

EDGE Stacy Lightfoot helps students 'Step Up' and learn through internships

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Stacy Lightfoot is Vice President of the College and Career Success Public Education Foundation.

Photo by Angela Lewis /Times Free Press.

Gallery: Stacy Lightfoot helps students 'Step Up' and learn through internships

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Last summer, 76 low-income Hamilton County high school seniors and juniors got internships at local businesses through Step-Up Chattanooga, a new program of the Public Education Foundation that aims to give students the skills they need to make it in today's job market.

And look for that to grow by 100 more students when the internship program gets going next summer, said Step-Up's director, Stacy Lightfoot, who is PEF's vice president for college and career success.

"We plan to place 175 students," she says.

Step-Up Chattanooga, which is based on a similar program in Minneapolis, Minnesota., is funded in its first two years by a \$350,000 Benwood Foundation grant. It's meant to help prepare students for complex, changing global economy, PEF officials say.

The program is headed by Lightfoot, a graduate of the University of Roehampton in London, England, who is a certified job development coach from the Career Development Network.

"You're exposing this group to the business world," Lightfoot says. "We're giving them lessons that their parents may not be able to give."

Research from the Chattanooga Area Chamber of Commerce says roughly 15,000 jobs can't be filled by Hamilton County residents based on educational requirements.

PEF also cites the Harvard Graduate School of Education, which found that a major reason students fail to complete a two- or four-year college program is that "too many can't see a clear, transparent connection between their program of study and tangible opportunities in the labor market."

PEF doesn't ask to see the test scores or grades of students that participate.

"We look at grit," Lightfoot says.

That said, not every student gets in. PEF checks with high school counselors to make sure students who apply don't have such problems as tardiness or suspensions. Seniors and juniors who do get in the Step-UP program get eight hours of training in "soft skills," such as learning to not take personally a boss's critique of job performance.

Step-Up Chattanooga is looking for more businesses that need interns.

The first year of Step-Up Chattanooga saw 46 businesses participate, including BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee, EPB, WRCB-TV 3, the city of Chattanooga, the Chattanooga Times Free Press and Chattem.

One of Step-Up's interns was Kentrell Evans, a point guard who helped guide Brainerd High School's basketball team to the Class AA state championship game for the first time in 19 years.

He has some new fans in the stands, Lightfoot said, since employees of Chattem, where Evans worked as an intern over the summer have come to cheer him on. Evans experienced tragedy when he was 11 years old, and [his father, Kentrell's primary caregiver, was shot to death.](#)

"Now, Kentrell has more than just his basketball team," Lightfoot says. "It is definitely changing students' lives."

Most Valuable Players

What business leaders were the most influential in shaping the local economy in 2016?

In the Chattanooga region, 2016 was a year of building for the future. The first new nuclear reactor of the 21st century and the biggest plant construction project ever in the region was completed, while a record amount of new housing, hotel and retail development was launched in downtown Chattanooga to soon double the number of residents in the central city. One of the biggest floorcovering plants took shape in North Georgia as two carpet companies combined and Chattanooga's airport added another airline and parking facility. Tennessee's biggest health insurer prepared to implement its biggest rate hike under the so-called Obamacare program, while the business trio that built one of Chattanooga's most successful startups in the past decade began a fund and program to bring more logistics companies to Chattanooga.

The individuals who led such efforts and did the most to reshape the regional economy are our Most Valuable Players in business in 2016. Our top list of MVPs includes both seasoned veterans and newly named heads of local businesses and reflects the diversity of Chattanooga's changing economy.

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