

Stafford Workforce Education Partnership: An Executive Summary

In 2009, Stafford County officials recognized a significant business need. While the county ranked number two in Virginia in both job and business growth (by percentage of growth 2004-2009) a number of businesses found it difficult to fill job openings with qualified employees. From this realization, industry and education stakeholders were invited by Stafford County's Department of Economic Development to develop and execute a plan of action to gather input from Stafford's valued businesses. Ultimately it was determined that Stafford County Schools, Germanna Community College, and the University of Mary Washington, would collaborate with the County's Department of Economic Development to form the Stafford Workforce and Education Partnership (SWEP).

SWEP determined that a series of four focus group sessions with the County's key industry representatives would provide the best mechanism for identifying employers' education and workforce development needs. In order to identify education and workforce development needs specific to Stafford County's employers, SWEP defined the County's primary industry clusters as those considered major employers – businesses experiencing high growth in the fields of science, technology, engineering and health care, and those engaged in the hospitality and tourism industry that support County's unique cultural and recreational assets.

Participants were asked a series of questions that were designed to elicit distinct information about their industry's education and workforce development needs. Information related to the critical skills and competencies needed by employees entering jobs and the current workforce, today and in the future, was obtained. Finally, focus group participants were asked about the availability of relevant education and workforce development programs within the County that would lead to employees' attainment of the most valued credentials – i.e., academic degrees, professional certifications, and licenses.

What we learned

Common themes were immediately apparent. Universally, Stafford County employers agreed that while job-based technical and professional skills are important, they cited another more pressing workforce challenge – the need for employees possessing what are generally referred to as “soft skills.” Work ethic, personal accountability, problem solving, adaptability, customer service, teamwork and collaborative skills, and the ability to interact and communicate proficiently were always included in the discussion among participants. More specifically, industry identified needs to include:

Federal Contractors: Education, certification, and training in project management, engineering, software development, computer science, mathematics, aerospace engineering, procurement and contract management, information assurance and security, and specialized information technology (IT) skills.

Healthcare Providers: Management classes for entry-level supervisors, certifications and education in disciplines to include EMT, life support, optometry and ophthalmology, nursing, radiology, medical assistance, healthcare management, radiology, and dental hygiene, and general computer skills.

Mechanics and Skilled Technical Trades: Credentials in PMP, LEED, ISO 9000, ASE, ISEC, NEMA, OSHA, ANSI, as well as vendor-specific certifications, engineering, drafting, construction management, computer skills, risk management, safety, AutoCAD, and an array of mechanical and technical skills.

Tourism and Hospitality: National and state-recognized certificates, including a career work readiness certification, and a centralized location for collaborative tourism and hospitality training, customized specifically for Stafford County was desired.

Near Term Next Steps

A review of focus group participants' responses and perspectives provided SWEP representatives with information that will result in actionable next steps that are planned to occur over the next three to six months. They include:

1. Raise awareness of the array of education and workforce development programs and services that are readily accessible through Stafford County Schools, Germanna Community College's Stafford County Center, and the University of Mary Washington.
2. Plan and conduct workshops that focus on recruiting, interviewing, and hiring best practices.
3. Focus on the National Career Readiness Certificate, and plan to create an atmosphere that strongly encourages such credentialing in Stafford.
4. Germanna will lead in scheduling their Customer Service Academy at the Stafford County Center, with a focus to be developed specifically for Stafford Tourism.
5. SWEP Partners will incorporate "computer competencies" into existing workshop offerings, and develop a plan of action to better move students into internships locally.

Recommended Long-Term initiatives

The SWEP focus group process has been extremely valuable, especially when identifying education and workforce development gaps that can be addressed within the next three to six months. However, industry-specific requirements require a more studied and customized approach. In order to address Stafford County employers' long term needs, SWEP representatives will continue to meet and work with either individual employers or groups of employers with common needs to better understand their requirements and to propose customized education and workforce development solutions that, when assessed, will have definable business outcomes.

In Closing

A constellation of significant economic factors have an ongoing impact on the ever-changing workforce. SWEP will monitor and respond to employers' needs that will contribute to Stafford County's prosperity and support business expansion and attraction, resulting in additional jobs and continued economic development.

Equally as important as gaining information about the most valued and needed education and workforce development programs was determining how to best offer the education. For example: Do Stafford's companies need online programs? Should educators hold classes on-site during the work day? Will employers provide released time so employees can attend programs designed to improve workplace capabilities? A major component of SWEP's efforts was to understand how to make educational opportunities convenient, accessible, attractive, and affordable. To this end, the County, Stafford Schools, Germanna Community College, and the University of Mary Washington are committed to improving the competencies of employees, enhancing the capabilities of our employers, and significantly contributing to the County's long-term economic growth and prosperity.