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A RESOURCE GUIDE TO ENGAGING EMPLOYERS

By Randall Wilson | JANUARY 2015



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A RESOURCE GUIDE TO ENGAGING EMPLOYERS

This resource guide presents working models of successful employer engagement and lessons for securing and sustaining partnerships with employers. It was written to help education and training providers fully realize the value of strategic, long-term, and intensive partnerships with employers. While directed to community colleges and their state-level partners in Accelerating Opportunity, it is relevant to all practitioners in workforce, career, and technical education, and adult education.

To develop this guide, the author researched current literature on employer engagement, with a particular focus on partnerships between community colleges and employers. We looked for the best examples that have a demonstrated track record—especially ones mentioned in multiple sources—and that are relevant to the advancement of lower-skilled and/or lower-income adult workers. There are a number of useful frameworks and models in circulation; this resource guide draws on and synthesizes them to provide a compact introduction for staff in community colleges and workforce programs. *(See References for a full listing.)*

This guide responds to a mismatch between the demand and supply sides of the labor market. While there is considerable effort on the part of the workforce community, in colleges and elsewhere, to connect to employers and provide the best-skilled job candidates, those efforts do not always translate into results valued by employers. This mismatch is well illustrated by the “perception gap” between educators and employers, recently documented by the Lumina Foundation. According to a study conducted by Gallup for Inside Higher Ed, 96 percent of chief academic officers claimed to be “extremely or somewhat confident” that their institutions are

According to a study conducted by Gallup for Inside Higher Ed, 96 percent of chief academic officers claimed to be “extremely or somewhat confident” that their institutions are preparing students for success in the workforce. In contrast, just 11 percent of employer representatives said they believe that graduates have the skills and competencies needed by their businesses.

preparing students for success in the workforce. In contrast, just 11 percent of employer representatives said they believe that graduates have the skills and competencies needed by their businesses (Lumina 2014). More effective and long-term engagement of employers is necessary to address these gaps—in perception, but most importantly, in educational and career preparation.

WHY ENGAGE EMPLOYERS?

Working with employers is a fact of life for community colleges—particularly their career/technical and workforce divisions. Just as employers need postsecondary institutions to provide a workforce with the right skills and credentials, community colleges need employers—to get the skills and competencies right, at a minimum; to ensure that curricula are relevant and up-to-date; and to employ graduates. All of these functions are essential, but none are as fundamental as “getting the relationship right.” For community colleges, this means working with employers in a variety of activities, over an extended period, in a manner that builds trust through participation in projects of mutual interests and leads to mutually successful outcomes.

Engaging employers produces benefits at every stage of the educational process, especially in the development and execution of career pathway programs. But the simplest case for it is this: neither employers nor educators can accomplish their goals in the labor market alone. As Louis Soares, vice president of the American Council on

Education, remarks, partnerships allow both sides to “leverage their combined knowledge of labor markets, skills, pedagogy, and students” (Soares 2010).

Strong employer engagement is also vital in today’s economic climate. Slow economic recovery, rapid transformations in technology, higher-skill and credential requirements for good-paying jobs, and emerging mismatches between employer needs and worker skills make business and educational partnerships critical. But initiating such relationships and ensuring their success and sustainability is far from simple.

Integrated pathways

Integrated pathways combine basic skills and career-technical instruction in a single curriculum; offer clear pathways from adult education to community college and postsecondary credentials in high-demand occupations; and offer comprehensive academic and personal support services to increase student success.

EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT IS CRITICAL TO BUILDING SUCCESSFUL PATHWAYS

For integrated pathway programs to succeed, states and colleges need to identify high-demand industries and occupations and prepare students for high-value credentials in those industries. Doing so requires close cooperation with industry as well as public workforce agencies to ensure that pathways and supporting curricula and instruction are closely aligned with the labor market. States and colleges

in Accelerating Opportunity rely on employers who “actively engage with colleges on pathway development,” according to the initiative’s goals, and work toward the goal of consistent exchange of labor market information between businesses and colleges, as well as improved job placement and employment results for students.

DEFINING EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT

Employer engagement is more than convening an advisory committee that meets with college representatives periodically, or a one-off project of contract training with a single employer, though both of these activities can be valuable to employers, colleges, and students. These activities are necessary but limiting if the goal is development of curricula, pathways, skill sets, and credentials that align with real labor market needs and result in job placement and career success for students and employers. To accomplish this, educators need to take a more active approach in relating to employers.

Active engagement of employers is different from a purely advisory approach. In a recent publication, the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce distinguished between a narrowly “advisory” or transactional role for employers and one based on “strategic partnerships” (Parker 2013). Approaching employers as “high-impact,” strategic partners means looking beyond the immediate needs of a program or college and seeking ways to make local employers or industries competitive. It requires building ongoing opportunities for problem-solving and program development. Doing so requires approaching employers in a listening rather than an “asking” mode—less “what can you do for us” and more “where is your pain? How can we help in addressing your challenges?”

When employers are engaged as strategic partners, their relationship to the community college, or other education and training partners, changes. These qualities distinguish engaged relationships with employers from narrowly advisory ones:

- > **Continuous:** cultivating long-term relationships, rather than episodic, one-time, or short-term transactions on an as-needed basis.

- > **Strategic:** approaching employers in the context of specific plans, opportunities, and objectives, rather than on a spot basis, when the college needs assistance.
- > **Mutually valuable:** solving problems and creating value for both sides of the labor market—employers (the demand side) and education and training providers and learners (the supply side).
- > **Wide-ranging:** engaging a variety of employers by using varied methods to recruit and involve a large number, rather than relying on one or a few of “the usual” representatives.
- > **Comprehensive:** engaging employers in a variety of issues and activities ranging from curriculum development and competency identification to student advising and placement, and policy advocacy on critical issues.
- > **Intensive:** engaging employers substantively and in depth, moving the conversations from a high level (“we need higher-skilled candidates”) to an in-depth dialogue about specific skill sets, long-term economic needs, and strengths and weaknesses of educational programs in meeting them.
- > **Empowering:** encouraging employers to develop and assume leadership roles in pathway development and other initiatives; approaching potential partners from business at the outset of a process, rather than near the end.
- > **Institutionally varied:** engaging employers through a number of channels, including industry or professional associations, public workforce entities (Workforce Investment Boards, one-stop career centers), chambers of commerce, labor-management training partnerships, and economic development authorities, among others.

A LADDER OF EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT

It is helpful to understand the college-employer relationship—and the many activities supporting it—as a continuum of activities and levels of engagement, with each step or level representing a higher degree of engagement and deeper

integration of employers in a college's workforce and education activities. Activities taken at one level, in turn, make more intensive practices possible at successive levels by demonstrating value and establishing trust and credibility. At higher levels, employer engagement becomes increasingly central to a college or workforce division's strategy.

Figure 1 (on page 5) illustrates this continuum and gives examples of activities associated with each level of employer engagement. It also shows how these activities change as an employer relationship deepens from a "new relationship" to a "working relationship" to a "strategic partnership."¹

Level 1: Advising. In the most basic form, employers are consulted informally about hiring or training needs through interviews or surveys of businesses in a sector or region. More formally, employers are represented on advisory boards for a program of study, a grant, or a division. Where advisors are engaged more strategically, educators shift from seeking short-term "input" or job placements from employers to collaborating with them to understand workforce challenges and support the success of employers, students, and communities.

Level 2: Capacity-building. Educators and employers respond to one another's needs: colleges provide customized training and skilled job candidates to individual firms; employers assist with equipment, space, loaned employees, and other supports to the college. Employers lecture or even teach an adjunct course at the college, while college instructors bring courses to the worksite.

Level 3: Co-designing. The employer shifts from being a passive advisor to an active collaborator with the college on education and workforce initiatives, including design of new curricula and pathways.

Level 4: Convening. Educators work actively to recruit and convene businesses and their associations as substantive, ongoing participants in addressing workforce needs. At a more intensive level, colleges serve as hubs or brokers of workforce collaboration with employers and other education and training providers.

Level 5: Leading. At the most intensive level, colleges, employers, and other stakeholders build partnerships that transform local or regional workforce systems and enhance the growth of targeted industries or sectors. Some of the most effective and long-lasting regional partnerships are those that are led by industry representatives.

This "ladder" or continuum of employer engagement is not meant to be followed rigidly. It is a stylized model that illustrates a progression from less intensive forms of engagement—such as advisory boards or contract training—to more intensive ones, such as development of pathways or partnering for sectoral workforce initiatives. Given the needs and interests of educators and employers, as well as partnerships or collaborations already in place, some steps may be skipped, engaged in simultaneously, or performed in different sequences. The ladder also suggests how productive relationships with employers might evolve, with activities at one level helping build trust, momentum, and leverage for more intensive activities.

The next section describes each level of employer engagement in more detail, offering examples and lessons from the practice of community colleges and other providers of workforce education and training.

¹ The continuum concept of "new," "working," and "strategic" relationships with business is adapted from Corporate Voices for Working Families, 2012, *Business and Community College Partnerships: A Blueprint*.

Figure 1. Ladder of Employer Engagement

	New Relationship	Working Relationship	Strategic Partnership		
	Level I	Level II	Level III	Level IV	Level V
Key employer role	Advising	Capacity-building	Co-designing	Convening	Leading
Stage of relationship	Initial contact / new relationship	Establishing trust and credibility	Working relationship	Trusted provider and collaborator	Full strategic partner
Activity examples	Discuss hiring needs, skills, competencies; advise on curricula; contract training; hire graduates	Job site tours; speakers; mock interviews; internships; needs assessment; loan/donate equipment; recruiting	Curriculum and pathway development; adjunct faculty and preceptors	College-employer sectoral partnerships	Multi-employer / multi-college partnerships
Engagement examples by level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Western Technical College (Wisconsin Shifting Gears) > Monroe Community College 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Bristol Community College 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Owensboro Community and Technical College > Automotive Technical Education Collaborative (AMTEC) > Columbus State Community College (LogisticsART) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > NorTEC > Northern Virginia Community College (NoVAHealth FORCE) > Cabrillo College / Bay Area Community College Consortium 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Health Careers Collaborative of Greater Cincinnati / Cincinnati State Community and Technical College > Health Professions Pathway (H2P)

LEVEL I: ADVISING

At this initial level of engagement, colleges consult employers about their hiring needs, skills, and competencies required for specific occupations, and the dynamics of labor supply and demand. This may take the form of one-to-one contacts with individual businesses, or regular meetings with an advisory board. By contacting a group of employers, colleges can obtain an industry-wide perspective and generate knowledge that may not emerge from one-to-one contacts, as employers engage and learn from one another. And the information complements labor market intelligence from government or private sources. Continued conversations with employers help to fine-tune or adapt curricular or pathway designs to current market conditions.

Potential questions to pose to employers might include:

- > What contributes to your company's growth?
- > What policies most affect this industry?
- > What are persistent skill gaps, and why?

Using labor market data from government and/or "real time" sources aids in deepening understanding of regional and sectoral issues. Presenting findings to employers, to obtain their confirmation or corrections, helps to anchor and enrich the discussion. Providing data also signals to employers that educators are prepared for a substantive discussion, while offering something of value to the employer.

Other tips for creating an effective advisory relationship with employers:

- > **Solicit information from employers using a variety of methods, including one-on-one interviews, focus groups, surveys, and presentations. Get out of the office and meet employers on their own turf.**
- > **If holding joint meetings of employers, allow time for non-workforce topics of interest to participants, such as finance, supply chains, or technology.**

Ideally, employers convened in this fashion become more than occasional advisors to the college. They come to see value in joining with other employers to discuss workforce and educational concerns, extending their network and expanding their knowledge.

Wisconsin: Shifting Gears initiative's Regional Industry Skills Education

When used as part of a broader strategic approach, advisory boards can generate data essential to creating industry partnerships, curriculum designs, and programs of study. Wisconsin colleges participating in Regional Industry Skills Education, a program of the Shifting Gears initiative, turned to employers who sit on advisory committees for occupational programs, to identify training needs and align pathway and bridge programs with industry trends. Western Technical College enlisted its manufacturing advisors in such a discussion, resulting in development of a career pathway in computer numeric control (CNC) machining, as well as the CNC Skills Institute, for training in operation, set-up, and programming (Chong & Schwartz 2012).

Rochester, New York: Monroe Community College

Rochester's Monroe Community College used surveys of the region's employers to assess skill needs and probe for potential gaps. After compiling an extensive database of firms, it conducted two surveys, including a skill needs assessment. Their research revealed that Rochester's manufacturers, especially smaller employers, struggled to recruit CNC machinists, particularly those with strong skills in analysis, blueprint reading, and technical writing. Survey results complemented findings from real-time labor market information showing a gap between machinist grads supplied by MCC and openings in the region's workplaces. As a result, the college mounted an accelerated certificate program in precision machining. It is currently planning to continue skill assessment surveys on a twice-yearly basis (Wright 2013).

LEVEL II: BUILDING EDUCATIONAL CAPACITY

At this stage, engaging employers serves to strengthen college programs and facilitate instruction and skill acquisition. This might include engaging employers to advise on, loan, or even donate technology to support hands-on learning. For students who are interns or employees of a college's business partner, the employer can share in assessment of project-based assignments, provide placements, and train or mentor students. Some colleges also employ loaned staff or executives as adjunct instructors. Employers, in turn, can host classroom-based learning, with college instructors teaching at the worksite, and make accommodations for employee-learners to study, providing release time and financial assistance.

With deeper engagement, both sides gain capacity for educational innovations such as work-based learning. A good example of such innovations comes from Jobs to Careers, a national initiative that invested in development of incumbent frontline health care workers as a means to better care. The program, managed by Jobs for the Future and supported by the Robert Wood Johnson and Hitachi Foundations, included 17 partnerships of health care employers and educational providers, including community colleges.

Employers can also expand the capacity of colleges' career and placement services. This can extend from lending guest speakers and conducting mock interviews to offering shadowing opportunities and helping assess and screen candidates for career pathway programs. Of course, the most vital role for supporting students' careers lies in interviewing and hiring students who successfully complete certificate and degree programs, or employing them while they study toward a credential. After hiring, an employer can work with the college, workforce provider, or community-based organization to coach and support the candidate's retention in employment and career advancement.

Other tips for expanding work-based learning opportunities include:

- > **Work with employers to develop work-based learning opportunities for adult learners (e.g., job shadowing, internships, on-the-job training).**
- > **Sustain innovative work-based practices by encouraging systems changes in both the community colleges and partner employers, such as granting college credit for experiential learning and offering employees tuition support for basic skills and developmental courses.**

Fall River, Massachusetts: Bristol Community College

In one Jobs to Careers site, Bristol Community College, in Fall River, Massachusetts, worked closely with an addiction treatment facility, Stanley Street Treatment and Resources, to enhance skills and provide career path opportunities for SSTAR's frontline counseling and administrative staff. To support a new course on effective group facilitation skills, eight staff members of SSTAR were appointed as adjunct college faculty. The course was taught both onsite at the facility, by SSTAR supervisors and BCC faculty, and online. Supervisors also provided work-based learning opportunities through mentoring and coaching of students in the course (Biswas 2011; Quimby & Rogers 2010; Rogers & Wagner 2010).

LEVEL III: CO- DESIGNING CURRICULA AND CAREER PATHWAYS

At the “co-design” stage, educators and employers have conducted sufficient shared activities to demonstrate the value that each can bring to the table, and they have the credibility and trust necessary for a working relationship. College staff engage employers in developing or modifying curricula in career/technical and professional programs. Employers can offer real-time advice and help set standards for programs of study, as well as new certificates and degrees that support career advancement. Joint analysis of workforce data and employer needs informs development of curricula and pathways tailored to meet these needs. Employers assist in contextualizing curricula to reflect workplace knowledge and competencies.

Establishing strong working relationships between colleges and employers in the design process offers many advantages. One is the standardization of curricula, and their translation into credentials with industry recognition and, in the best cases, transferability across employers (Chong & Schwartz 2012; Bozell & Goldberg 2009). This was demonstrated powerfully in the automotive sector through the Automotive Technical Education Collaborative (AMTEC), comprising auto manufacturers and community colleges tasked with defining competencies, tasks, and skills needed for specific jobs, identifying skill gaps, and upgrading curricula and instruction (Parkers et al. 2012; Chong & Schwartz 2012).

The National Network of Sector Partners offers these additional recommendations (Mills 2011):

- > **Work alongside employers to review and align existing curricula or develop new curricula that meet national and state standards to support local job market needs.**
- > **Request authentic workplace materials, scenarios, and examples from employers to assist in contextualizing the instruction.**
- > **Ask employers to identify the credentials they value for occupations in the chosen pathway(s).**

Owensboro, Kentucky: Owensboro Community and Technical College

A close working relationship around curriculum or pathway design helps ensure that graduates' skills are relevant and responsive to employers' needs—especially critical in today's rapidly changing environment. This sometimes requires going back to the drawing board. Owensboro Community and Technical College's manufacturing skills initiative, Meeting Educational Capacity Through Higher Education Alternatives, was launched to address the shortage of technically skilled workers in the region's manufacturing sector. The initiative, with support from the federal Community-based Job Training grant, was originally designed to serve incumbent workers through on-the-job training, but the Great Recession's impact reduced employers' need for this. After consultation with manufacturers—ones that OCTC had built close relationships with in prior work—the college redesigned its program to meet employers' needs for multiskilled workers whose skills bridged areas such as welding, electrical, and mechanical, as opposed to specialized employees in each area. The program, available to dislocated workers through online and classroom instruction, offered short-term, stackable credentials aligned with OCTC's academic programs. As employers validated the skills and performance of candidates completing the program, they became more comfortable with enlisting the college to train incumbent workers. The latter—lower-level production workers lacking credentials—were trained to enter pathways and prepare to move up as higher-level workers retired with the economy recovering (Milfort et al. 2013).

Engage employer partners at the beginning of a design process, including discussion of the purpose and goals.

Columbus, Ohio: Columbus State Community College's LogisticsART

The LogisticsART program of Columbus State Community College illustrates the value of early and ongoing collaboration with employers in curriculum design and implementation. The program originated from the needs of Columbus-area logistics firms for both work-ready entry-level workers and higher-skilled incumbents. CSCC worked through area business and sector associations—the Chamber of Commerce's Logistics Council and Ohio's Skills Bank Logistics Employer Panel—to convene 16 employers who defined critical skills gaps, and a core group that designed an entry-level program in logistics. Once the larger group vetted the curriculum, the community college delivered entry-level training in work readiness and the Certified Logistics Program of the Manufacturing Skills Standard Council. Logistics employers, in turn, conducted the third module of specialized technical training, employing on-the-job instruction on the warehouse floor. According to a U.S. Department of Labor report, "success in engaging employers has translated into success in placement," including candidates who are formerly incarcerated or who lack high school credentials. The program's success has induced the Chamber to include LogisticsART in site visits of prospective employers (Workforce30One 2012).

LEVEL IV: CONVENING WORKFORCE PARTNERSHIPS

As employers and educators begin to build sector-focused partnerships, they often move to create a bigger “table.” Columbus State Community College, for instance, through its federal Pathways Out of Poverty grant, brought business associations as well as individual employers into its collaboration. The college also engaged the public workforce system, nonprofit and community-based service providers, and economic development authorities (Hay & Blair 2013). Similarly, the Northern Rural Training and Employment Consortium (NorTEC), a workforce intermediary serving 11 counties in rural Northern California, casts a wide net, engaging “economic development, universities, community colleges, and employer groups to focus on jobs and business creation.” In so doing, it has made itself a “regional convener” for this conversation (Workforce30One 2011).

In 2005, Northern Virginia Community College convened the region’s largest health care employers and health professions schools in response to predicted shortages in the nursing and allied health workforces. The assembled group established a sectoral consortium, NoVAHealthFORCE, and an action plan to address workforce shortages. The consortium’s decision making is steered by its CEO Roundtable, comprising the executives of six hospital and health care systems, and the presidents of the region’s colleges. Meeting twice annually, the group has secured annual allocations by Virginia’s General Assembly in nursing and allied health education, with additional investments by each of the participating employers.

To sustain long-term partnerships with employers, ongoing, two-way communication is critical to supporting active participation and building commitment and shared vision.

Staffed by NoVA's Medical Education Campus, the consortium also provides a forum for fresh intelligence and problem solving in the health care labor market (Sherrill et al. 2012)

One of the best examples of a community college serving as a partnership broker, or workforce intermediary, is Cabrillo College in Santa Cruz County, California. Cabrillo Dean of Career Education and Economic Development Rock Pfothenauer made a conscious decision that his institution would serve a wider regional community than just Cabrillo students. As he explains it,

We realized that we could be much more effective and our community would be much better served if we saw ourselves as being responsible for fostering the integration of all of the community's investments in workforce development. We have been successful in this role because we have understood that our interests were served when the interests of our partners were also served (Pfothenauer 2007).

Prompted by both high turnover and shortages of entry-level health care staff, Pfothenauer convened area hospitals and other health care employers and educators, and established the Health Careers Partnership to both develop training programs and career ladders for youth and adults in allied health, and to align training and support services among various providers, including high schools and vocational schools, postsecondary career and technical programs, the public workforce system, and county social services.

The objective was to initiate or expand effective initiatives while giving employers "access to the whole supply chain" (Pfothenauer 2007). Cabrillo has subsequently created consortia in health care IT and industrial technology modeled on the health careers partnership. On a wider scale, it has convened 28 regional institutions as the Bay Area Community College Consortium, successfully leveraging private and public funding to support alignment of educational programs with the needs of the Bay Area's employers (Cabrillo College 2013).²

² For additional information on the Bay Area Community College Consortium, see <https://sites.google.com/a/cabrillo.edu/baccc/Home/allied-health-marketplace>

LEVEL V: LEADING AND SUSTAINING REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

The highest or most intensive stage of employer engagement occurs when businesses or their associations assume leadership for workforce development initiatives or partnerships. When employers “take ownership” of workforce development at this level, they bring their combined resources, expertise, and clout to solving workforce problems in a sustainable way. And if the partnership is truly encompassing of regional employment in a sector—as in Virginia’s NoVAHealthFORCE or Cincinnati’s Health Careers Collaborative—it aids in reducing the barriers to trust that often inhibit competing employers from sharing information and collaborating effectively. For community colleges and other participating education and training partners, these close partnerships help ensure that curricula are closely aligned with employer needs and provide strong feedback on the quality of training and candidates.

Other tips for establishing partnerships:

- > **Where feasible, establish formal structures and memoranda of agreement to govern partnerships and establish accountability.**
- > **Use employer involvement to promote best practices and systemic change, both within businesses and in the wider workforce and educational system.**

Cincinnati, Ohio: Health Careers Collaborative of Greater Cincinnati

A widely recognized example of employer-led collaboration is the Health Careers Collaborative of Greater Cincinnati. Founded in 2005 with initial support from Ohio's KnowledgeWorks Foundation, HCCGC engaged the region's major health employers, including UC Health, TriHealth, and Cincinnati Children's Hospital, as well as education providers and community-based organizations, such as Cincinnati State Technical and Community College, Great Oaks, Mercy Neighborhood Ministries, and Dress for Success. The consortium has taken a self-consciously "employer-centric" approach to solving workforce challenges while promoting development and advancement of lower-income workers, both incumbent and unemployed. Employers chair the steering committee, run monthly meetings, and recruit executives from additional organizations to the collaborative. Each participating employer must sign a memorandum of understanding to signify commitment to mutual expectations and obligations, including making systemic changes in workforce policies—such as prepayment of tuition support for employees enrolling in Cincinnati State and other institutions, and dedicated support for a retention specialist or career navigation coach. Collaborating employers and educators also enjoy mutual benefits by exchanging data on participants; colleges can tell employers how many of their students have completed study and entered jobs at the employer, while employers can report on former students' retention and promotion.

HCCGC's wide reach, both among employers and workforce and human service providers, enables it to take a holistic view of workforce needs and opportunities for systemic change at all levels. This positioned the consortium, and Cincinnati State, to establish a national consortium of colleges and employers (Health Professions Pathway, or H2P) dedicated to streamlining the credential-attainment process in health care through development of a core health care curriculum. The initiative, funded by the federal Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College Careers Training grant, is managed by Cincinnati State and encompasses nine colleges in five states, each of which engages employers, industry groups, and accrediting bodies.

The employer-centric approach of HCCGC has paid rich benefits. Over 4,000 credentials have been awarded in the past decade to workers supported by the collaborative; completion rates are at 80 percent or higher ([HCCGC website](#); Corporate Voices 2012). An independent analysis of the collaborative's business impact found a return on investment of 12 percent from its tuition advancement efforts, reflecting improved retention and reduced recruitment costs (Elvery & Spence 2011).

- > **Support and sustain employer partnerships with a "backbone" or intermediary organization to support collaboration with higher education and service providers.**
- > **Allow sufficient time for industry-led partnerships to grow, cohere, evolve, and adapt to changing circumstances in the economy, labor force, and participating organizations.**
- > **Assist employers in navigating the workforce and other support systems by mapping the region's providers and their roles and resources; assist them in connecting incumbent workers and trainees to needed services.**
- > **Support continuous improvement and monitoring of partnership impact by collecting and analyzing data on participant progress and outcomes, and return on investment to employer partners. Ask employers to provide feedback about the success of program participants once they are hired. Evaluate programs to ensure they are relevant to employers and current with changes in the industry.**

CONCLUSION

Strategic, comprehensive, and continuous employer engagement is challenging. It demands staff time and resources that might be dedicated to activities deemed to be more central to the college's educational mission. At the same time, working with higher education does not top the list of an employer's core business priorities.

Despite these obstacles, sustained and successful employer engagement is both feasible and worth the challenge.

There are myriad ways that employers and community colleges can collaborate to the benefit of each, and to the benefit of students, workers, and the broader community and region. As this brief suggests, this relationship yields richer benefits as each side climbs the ladder of engagement. That doesn't mean that there is less value in lower-stage activities, such as advisory committees or loaned instructors, nor does it imply that higher-stage partnerships, such as convening or leading sectoral initiatives, are feasible or necessary in every instance. The key lesson is the importance of engaging employers strategically, identifying how the education or workforce entity can create value for employers, and building a productive and trusting relationship through a succession of shared activities.

The following are additional lessons general to any stage of employer engagement, but of special importance when exploring and initiating business relationships:

- > **Know your employers.** Do the initial research to select the right partners and tailor strategy accordingly: are they growing, declining, or stable? What industry or sector? What is their history of partnership? What are their connections to local boards, associations, and the public workforce system? Who should be contacted initially? Who has the authority to make decisions about partnering?
- > **Cast a wide net within the firm.** Strengthen relationships with employers by engaging members at multiple levels of the organization—not only human resource or workforce staff but also high-level leadership and department managers. This helps to limit dependence on a single “champion” who might leave the organization, become overburdened, or offer a narrow view of the organization’s workforce needs.
- > **Learn to speak “business.”** Be problem- rather than program-focused. Translate academic terminology or “grant speak” into a common language. Columbus State Community College’s Cheryl Hay reminds us that employers see themselves first as “businesses,” whose primary purpose is not providing employment or supporting advancement, but making things or offering services to create a profit or generate revenue (Hay & Blair 2013). Understanding the distinct agendas at the table, while determining common goals and metrics (skill sets, productivity, retention), is critical to effective employer engagement.
- > **Bring value to the table.** Be clear about the value your institution can create for business, and the assets you can offer. What courses or programs of study currently offered are relevant? How can new or revised curricula and credentials respond to business needs in specific skill areas? Provide data on labor market trends and assist business with mapping the constellation of local services.
- > **Cultivate and maintain relationships.** Remember that “the cows need milking every day,” as Nan Poppe, former campus president at Portland Community College, observes. Building a relationship takes time, early wins, and persistence. Once a working relationship is established, keep employers “in the loop” about curriculum and program development, as well as student progress and outcomes. Offer recognitions and publicity to employers for their support and participation.
- > **Make employer participation user-friendly.** Be clear about your specific needs. Coordinate contact lists and gatherings with other workforce-serving organizations in your region to avoid duplication; team up where feasible. Take inventory of your current workforce relationships and leverage them where possible, rather than initiating partnerships from scratch.
- > **Build on business networks.** Recruit new partners through existing ones. Lead with employers to make the case to additional employers. Identify and cultivate employer champions.
- > **Focus on producing systems changes,** not just programmatic outcomes.

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