

Summary of Employer Roundtable, Session #1
November 12th, 2012
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

Tim Carson, Director, Washington County TN Health Department
Dan Cates, Vice President and General Manager, WJHL-TV
Brian Crawford, Recruiter, Denso Manufacturing
Larry Durham, Human Resources Manager, Nuclear Fuel Services
Pat Niday, Assistant Vice President and Chief Learning Officer, Mountain States Health Alliance
Ginger Ray, Human Resources Generalist, Nuclear Fuel Services
Annette Tudor, Supervisor of Curriculum and Instruction, Bristol Tennessee City Schools

Welcome, Opening Remarks

Dr. Kirkwood expressed how “enjoyable and worthwhile it will be for local employers to be able to talk with colleagues in the area about something really important, which is the role that higher education plays in helping businesses and organizations and our whole region thrive.” He introduced ETSU President Brian Noland.

Dr. Noland asked the guest employers to “engage in a conversation with us about ETSU—about our graduates, about our programs, but also about our direction.” He said that we have recently completed the centennial which was a joyous celebration in which “we explored where we have been, our history, and all the individuals who have contributed to make us the institution that we are. Moreover, we are now in a similar conversation to something we engaged in in 1986. Looking forward—where do we want to be twenty five years down the road? What will be our profile of academic programs, what will be the size of the institution? But ultimately, our goal is to provide access to opportunities for students to realize the dream of receiving a college degree and then to stay and live and work in the area and help to diversify the economy.” He explained that this Employer Roundtable would be “the first of the series of conversations with employers to get a sense of thoughts about our students, thoughts about our graduates, and thoughts about the institution as a whole. It is our intent that we will roll all these conversations together. They will inform the Committee for 125 process, but they will also inform our work with Deans and Chairs.”

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

Perfect New Hire

Ms. Clavier asked participants to describe the perfect new hire, fresh out of college with a bachelor's degree. Participants mentioned the following attributes:

- new hires are typically new graduates;
- mechanical, electrical, or industrial engineering knowledge;
- GPA has to be at least above a 3.0;
- co-op or internship or shadowing experience;
- involvement with a scholarship programs;
- involvement with mentoring and/or residency programs;
- take waste out and focus on client or patient;
- energy and passion and desire to do whatever it takes to be successful;
- hard working;
- adaptability to systems;
- math and physics knowledge;
- professionalism.

Soft Skills

Aside from particular content areas or knowledge base, Ms. Clavier asked participants to describe other soft skills, perhaps not taught in the classroom, that are important in a new hire. Participants mentioned:

- team player;
- collaborative;
- problem solver;
- global understanding;
- technical;
- client or patient focused;
- ability to listen and relate;
- genuinely nice;
- great attitude;
- preparation;
- diverse;
- adaptable;
- respectful.

Resume

Ms. Clavier asked what resume items might capture employers' attention. Responses given included:

- Senior design project in resume—was role in the project as team leader or follower?
- True involvement in groups and organizations, preferably some work related, but also civic to show reflection of character and social skills.
- Shadowing to determine true fit to career path.

Diversity of Experiences

Dr. Noland asked, “If you were choosing between someone who had had the volunteer work specifically in their subject areas or someone who had a diversity of experiences across the institution, which would you prefer?” The panel seemed to appreciate a diversity of experiences, responding with:

- We hope students are coming to us looking for a career, not just a job.
- Students should express areas of experience and also areas that would be satisfying.
- Students may start out in one career path and progress into another (i.e. management).
- Succession planning is a huge piece.
- We are looking for that person that is going to be with us twenty or thirty years down the line.

Online or Traditional College Experience

Ms. Clavier asked if it makes a difference to employers whether a student completes a degree or the majority of coursework through online classes or through a traditional college experience. Some ideas from employers were:

- Simulation is a huge area for us right now.
- Would be very skeptical of hiring someone who had the vast majority of their classes online (miss some of that personal, one on one interaction).
- Depends on the job.

Dr. Noland asked whether online versus traditional classes was a topic of discussion during interviews. Some employer responses were:

- It truly comes out in the interview –we learn that very quickly.
- I think it can be a plus–maybe that applicant is a single mother who made it happen and got that technical degree and that stands out to us.
- They definitely need to be very tech savvy.
- Depends if it is undergraduate or graduate work that you are talking about–and if they are actively already involved in the area (for example, a full-time employee completing a master’s degree online).
- I appreciate the opportunity that graduate students have to be able to do the online and hold their job– Life Path Program here, which we are utilizing a lot across the state, is a good example of that.

ETSU Reputation

Ms. Clavier asked about ETSU’s reputation. Specifically, “when you see on someone’s resume that the potential employee is an ETSU graduate what does that mean to you?” Responses included:

- I am an ETSU graduate. I would hope it means something good.
- When I see that a person is an ETSU graduate I feel very good about that.
- I think it is something about a standard. The fact that, in those graduates that you have, they are able to maintain that university standard and be able to graduate.
- I think the reputation is a solid reputation.
- I heard that Coach Bartow had graduated every single student athlete that he has ever coached– that just blew me away.

- It is an expectation here; it speaks highly of your reputation.
- The students that we have hired over the last two years from ETSU have worked out really well for us.
- One of the students we hired went to Japan within two weeks of hire, and he did a really good job of being able to do that interaction.
- I had family at Vanderbilt for some specialty care a few years ago and two nurses were ETSU graduates; I thought that spoke very well.
- I think what is a strength is that the College of Education definitely works with us, for STEM partnerships in particular; it is a strong reputation from our perspective.
- Actually, one of our communication team members is an ETSU grad and is an excellent employee. I believe she learned that from ETSU—she has the team knowledge and working with others, she is really strong as far as communication skills. She shows a real pride and is a go getter.
- Our processing operators need to have a year of physics or a year of chemistry; our last search was difficult, finding folks to be able to give us that.
- We definitely want to work closer with ETSU because they do have a reputation of providing excellent students and workers.

ETSU Strengths and Weaknesses

Ms. Clavier then inquired about areas in which employers find ETSU graduates to be particularly strong. Responses were:

- From an engineering side, the PLC (Program Logic Control) class that you have at ETSU.
- The graduates that I have met seem to have high levels of confidence.
- They seem really prepared to come out into the world of work.
- They seem very sincere and humble, which is a good thing.
- The students are passionate.
- I think they are well prepared.

Ms. Clavier then asked if there were areas in which employers find ETSU graduates to be weak. Those present responded:

- The lack of co-op experience on the engineering side.
- How they choose those internships—the practical experience stands out more and I would encourage them to be wise in how they choose that.
- The biggest challenge that we have is that we are not local to the area, so looking for that student who is willing to make that move.
- I think maybe just what life in the real world is going to be like.
- I guess be willing to be flexible and be willing to change.
- Leveraging the resources available to them, for example a career center.

Preparation of Graduates

Ms. Clavier asked, “Is there specific advice that you would give to ETSU to help better prepare your future employees for the workforce? Are there specific things we could do more of, a better job of, or do differently?” Responses included:

- Having them come and see the workplace or come to our staff development days so they are hearing the same information our teachers are hearing.
- The realization of the amount of money from an engineering standpoint that these guys will have the exposure to spend.
- Be able to communicate at all levels—feel comfortable regardless of who that person is.
- I am most impressed with students that are the kinds of students that make things happen for themselves. I have seen time and time again where a student will get to know a company and kind of be involved whether it is part-time work on and off as they are in school.
- One of the things I have seen implemented over the last couple of years is universities setting panels with recent graduates to talk about what their experience was.
- Perspective or mindset shift.

Collaboration

The panel then discussed collaboration opportunities between ETSU and employers. Ideas discussed included:

- Stronger guidance program—start sooner to help guide students in a direction and to give them a better idea of maybe of where they do want to go.
- We have to do a better job of reaching out to you to make sure that we let you know what opportunities that we have and not miss any of those opportunities because we were not doing our job (as employers) being proactive.
- We also want staff to feel good—if I am going to be in a staff position how can I do laddering kinds of things that enable me to succeed but be able to stay in that front line?
- An internship, a co-op, job shadowing, some sort of hands on non-profit or other interaction that other individuals could add to their repertoire as they are getting their degree as a part of their graduation requirements.
- You have got to have international experience.

Questions from the ETSU Panel

Ms. Clavier then allowed members of the ETSU panel to ask questions.

Dr. Bach asked if employers would feel differently about ETSU if they learned that our programs required distinctive co-ops, study abroad, or job shadowing experiences. Responses included:

- I would be impressed that it was a requirement, that that university had maybe taken a risk that I do not have to take with the student who has not had that experience; it would show me that the school is serious about placing these students after they graduate.
- Do not send me a single resume that does not have co-op experience on it.

Dr. Bach then inquired about writing and oral communication skills. Employers replied:

- It is a big issue in my opinion, and I think that the culture in the society that we are in with the texts and shortcuts and all that, spelling and grammar is a big issue.
- Sometimes we'll get an intern that cannot write a sentence; that is not good.
- The slang and jargon—you cannot have that kind of conversation in a presentation.

- We are starting to work on ourselves now, offering some things just as it relates to the ability to have a meeting, to do an agenda, to do some of those kinds of things in a correct protocol or correct way.
- They are going to be writing across the board for everything; being able to take their thinking and be able to put it down on paper is important.
- Even the most talented engineer...if something in that cover letter jumps out at you it places that in the back of your mind, "Is this person really ready?"

Dr. Bach asked employers if ETSU students are parochial in their perspective. Employers responded:

- My feeling and perception is that they are much more adaptable and that they are much more interested in going where the job is.

Dr. Bishop asked if employers had ideas about how ETSU might instill global perspective in our curriculum for students who may not have options to study abroad. Some ideas generated were:

- Some other universities will ask us to send Japanese coordinators to talk to different classes to about their experiences.
- Sometimes our company will send our engineers into classes to talk about their opportunities and discuss a global perspective.
- It is reaching out and forming partnerships with those companies that do have that international, global aspect about them.
- However you can go about developing this multicultural curiosity.

Mr. Ross asked for more detail regarding what employers look for on applicants' resumes or ask about in interviews. Responses included:

- We also even ask for a copy of transcripts because we want to be able to see what that truly looks like—sometimes if you have a 3.8 and somewhat of a decent co-op, that may be less desirable than someone who has a 3.3 and a great co-op that aligns with our business.
- When you see a higher GPA you know what was involved in getting there and the kind of work ethic that student has to have.
- We use that in all of our intern programs and all the pre-selection to actually get them in to begin with.
- Before my manager goes to anything else he is going to go to GPA and co-op.
- All 3.8's are not equal, and all 2.9's are not equal.

Dr. Noland asked about long-standing job vacancies because of the inability to find skilled workers.

Employers noted:

- Engineering is a huge gap for us: maintenance, the trade skill side.
- Information Systems; they are reaching the point now of being willing to take new graduates.
- We have to ask ourselves - what are we doing to prepare people to be managers and a field that is escalated to have enough of them in this area?
- Engineering positions—sometimes those jobs will stay open too long or we do not hire the right person.
- If we have an opening that is vacant for any period of time it is usually not because a shortage of applicants; it is because the state has a rather cumbersome hiring process that prevents that position from being filled.

- Engineering; chemical engineering especially.
- "Safety and Health" type positions.
- I think manufacturing positions are pretty huge ordeals for us; not many schools seem to teach those programs.

Wrap Up, Closing Remarks

Ms. Clavier expressed that "this has been very insightful" and thanked employers for attending. Dr. Noland added, "I want to echo the sentiment of thanks. And also thank you for your candor. Thank you for your insights and your observations. We are going to take all of this and bring this together across a couple of roundtables that will be held throughout the Fall to help better position our students that they can move through the workforce and provide the skills that you all need. Because in the end that is why we are here. We are here to open doors of opportunity to our students across the region and to hopefully position them for employment opportunities within the region. We thank you for your time, for your candor, for your insights. And if you have any follow-up observations or reflections please feel free to email them to us. I hope this is the beginning of a long and fruitful conversation."