

Heather LaDue: Business-campus partnerships key to helping NH get back to work By Heather LaDue



THERE IS a problem in cities and towns across New Hampshire with implications beyond the evolving challenges of the current pandemic. Employers in a range of industries large and small struggle to stay competitive to meet their ever-changing consumer demands due to a “skills gap” in their available workforce.

The key to mitigating this challenge that transcends regions and hits some fields, such as healthcare, harder than others is developing effective partnerships to develop New Hampshire’s workforce in new and focused ways. Employers across the Granite State are faced with ongoing setbacks in their efforts filling jobs and they struggle to stay competitive.

Faced with rebuilding themselves in this new economy as they reconstruct their businesses, their lack of attracting the “right” skills can limit their competitiveness.

Ultimately, these problems hold them and our state back, and they end up affecting many of us who call New Hampshire home in one way or another.

To solve this pressing issue, New Hampshire employers should reach out to explore new ways to collaborate with the public and private colleges and universities in the state to help them with their workforce challenges. Colleges and universities should do a better job of letting employers know about the resources they have available to provide training and creative, customized learning.

These partnerships should be focused on and committed to helping local businesses, municipalities and organizations recruit new skilled employees -- and retain and add to the skills of their current workers. Mastering new technologies and requirements for today’s economy is one of the best ways to empower businesses to increase productivity.

Health care and social assistance is the state’s second-largest industry, behind only the retail trade. According to New Hampshire’s Workforce Challenge: Innovative Approaches to Attracting and Retaining Workers, the sector is projected to grow 11 percent through the end of this year.

In 2017, the N.H. Health Care Sector Partnership reported “many of the state’s health care employers reported a ‘skills gap’ and difficulty finding qualified people at all levels.” This is a glaring problem with COVID-19 still lurking, concerns about a second wave widely reported and a vaccine still not expected until early 2021.

Currently, only half of Granite Staters have earned a post-secondary degree. That needs to change -- and we can do better.

Over the years, the state has moved from a largely industrial economy to a knowledge-based economy, which means a strong need for post-secondary certifications and degrees. This movement is good for everyone as it lowers unemployment and turnover, expands human-service resources, increases economic success and provides informed citizenship.

The state legislature recognizes this opportunity to support a concrete solution to a very real problem and they have set up a program for employers to help cover the cost of training. The New Hampshire Job Training Fund is a dollar-for-dollar matching program that helps defray employers’ costs for education, certification, and other approved forms of training.

This is a win-win for everyone. Employees get retooled, employers gain the benefit of the right skills needed to compete and New Hampshire’s higher education institutions provide the path to get them there. Business partnership with higher education is a way to mitigate costs and maximize their tuition assistance through discounted courses.

Higher education needs to accommodate working adults. It needs to provide micro learning to get people upskilled quickly. But not all colleges and universities in our state are currently set to take on this challenge. They need to seek out and implement the right resources to put new programs in place, and as we have learned at my own university, the process is not a difficult one and it brings big rewards to people who want to pursue new professional opportunities.

Partnership programs such as those described above have made a tremendous impact in other states. At Brigham Young University in Utah, the BYU Pathways Program and several programs at Texas A&M University are providing new higher-education models specifically for the workforces in their home states that all institutions can learn from.

One way Franklin Pierce University is helping New Hampshire climb out of the current economic slump created by the pandemic is by offering a 40 percent discount of our online courses to state residents who are unemployed. This will help them finish their degree, make a career change or gain new skills that are in demand.

The only thing holding New Hampshire partnerships back is a lack of focused communication on establishing them. Employers should embrace opportunities to talk and share their needs with two- and four-year higher education institutions, and those who run these colleges and universities need to listen and respond in new ways to make these partnerships a reality.

This is New Hampshire's way forward and it is the best way to get our citizens back to work and remain employed for the long term.

Heather LaDue is executive director of professional programs and partnerships at Franklin Pierce University. She lives in Chester.