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# Zaczek hired to lead workforce participation

By DON SERGENT [dsergent@bgdailynews.com](mailto:dsergent@bgdailynews.com)  
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Joshua Zaczek  
Submitted

Joshua Zaczek cut his teeth on data analysis while studying political science, economics and legal studies at Western Kentucky University. Now the 2021 magna cum laude graduate will get to apply those research skills in a role that is more than academic.

## MORE INFORMATION



City, county helping pay for new workforce position

Zaczek was announced Tuesday as the choice to fill the new workforce participation lead position that was created as a partnership between WKU's Innovation Campus and the South Central Workforce Development Board.

Housed at the 30,000-square-foot "collaborative smart space" that is part of the Innovation Campus, Zaczek will report to both Innovation Campus CEO Buddy Steen and workforce development board President and CEO Jon Sowards as

Training on heavy equipment aims to fill need

he attempts to tackle a problem gnawing at the state and regional economy: workforce participation.

In a region where new employers will soon be bringing hundreds of jobs, a low percentage of working-age adults either working or looking for work can be a drag on economic growth.

Sowards, in fact, calls the workforce participation rate "the topic of our time" and has made it a priority to address the issue.

Now, with help from WKU, Warren Fiscal Court and the city of Bowling Green, the workforce board and the Innovation Campus have the wherewithal to tackle the workforce participation conundrum.

The Innovation Campus is helping finance the effort through a five-year, \$250,000 grant from the U.S. Economic Development Administration procured in partnership with the University of Louisville.

Fiscal court and the city are contributing \$20,000 each to help fund a position that is expected to help local leaders understand the workforce participation issue and address it.

"There has been a seismic shift in the workforce over the past two years that we urgently have to understand and solve as a region," Sowards said in a news release. "I am thankful that the community has funded and entrusted the workforce board with oversight and direction of this effort."

That seismic shift Sowards talks about can be seen in employment data.

The national labor force participation rate has plummeted from 67.3% in 2000 to 62.3% in a September report. With a participation rate of 66%, Warren County is near that national figure but Kentucky as a whole is at 59%.

Understanding those numbers requires research and data analysis, something that Sowards believes Zaczek can provide.

“The position will focus heavily on research, looking at what are the national and local trends,” Sowards said.

Zaczek believes his background has prepared him to do just that.

"It all starts with finding out why things are what they are," said Zaczek, 24. "We'll look at local data and zoom in on the most micro parts of the issue.

"I used to work on political campaigns and would look into data, so I have my research legs under me."

That research, Steen says, will not be simply an academic exercise.

Steen hopes Zaczek's work will lead to what he calls "novel potential solutions" to the workforce participation problem.

"He (Zaczek) can identify things that are choke points in workforce participation," Steen said. "He can then bring together people from

industry, government and education and work toward developing pilot programs that can be tested."

Zaczek believes being housed at the Innovation Campus will allow him to tap into WKU resources that will help him access and interpret data in a way that will improve understanding of an important topic.

"Employment is something that affects everybody," he said. "I'm really excited to dive into it. I'm looking forward to it."

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