Business leaders, UW-Stevens Point tackle IT demand

Bernie Patterson, For USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin

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I’ve used this space in the past to applaud strong partnerships the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point has with businesses and organizations throughout the region. My appreciation again goes to several community leaders, who recognize the key role our university and other educational institutions play in preparing individuals for meaningful careers and leadership roles in central Wisconsin.

Most recently, business leaders have stepped up to help address the demand for information technology workers.

IT-related jobs are projected to grow by more than 12 percent in central Wisconsin by 2018. Tim Krause, chair of our Computing and New Media Technologies Department, says UW-Stevens Point cannot turn out graduates fast enough to meet the demand.

Numerous regional business leaders have formed the Central Wisconsin Information Technology Alliance (CWITA). Its mission is to attract, train and retain an exceptional information technology workforce. About 40 companies attended an inaugural meeting in June 2015, according to Cliff King, chief executive officer of Skyward, Inc., who initiated it. They set up workgroups for K-12, higher education and community development, aimed at strengthening IT workforce and career opportunities. Partners include the North Central Wisconsin Workforce Development Board and UW-Stevens Point’s economic development coordinator.

Six of those businesses also pledged to help fund an additional IT instructor at UW-Stevens Point for one year. My sincere thanks goes to Delta Dental of Wisconsin, E.O. Johnson, Footlocker/Eastbay, Heartland Farms, Sentry Insurance and Skyward. This funding, along with a Fast Forward grant from the Workforce Development Board, will help UW-Stevens Point teach more students interested in information technology and help them enter the workforce sooner.

This is one of several business-led initiatives in the region.

On Friday, Sentry Insurance announced it will open a new Information Technology Co-op program for UW-Stevens Point students at a storefront in downtown Stevens Point. Students will have real-world experience working as part of Sentry’s IT Application Development team. It is modeled after a successful
program Sentry developed in Madison. Students will work with Sentry’s IT staff on real work projects, honing their skills while pursuing degrees, beginning this summer.

Students will work between 12 and 19 hours weekly during the school year, and up to 40 hours per week during summer months. They will receive competitive compensation and have the potential for full-time employment after graduating.

Internships, whether at Sentry, Skyward or scores of other businesses and organizations throughout central and northern Wisconsin, give our students valuable experience while they complete their degrees. The experience helps them be stronger candidates for full-time jobs at those or other businesses when they graduate. That’s good for our students, and good for the regional economy.

Last spring, Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development awarded North Central Wisconsin Workforce Development Board a $189,642 Wisconsin Fast Forward worker training grant. It applied for the grant on behalf of Skyward, Sentry Insurance and Delta Dental, in collaboration with UW-Stevens Point and Mid-State Technical College.

The grant supported customized information technology training for 60 current employees and 17 unemployed and underemployed individuals in central Wisconsin. After completing two- or four-year degrees, the goal is for participants to secure full-time employment.

I applaud our business partners for taking the lead in addressing workforce development needs in central Wisconsin. With the North Central Workforce Development Board and other education partners, we’ve forge strong collaborations. This helps our communities, and our university, thrive.

Bernie Patterson is the chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.

http://www.stevenspointjournal.com/story/life/2016/02/01/businesses-uw-stevens-point-tackle-demand/79468678/