STAKEHOLDER BRIEF 1

Strengthening College-Employer Partnerships

In 2021, the Project on Workforce launched the College-to-Jobs Initiative, a multi-year research effort designed to examine the connections between postsecondary education and the workforce. The initial phase of research culminated in the College-to-Jobs Playbook, a comprehensive review of the evidence and implementation of programs that connect students to meaningful careers. Through our research, we identified six themes that warranted further exploration. This brief explores the **first theme: building partnerships between colleges and employers.** *We convened expert discussion groups to dive into each theme and conducted additional research to produce memos detailing actionable recommendations for three main stakeholder groups in the college-to-work ecosystem: educators, employers, and policymakers.*

Jump to Recommendations

Strategic collaboration between colleges and employers enables educators to develop programs that are aligned with industry needs and businesses to build reliable talent pipelines. Through work-based learning experiences that are aligned with education goals, students gain access to skills, knowledge, and social capital that facilitates further career advancement. This brief details approaches for employers, higher education institutions, and policymakers to build stronger college-employer partnerships.

Challenges to Collaboration

Differing priorities and timelines

Employers look to postsecondary institutions to develop workforce talent, but colleges do not always prioritize job skills and career readiness.[1] Meanwhile, employers typically engage with colleges by recruiting students at the end of their time in college, rather than early on in the pipeline, when they could more effectively align education offerings with career opportunities.

Institutional complexities and communication gaps

Without clear structures and systems for establishing and maintaining college-employer partnerships, it can be difficult for employers to navigate the administrative complexities of higher education. Absent clear processes, partnerships develop ad-hoc, relying on personal connections between educators and businesses, and leading to disparities in access to quality programs.[2] Employers and educators often use different jargon, leading to misunderstandings and preventing the creation of joint programs.[3]

Siloed data systems

Higher education and employment data is often collected and reported separately, spread across federal, state, and third-party data systems. Without connected data systems, it is difficult to assess the efficacy of college-employer programs.[4] Timely and accurate labor market data is often inaccessible, making it difficult for colleges to align programming with in-demand careers.[5]

Resource constraints

Both colleges and employers (particularly small businesses) face resource constraints, whether they are financial, human, or time-related. Building and maintaining partnerships requires dedicated time, funds, and knowledge; without the necessary resources and personnel, it is difficult for a collaboration to succeed.

Limited evaluation of employer efforts

There is a dearth of research on the efficacy and return-on-investment of employer initiatives in higher education.[6] Lack of awareness about the benefits of college-employer partnerships can impede their formation, particularly when they require substantial investment.

Guiding Principles

Establish clear structures, responsibilities, and communication
Roles and responsibilities should be communicated early, clarifying priorities and setting expectations for all stakeholders involved. Both colleges and employers should assume responsibility for—and invest resources in—student career readiness and success.

Prioritize programs that add value over students' lifetime
College-employer programs should focus on foundational skill development, in addition to technical skill development. Competencies like teamwork and communication will carry lasting value throughout students' lifetimes, even as jobs continue to change.

Design career exposure early in the college journey
College-employer partnerships should emphasize engagement with students early in their education. This approach gives students insights into career opportunities and expectations that will help them make better education decisions.

Collect and report data on student performance and success
To foster a culture of continuous improvement, partnerships should establish data collection and reporting mechanisms. Accurate data in the workplace and in the classroom enables evidence-based decision-making, allowing for ongoing program improvement and alignment with the evolving needs of both parties.[7]

Center student success and equity
Partnerships should focus on providing equitable educational and career opportunities, which may require designing programs that address barriers by providing wraparound services like transportation, childcare, and mentoring.

Recommendations

Policymakers

1 **Launch competitive federal and state grants for cross-sector regional partnerships.**
Competitive grant programs should require collaboration between education and industry, incentivizing higher education institutions and regional employers to work together to build programs that prepare students for high-paying, in-demand, high-growth jobs.

> **EXAMPLE**
> The Good Jobs Challenge, a competitive federal grant program enacted as part of the American Rescue Plan, required applicants to build a consortium that included a mix of economic development organizations, workforce organizations, 2- and 4-year higher education institutions, local governments, labor unions, and community-based organizations.[8] To date, 32 regional collaborations have been funded through this initiative, increasing knowledge-sharing, joint decision-making, and resource pooling.

2 **Introduce tax incentives to promote employer engagement with colleges.**
States can incentivize employer engagement with colleges by granting credit to organizations that hire student interns or build other work-based learning programs, such as apprenticeships. Tax incentives should be targeted at small- and medium-sized businesses that traditionally do not have the means to support student connections.

3 **Provide technical and program assistance through workforce development boards (WDBs).**
Regional WDBs act as intermediaries, liaising between employers and postsecondary institutions to help facilitate partnership-building and spur economic initiatives. WDBs can offer technical assistance and capacity-building support to colleges and employers, providing guidance on program design and data collection, among other strategies. WDBs can also communicate the benefits of college-employer partnerships for all stakeholders, hosting events to help leaders learn about the steps involved in partnership building.

Higher Education Institutions

1

Designate a single department, such as career services, to manage employer relationships.

Institutions should designate a single unit, such as career services, as the decision-making authority for career development and employer relations. An "employer hub" makes it easier for businesses to identify contacts within colleges whom they can work with to build joint initiatives. It also creates accountability around employer engagement for the institution. It is imperative that the department works across the college, including by working with faculty to build in employer-aligned career-connected learning into the curriculum.

2

Leverage labor market information (LMI) in decision-making processes.

LMI tools, such as Lightcast and Steppingblocks, empower institutions to glean insights into the workforce landscape, which can inform program development and employer outreach. Colleges should train faculty and staff to leverage LMI and establish a Chief Data Officer role (or an equivalent position) to develop institutional data processes and culture around data. Additional recommendations on establishing and using data systems to facilitate employer engagement can be found in Stakeholder Brief #4: Modernizing Data Systems for a Connected Education-Workforce Ecosystem.

3

Co-design programs with employers that lead to industry-recognized credentials.

Programs that lead to industry-recognized credentials that are valued by employers—and can be stacked into degrees—ensure that academic programs align with industry standards and skill needs.[9] Colleges can engage adjunct faculty and guest lecturers from industry to bring real-world expertise to the academic setting and ensure curricula stay up-to-date.

> **EXAMPLE**
> Westmoreland County Community College (WCCC) in Pennsylvania has partnered with Siemens to develop stackable pathways around its mechatronics systems, integrating Siemens level-1 and level-2 certifications into the WCCC curriculum.[10] Wage data is published on WCCC's website, which helps encourage students to stack credentials towards a degree.

4

Form employer advisory committees and engagement processes.

Colleges should form advisory committees, comprised of employers, industry experts, alumni, and community leaders, to offer recommendations that align academic programming with industry standards and keep programs relevant. Committees should

meet regularly, review data, set clear goals, develop career pathways, and commit to employment outcomes for students at a program-level.[11] While some workforce programs already have advisory committees, those committees are often ineffective and perfunctory. For advisory committees to be valuable, there should be standards surrounding quality and meeting consistency. Colleges should also require that employers that serve on advisory committees commit to offering a guaranteed number of job interviews to students each year.

EXAMPLE

Pima Community College created a standardized process for engaging advisory committees. The college produced an advisory committee handbook, outlining membership guidelines, meeting structure, and roles and responsibilities for participating members. The college also adopted the Developing a Curriculum (DACUM) Occupational Analysis approach, structuring meetings to include best practices from focus groups and incorporating a storyboarding process that makes it easier to identify necessary skills and knowledge. The Business & Industry Leadership (BILT) model is another approach the school has introduced, which provides specifications around meeting frequency, organization, and leadership.[12]

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5 **Encourage faculty and staff participation by integrating employer engagement into review procedures.**

Colleges can encourage faculty and staff to engage with employers by recognizing and rewarding employer collaboration in program reviews and promotions. This approach not only underscores the institution's commitment to employer engagement but also incentivizes faculty and staff to meaningfully contribute to external partnerships. Colleges can also create financial incentives or rewards that recognize faculty and staff who have developed exemplary models. Such programs could be designed to promote the replication of successful models across the institution, encouraging others to develop similar programs.

6 **Engage alumni in building partnerships and creating career experiences for students.**

Alumni are uniquely positioned to bridge gaps between colleges and employers, facilitating new dialogue and creating opportunities for both students and businesses. Colleges can conduct outreach through emails and surveys, suggesting that alumni and their organizations develop various career-related experiences and activities for students. Those activities could include expert lectures, internship opportunities, interviews, resume support, and mentorship.[13]

Employers

Create processes and structures to manage relationships with colleges and students.

1 **Assign a team or individual to oversee college partnerships.**
It is important that employers dedicate time to building and sustaining college partnerships. By designating individuals who are tasked with this responsibility and compensated for their work, employers can ensure that programs are thoughtfully designed and successfully deployed to meet the needs of both students and businesses.

2 **Leverage college-connected platforms to advertise work opportunities.**
Many students struggle to find job and internship opportunities, while employers cannot find the talent they need. Employers should use student-centric portals, such as Handshake, to promote opportunities within their organizations, reach students where they are, and attract top talent.

3 **Encourage employees to participate in student programs and initiatives.**
Employees can engage with colleges and students in a number of ways, including by acting as mentors, participating in company internship programs, and serving as guest lecturers. To encourage employee participation in those activities, business leaders should recognize them, provide compensation, and integrate them into professional review and promotion process. Companies should provide engagement guidelines, ensuring that employee activities align with organizational goals and contribute meaningfully to both employee development and student education.

Build connections with regional organizations.

4 **Join consortia that foster collaboration across education and industry.**
Employers should actively engage with local industry associations, chambers of commerce, and workforce development boards. By joining those and other regional organizations, employers can network with colleges, share insights, pool resources, and collaborate on initiatives that align education with workforce needs. Employers should also join college advisory committees to provide input on program development and design.

5 **Prioritize engagement with community colleges, historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), and minority-serving institutions (MSIs).**
Employers can boost racial and socioeconomic diversity within their organizations by prioritizing outreach and engagement efforts with community colleges, HBCUs and MSIs, creating pathways to economic mobility for students who have historically been overlooked and underserved. Employers should identify regional institutions with which to form partnerships–focusing recruitment efforts there and providing work-based learning opportunities to those students.

6 **Co-design curricula with regional colleges.**
Employers should work with colleges to shape curricula, ensuring that the lessons taught in the classroom foster skills and knowledge required for the workplace. They should offer structured, paid work-based learning opportunities to complement classroom instruction, and commit to interviewing a set number of students who complete the program and meet set criteria. Employers should also consider inviting educators to attend company planning meetings so they gain insight into business trends and emerging skill needs.

Additional Resources

"The Partnership Imperative," Managing the Future of Work, Harvard Business School
This paper explores the perspectives of both senior executives and college leadership on the factors contributing to underdeveloped engagement between community colleges and employers.

"Career Services and College-Employer Partnership Practices in Community Colleges: Colleges in California, Ohio, and Texas", RAND Corporation
This report looks at how career services and college-employer partnerships play a key role in driving opportunities for students.

"Engaging Employers in Community College Workforce Education Programs: Examples From the Field," U.S. Department of Education
The Department of Education has compiled a series of partnership models for colleges and employers to borrow lessons from, offering a valuable resource for understanding the steps and complexities involved in establishing successful partnerships.

"Employer and Community College Partnerships," Strada Education Foundation
This report examines models and best practices for forming community college and employer partnerships, summarizing interesting research and models that can guide future partnerships.

"Building Sustainable and Strategic Partnerships with Business and Industry," Achieving the Dream
This report presents a step-by-step guide for how community colleges can develop partnerships with industry.

"A Community College's Guide to Engaging with Employers," Education Design Lab
This guidebook offers practical strategies for building stronger relationships between employers and community colleges.

Endnotes

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5   Ibid.

6   Deming, David, Joseph B. Fuller, Rachel Lipson, Ali Epstein, Kerry McKittrick, and Emma Catalfamo. "Delivering on the Degree: The College-to-Jobs Playbook." Harvard Kennedy School, April 2023. https://college-to-jobs-initiative.netlify.app/college-to-jobs-playbook.pdf.

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9   Karam, Rita T., Charles A. Goldman, and Monica Rico. "Career Services and College-Employer Partnership Practices in Community Colleges: Colleges in California, Ohio, and Texas." RAND Corporation, 2022. Career Services and College-Employer Partnership Practices in Community Colleges: Colleges in California, Ohio, and Texas. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED622166.pdf

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