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Showcasing the Region's Best Practices: The Commons Program

MS. O'BRIEN: I mean, I just love Becky. I love your comment about creating this region as the leader for talent. You know, that is a map we want to follow. And just as quick housekeeping issue, you know, I mentioned please make sure you download the conference app, in case you're confused, there are pieces of paper on the tables that show the password. And the password is SRC17; Summit Regional Competitiveness 17.

So, next, this year we are adding something new to the program, what we're calling the short vignettes, to highlight some of the best practices that we have found in the region. And the Alliance Workforce Team is very interested in a program that we have heard about from Michael Holstad called, The Commons. Michael is the Executive Director of Innovation Milwaukee, and co-founder of The Commons. He is a serial entrepreneur, and the creator of an app at UWM called *The Brewery*, which hires students and builds mobile applications for researchers, non-profit organizations, and start-up organizations

throughout Wisconsin.

Although, again, I think this is something, Michael, that we need to extend beyond the borders of Wisconsin. But, this is -- The Commons is something that I think we should really listen carefully about, and I think there is real opportunity for application across the region. So Michael, thank you for being here today, and we look forward to your remarks.

MICHAEL HOLSTAD: Well, good morning. It's always hard to be the guy that follows a keynote like Becky, mostly because she was incredible, but also because it completely changes everything that I wanted to say today. So, we're just going to wing this. How's everybody feeling about that? Again, I'm Michael Holstad. I work and oversee the talent and innovation initiatives at the Greater Milwaukee Committee. If you're not familiar with the work of the GMC, we're a civic organization in Milwaukee. We have a membership of around 180 C-Suite leaders, CEOs in particular, focusing on a variety of issues from vibrancy of place, to economic prosperity, to talent and innovation.

And the program that we'll be talking about today is really the flagship program of our talent and innovation efforts here. It's called The Commons. When I started at

the GMC three years ago, the executives that we were working with were saying much of what we've been hearing already here this morning: I can't find the talent that I'm looking for in my company. But, in particular, I can't find the talent that I need to help me be innovative in moving my company forward.

We started thinking about the assets that we have in the region to solve that challenge. We have within the M-7 region alone, 24 colleges and universities representing 185,000 students; which by the way, is one of the highest densities of college students in the country. But we don't often think of ourselves in Milwaukee as a college town or a college region. So, we have that going for us.

We have a collection of companies in the area that are innovative in their industry. Many are headquartered in the Milwaukee area, which presents some different talent needs, but also some unique opportunities for our young talent in the region. And then, regardless of what the Kaufman Foundation might think of us, we do have a growing and thriving startup scene in the Milwaukee area. So, we've got innovators coming into this city, people who are thinking about startups and innovating in that area.

So, we thought, what if we could merge these communities together and create a platform that makes it

easier for companies to find talent out of these communities? And so, The Commons was born.

We went back to our corporate leaders, and we said, well, when you say you're looking for entrepreneurs, what exactly are you looking for? And they said, well, we want someone with an entrepreneurial mindset. We said, okay, what does that mean? And I think that, honestly, the word that wasn't spoken at the time, but I heard the word this morning, was "learnability".

In a lot of ways what we're honing in on with these students is not necessarily what it takes to start your own company, but what it takes to think like an entrepreneur; how to have the ability to learn as you go. If you think about serial entrepreneurs, these are the people who can go into just about any industry, understand and see a challenge or an opportunity, innovate and build ideas around that. And that's a lot of what we're working on with the students in this program.

We're teaching them about resilience, we're teaching them about adaptability, we're teaching them about how to deal with failure, how to think critically, how to communicate effectively, how to be collaborative in their processes. And that's the skills that we're looking at.

We talked to our students when they come into the

program about the four H's. We have four H's that we think that students kind of fit into; the hacker, the hipster, the hustler, and the handler; the hacker being more your technical type, the hipster kind of your design person. I am not that person, by the way; your hustler who is the salesperson; and your handler is kind of the person that brings them altogether, your project manager type person. And we thought that that's what we want students thinking about in terms of that entrepreneurial mindset. Not that I'm a biomedical student, not that I'm an accountant, but rather, these are the skills that I can bring to the table to solve real world challenges.

So, what does this program look like? Again, it's a regional collaborative. We bring students from those 24 colleges and universities to the table. Those students apply into the program. In a bit, in just a minute about what that application process looks like. We accept 75 students in the program. We run it twice per year. It's a nine-week program. It fits nicely in the spring semester and in the fall semester. I am not an academic, but we hired one to help us actually develop a curriculum and put some academic rigor around the program. So, students from 20 of those 24 campuses actually receive academic credit for their work in this program.

Now, a bit on what it takes to get into the program. We really focus in on having students apply into the program to talk to us about what they can bring to the table. We specifically do not ask them their year in school. We don't ask them about their degree program. And we certainly don't ask them about their GPA. If I had been asked about my GPA to get into this program, I probably wouldn't be able to get in.

So, these are the things that are often used to evaluate students getting into these types of programs. But what we're really looking for is about passion and drive. We ask them about how they work on teams; describe a dysfunctional team that they've been a part of. What did that look like, and what did they learn from it? Tell us about a time when you were on a really well-performing team. What did that look like? What did you bring to the table to make that happen?

But mostly, we're putting these students in uncomfortable situations, situations they might not have been in before. Some of them might even be talking to a CEO at some point. We want to understand how they're going to leverage those opportunities to build their career. All of this is about showing them the opportunities that exist in our region to help keep them here and develop them into

employees or startup founders at some point.

So, the program itself, once those students are accepted, they get split into one of 10 teams. We have five teams that are focused around startups that are student-led ideas. So, when students sign up for the program, there's a little checkbox that says, "I have an idea that I'm interested in bringing to this program." We will meet with those students and find out if that idea is a fit for the program. If it is, we will accept them in as one of our five student founders. Those students then have the opportunity to build the team of their peers to help take that idea through the nine-week program, and see if it has any legs, and see if there's an opportunity there.

The other five teams are corporate led innovation challenges from companies like Kohl's, Northwestern Mutual, or American Family Insurance. These are companies who are putting forward a very broad innovation challenge. And I'll use an example from Manpower. Manpower has been a great partner with us from the very beginning. Their challenge last semester was, they came up and they said, okay, so, for centuries we've been using this piece of paper called the resume to tell everybody why we're qualified for a job. Maybe that resume has gone online now, but ultimately, it's the same thing. We want you to

completely throw out the resume, and imagine what the future resume is going to look like for jobs in the 21st century innovation economy. And it was like the mic dropped, and students were like, oh, I can be on this. I hate building a resume. Let me be on this team and figure out what the resume of the future is going to look like.

So, these are the sorts of opportunities that we really want our students to work on. These are real-world applications of what they're learning in the classroom. So, what do our students look like? It's a very diverse group of students. We've had 500 students go through our first six classes. We're in the middle of our cohort right now. We have a mentor network of over 350 individuals. These are startup founders, business executives, retired business executives, community leaders; people who want to help these students get connected.

Students have taken on 70 projects over the course of the program. And our diversity numbers is something that we're really proud of. And I'd love to be able to say that we were purposeful in this, but the great thing is that with diversity or of our 24 colleges and universities, The Commons is really a slice of that diversity. So, we're almost one-to-one, male-to-female, and 35 to 37 percent students of color, depending on the cohort.

The other interesting thing here is our age diversity. We've had students as young as 17, and as old as 56 years old go through the program. And ironically, in that case, both students on either end of that bell curve were on the same team. They were innovating for American Family Insurance. And it was neat to see how those two individuals approached the challenge, both walked away with very different experiences, but still it's something that was incredibly valuable to them.

We have had some pretty significant results, and this is what we're proud of. We really do a lot of evaluation through the program, both before students even step foot in the door, we're sending out surveys and asking for information, and then many times through the process of the program, and then again at the end. Ninety percent of our students have made key professional connections as a result of the program. This means that they've sat down and had a cup of coffee with an executive. They've taken the opportunity to meet with people to leverage the connections that we provide them to really grow their career options.

And the stat that we're most proud of is that 81 percent of our students after they go through the program are more likely to seek jobs here.

Now, a little bit on that. When we asked students how

likely they are to stay in Wisconsin when they first come into the program, we're shocked by how few students actually want to stay here. And when we dive into that a little deeper, we find that it has nothing to do with the weather or anything like that. It has, in fact, everything to do with that they don't think that there's anything in that region for them. Many of these students have grown up with these companies in their backyard and they have perceptions about, well, Briggs and Stratton just makes lawn mowers. And Kohl's is where my mom forced me to shop when I was in high school. How are these companies actually innovative? Our job in this program, over the nine weeks, is to help them understand, not only how these companies are innovative, but how the community itself in the Milwaukee area has opportunities for them, and is innovative in and of itself.

So, our secret sauce in all of this, and as you would expect it to be in any sort of collaborative effort, is trust and relationships. We've taken a long time to really build those trust and relationships between these four key stakeholder groups. But where it all begins for us is the student experience in the lower left-hand corner there. From day one of the program, and we've pivoted pretty significantly since that first cohort, we've stayed true to

providing an amazing experience for the students. And what that has resulted in is an incredible amount of trust among these students.

So, when we create opportunities for them to come and speak to companies, to participate in Hackathon, and to come to a speaker series, they show up, because they know that there are opportunities for them. Once that trust and that platform is there, the business and industry community comes together, academia comes together, and so too does the community. It's been interesting to see, especially in the non-profit and social innovation world, both the students' interests, as well as our understanding that it may be easy for a student to leave a job, a young professional leave a job; it's a lot harder for them to leave a community or a neighborhood that they feel a connection to.

So, throughout this program, we try to expose them to opportunities for them to apply the skills that they have, these strong amazing skills, into their neighborhood and into their community, so that they can put those roots even deeper into our area.

So, where are we going from here? We really view this as an opportunity to create a framework, a connected regional platform. If we can bring high school students,

college students, our alumni, and pair them with mentoring professionals, local communities -- or local companies, excuse me -- community partners, that's where we really see that we can create an opportunity for people to easily connect with our young talent.

We are growing The Commons both regionally, as well as programmatically. We are looking at creating deeper presences in communities like Racine and Kenosha, Waukesha and Sheboygan, as well, and there's been interest in Madison. We'll be exploring that in early 2018. But from a programmatic perspective, we've been really surprised by the amount of interest from our middle schools and high schools. We've had over 30 high school districts reach out to us. We have not been out there getting them. They've filled out our form on our website and have a real passion for what we want to do.

So, if we can start to impact high school students, and we've done this in a couple of cases, we've done pop-up classes in high schools where we've had students individually come to us and say, you know, we didn't realize how easy it was to get connected here. And three of those students said that they changed their committed school from a campus outside of the state to Milwaukee-based universities as a result of seeing how they could get

connected to the business community. That's three students. That is three more students in the talent pipeline now than what we would have had before. And we weren't even really trying to make that happen. If we were focused on doing that, this could really start to grow the pie of talent in the region, which is very much what we're looking for.

So, with that, I'm happy to take any questions that you might have. I don't know -- I don't see Kelly where we're at on time. But happy to take any questions; otherwise I'll be finished here within five minutes. Thank you. So, five minutes for questions. Yes?

FEMALE SPEAKER: Can you address the cost structure?

MR. HOLSTAD: Sure. The question was about the cost structure. This is free for students, as well as free for the universities. Primarily, our corporate partners give to the program, as well as foundations and philanthropic grants.

MR. HOLSTAD: Yes?

MR. BOYLE: Can you please wait for a microphone before you ask the question?

FEMALE SPEAKER: Hi, I'm Lesley Walker, and I'm from UW Parkside, and I'm dean of a college of Arts and Humanities. One of the things I was wondering about, have

you had an opportunity to maybe get an ensemble of some sort started as a small business, or a theatrical group, comedy group; anything in the arts where -- because, you know, obviously, all of our graduates in the arts do -- a lot of them are interested in starting ensembles, and those are fundamentally small businesses.

MR. HOLSTAD: Yes, absolutely. So we've -- you know, the beauty of the program is that it mixes students from a variety of different disciplines and colleges and universities, and I've been amazed, you know, you might expect a program like this, you're going to see a lot of business students apply for it. And, we do have them, but it's been amazing how many creatives and fine arts and just art students, in general, have kept coming to the program.

So, we actually just had a student come through the program that is an accomplished violist from UW-Milwaukee, and he created a company called BookLive. He had a hard time connecting his talent to people who wanted to book his talent, and found that in his community that was a common recurring theme and a challenge for people to deal with. So, he has taken that program forward. He's since gotten following on funding, participated in a number of business plan competitions, and is moving forward with that.

Our goal in this is not, you know, to create companies

and create jobs. We're really just exposing students to what it means to think like an entrepreneur. And in the process of that, we've uncovered some amazing students who might be your -- might not be your typical entrepreneur, that have gone through the program, learned what it takes to understand your market, understand your customer, how to solve a problem. And then we feed them into other programs within the ecosystem in Milwaukee that can provide further support for them to really grow their business.

FEMALE SPEAKER: Do you have a list of those?

MR. HOLSTAD: Of?

FEMALE SPEAKER: Students and projects.

MR. HOLSTAD: Yes, yes. If you go to our website, www.thecommonswi.com, and I can also follow up with you as well. I think there's one more person.

FEMALE SPEAKER: I'm not sure if I need a microphone. I'm a professor, so I usually project. But be that as it may, are any of your students that are participating available to come to some of our campuses and talk with our students about their experience and encourage and motivate them as well?

MR. HOLSTAD: That's a great question, and the short answer is yes. Our -- the way we get our students into this program is primarily through word of mouth. We have a

dedicated campus liaison network of faculty and administrators that help get the word out, but ultimately it's from the students that have gone through program that go and tell their friends and so forth.

So, our students that have gone through this program, sort of go through with withdrawal after the program because they're like, now what do I do, I just had this amazing experience. And so we've really encouraged them to become mentors into the program. They've worked with some of our high school students, but they also go onto campuses and talk about the program and encourage people to attend. So, absolutely, we would definitely welcome that.

All right, great. thank you.

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