

DIVERSITY, GROWTH, AND TECH SAVVINESS: WAKE TECH STUDENTS ENHANCE LOCAL BUSINESS WHILE BUILDING TRANSFERABLE SKILLSETS

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BACKGROUND

Programs in which students gain practical work experience and potentially earn wages while pursuing a credential have been recognized by higher education institutions, employers, and policy experts as providing opportunities for workforce talent development while advancing equity and diversity in industries.¹ Multiple avenues exist for students to gain professional experience through Wake Tech, which tend to fall under three broad categories: (1) Work-Based Learning (formerly known as Cooperative Education or “Co-op”), (2) apprenticeships, and (3) internships. In addition, since around 2018, an informal partnership with The Tennie Group, an accounting firm headquartered in Knightdale, NC, has facilitated opportunities for Wake Tech students seeking employment and on-the-job training.

The purpose of this case study is to understand the distinctions among these programs, as well as how this informal program has operated successfully to provide benefits to students and the employer. An additional aim is to identify whether there are elements that could be scaled up and/or replicated with other local employers—as well as the resources that would be needed to do so—to provide more of these types of mutually beneficial opportunities.

¹ Cheney, 2019; Haviland & Robbins, 2021; Ross et al., 2020

FINDINGS

Data from semi-structured interviews with key informants, Wake Tech program websites and online source material, Wake Tech podcasts, and email correspondence, provide evidence for the following key findings:

- The informal nature of the partnership with the accounting firm has allowed for students with diverse backgrounds to gain access to the work opportunities with fewer academic and administrative requirements than the formal programs.
- Major benefits/gains for students working for The Tennie Group:
 - new skillsets learned on-the-job
 - work experience in a professional setting
 - transferable skills and knowledge they can apply in other industries
 - experience working in a supportive environment to help them succeed
 - flexible scheduling to accommodate their class schedules and academic workload
 - growth and advancement within the company
 - experience training others as they transition into new roles
- Major benefits/gains for the employer:
 - cultural and linguistic diversity within the firm to better represent and communicate with the communities they serve
 - diversification of the firm's client base
 - ability to grow into new markets and geographies
 - enhanced technological savviness

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for ways Wake Tech can scale up partnerships with local employers:

- identify new or existing resources to have an intermediary at the college who can identify the specific needs and interests of students and employers and



make recommendations based on a goodness of fit for student employment outside of the formal programs

- explore the possibility of providing a direct line to the college for employers to get referrals for student hires
- expand outreach to recruit new employers into partnerships
- communicate with existing and prospective partners about various options for employing students.

Ultimately, existing research and evidence from this study indicate that enhancing and diversifying collaborative relationships between higher education institutions and employers can create opportunities to promote the upward mobility of underrepresented and minoritized groups and, by creating a school-to-employer pipeline, to address local and nation-wide equity and labor gaps in high-paying, fast growth jobs.

REFERENCES

Cheney, G. (2019). Growing equity and diversity through apprenticeship: Business perspectives. JFF's Center for Apprenticeship & Work-Based Learning.

Haviland, S. & Robbins, S. (2021) Career and technical education as a conduit for skilled technical careers: A targeted research review and framework for future research. ETS Research Report Series ETS RR-21-07.

Ross, M., Kazis, R., Bateman, N., & Stateler, L. (2020). Work-based learning can advance equity and opportunity for America's young people. Washington, DC: Brookings.

FURTHER READING

Full report:

Madsen, R., Niles, B., & MacDonald, J. (2022). Diversity, growth, and tech savviness: Wake Tech students enhance local business while building transferrable skillsets. Wake Technical Community College.

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