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## Experts Engage Students in Virtual Career Exploration

Even though we are in the business of providing career exploration, we sometimes forget just how little today's students know about careers. We provide services for many schools, among them the East Syracuse Minoa School District. The Spartan Academy Sophomore Bridge is an experiential program where rising sophomores are asked to take a pretty deep dive into self-reflection academically, professionally, socially, and emotionally. They are challenged to start to move beyond the surface and dig more into their strengths and areas in need of growth.

We were asked to provide some career exploration for this program. This large group of 45 students would be divided among four professionals running concurrent sessions in separate "rooms." The specialists we recruited were Lisa Mondello from SRC, Timothy Diehl from Bristol-Meyers Squibb, Stephanie Mayne from TTM Technologies, and Teresa Mosher from Loretto. We asked our volunteers to address the same general issues as well as provide information about their current positions, the companies they represent, and the job openings they seek to fill.

The coordinator of that program, Adam Shatraw, and I decided we would provide some introspective questions for the speakers to address with the students. We wanted these conversations to help the students better understand themselves, a critical first step in making clear career decisions. Like personality assessments, we hoped to employ questions that would lead them to their best "fit" and more important, what would NOT be a good match for them. A guided question and answer conversation might disclose that a student was, for example, more analytical than intuitive, more exact than creative, and might thrive in a job that deals with irrefutable facts. This person might enjoy working on spreadsheets and formulas, while the same job would drive the opposite personality crazy.

We knew this wouldn't be an easy task for fifteen-year-olds to accomplish, even in person. The virtual platform added even more obstacles to engagement and pacing. We attempted to make the questions as thought provoking as possible. Are you claustrophobic, afraid of heights, have allergies, or physical limitations? Are you a morning person? Do you prefer to work alone, or do you work best with others? Do you prefer a routine? Would you be happier indoors or out?

I was able to move in and out of the four different sessions and they were all amazing. These professionals rose to the occasion and worked hard to get these students engaged. They conducted dialogues about what working was really going to look like and whether it was in line with what they wanted to do. Students learned about work schedules, company policies and procedures, and benefits. The conversation touched on different cultures in the various work environments. Some workplaces are fast paced with a sense of urgency (imagine a job in the Intensive Care Unit) and some are extremely relaxed and collegial (the marketing department of an advertising firm). Not only did the students have to imagine themselves in a job, they were asked to imagine where the best opportunities for those jobs were—New York City, Syracuse, Ithaca—all very different lifestyles with very different pay scales. A lot for these young students to think about.

After the event, Adam wrote the following to these professionals: *"I appreciate the time and energy that you put into this workshop. Your expertise, perspective and experience really helped to make for a dynamic experience for our students. The Workshop that you all led was completely aligned with our planning and, based on our post-program survey results, was a favorite among the students. Many of them identified that they had never thought about careers in any other terms than 'having a job'. I know that, at times, it might have been difficult to get them to interact, but they were listening and taking in the points that were being made."*

I want to add my thanks to the above-mentioned professionals who enriched the lives of these young students. Our success depends on dedicated volunteer career professionals such as these.

For more information on career exploration events/opportunities, contact MACNY affiliate Partners for Education & Business at [mponge@macny.org](mailto:mponge@macny.org).