

Building Bridges

Steelcase and West Michigan Hispanic Chamber of Commerce to provide development opportunities for Latinx youth

As a junior in college, Steelcase Intern Nikki Castro-Hernandez wrestled with what her future may hold after she graduated. Born to parents who emigrated to the U.S. from Mexico, the barriers to access the resources needed to guide Castro-Hernandez into the American workforce were difficult to overcome. Feeling unsure of her future, she enrolled in the Building Bridges Through Education (BBTE), a fellowship program powered by the West Michigan Hispanic Chamber of Commerce (WMHCC) designed to connect high-potential Latinx students with opportunities with leading employers in the region through internships and mentorships. Steelcase partners with the WMHCC to provide Hispanic college students with development opportunities.

Castro-Hernandez said the BBTE program changed the trajectory of her career for the better.

“I lacked the resources and that sense of developing ‘what’s next for me after college,’” Castro-Hernandez says.

“This fellowship helped me identify not only who I was, but who I could be.”

NIKKI CASTRO-HERNANDEZ | Steelcase Intern + BBTE Fellowship Scholar



Guillermo Cisneros, President and CEO of the WMHCC, says programs like BBTE are needed now more than ever because in Michigan only 25 in 100 Hispanic college students earn their degree.

“That’s not acceptable,” says Cisneros. “We want to make sure we connect with these college students. We want them to feel like they belong to a program, and when they have that, they stay in college – they finish college.”

Building Bridges Through Education is part of the Steelcase commitment to grow a more dynamic and inclusive workforce through various community partnerships by removing barriers to opportunity for diverse perspectives and experiences to thrive. Steelcase helped WMHCC launch the BBTE fellowship in 2019 and since then the program has served more than 400 Michigan students.

For Castro-Hernandez and fellow Steelcase intern Andrea Pantoja, the BBTE program is unique in its level of personal attention.

“I think it’s really important for companies like Steelcase to not only invest in these types of programs, but also be active participants,” Pantoja says. “There’s a lot of Latinx talent out there and if companies don’t build these pathways to careers, it’s a lot harder for us to make these connections and showcase our abilities.”

The 8-month fellowship supports students from all over Michigan by guiding them through career readiness, coaching, and promoting their talents and skills for internship and career placement. In the fall, BBTE Fellows participate in virtual workshop sessions to help them craft quality resumes and cover letters, and enhance their LinkedIn profiles.

The second portion of the program centers on improving the Fellows ability to navigate ambiguity, test and learn quickly, experiment and iterate. Using design thinking methods, Fellows are issued a challenge and work in teams (guided by a coach) to do primary research with end users, define and frame the challenge and develop new ideas which they prototype and test in the field. Their findings are presented to all the BBTE Employer Partners in a showcase at the end of the year.

“It’s all about that genuine representation,” Pantoja says. “It’s great to feel like we’re being seen and that a company really cares about us as people.”

“It made me feel like I can belong here at Steelcase.”

ANDREA PANTOJA | Steelcase Intern + BBTE Fellowship Scholar



Engaging with organizations like the West Michigan Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and programs like BBTE has helped Steelcase leaders to remove barriers for talent to engage and thrive.

“It really strengthened my desire to work with organizations such as the West Michigan Hispanic Chamber of Commerce,” says William Maurer, Steelcase Global Talent Acquisition Manager. “It inspires us to amplify people’s impact, keep removing barriers, and influence equal access to opportunity. That’s important. We really want to focus on skills and competencies, as well as try to understand how cultural differences may have an impact on how someone interacts with a potential employer.”

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