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## Developing Market-Relevant Curricula and Credentials: Employer Engagement for Community Colleges in Partnerships

Many stakeholders are important to the success of community colleges, but one stakeholder group is paramount: employers. In a thriving regional economy, the business and education communities share an understanding of the type, level, and quantity of skills and credentials needed by the workforce. Progressive institutions recognize that this alignment can only be achieved by truly engaging employers as strategic partners in postsecondary planning and action.

Community colleges often struggle to engage employers effectively, despite a long history of relationships with business. Engagement efforts frequently focus on convening employer advisory committees or conducting one-on-one outreach to businesses. In these cases, employers frequently end up offering tangential input or only providing insight and approval after decisions have been made about course offerings. Students then pay for an education that may not align well with the competencies they'll need at work.

Community Colleges are recognizing the importance of more deeply engaging their business partners. How can colleges more deeply engage employers as strategic partners? Engagement is more than attending annual business advisory committee meetings or providing input regarding curriculum. Effective engagement requires building deep, sustainable relationships that ensure curriculum design and credentials meet the needs of industry sectors/clusters important to the region, and that students exit institutions able to demonstrate that they have the skills and credentials needed by business.

Employers as Advisors...	→ Employers as Strategic Partners...
Attend business advisory committee meetings or respond to surveys and one-on-one engagement on an as-needed basis, once or twice a year.	Are engaged in numerous ways with colleges, including curriculum and assessment design, work- based learning, internships, providing adjunct faculty, etc.  Participate in ongoing dialogue about program decisions through focus groups, group meetings, presentations, and the like.
Respond to surveys and report placement data as requested to help measure success.	Help design surveys, use their connections to increase the survey response rate, and partner in designing the success metrics.

Work one-on-one with the workforce units in colleges to get their individual (customized) training needs met.	Work with colleges and their partners over time to address workforce development needs, especially in sector/cluster approaches among groups of employers in industries important to the regional economy.
Hire graduates as needed from existing programs.	<p>Work with colleges to identify and map career pathway opportunities for students/workers, and to fill program gaps as necessary.</p> <p>Strategically partner with colleges to develop programs that provide a steady “pipeline” of workers in occupations and industries that are expanding.</p> <p>Participate in creative options to connect with prospective workers. <i>Community Housing Partners</i> (Christiansburg, VA) started hosting a “Minute to Get It” Job Fair when typical eight-hour job fairs ceased to attract employers. The reverse job fair gives participants a chance to get in front of an audience of employers and describe the training and skills that they possess—and ultimately why the employer should bring them on as a part of their team—in one minute’s time.</p>
Talk about the importance of higher skills and advise on curriculum.	Work with colleges and provide subject matter experts (SMEs) to identify the competencies and skill standards needed; design relevant curriculum and assessments; and develop and use market relevant credentials.
Receive generalized outreach about college offerings and the value proposition for being a partner.	Are targeted using specialized outreach with a clear ask and suggested role. Colleges should research the organization and its industry ahead of time and create a presentation that puts its services into the context of a specific employer’s business model or profit structure and ensures the pitch appeals to the employer’s values. Engagement is respectful of employers’ time, with clear, purposeful agendas for discussions and meetings.

## Engaging Employers as Strategic Partners: Questions for Colleges to Consider

- Do the college’s mission and strategic plan(s) reflect commitment to employer engagement?
- Are there goals in place for employer engagement? Does the college set objectives and targets, and measure success at meeting those objectives?
- Are employers engaged regardless of whether there is a special project for which the funding source mandates employer participation?
- Do the academic, workforce, student services, and developmental education units work together to solve employer challenges; or does each division engage employers separately – operating in silos?

- Are employers directly involved in competency identification and credential development, curriculum design, assessment design, delivery models, and delivery infrastructure?
- Are colleges connected with other organizations in the region who are also reaching out to employers? Are partnerships being built with these organizations to coordinate employer engagement efforts?
- Is the college able to articulate what it can offer employers beyond trained workers? What additional added value can the college bring?

## Overcoming Challenges to Engaging Employers

Unquestionably, there are many challenges to effective employer engagement, including convincing employers who are not hiring or feel they have little trouble finding talent to nonetheless engage; meeting skill needs in the timeframe employers need; finding that not enough graduates are hired despite having assessed employer needs; conducting assessments that too quickly seem outdated; and in general making the case to employers that their involvement will pay off for them. In short – employer engagement is hard work and not for the faint of heart!

The issue at hand is how to become more effective, intentional, on-going strategic partners with employers in developing the workforce in the community.

Employers become engaged as strategic partners when:

1. Colleges work with them to identify their core workforce and training needs, rather than offering a menu of “off the shelf” programs.
2. Colleges have a structured process to define competencies, curricula, and credentials.
3. Colleges identify and work with credible employer “champions” who can recruit additional companies to join sector partnerships (see below!).
4. Colleges are regarded as credible strategic partners in developing companies’ short-term and long-term talent needs.
5. Employers’ time is used wisely, notably by spending meeting time on identifying challenges, articulating employer needs, action planning and decision-making – not process discussions.
6. Meetings are not just about workforce issues, but also provide employers time for networking, sharing, joint policy strategizing, and practical problem solving.
7. College staff demonstrate deep understanding of the industry: what makes companies grow? What policies affect this industry? What are persistent skill gaps, and why?
8. Colleges work with employers “at the table” (in group meetings) and beyond the table – meet them directly in their space or in other ways to keep them engaged.
9. Colleges offer them the opportunity to participate as volunteers in activities like mock interviews or guest speaking as a way to let them see the program in action and give them more stake in the outcomes of the program.
10. Employers are able to see regular measures of progress leading to engagement goals that they helped to identify.
11. The workers that employers hire or advance can demonstrate that they have the skills/competencies needed to succeed and compete.

In general, employers will be expecting to find solutions to their own workforce needs. This is critical! While there are many altruistically minded employers, the vast majority will be interested in partnering

mainly to gain information, tools, or new relationships that will benefit their own businesses. That is often a compelling motivation. A key implication for colleges engaging employers is the need to ensure “early wins,” with at least some of the benefits employers are looking for demonstrated from the beginning. Some of the benefits to employers of such engagement are described in the table below.

Benefit	Ways to Demonstrate Value
Shared understanding of community/regional issues.	Sometimes, employers simply need better information about community and regional workforce issues to help them plan for and meet their hiring, retention, and training needs. This could be a benefit for employers that are planning for an expansion or reduction in their workforce.
Access to an expanded labor pool.	Involvement provides employers with a leading edge in a competitive and tight labor market. Having access to a nontraditional candidate pool may enable employers to meet critical hiring needs, particularly for high-skill, technical positions.
Shared cost of training.	Subsidizing training or creating a training fund with both public and private resources can help underwrite the employers’ own training costs. This could be a significant benefit to small and medium-sized employers.
Increased employee loyalty, quality of work, and morale.	When employees feel that employers are making an investment in their human capital, this can increase their productivity and loyalty to their employers.
Reduced employee turnover.	Increased loyalty, morale, and performance can result in a reduced employee turnover and hiring costs.
Increased skill adaptability.	Employees that receive needed training improve their range of performance and ability to adapt, and are better able to meet the demands of changing job requirements.
Improved pool of skilled workers.	Working with other employers and education and training providers to develop needed training programs increases opportunities for workers to upgrade skills and improves the overall skill base in the community.
Promotion of corporate citizenship.	Many employers, particularly those with a local customer base, are committed to improving the quality of life in the community and earning local goodwill. Recognition as a good corporate citizen is frequently an important motive. Publicly recognizing employers can provide a high profile for both the employers and colleges’ projects or initiatives.
Closer relationships with schools, colleges, and universities.	Closer relationships with educators means that employers will have greater opportunities to engage in dialogue and have an impact on curricula and programs.

## Sector Partnerships: A Model Approach to Business Engagement

The most successful efforts to engage employers are found in what is termed “sector partnerships” – efforts to work with a group of employers in industry sectors that are important to the regional economy – to bring their collective expertise to bear on issues such as skills identification, curriculum design, credential development, and other workforce preparation issues. Such partnerships are employer-driven and include industry, education and training, and other stakeholders, with a strong intermediary to coordinate information and resources. This approach has demonstrated increased productivity for employers, as well as higher wages and better placement and advancement rates for workers.

Although colleges have a long tradition of working with business advisory committees, often these committees do not have the opportunity to provide substantive input into curriculum design, career pathway opportunities, or other related workforce challenges. Effective sector partnerships work over time to identify core workforce and training challenges and develop solutions to those challenges.

Through participation in sector partnerships, colleges can achieve deepened, ongoing relationships with employers in key local industries. This approach increases the ability of colleges to develop and offer real, market-relevant career pathways that prepare workers for good jobs in their community and ultimately result in hiring the graduates of the programs.

### Examples of Effective Employer Engagement

[The Community and Technical College System of West Virginia](#) nurtured industry partnerships over many years, including the nationally renowned Digital Design and Print Communications Program at Bridgemont Community Technical College (CTC) and the Coal Academy at Southern West Virginia CTC. Both of these programs deeply engaged businesses in numerous ways to develop programs that meet the ongoing needs of their respective industries. West Virginia’s Community and Technical College System worked with CSW in 2008-2011 to build on these successes and institutionalize a sector-based approach to business engagement in its ten colleges by:

- Working with the presidents of the ten colleges and their leadership teams to develop a policy and practice framework for designing and implementing a sector based approach to business engagement.
- Assisting the colleges in determining the key sectors on the state and regional level.
- Helping colleges to begin to break down internal silos in approaching this sector based work.
- Training college faculty and staff on how to implement a sector based approach to business engagement their communities.

[The Pacific Northwest Center of Excellence for Clean Energy](#) (formerly, Center of Excellence for Energy Technology), a Centralia (Washington) College Partnership, is a nationally recognized model providing strategic coordination for the energy industry’s skilled workforce in the Pacific Northwest (Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, and Utah). The Center is led by a broad based consortium comprised of industry and labor leaders that guide the center to:

- Develop and foster industry and labor partnerships to better understand the ever changing workforce issues facing electric utilities and independent power producers.
- Translate energy industry research into “Best Practices” training and education to ensure programs meet industry’s workforce needs.

- Provide clear education and career pathways for students and job seekers for entry into high skills, high wage energy jobs.
- Create a competitive workforce pipeline to meet increasing energy demands and support the economic future of the Pacific Northwest.

For more about this initiative, visit [cleanenergyexcellence.org](http://cleanenergyexcellence.org).

The **Automobile Technical Education Collaborative (AMTEC)** is a consortium of American, Asian, and German auto manufacturers and twenty-four community colleges in nine states that has identified 170 tasks in over twenty duty areas for maintenance technician occupations. The consortium and industry co-developed assessments are used globally throughout the sector. AMTEC's process to identify needed competencies involves subject-matter experts from industry working with college faculty, and focuses on identifying the tasks and skills required for a specific job. Among the lessons of AMTEC is the need for intensive collaboration between employers and their college partners to transform educational delivery methods and reduce the time of learning. Just as important is the need to make instruction rigorous, relevant, and standards-based, so that students can demonstrate their ability to translate their learning to the workplace. The AMTEC educational model represents a shift from one driven by academic expectations to one driven by employer needs. AMTEC's systematic, methodical, and detailed process focuses on the actual work done for a specific job and can be quickly and efficiently tuned among employers, students, and colleges. [www.nga.org/cms/home/nga-center-for-best-practices/center-publications/page-ehsw-publications/col2-content/main-content-list/a-sharper-focus-on-technical-wor.html](http://www.nga.org/cms/home/nga-center-for-best-practices/center-publications/page-ehsw-publications/col2-content/main-content-list/a-sharper-focus-on-technical-wor.html)

**Corporation for a Skilled Workforce** is a national expert in industry sector strategies, with a primary focus on meeting the needs of industry partners. CSW partnered with the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices to accelerate the adoption of regionally targeted industry strategies as a state policy framework, working hand in hand with cabinet-level teams from eighteen states to help develop and launch sector strategies. CSW has also worked with several community and technical college systems (including Kansas, Missouri and West Virginia) to develop comprehensive plans for improving their responsiveness to business and industry.