

Summary of Employer Roundtable, Session #3
January 7th, 2013
8:00 AM to 10:00 AM
President's Conference Room
East Tennessee State University

ETSU Attendees

Brian Noland, President
Bert Bach, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs
Wilsie Bishop, Vice President for Health Affairs and University Chief Operating Officer
Jeremy Ross, Associate Vice President for University Advancement
Bill Kirkwood, Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education
Cheri Clavier, Director of Assessment and Teaching
Reedena Newlon, Executive Aide, Assessment and Teaching
Curtis Montgomery, Assistant to the President

Guest Employers

Nicole Arbogast, Office Administrator, Baker Donelson Law Firm
Betsy Butler, Regional Manager, Youth Villages
Debbie Dover, Corporate Director of Human Resources, Mountain States Health Alliance
Pat Gagan, Superintendent, Roan Mountain State Park
Pete Peterson, Manager of Government Office, City of Johnson City
Anthony Sylvester, Director of Corporate Financial Services, Eastman Chemical Company

Welcome, Opening Remarks

Dr. Kirkwood explained that “we want to try to learn more about how we are serving our constituents in the region and how we are serving our students. We think there is nothing more important that we can do than to learn from prospective employers of our students and community leaders. . .” He also thanked the guests for their attendance and introduced President Brian Noland.

Dr. Noland thanked the guests “for taking the time out of your schedules to engage in a conversation with us about ETSU.” He explained that “today is part of an ongoing effort across from the institution to get a sense of individual perceptions of the university—areas in which we are serving your needs, areas in which you would like to see us push a little bit harder, and areas you would like to see us expand our horizons. The most important thing that we do is to prepare students for life beyond college. This past December we had more than two thousand students walk across the stage to receive their degree. That realization of that degree in many respects is the realization of the American dream. But how are we insuring that those students that receive those degrees are obtaining the requisite skill sets and ability to fill the needs that you have with your respective industries?”

Dr. Noland prompted introductions in the room and introduced the organizer and facilitator of the Employer Roundtable, Ms. Cheri Clavier.

Employer Needs

Other than the skill set based on the positions being filled, Ms. Clavier prompted discussion of other skills, abilities, or attitudes that are important of the new employees hired. Participants mentioned the following attributes:

- we have found if students have a good attitude about what they are doing and they are energetic about learning we can give them all the skills they need; we have the opportunity through the service learning program, internships, and practicums to judge the student's attitude

- in a good poker game it takes jacks to open; it takes a degree just to get your foot in the door
- those that come through and have the leadership classes tend to hit the ground running; those folks have more initiative
- I need to see how they deal with conflict resolution
- ETSU has an excellent leadership training program and the reserve officer training core program; the ROTC program is a fantastic leadership training program
- from a business perspective what we are seeing is that ETSU students are very academically well prepared; their rate of passing the CPA (Certified Public Accountant) exam for the first time is very high
- if you lean back to leadership we view that as a common thread here; we use the STARS (leadership development program) technique as an interviewing technique
- ability to work in a team environment
- being very conversational, being able to communicate both orally and in writing
- ability to apply good judgment, strong initiative
- the Honor's Program students seem to be a little bit more mature; they can converse on a lot of different levels
- internships are really helpful for the students too because it kind of gives them an idea of what they have learned and what they have heard from other providers in businesses in the area; it lets them see how we do things and what might be unique
- we are kind of building a society where there is a black box with the answer; we are retarding the ability of the human being to solve problems
- there are businesses and organizations that could mentor or take under advisement interns or practicum students and give them insight into how organizations really work

Online or Traditional College Experience

Ms. Clavier sought opinions on a more traditional face-to-face college experience versus completing the majority of coursework through online mechanisms.

- a mixture of online versus classroom does not harm the student; a lot of our executive education now is interfaced online
- the students seem to be very good with these simulation type classes where you are taking the textbook and you are trying to apply it to real world situations, the case studies, etc.; I encourage you to continue to do that type of thing
- also doing a mentoring program; we call it "onboarding" for our interns as well as our new employees
- if it is somebody who is working and is already getting some of the work experience and they are partnering that with an online education, you at least still have them in the work environment and they are working through some of that "how to work and play well with others."
- if someone is doing a program completely online and are not in an interactive classroom environment, my concern would be how are they going to interact with everyone in their department

How ETSU Can Fill Employer Needs

Ms. Clavier asked, "What can we do for you?"

- be more reactive on the front end as our trends start to happen to make sure that the institution is leaning that way or providing that type of education and direction for those students
- one of the skills that I look for is that people know how to use Microsoft Word and Excel; maybe there needs to be a refresher at the end of students' programs
- thread of something you put in multiple classes where they learn about group dynamics, the psychology of motivating people, of understanding that different people communicate in different manners, and how to try to recognize that, how to have the skill set to know how

ETSU Reputation

Ms. Clavier asked about ETSU's reputation. Specifically, "when you see on a resume that a potential employee is an ETSU graduate what does that mean to you?"

- you would have someone that has had the opportunity for a well-rounded educational opportunity—who is familiar with the area, familiar with the dynamics of the area and the city
- I do think when we see ETSU on a resume I am a lot more familiar with the programs, with the contacts there, and being able to know the coursework that they have had to be able to prepare them; I will always want to know where they did the internships
- it is significant if an applicant position has a degree from ETSU; I can pick up the phone and talk to any number of professors throughout the university
- another way of saying that is a form of networking; it lasts a lifetime—particularly in the mountains of East Tennessee where there are two threads of continuity throughout Appalachian life—one is family and the other is church
- when I see the resume and I see ETSU on the resume I think integrity, hard-working, committed to doing a good job, and conscientious
- they seem to be pretty strong in the foundational things—building blocks of whatever their academic pursuit has been or degree they are in—they seem to be pretty strong there
- they are weakest on those softer skills—maybe professionalism, dealing with a large corporate environment, understanding the political environment that can sometimes exist within a company, and sometimes the red tape that can happen in a company, and the global perspective

ETSU Strengths and Weaknesses

Ms. Clavier continued with ETSU's reputation. She asked employers to compare ETSU graduates to non ETSU graduates and point out the strong or weak areas. Responses were:

- I think ETSU graduates have very good organizational skills; their weaknesses that I have seen would probably be conflict resolution
- they seem weak with understanding of the corporate structure and they do not have patience to understand that they have to be in a position for a little while before they can move up
- we are hiring team players not superstars; I think the university has an opportunity to expand the internship opportunities or the practicum opportunities with any number of organizations throughout the region that would give students an insight into how an organization works
- we have a lot of our professionals come on campus to speak to the classrooms to kind of give them some insight; we come and speak to some of the social organizations to talk about those types of things to level set those expectations
- offer classroom credit for completing an internship for this period of time before they graduate; I think that would help us on the employer end for those students as they are graduating because they are going to be able to already see and work through some of those soft skills

Other Things ETSU Could Do

Ms. Clavier asked the employers to point out things ETSU could do to help ease frustrations in student weaknesses, etc.

- there is a lot of value as a student as well as an employer to making sure that the students have contact with the practitioner—somebody that can tell and give them a little bit of insight in the classroom that this is what this is all about; I think any opportunity we can create to help people understand that with a higher position in the organization comes along with a lot more responsibility and a lot more challenges and a lot more difficult decision making
- I do not think the university has to build a monster of an internship program or expand; just having practitioners come would help, and then if particular students wanted to be mentored they could develop a relationship with that person in that organization as a follow-up to the presence in the classroom

- I think giving them realistic salary figures for the area or salary bands of some sort
- some of the institutions, including ETSU, are still teaching types of technology that are not needed anymore; things have gone so far beyond that –you go to get a four year IT degree and there are two or three classes that are almost a waste of time
- from finance and accounting perspective we are looking more for advisors, more analytical skills; the case studies are helping them that way because you give them data and then they have to figure out the problem and develop a solution
- in the area of information technology I have not had the experience of having a student or graduate be ill-prepared; every student that I have worked with has had familiarity with and the ability to work Excel spreadsheets and Word
- it is not just the computer; their preparation technically is spot on
- and then as far as parochial versus global perspective, there is accommodation of perspective—at least the students I deal with; the graduates come to me and understand where they fit in and where the state fits into a global economy essentially
- we just need to make sure that they are comfortable with basic processes and willing to learn and just be comfortable knowing that their documentation—pretty much everything they do is going to be done electronically
- I hired a gentleman and made the assumption that basic Microsoft products would be something that would be easy to do; and here is somebody who is a brand new, masters-level program prepared person who is doing a vlookup (Microsoft Vlookup Formula) and was absolutely not even close to having that necessary skill set
- two skill sets that I think could be worked into ETSU curriculum, especially for maybe political science would be knowledge of Sharepoint (keeping large organizations in tune with their internets, and extranets, and understanding); the other thing that I would say—Westlaw/Lexus Nexus (to do legal research)
- I think we are seeing differences in the curriculums based on the disciplines; we do not have that problem in the accounting area; these students are well versed in the Microsoft Office tools
- that is why we do the internships –that is the pipeline; an audition is the way I describe it
- we have not noticed any IT deficiencies that I am aware of; the majority of the comments that I have heard are that most of the staff have learned something from the interns that we have
- we have a lot of generations in our organization at the same time right now; that may be where some of that is coming out; I have seen all these different levels of knowledge

Collaboration

Internships, practicums, and employers in the field addressing classrooms were just some of the points of collaboration that were touched on. The panel further discussed collaboration opportunities between ETSU and employers.

- I think it could just be trying to do some of those things more consistently; I think the career fairs are always helpful for us as far as building/working; I would not mind for someone to call me up and ask for information or something like that
- I do not know if this exists or not but if there could be some sort of program put together that somebody that was really interested in working in government could go to Nashville (TN) and do an internship during the legislative session (Dr. Noland interjected and said this exists, but is hyper competitive; he said we might look to explore a similar opportunity at a more local level which prompted a couple of attendees to point out some of these local examples)

Gaps in ETSU Curriculum

Dr. Bach asked the employers to point out gaps in ETSU’s curriculum.

- we obviously have to go somewhere else besides ETSU for engineers; engineering is an area that we are forced to look at other areas for
- any opportunity that we can create as employers and as educators to do those team building things, those soft skills, and to get different generations together to learn that we do think differently

- teamwork is not only people who are your age, which is what they get a lot of exposure to during the curriculum; it is also people with different backgrounds, different ages, and coming from different places
- I think you hit upon the reason my company goes out and recruits from other universities—it is that diversity; diversity in thinking as well as the caliber of student; we do not want to all be the same

Questions from the Guest Employers

Ms. Clavier prompted the guest employers to ask questions.

Q: “. . .Thirty years ago is kind of my reference. People would come out of school and there was a perception at least that a lot of graduates never realized their full potential because of their unwillingness to relocate. Is that still the case or are you seeing that the graduates of the university are much more willing to relocate now than what they have traditionally been?”

A: “. . .I think it is still an issue and I think you specifically indicated areas in which it is an issue. It is in the area of education—looking for positions. . .You commented earlier about people associate with family; people associate with place. I think that is a very real factor—continues to be.”

A: “My observation is among our better students, and I do not necessarily mean by that those that are just the absolute brightest but those that I say have the spark and sparkle to them. . .They tend to be willing to move. They just get it. They get what it is they have got to do. And they do the next right thing. They will take the job. They will do the internship. They will ask the informed question. But we have a lot of students who come to us who are first generation students who are from this region. Dr. Noland likes to say, we are really in the dream business here. There are a great number of Tennesseans and others who come to us who do not have the family background—that do not have the shared experience to know what is possible for them. For those students I think all the sorts of things you are talking about—the willingness to consider moving and realizing what they are capable of that they do not even yet know about. I think it is a tremendous challenge for us. Someone said to me about six months ago, we need to show those students the light at the end of the tunnel for them because they really do not see it. That is a conversation I hope we can have down the road. We have many different kinds of students at ETSU. Some of them I think we really do a great job with and others I think there are still doors and windows we can open with your help. They really need to hear it from you and not from us.”

A: “I would like to follow-up on your point. About seventy percent of our alumni live within a hundred mile radius of campus. . . I think one of our challenges as an institution is to redefine the word relocate. I know someone who lives in Oklahoma and works in Georgia. The sense of physical place does not altogether mean as much as it may have thirty years ago. . . The definition of relocate in relocation is different than it was thirty years ago because of technology. . .”

Q: “Do you have any new programs or curriculum in the works that we might be interested in?”

A: “. . .You are going to see us look to create or to adjust curriculum offerings at the institution to respond to emerging business industry needs. . . Through the process of the Committee for 125, which is the looking down the road at the vision for the university—it is our 125th anniversary. We are looking hard at programs, big programs such as dentistry and big programs such as engineering. But based on what I have heard today and what we have heard through other roundtables with employers—some of the adjustments may not be in creating a brand new program. It may be in reframing and adjusting some of our existing programs and existing curricular offerings. But the two big programmatic areas—we are going to take a serious look at establishing a School of Dentistry and we may look at a niche area or two in engineering.”

A: “. . .You indicate the number of people in your area that you hire in information technology. And you mention the degree to which in the healthcare area having an IT component is important. I think there is some significant work that is taking place here in the university that will have some curricular impact that you will see frequently. I believe that significant increase in areas which focus on interdisciplinary means of delivering programs that meet the needs of the community. We have a lot, for example—several of you have talked about teamwork and those kinds of issues. We have programs in counseling, social work, psychology, psychiatry. We have a counseling center. I think the degree to which people work in teams in these areas. . . I believe that is a major area. I also think that the issue of engineering has been raised here. I think there are particular opportunities we have under the Complete College Tennessee Act and Cause for Inter-institutional Cooperation in terms of delivery of programs. I think there are some opportunities for cost

effective means in which we may access parts of curriculum that will emerge. And we have some programs that are actually looking at using courses from other institutions as components of programs that cost effectively meet needs here. . . It is an ongoing discussion in the DNP (Doctor of Nursing Practice) Programs that are taking place in the state, but at the same time there are opportunities in technology here too.”

A: “. . .All of the colleges in the academic health sciences have agreed that interprofessional education has to be the core of what we do. We just had a strategic planning session last week that we reiterated that. Actually right now we are doing value ed, but we want to go into making curricular changes in each of the colleges that will make sure that every student who graduates from ETSU has that experience. We are doing a pilot this year. The students have fallen in love with it. You may have seen an article in the paper over the holidays about the student association that they created on their own—that is going to be franchised is the best way to say it. We have folks from University of Pennsylvania and from University of Kentucky who are interested in establishing chapters of the student organization, that we have established right here in Johnson City on their campuses. We started doing this back in the 90’s with the Kellogg Program. It started really in medicine, nursing, and public health. By the time we finished ten years later the whole university was involved in business and storytelling and art. And some of the work with the Spanish community has grown out of this interdisciplinary work. We are looking at a niche where we can be nationwide and really have recognition for what we are doing in professional education. It is certainly what the Affordable Care Act has paid for. . .”

A: “I think several of you have talked about internships—the importance of internships— and the importance of practical experience being valued and awarded credit. I think if you look at what has happened with the institution for the last three to five years and what is projected to happen that is a kind of a macro level. If you looked at the ratio of courses that are didactic—classroom lecture courses—the ratio of those types of courses to courses that are clinical or field based or these kinds of things. That is a major characteristic—that shift—whether it is in teacher education, whether it is in our construction programs, applied technology programs, whether it is in our business programs. Certainly, this is a major shift that is taking place and will continue to take place. I think relative to your comments on the global awareness and diversity and this type. I think focus on areas like study abroad, like significantly increasing numbers of international students with whom our students interact. In order to address areas of improvement that you pointed out. It is very much part of the culture here now.”

A: “. . . And increasing the number of our students who participate in study abroad is obviously a priority that we have. We have relatively few programs in which a study abroad experience is a requirement or an opportunity to fulfill a curricular obligation. We have a strategic goal in which we are attempting to expand that number of courses and we are trying to seed it with some revenue we have through student fee revenue that is used for study abroad types of experience. We have five or six programs that are currently looking at developing a concentration in a program for which that study abroad experience would serve. The other which someone here mentioned is a program, which is actually based on a program at Georgia Tech. Which is the ability for a student to—whatever the discipline the student is graduating in—to graduate with a transcript competency in global awareness that involves competency in a language other than English, the participation in a number of courses that involve types of diversity, and a study abroad experience. We are currently involved in a Quality Enhancement Plan for our SACS (Southern Association of Colleges) reaffirmation. Georgia Tech developed the model for this graduating with global competency. And we now have that as a curricular option at ETSU.

Wrap Up, Closing Remarks

Dr. Noland said, “I want to thank everyone for your taking your time this morning. One of the things that truly makes us unique as an institution is the fact that you are not going to find many institutions in the country that are more engaged and aligned with the needs of regional business and industry. Be it a RAM (Remote Area Medical) Clinic providing free healthcare service to folks across the region, to the partnerships we have with Eastman, to our long standing history in service learning. I think that is our strength—that is who we are as an institution. But also part of who we are as an institution is the dedicated commitment to continuous improvement. That is what the conversation today was about—was an opportunity for us to listen and learn, to continue to push that envelope on continuous improvement. If there is something that you forget about—if there was a comment you really wanted to make, but was apprehensive given the setting please send us an email. Please pick up the phone. . .”