Storytelling
- Public/Private Partnerships

Regarding availability of tuition reimbursement, few of the employers indicated that they currently offer in house tuition reimbursement programs---more in the private sector than in the public sector. Public sector organizations particularly mentioned that budget cuts over the past five years had removed access to these type of programs.

The one question that would require follow up research to establish a clear answer centers around whether organizations offer a pay preference for those with BAS versus AA degrees. Most employers in this pilot had a bachelor's degree hiring preference or requirement so did not have ready data on salary differences between those hired with AA versus BAS degrees and stated that additional research with their Human Resource department would be required to accurately address the question.

Conclusion:

Gathering strategic, comprehensive and meaningful employer engagement data is challenging. Employers are busy people and appear rarely to have been approached by higher education representatives seeking their opinions on how well colleges are doing in producing employees that can achieve success in their workplace. Much was learned in the course of this pilot project that will be leveraged as additional employer engagement discussions are held with hiring managers in the other 5 career pathways that the COE-HSEM supports. The COE is committed to building and sustaining ongoing relationships with employers to ensure workers that leave the CTC system are prepared to achieve success in a 21st century workplace. If interested in more information: **Wendy Freitag Wfreitag@pierce.ctc.edu or 206-818-9673.**

EMPLOYER DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. Which best describes your role in hiring employees at your organization. (Circle one)
   A. I am a recruiting or HR professional who works to identify talent for the organization.
   B. I manage people and take an active part in hiring at my organization.
   C. I am a department manager who makes final hiring decisions in my organization.

2. Does your organization hire recent college graduates who have earned AA degrees?
   A. Yes
   B. No

3. Does your organization mostly hire recent graduates who have earned
   A. Bachelor's degree
   B. Graduate level degree

4. How many years of work experience do you have across all jobs you have held?
   A. 10 or fewer years
   B. 11 -20 years
   C. 21 – 30 years
   D. 31 or more years

5. What industry does your organization primarily serve?
   A. Health Care
   B. Services/Retail
   C. Manufacturing
   D. Science/Technology
   E. Education
   F. Government/Non-profit
   G. Transportation/Travel
   H. Private Sector Consulting
   I. Other _____

6. Approximately how many people does your organization employ?
   A. Fewer than 50
   B. 50 to 99
   C. 100 to 499
   D. 500 or more
   E.

7. In what state is your organization headquartered? _____

8. Is it likely that your organization ever hires a candidate with strong work experience but no degree for a job that was advertised as requiring a bachelor's degree?
   A. Yes, we look for candidates with the right fit regardless of degree.
   B. Yes, for a particularly outstanding candidate only.

C. No, a degree is always required.

9. Does your organization offer a pay preference for those with BAS versus AA degrees? What is the differential/scale used?

10. How important is a recent college graduate's major to your organization when you hire?
    A. We look for specific majors only and do not consider candidates without them.
    B. We value some majors over others but are open to good candidates regardless of major.
    C. A candidate's major is only part of the picture; we balance it out with other factors.
    D. College major is not at all important in our hiring process.

11. List the three top majors you prefer for your hires.
    1.   2.   3.

12. We often hear feedback from graduating students that finding what they consider entry level positions in their field of choice is challenging as most jobs require 3-5 years of on the job experience. Would you count internship or volunteer work experience toward meeting work experience requirements?
    A. Yes
    B. No
    C. Other Explanation_____

13. How much weight do you give each of the following types of experience when you evaluate a recent college graduate's resume? (Please assign a percentage from 0 to 100. Your responses must add up to 100%; if an item is not important at all, assign it a value of 0.)

    A. Experience gained through internships _____%
    B. Experience gained through any employment during college _____%
    C. Experience gained through volunteer experiences _____%
    D. Experience gained from extracurricular activities (e.g., professional clubs, athletics, service) _____%

14. What are the five most important skills that recent college graduates seeking positions in your organization should have to be successful. (Please circle the five most important)

    A. Knowledge of a content area associated with the job.
    B. Technical skills associated with the job.
    C. Creative
    D. Strategic thinker
    E. Written and oral communication skills
    F. Team Leadership
    G. Collaborative
    H. Diversity and cultural sensitivity
    I. Analytical/research skills

J. Planning/organizational skills
K. Decision making/problem solving
L. Active Listening
M. Customer service oriented
N. Flexible and adaptable
O. Facilitation skills
P. Ability to multi-task
Q. Other (please specify) _____

15. Using the skills list in the previous question or others that you consider important, which 2 skills do you consider **lacking** in most recent college graduates that seek positions in your organization?
    1. _____
    2. _____

16. There seems to be a high number of vacancies occurring in local EM jurisdictions in our state at present. Do you believe these vacancies are part of the graying tsunami or are the demands of the job somehow contributing to turnover? Are there skills sets/competencies that colleges need to instill more than ever in future emergency management leaders that will set them up to be successful and have longevity in their career paths?

17. Please rate how well colleges and universities are doing in producing employees who are successful in your workplace? (Please circle your answer.)
    A. Excellent
    B. Good
    C. Fair
    D. Poor

18. Does your organization offer Tuition Reimbursement programs for current employees? If so, describe your program.

19. What homeland security emergency management related training needs are most in demand for your workforce? _____