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Kat Toomey | Inside the Job Market: How to achieve your dreams

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By Kat Toomey

PITTSFIELD — "What is the best way to achieve your dreams?"

A Berkshire County student recently asked this question on Career Village, a website where students can ask questions about different careers they are interested in. Vetted professionals answer questions daily on this website about myriad careers, but their responses often intertwine career advice with life advice.

Other questions included, "How do you make your resume stand out?" and "How do you limit after-college debt?"

Here are some answers:

Career education

Career education is extremely important. The MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board has been leading Berkshire County's college and career readiness initiatives for decades.

Although nearly 90 percent of all graduating seniors participate in the workforce board's college/career readiness programming through career fairs, shadowing days, internships and

STEM — science, technology, engineering and math — initiatives, much more needs to be done to educate the community about career pathways and employment opportunities that exist in the Berkshires.

All Berkshire school districts have college/career programs that help to assist students. Career readiness coordinators, often counselors, and the workforce board work together to enhance career-readiness models.

During the past month, Berkshire County schools have been using Career Village to engage eighth and 10th graders — replacing the regional 10th grade Career Expo and eighth grade Career Conferences slated to happen this spring. The workforce board is providing ongoing support to teachers and guidance counselors to set up classrooms in Career Village with weekly assignments.

A Berkshire Youth Career Readiness Network group has been established within Career Village for local professionals to answer questions posed by local students. The Berkshire Workforce Board is recruiting professionals to sign up through its existing Career Readiness Volunteers initiative. For information, contact Kat Toomey at kat@masshireberkshire.com.

Summer Youth Works Program

The Berkshire Workforce Board, in partnership with the MassHire Berkshire Career Center, is developing project-based, virtual opportunities for Pittsfield youths this summer who meet income eligibility in the city's 16th state-funded Youth Works Program. The project for younger participants will be in partnership with a local farm and market that are providing gardening kits and supplementary lessons around developing a home garden.

Integrated into the curriculum are work-readiness and life-skill components from the signaling success curriculum.

The older participants will be participating in a virtual customer service certification program offered through Goodwill Industries. These youngsters will also take part in the signaling success curriculum. Participants will complete around 16 hours of project-based learning/training a week and will receive a weekly stipend of \$150, with additional incentives for 100 percent participation.

For information: Kelly Skrocki, MassHire Berkshire Career Center's youth services coordinator, at kskrocki@masshireberkshirecc.com.

School programs

Schools continue to offer career education. While educators are navigating a new way of learning, they have not forgotten to incorporate career development lessons, and we owe them tremendous gratitude for everything they are doing to keep students engaged.

- Pittsfield Public Schools is engaging career vocation technical education students through content/trade-specific software, in addition to all students using Xello, a college and career planning platform, and Edgenuity, an online blended learning curriculum for career awareness and exploration.

Co-op students may voluntarily (with caregiver and employer permission) continue at their job site. The CVTE coordinator is conducting virtual check-ins with students and employers. Career

readiness coordinators are using Career Village, the Massachusetts Career Information System and additional virtual career-readiness resources to engage non-CVTE students.

- Hoosac Valley Middle and High School's Career Readiness Coordinators are providing individual college and career counseling. They are using Career Village with the eighth grade.

Students enrolled in work-readiness courses and work-based learning are doing virtual activities focused on career exploration in the way of a "Reality Check."

Students choose a city to move to. Then, they choose a part-time job, learn to apply for a school loan, locate an apartment, budget utilities, figure out their preferred mode of transportation, go grocery shopping, etc. The students have found this to be eye opening, and most say that they now see living on one's own is not inexpensive.

- Mount Everett Regional Middle and High School's Career Readiness Coordinator is using Career Village to engage all 50 junior and senior students and interns. Eighth graders are engaged via Career Village as well.

- Lenox Memorial Middle and High School is posting career awareness and exploration activities, videos and more from Naviance (it's a college and career planning system) and the Massachusetts Career Information System into Google classrooms to maintain career development for students doing internships. The high school students are doing assignments on identifying strengths and multiple intelligences and learning styles. These activities connect with other Naviance assessments pertaining to career clusters.

- Lee Middle and High School's career readiness coordinator is working with a junior English teacher on a virtual resume-writing unit. This will replace the canceled schoolwide career fair and mock job interviews. All students doing internships are required to do weekly journals and college/career-readiness focused writing assignments.

Looking ahead

The Berkshire Workforce Board is also developing virtual work-based learning and externship opportunities for summer and fall 2020, as well as virtual opportunities for keeping students in grades six through 12 engaged in career development education.

While we continue to physically distance from each other, we still need to be connected. One way for professionals to support Berkshire County students is to join Career Village and give advice. Now more than ever, it is important for our students to be aware of opportunities in their community and find support from professionals to help achieve their dreams.

For more information on the Berkshires' career readiness initiatives, contact Kat Toomey at Kat@masshireberkshire.com.

Kat Toomey is the MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board's career readiness coordinator.