TALENT TALK FEATURES SKILLED WORKFORCE PATHWAYS AND LOVE, KANSAS LAUNCH

By Emily Younger Barnwell

The Partnership was pleased to have collaborated with the Workforce Alliance of South Central Kansas and the WSU Foundation and Alumni Engagement to host its third Talent Talk of 2024.

The Aug. 1 event brought together approximately 75 education, industry and community leaders to discuss how employers can tap into the region's educational pathways.

Bobby Gandu, WSU assistant vice president for strategic enrollment management and undergraduate admissions, launched the event. He welcomed those attendees to the Marcus Welcome Center on the WSU campus.

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Tami Bradley, the Partnership's senior strategic advisor for Talent Roadmap and workforce development, encouraged attendees to dig into the talent conversation. She underscored the critical importance of connecting the workforce with employers and vice versa, a key focus identified in the Talent Roadmap.

"Our Talent Talks intend to bring industry and education leaders together to align priorities to strengthen our region's workforce," Bradley explained. "Today is about talent pipelines. We want those in attendance to gain insider knowledge about available programs to help business and industry find highly skilled talent."

Panel Discussion

A robust panel discussion, moderated by the Partnership's Ricki Ellison, followed. Panelists included:

- Brian Austin, Director of Employee Relations, Wichita State University
- Jordan Buxton, Business Development, Hutton and Circle School District, BOE VP
- Suzy Finn, Marketing and Strategic Partnerships Manager, USD 259
- Laura Ritterbush, President and CEO, Goodwill Industries of Kansas

The panelists highlighted the opportunities for businesses to engage with students, the importance of offering applied learning opportunities that start as early as middle school in some cases, and the success of programs for adult learners in the regional community.

Key takeaways:

- **Foster meaningful relationships**: Businesses and industries must create strong connections with students and educational institutions and vice versa to enhance workforce development and pipeline success.
- **Empower student initiative**: Encourage students to seek opportunities by collaborating with businesses to support self-directed career exploration.
- **Innovate engagement methods**: Industries and businesses must move beyond traditional talent recruitment efforts. They can implement creative approaches, such as work-based learning programs, or offer interactive and action-first displays at career fairs to build trust with students.

- **Include diverse voices**: Ensure a variety of perspectives are represented in discussions to enrich collaboration and decision-making.
- **Engage students and parents**: establish connections with students as young as middle school and their parents to better understand and support their needs and career aspirations.

They also discussed their innovative approaches to ensuring a steady stream of highly qualified students and adult learners are connected to local industries. Some examples include:

- Goodwill Industries of Kansas and WSU Tech have several partnerships including the FutureMaker Mobile Learning Lab and the GED Test Preparation Course. Goodwill's Employment Training Specialists (ETSs) also help find job opportunities for people with disabilities and other barriers to employment.
- Circle School District offers the College & Career Readiness Program, guided exposure to potential future college and careers for students in the 7th through 12th grades.
- Wichita Public Schools offers 25 Career and Technical Educational Pathways, providing relevant, hands-on experiences focused on high-skill, high-wage and high-demand careers.
- Wichita State University's Shocker Accelerate Program offers career navigation tools including access to targeted internships, applied learning opportunities, workshops, career coaching, career fairs, etc.

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Keith Lawing, executive director of the Workforce Alliance of South Central Kansas, closed the program. He challenged business leaders in the room to step into internships and other workforce development opportunities.

"We need more businesses to lean into this conversation. It benefits all of us," said Lawing. "We need to wave our flag about our thriving community a bit higher and make sure people know about the opportunities happening in Wichita and

south-central Kansas."

The fourth and final Talent Talk of 2024 will be in conjunction with the Ad Astra Technology Summit on Oct. 2 at Wichita State University.

Wichita State University Marcus Welcome Center

Love, Kansas Kick-Off Event

Following the Talent Talk, participants were invited to join a Love, Kansas event hosted by the Partnership in collaboration with the Kansas Department of Commerce. Love, Kansas is a national talent campaign designed to bolster Kansas' population by inviting new and former residents to experience the abundant opportunities in the Sunflower State.

Ellison once again facilitated the conversation, welcoming more than 100 leaders to the kick-off event and introducing the dynamic speakers.

Telly McGaha, president and CEO of the WSU Foundation and Alumni Engagement, started the conversation. He welcomed the attendees to Wichita State University and briefly shared his connection to the Love, Kansas campaign.

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Rachel Willis, the director of legislative affairs for the Kansas Department of Commerce, offered a call to action for attendees to be the voices of this campaign.

Rachel Willis, the director of legislative affairs for the Kansas Department of Commerce, offered an inspirational overview of the marketing initiative.

"It's time for us to share far and wide the love of our great state and ask others to join us. We need Wichitans and Kansans. We need your voices to be the main drivers of this campaign," said Willis.

Wichita Mayor Lily Wu explained why the Love, Kansas campaign is critical to Wichita's success, touching on its distinct ability to promote local pride and identity while boosting tourism and economic growth.

"Wichita is an international community. We are the Air Capital of the World. We are aerospace. We are innovators. We are entrepreneurs and we are researchers. This is a time like no other. This is the time for us to share our story, so others know why Wichita and Kansas are the best places to live, work and play," said Mayor Wu.

Three Kansas boomerangs and Wichita natives, LaShae Bell, Audra Dinnell and Sage Williams then shared why they returned to the Sunflower State.

"Wichita is a hidden gem. It has a big city vibe, but it has the authenticity of a small city. Wichita is diverse and innovative," explained Bell who lived in New York City and Los Angeles before moving back to Wichita. "I wanted my daughter to grow up around good, authentic people. I wanted to own a home with a backyard and have the ability to pour back into my community."

"Atlanta felt transactional. Everything in Wichita, Kansas was heartfelt. People want to see you thrive. They want to see you change the world," shared Williams.

"I can drive to Target and buy diapers within 15 minutes. I could not do that in Hawaii," laughed Dinnell. "The ease of living that allows me to spend my energy on the things I love rather than thinking about the logistics of daily life is what I love."

Ellison concluded the program by inviting participants to share the Love, Kansas campaign. She asked that they write, text, call, etc. their friends and family, and explain why Kansas misses them and wants them to return home.