



Providing Job Opportunities and Career Options for Local Youth

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by Lauren Brown

In most communities, it is hoped that youths might grow up, perhaps go off to college or a trade school, and then bring back those skills and knowledge to the community that raised them. Harney County is no different.



The Youth Changing the Community Initiative, a High Desert Partnership (HDP) collaborative, seeks to give local youths exposure to careers within Harney County in hopes they might one day choose a career path that could bring them back home. The initiative started in 2016 when HDP board member Kathy Rementeria proposed that we fulfill our mission with a community focused initiative. After we had many cups of coffee with a number of community members, there was a strong interest for our youth. "It felt like if there was

something this community could coalesce around it could be our youth," said Brenda Smith, Executive Director of High Desert Partnership. "One of the things we were hearing in these really early conversations was that youth leave the community without knowing that there might be opportunities in the community."

Since then the youth initiative has looked into creating an internship program for high school students that would connect students with local businesses or agencies to give them hands-on learning in a real world environment. While the initiative is still working on funding for that program, the High Desert Partnership has been able to hire recent high school graduates and college students to be part of a five-member crew working to collect data for the partnership's wildfire collaborative.

Youth work crews

Brianna Goehring is the Shared Science Monitoring Coordinator for the High Desert Partnership, and she is leading the crew of five, which includes three Burns High School 2020 graduates and two who graduated in 2019. The crew of 18- and 19-year-olds started working in the Pueblo Mountains monitoring vegetation in a fuel break installed by the Harney County Wildfire Collaborative last year.

While the crew is obtaining experience in the natural resources field, they are also learning the practical parts of the job, which include filling out timesheets, checking the oil on the truck and learning to drive on dirt roads. "They're learning accountability with the equipment, accountability with communication to me and accountability if there's a gap in communication and making sure they're getting the answers they need," Goehring said. "They're learning to just be out in this field on their own making their own decisions."

Smith said HDP made a conscious decision to hire local youth this summer, and she has been thankful for Goehring's leadership of the youth crew. "She recognized early on that this was more than just about monitoring our rangelands, that it was about showing up for work on time, making sure that you had safe driving skills, making sure that you had a good orientation, making sure that if there was an emergency, you knew what you needed to do. It's everything that we know has occurred when we hire younger employees so they have a successful experience."

Crew member Ryan Robles graduated from Burns High School this year and is interested in a career in natural resources. In fact, he'll be headed to the University of Idaho in August to study wildlife resources. Robles said he grew up enjoying outdoor activities such as hiking, camping and birdwatching. "I've always just had a keen

interest in wildlife and as I've gotten older, I've just realized that I can work out in the place I love and help protect it and let it thrive," he said.

He said he's enjoying the summer job with HDP because he's getting experience with vegetation that will aid him in as he furthers his education at the University of Idaho. After all, plants and wildlife go hand in hand, he said. Robles hopes to pursue a master's degree in a specific area of wildlife that is still to be determined. Once he graduates college, he expects to work seasonal jobs until he lands a permanent position somewhere. He is open to returning to Harney County after college but is also open to exploring other areas and will go where the opportunities take him.



Pictured above: Ryan Robles, Lucy Baron, Calvin Bates and Megan Ellibee, four of the members of the Harney County Wildfire Collaborative monitoring crew working in the Pueblo Mountains.

Emphasizing careers in natural resources

At the Eastern Oregon Agricultural Research Station, rangeland scientists have been hiring high school and college students to help collect data for the summer season.

Chad Boyd, a rangeland scientist with the United States Department of Agriculture, said there are probably more than 20 students working at the research station this summer between Oregon State University and other federal agencies. Most are college students who are interested in going into a career in natural resources. "Over the years, we've seen some linkages between our outreach, the work at the station and kids making a career out of it," Boyd said.

Outreach at the research station begins at an early age. Boyd said that every year, with the exception of this year because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the research station hosts a field day in which they invite all the second-graders in the county out for a day of science-themed education. Students are divided into groups that

rotate among six or seven stations. "All we're trying to do is get them interested in science," Boyd said. "We do talk about agriculture specifically because that's what we do, but in the larger context, we're trying to get them to see that science is nothing more than asking questions about everyday life and trying to figure out the answer."

Boyd said at the high school level, the research station hosts the High Desert Youth Range Camp each summer (The camp will not be held this year because of COVID-19). Normally, they invite local students as well as students from California, Washington and Idaho to participate in an intensive three-day camp that focuses on rangeland ecology.

Vanessa Shroeder is a faculty research assistant for Oregon State University's Extension Service, and she helps with the rangeland camp each year as well. She noted that the camp was the brainchild of Brenda Smith and was intended to get students out into the ecosystem. "It brings together some of the best researchers in rangeland ecology but also in wildlife biology and in the area from the various natural resource professions," Shroeder said. "The kids get a high-level crash course in ecology of the ecosystem."

The students are placed in teams, and they work together to create a management plan. At the end of the camp, they present their plan to staff, parents and judges. The top student at the camp is then sent on an all-expense-paid trip to the international meeting for the Society for Range Management.

Shroeder said the extension service ended up hiring one of the top campers from last year to work at the research station this summer. "So it's also a really good venue to network and provide opportunity for folks," she said.

This summer, Shroeder has one recent BHS graduate working with her, and she said they try to hire locally as much as they can for the seasonal summer positions. "It's always fun to work with youth and expose them to what field research looks like," she said. "At the very least, it opens their eyes to what opportunities are out there. Some folks who have worked at the research station in the past end up changing their degrees and exploring natural resources, and I think that can be great for the community because there are so many natural resources jobs here."

Kirk Davies, a Rangeland Scientist with the United States Department of Agriculture, agrees that hiring locally has many benefits. "We've found over the years that we're almost guaranteed to get a good employee if they came from here. There's just a really good work ethic here," he said.

In addition to advertising seasonal positions on national job boards, Davies also contacts high school science and agriculture teachers to see if there are any local students who would be interested in the positions. Davies said these positions can be a good venue for students to see firsthand how data collection and field research apply to land management. "It starts giving them some really good hands on experience," he said. It is one thing to learn about rangeland ecology in the classroom, but then to actually see it in action can be really helpful for those exploring their career options.

Davies said that these seasonal positions can also spur college students to consider furthering their education in their chosen field. He said seasonal summer work encouraged him to get not only his bachelor's degree but then go on to obtain his doctorate and continue with research. "We do get quite a few of those students who come and work for us as an undergrad, and they decide they want to get an advanced degree." If possible, the research station tries to assist them with that goal.

Boyd believes it is addressing students at the second-grade level, high school level and college level that encourages interest in science-oriented careers and offers insight into what careers are available here in Harney County. "It's that continuity of contact that we've had with the kids that builds on itself and is important," he said. "A kid comes to range camp and thinks, 'Hey that's cool. Maybe I'll get a job at the station.' They get a job at the station and think maybe I could do this for a living. They go to school and get interested in

a masters and come back here. Trying to build that continuity through repeated positive contact with the kids is the nugget.”

Exploring careers through internships

Smith said that as the partnership begins to re-engage the youth initiative it will strive to come up with an internship program that will benefit local high school students. She hopes the initiative will work with local businesses to create internships, perhaps paid, or perhaps offering school credit so that students can get a better idea of what careers are out there and specifically what positions Harney County has to offer should they decide to stay here after graduation or return home after going to college.

Lucy Baron is a 2020 Burns High School graduate who is working on the HDP youth work crew this summer. She plans to attend Brigham Young University in Rexburg, Idaho, to study mechanical engineering. She said she got lucky with the summer job through the partnership this summer. Last summer, she had to apply at five or six different places before finally landing a job at a hotel.

She wishes there were more opportunities for high schoolers to job shadow different careers so that they could get a better idea of what jobs are available. She had the opportunity to job shadow someone at the hospital this past year, and that although she probably won't be pursuing a career in healthcare, it was a helpful experience. "I've been looking for opportunities to learn new things and figure out what I like and what I don't like," she said.

She doesn't think all internship opportunities need to be paid. She believes students should have more job shadow options available to them especially during school hours in a variety of fields. "Maybe offer job shadows at a mechanic or a hair salon," she said. "Making sure the community is open to those ideas is important."

Smith hopes the youth initiative can help organize a plan to help youths explore local career opportunities. From the natural resources perspective, that effort appears to be paying off. The task ahead for the youth initiative will be expanding that to include other facets of the community. "It's coordinating that effort and putting kids and business people together so that they have this successful experience," she said.

This article is provided by High Desert Partnership; a Harney County nonprofit convening and supporting six collaboratives including the Harney County Wildfire Collaborative and Youth Changing the Community Collaborative.

