



Everything Michigan

Foundation grants boost internship initiative in West Michigan

Published: Thursday, August 18, 2011, 7:00 AM

Business Review West Michigan

By



Photo by Johnny Quirin

West Michigan Strategic Alliance President Greg Northrup

The **West Michigan Strategic Alliance** is more than halfway to its goal of creating 3,000 internship opportunities by the end of this year.

Those efforts will no doubt be buoyed with \$20,000 in grants aimed specifically at helping build internships in the nonprofit sector.

WMSA created the **West Michigan Internship Initiative** in 2009, hoping to expand internships in the region by partnering with area universities and colleges.

"The question was, what can we do from a regional standpoint to try to encourage students to see if there are opportunities here in Michigan?" said Cindy Brown, WMSA internship project manager. "Also, from an employer's standpoint, what can we do to share those opportunities, and make sure there's a bridge between the employer and the graduate?"

The initiative was prompted by a statistic. A study showed that the percentage of the West Michigan population ages 25 to 34 with bachelor's degrees or higher is 25.9 percent — lower than state and national numbers.

"When we were going through such difficult times in 2008, even though we were still doing pretty well in West Michigan, the perception was of people having to leave the state to go elsewhere, of jobs being lost," WMSA President Greg Northrup said. "We have employers saying that 'We're having trouble finding people with the right skill sets.' That's one reason for doing internships."

Brown attributed part of the problem to a disconnect between college graduates and employers. Grads think

there aren't job opportunities here because that's what they've heard, and employers conclude that all qualified graduates are leaving, and there is no educated talent available for hire.

Internships can help bridge that divide.

"The national statistics are about 70 percent of interns are offered positions, and about 50 percent will stay on full-time," Brown said. "But other employers will see (an internship) on a resume, and think, 'So and so has a great internship program.

This person must have had a great working experience while they were there; this will probably be a good hire for me."

Internships can also open students' eyes to opportunities here.

"That's the problem with the perception that you have to leave West Michigan to find a job," he said. "In fact, there are lots of jobs in West Michigan. Part of what an internship can do is change people's perceptions about what's available and what's not available."

WMSA has been working to show companies that setting up internships is worth the time and investment.

"We created the employer internship tool kit that breaks it down into five steps on how to have an effective training program, and we offer training advice," Brown said. "The idea is, if the employer's interested, they can come in one-on-one, or we can talk to them in a training session, which is really beneficial because then there are other employers in the same room, probably asking other questions, or there might be others in the room that have had internship opportunities in the past and they want to tweak theirs."

WMSA has been reaching out to community foundations for financial support in building internship programs among the more than 5,000 nonprofit organizations in the region. With \$5,000 from the Community Foundation of the Holland/Zeeland Area, \$10,000 from the Grand Rapids Community Foundation and \$5,000 from the Fremont Area Community Foundation so far, WMSA will apply the strategy it has used in small- and mid-sized companies to the nonprofits.

Not only will that provide interns with valuable on-the-job experience, the organizations benefit from the boost in staffing.

"We sensed that there was work that could be done to help nonprofits understand how internships could help with their employment process," Northup said. "Later this fall, we would start doing training programs for nonprofits in the region."

Bringing nonprofits into the fold can only help propel WMSA closer to its goal of establishing 3,000 internships by the end of the year.

"Those that follow the guidelines that we put together are doing extremely well," Northrup said. "There's a lot of value to working with an intern."

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