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Workforce board looking for investors in KY hirED

By DON SERGENT dsergent@bgdailynews.com Mar 8, 2019

Leaders at the South Central Workforce Development Board are hoping local employers are willing to invest in a new program aimed at helping solve some workforce issues.

KY hirED is the successor to Western Kentucky University's Learn and Earn program that placed WKU students in part-time jobs with local employers and offered the opportunity for those students to earn scholarship money.

Learn and Earn was a victim of WKU's belt-tightening, so the workforce board and its nonprofit foundation have picked up the program.

"We were concerned when it (Learn and Earn) seemed to be ending," said Michelle Dyer, human resources manager at Service One Credit Union in Bowling Green. "So we're glad it's continuing with KY hirED."

Dyer said Service One Credit Union used the Learn and Earn program to fill a number of part-time positions, and she plans to use KY hirED for multiple job openings as well.

KY hirED launched in January, and the workforce board introduced it to some local employers and potential investors Thursday during a meeting at La Gala.

WDB President and CEO Robert Boone said the new program is a good fit because it allows the board to address workforce issues that go beyond the scope normally funded through the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.

Boone said a new nonprofit arm of the WDB called Employward Inc. will be utilized as the conduit for raising the funds that are used for providing scholarships.

Under Learn and Earn, businesses hired WKU students for part-time work for a semester and then were invoiced for the scholarship that the student earned through completing the work requirement and maintaining good academic standing.

With KY hirED, business owners contribute \$2,000 per student to the WDB nonprofit that then handles distribution of the scholarship money.

Leslie Witty, who oversaw Learn and Earn at WKU and is now the workforce board's vice president of outreach and communications, said KY hirED has other advantages over Learn and Earn, which was in place for about three years. For starters, the new program is available to students at both WKU and Southcentral Kentucky Community and Technical College.

Those students are able to utilize the Career Edge curriculum used by WDB service provider Career Team to learn the "soft skills" needed to succeed in the workplace.



“This is something that I believe in wholeheartedly,” Witty said. “It addresses the problem of rampant turnover with entry-level jobs and addresses the problem of college tuition costs.”

Witty said KY hirED can give students a “guided work experience” that pays them a part-time wage while also giving them an opportunity to earn scholarship money.

“This is not an apprenticeship or a co-op,” Witty said. “This focuses on entry-level jobs where we have a need to ramp up retention. The students are pre-screened so we can find the students with the drive and determination to succeed.”

Sally Ray, who helped launch Learn and Earn when she was chancellor at WKU’s Glasgow campus, believes the transition to the workforce board makes perfect sense.

“I’m thrilled,” said Ray, now a professor of communications at WKU. “I think this program has found the right place. It has great value for students, businesses and the community. It makes sense to have it at the workforce board.”

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