



White Paper



Windham Region, VT

What is a “Good Job”?

Defining Opportunity in Southern Vermont

June, 2019



Historically, the measures for a strong economy have been jobs, job growth, wages, and employment. Unemployment, projected job growth, and high school graduation rates are often foundational data points when directing investment in our workforce education and training systems. With declining birth rates, low unemployment rates, dropping workforce participation, and limited progress in addressing poverty or addiction, we can no longer afford to merely focus on today’s job vacancies. Instead we must think bigger, longer term, and system wide. It is now time to focus on the quality and quantity of those jobs today, tomorrow, and years in the future.

At Brattleboro Development Credit Corporation, our Workforce Center of Excellence strives to improve alignment between regional demand for talent, and job seekers of all sorts. The opportunities this alignment creates revitalize our economies and improve the wellbeing of our communities. One important factor in creating this alignment is building awareness about opportunities among current and future job-seekers. This requires creating an understanding about what “opportunity” means.



High-Wage/High-Growth Jobs = Opportunity

The McClure Foundation's "Pathways to Promising Careers" was a critical step forward in this effort. The campaign, including a brochure that has transformed conversations about careers in Vermont, introduced a popular and poignant phrase to describe the kinds of jobs worthy of the investments we are making when educating, training, and empowering Vermont's future workforce; "High-Wage, High-Growth".

While the value of preparing the workforce for high-wage jobs is a straightforward investment, the focus on "high-growth" jobs introduces a forward-thinking, rather than backward-looking, approach to workforce development. This approach must be seized upon and integrated into our State's vision of Act 77 and Personalized Learning.

Perhaps the most important role high-growth jobs play in our workforce education system is providing long-term targets for curricula designers, work-based learning specialists, and career and guidance counselors. As the costs of post-secondary education continue to rise, it's ever more important that the investments young people make in their future are for careers that will continue to exist long past their high school graduation.

With the advent and adoption of digital technology at a previously unimagined scale, our educational institutions are endeavoring to integrate the competencies, skills, and behaviors needed to meet a high-growth sector that has only existed for a couple of decades. In Vermont, this need to change the awareness and preparedness around career planning extends to the diverse and unique industries that make up our diverse regional economies.

One shining example is a change in the role of agriculture and food production in our regional economy here in Windham County. Although dairies are becoming more automated to remain economically viable, yielding fewer and fewer jobs over time, growth in both jobs and wages in our value-added food production industries have outpaced traditional, durable goods manufacturing. As non-durable manufacturing continues to innovate, our agriculture and manufacturing programs lose contextual relevance if kept separate. A necessary solution is to combine food science, agriculture and horticulture, electromechanical engineering, and business development courses to create pathways that can best prepare Windham County students for these exciting, innovative, and uniquely Vermont careers.



High-Need/High-Opportunity Jobs = Opportunity

As we focus on these trends, however, it is important not to lose sight of another set of occupations that are equally important for students to be aware of and prepared for; High-Need, High-Opportunity Jobs. “High-Need” refers to occupations with dangerously large vacancies in a given economy that may be integral to the function of a business, but aren’t new or industry-specific. Often, the jobs may not be growing in number, but demographic pressures such as an aging workforce are driving extraordinarily high vacancy rates. Many entry-level occupations in high-demand (while not necessarily high-wage at the start) are “High-Opportunity” and provide students and young workers a foot in the door of companies capable of offering long-term careers.

For instance, an entry-level trade/construction occupation, like a Lumber Handler, may not be immediately appealing to a young person until they realize that, even without additional classroom experience, there remains a career pathway to become a Master Level Carpenter. Many early career opportunities have internal pipelines for people to move upwardly within a company. Newly hired employees are regularly given the opportunity to acquire new skills, attain credentialing and are often encouraged to take advantage of tuition reimbursement options as they ascend a company’s career lattices, all the while being paid and receiving crucial health benefits.

The reason so many high-quality occupations are able to provide on-the-job educational resources is because of tremendous investment from our employers, state agencies and educational institutions.

- The Vermont Department of Labor invests hundreds of thousands of dollars a year in upskilling the workforce and preparing jobseekers to access higher wage opportunities.
- The Department of Economic Development funds the Vermont Training Program, a grant program for employers looking to go above and beyond the typical investment in their workforce.
- The Vermont State College System has robust programming for students and employers in need of educational support to achieve their career goals, both on the job and in the classroom.

With these resources more readily accessible than ever before, there is no better time for jobseekers to select a pathway toward a high-quality career. For newly hired employees with a strong work ethic, positive attitude, and commitment to learning, the opportunities for promotion and advancement are strong.

Students and parents deserve more transparency and information regarding the costs associated with higher education, understanding salary trajectories for various career clusters and the value of benefit packages. Additionally, incorporating trainings around the importance of and need for self-advocacy, self-reliance, and grit as they relate directly to successful career outcomes, should be taught, practiced and reinforced. Armed with this knowledge, all students will feel empowered as they traverse the job exploration, application, and negotiation process.

By gathering and utilizing data to understand the opportunities and career paths available to ALL Vermonters, regional workforce and economic development organizations like BDCC strive to ensure the best opportunities are available for the people who need them most. High-need/high-opportunity occupations, in addition to high-wage/high-growth occupations, should all be a priority, as they are significant stepping-stones on the pathway to a high-quality career and an enriching and satisfying life, all contributing to a thriving economy for Southern Vermont.