

## **Deep East Texas Jobs and Education Forums**

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Workforce Solutions Deep East Texas (WSDET) was awarded one of the 17 2023-2024 Texas Education Agency (TEA) Tri-Agency Grants for Regional Conveners in April 2023. During our research in the fall of 2023 for development of the WSDET Regional Asset Map & Gap Analysis, we conducted numerous employer interviews that revealed that new hires lacked the “Soft Skills” or “Employability Skills.”

About this same time, I had the opportunity to attend a Deep East Texas water quality and wastewater meeting, which I visited with several young adults that had just started their new careers. As I visited with these new employees, I realized that we have a large disconnect between several of our regional employers and their expectations of their employees, as well as the new employees’ expectations of their employers. I had the opportunity to discuss the “disconnect” during a meeting here at the board office, which I was told “ Jeff, this was nothing new and the lack of soft skills has been an issue for the past twenty years”. So, I decided to do something to address the challenges of our employers & employees, by developing a true collaboration experience that would address tough, relevant issues.

We started planning to host a series of collaboration meetings this past spring/summer, in which we would invite all stakeholders (secondary school reps, post-secondary institution reps, training provider reps, college students, high school seniors-max of 3/school, county officials, community organization reps, and community members). We partnered with the Stephen F. Austin State University Center for Applied Research and Rural Innovation (CARRI) for the forums, since our focus aligned with the EDA University Center Program grant they received last year.

We scheduled the forums to be conducted at different locations/dates within our region to allow for better stakeholder attendance opportunities (flyer attached). During the forums, we provided a brief introduction about the Tri-Agency Regional Convening grant and our convening targeted occupation educational pathways. CARRI also provided a brief introduction about their services and the opportunities they can offer to their students, staff, and regional employers.

The forum program was designed to spend most of the time for our forum attendees to collaborate at their tables and then provide us with their responses to our questions. We asked multiple questions about employability skills, employer expectations, employee expectations, mentorship program availability, training opportunities, WBL opportunities (High School Practicums, Internships, apprenticeships) , positive/negative effects on workplace culture/climate, as well as several questions for our students. We utilized [Interactive presentation software - Mentimeter](#) to not only collect table responses but provide additional opportunities for participant engagement. We ended each forum with an opportunity for attendees to complete the forum “exit ticket” evaluation. For one of the evaluation questions, We asked attendees to provide us with their contact information if they wanted to be a part of our regional initiative . We had an outstanding response (including multiple high school seniors) to our invitation to be a part of our team.

We also had positive responses from our 211 participants (Avg 53/forum) that highly valued the forums and expressed their support for the experience.

Our plan is to reunite forum participants (especially those who volunteered ) to review all the feedback/table responses we received to help create a “best practices” resource. The ultimate goals of these forums would be to further strengthen the regional mindset , as well as that this product/resource would be incorporated into our employers’ new hire/onboarding processes.