

Interns Turn Hired

A business-internship program cultivates full-time employees

BY JULIA DIXON

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Kevin Aliberti is excited about his summer internship at Cascade School Supplies, a North Adams–based distributor of consumable school supplies and furniture. “This is a good first foot in the door to a world I haven’t been in before.”

By “world” he means the start of his career. Aliberti, who grew up in Medford but has family in Williamstown, is studying economics and

computer science at Westfield State University in neighboring Hampden County. Poised to enter his senior year, his focus is on information technology, although he is interested in learning more about web development.

“This is my first internship,” he says. “I have worked in restaurants but that doesn’t prepare me for what I want to do.”



MEGAN HALEY

Cascade's president Pete Cote often hires high-school and college students to help fill orders in the summer but, like Aliberti, is new to internships. Cote is looking forward to cultivating relationships with college interns who bring "a fresh set of eyes" to company projects. "Our goal was to get Kevin to work on the website," Cote explains. "He has already made suggestions to us to make it more user-friendly. So far, he's been great."

Aliberti and Cote are working together thanks to [Berkshire Business Interns](#) (BBI), a cohort-based internship program launched this summer by Lever, Inc., an enterprise-development center. The program acts as a matchmaker between eager students and companies, collecting applications to local internship positions or, in some cases, working directly with small-scale employers to create first-time internship positions.

BBI is available to any business in any industry. "The common thread is that we place interns at companies that want to grow and develop the workforce," says Huff Templeton, BBI's program director. This year, the 15 participating companies range from manufacturers and printers to healthcare nonprofits and banks.

Whether large or small, these companies are starting to understand trends in millennial hiring. BBI received 450 applications from students and recent graduates; one-third of those applicants were from Berkshire County, but the 30-intern cohort is two-thirds local.

Pete Lopez, senior manager at LTI Smart Glass in Pittsfield, is a BBI intern supervisor who made a point to choose a local applicant. "What BBI offered was a mechanism to reach students who were interested in the work we do and interested in the Berkshires as well," says Lopez. "We've probably hired three to four local, young engineers in the year I've been here. We see an internship program as a way to recruit young employees who are a good fit."

Perhaps what makes BBI so compelling to students and supervisors alike is the intensive training it offers. Supervisors attended a half-day workshop in June that provided management best practices as well as the student perspective. Although Lopez had worked with a Williams College intern last summer, his team still benefitted from the training. "It reinforced for us that we were doing the necessary things before the interns arrived to ensure a good ten-week experience."

Interns attended their own two-day orientation that same month, which allowed them to meet each other and prepare for the work ahead. "This training is one of the key selling points for the students," says Templeton. "We covered everything from dress and professional etiquette to how to parlay their internship into a job."

The student orientation was just one of many social events BBI has planned for the cohort. The program gives students the opportunity to make connections with their peers and enjoy the

Berkshires while they're here, but they seem more focused on work than play.

"The Berkshires may be more appealing to certain people," Templeton explains, "but, ultimately, students really want to be paid and have challenging experiences they can grow from."

BBI has found the right formula: providing hands-on job training to students and quality talent to employers.

"The interns get paid minimum wage or better and work full-time from June through August," says Jeffery Thomas, executive director of Lever, Inc. For companies, particularly those that do not have a formal internship program of their own, he says, "We are helping to create a culture and competency at Berkshire businesses to better understand and integrate early-career employees."

Ultimately, Thomas hopes the program will play a role in increasing the number of young adults choosing to live or stay in Berkshire County by recruiting the best and brightest talent to local companies. "We will be in touch with BBI alumni over the years and shape the program over time to influence the retention rate," he says. "We have no control over retention, but we will be following it."



Huff Templeton, BBI's program director, joined the interns on a visit to Hancock Shaker Village, where they toured the location with HSV's director Jennifer Trainer Thompson and gathered for a meal.

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BBI received **450** applications, **30** interns were selected for the program, two-thirds of them local, and **15** companies are participating in the program

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