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Backpacks to Briefcases helps millennials launch careers

BY TOM WHITE

It is, unfortunately, an increasingly common story for millennials: graduating with a bachelor's degree only to find a soft labor market coupled with a supply-side horde of experienced dislocated workers competing for scarce entry-level jobs in a post-recession economy.

So what does a millennial do when faced with this dilemma? In many cases, the answer is to take a temporary job in the service industry or with a community-based organization while remaining vigilant for career openings in fields of interest.

These graduates often need just a modicum of targeted support to make the connections that can propel them to personal and career success and fulfillment. But without that support, there's tremendous risk that a starter job slides into underemployment that can deflate the most ambitious young grad.

For some North Carolina residents facing this situation, there's an answer. The Backpacks to Briefcases program provides paid internships and access to job openings that better align with career aspirations, enabling underemployed grads to launch their professional careers.

The program accepts recent college grads – unemployed or underemployed and out of school for six to 24 months – who are residents of Wake or Johnston counties; the Cape Fear region encompassing New Hanover, Columbus, Brunswick and Pender counties; and the Kerr Tar region, which includes Warren, Vance, Granville, Franklin and Person counties. Students work 30 hours per week for \$11 per hour. Internships last eight weeks and include a mandatory weeklong orientation of enhanced career development exercises including resume preparation, soft-skill development and interview and career-fair preparation.

Bitu Asgari is one prime example of the power of Backpacks to Briefcases. After graduation, she secured an administrative support position with a community-based organization in Raleigh. The bachelor's degree that Bitu earned from N.C. State in political science was nicely complemented by a very impressive quantitative analytical skill set. So it was really no surprise when her Backpacks to Briefcases enrollment produced an internship at international investment bank Credit Suisse in Research Triangle Park. She capitalized upon that introduction to the world of

finance to secure a permanent, full-time management position as a risk management/profit and loss analyst with Bank of America in Charlotte, a logical progression from her internship experience.

With aggregate student education loan debt at roughly \$1.3 trillion, projected to rise to an astounding \$2 trillion by 2020, it certainly would be fortuitous to see a new focus on this looming debt bubble and the havoc it could wreak. An initiative such as Backpacks to Briefcases, currently funded by a grant from Duke Energy Foundation, produces a plethora of public-policy benefits, some labor market exchange efficiencies, some productivity enhancement and some relieved parental co-signers on loan obligations. It also has the propensity to make employers happy that they have another mechanism to bridge the insidious skills gap.

Backpacks to Briefcases' quintessential feature just might be the power, potential and promise of the millennial generation. We all have a stake in their personal and professional success. We can do more to help bring that about. With broad-based support, Backpacks to Briefcases can be scaled up across the state – and eventually across the Southeast and the nation – to become a true force for millennials and for the world they will soon lead.

Tom White is director of economic development partnership at N.C. State University.

MORE INFO

Backpacks to Briefcases is a partnership between N.C. State, EDSI and the Capital Area Workforce Development Board and funded by a grant from Duke Energy. For more information, visit nando.com/backpacks or email tjwhite3@ncsu.edu.



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