

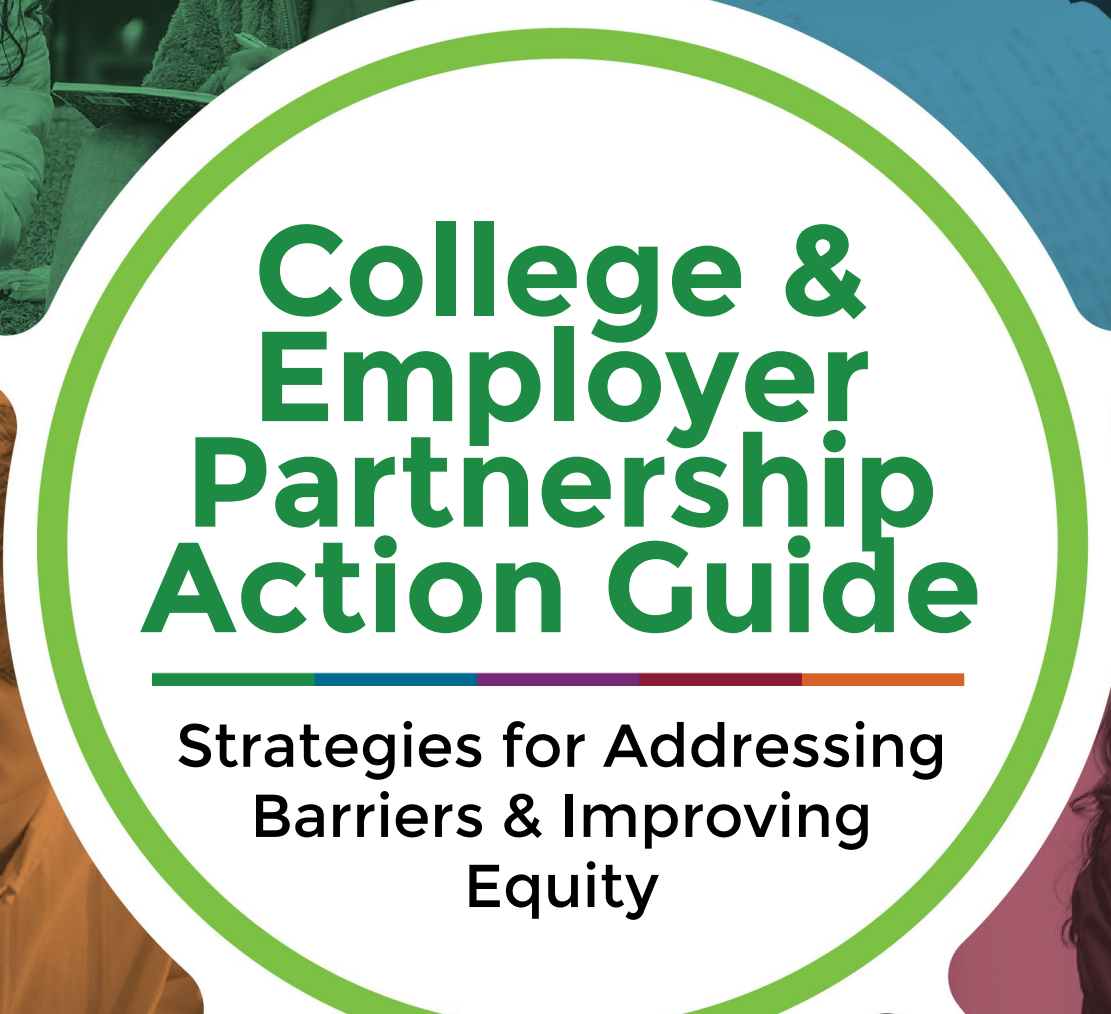


ACE UP

Advancing Community Equity
& Upward Mobility



CSW
CORPORATION FOR A
SKILLED WORKFORCE



College & Employer Partnership Action Guide

Strategies for Addressing
Barriers & Improving
Equity

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About Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW)

CSW is a national workforce policy and systems change nonprofit that partners with government, business, and community leaders to develop good jobs and the skilled workers to fill them. Since 1991, CSW has provided high impact strategic planning, program development, and evaluation assistance to state, regional, and local partners. We catalyze change in educational and labor market systems, policies, and practices to increase economic mobility, particularly for people of color and others historically excluded from success.



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Introduction

In 2024, systemic barriers continue to limit economic opportunity and mobility for Americans, particularly for individuals and communities of color (Economic Policy Institute, 2024). America’s colleges and universities—especially open-access community colleges and four-year institutions—play a critical role in addressing these inequities. They shape equitable pathways to upward mobility for local residents and families.

These institutions do more than grant degrees and credentials; they partner with employers and industries to supply skilled talent, improve access to quality jobs, and expand career pathways. They also advocate for inclusive work environments, equitable hiring practices, and better working conditions.

The purpose of this guide is to support colleges building capacity to engage in equity-driven work, which advances upward mobility for those traditionally excluded from educational and workforce success. Recognizing the essential role of colleges in addressing systemic inequities, this guide provides practical insights from institutions participating in the [Advancing Community Equity and Upward Mobility \(ACE-UP\) Community of Practice](#). The guide highlights how colleges across the nation are strengthening their foundations and collaborating with employer and industry partners to promote equity and economic mobility. For colleges’ employer partners, this guide offers examples of effective collaboration with community colleges and serves as inspiration for deepening partnerships with higher education institutions. It also provides insights into innovative practices in industry-higher education relations and highlights how equity efforts can better engage learners in the workforce.

About ACE-UP

Since its inception in 2023, [ACE-UP](#) has supported colleges in peer-based collaboration, shared learning, and targeted coaching to enhance equity in education and workforce development. Participating colleges have engaged in virtual workshops, group discussions, and an in-person convening. They have also benefited from expert coaching and technical assistance provided by [Corporation for a Skilled Workforce \(CSW\)](#) and guidance from nationally recognized practitioners, industry professionals, and researchers. [The Urban Institute](#) serves as a research partner and is documenting the effort and [publishing a set of related products](#), referenced throughout this guide.



ACE-UP Elements of Success

ACE-UP is grounded in the Elements of Success Framework, developed by CSW to guide colleges in advancing equity, aligning educational pathways with workforce needs, and driving meaningful outcomes. This guide is organized around the framework's interconnected elements, represented as a cyclical and iterative wheel to underscore the dynamic nature of this work. Each element plays a critical role in fostering institutional growth and promoting equitable outcomes.

Advancing Institutionalized Equity

Developing tools and strategies to identify and address equity gaps at all levels of the institution.

Aligning Policy and Practices

Improving learner and worker placement and retention rates through policies and practices that span colleges and employer partners.

Optimizing Employer Partnerships

Building deep, strategic relationships with employers that foster long-term collaboration.

Enhancing Student Services

Creating services that reflect the diverse needs of learners and improve recruitment, advising, and outcomes.

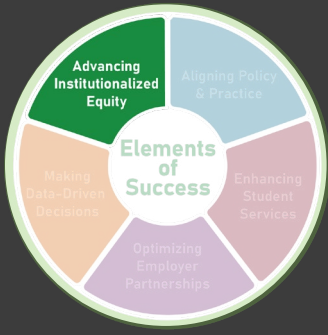
Making Data-Driven Decisions

Using disaggregated data analysis to inform program design and drive continuous improvement.



How to Use This Guide

Whether your focus is on institutionalizing equity, optimizing employer partnerships, or leveraging data for decision-making, you can navigate directly to the sections most relevant to your goals. Each section highlights key actions taken by ACE-UP members that have proven effective in building capacity for equity work. Within each section, you'll also find practical suggestions, including metrics and adaptable tools, for measuring the impact of these actions, along with examples from ACE-UP member institutions. We encourage you to explore the guide in any order that aligns with your institution's priorities. Grounded in research and providing real examples and actionable tools, this guide empowers colleges to strengthen their capacity to engage meaningfully in equity work and drive transformative change.



Advancing Institutionalized Equity



Advancing Institutionalized Equity

Creating tools and strategies to address equity gaps affecting labor market access and outcomes

Colleges have the opportunity to model equitable best practices for their peers and the benefit of their students and staff. To do this, colleges must have a clear understanding of how their internal and external processes manifest equity. There are a variety of tools available to assess equity efforts and corresponding outcomes, but a few initial questions can be asked to gauge an overall commitment to equity: how does the college recruit and hire? Does employment at the institution meet job quality standards for all staff? How does the institution's strategic plan reflect equity? Are there budget allocations to support effective practices? These, and other key actions, have been implemented by ACE-UP member colleges as a means to advance institutionalized equity.

Key Actions for Advancing Institutionalized Equity:

- 1 Implement Equity-Minded Strategic Plans
- 2 Conduct Collaborative Equity Reviews and Audits
- 3 Dedicate People and Policy to Addressing Inclusion



As you read this section, consider:

How might we improve our approach to institutionalized equity by:

- Identifying and addressing gaps in training, career services, and other supports for marginalized and underrepresented students?
- Addressing pay equity for Black, Latino/a/x, and other students of color in our programs?
- Developing strategies to regularly review and revise policies that support equity in teaching, student services, and career pathways?
- Ensuring the sustainability and accountability of equity initiatives across all departments?

Key Action #1

Implement Equity-Minded Strategic Plans

Colleges can support fairness by creating and sharing plans that focus on closing gaps, helping marginalized and underrepresented groups, and improving racial equity (Felix & Castro, 2018). Many ACE-UP colleges include equity goals in their plans by working closely with faculty and staff to get their support. These plans are updated often and used to guide meetings and daily decisions, keeping fairness and equity a priority. Data tools that break down information by semester, course, and program help leaders and teachers implement strategic plans and make better decisions for Black, Latino/a/x, and low-income students (Petrov, Briggs & D'Elia 2024).

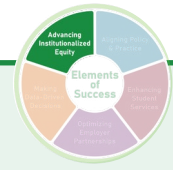
↑ ACE-UP College Examples

Strategic DEI Plan

South Central College worked with faculty leaders, including union representatives, to create its strategic DEI plan. Together, they formed a working group that simplified the plan from five broad areas to three clear goals. This ensured the plan aligned with the college's overall goals and addressed faculty concerns.

Innovative Dashboards

As part of its [strategic planning process](#), Reynolds Community College developed innovative dashboards to close equity gaps and boost student success. These tools track enrollment, retention, and completion outcomes in real-time, disaggregated by school, program, demographics, and even geolocation. This data infrastructure supports the college in monitoring progress on equity goals and driving continuous improvement.



Implement Equity-Minded Strategic Plans

Resources Needed:

- Strategic planning processes that integrate equity goals across programs.
- Budgeting processes that prioritize equity-focused initiatives.
- Partnerships with organizations support equity-based planning.

Outcomes:

- Comprehensive, equity-focused action plans that address systemic gaps across all institutional programs.
- Clear accountability systems with metrics in place to track progress on equity goals, using data to support ongoing improvement.
- Sustainable funding for long-term equity programs, with budgets designed to support equity initiatives.

Metrics:

- Percentage of new interventions launched to address equity gaps based on race, ethnicity, income level, or gender, with their success measured by how much they reduce those gaps.
- **Digging Deeper Metric:** Number of equity-related recommendations from received from students, alumni, and community members received.
- **Digging Deeper Metric:** Number of policy and practice changes implemented as a result of these recommendations.

Helpful Tools:

- [Achieving the Dream: Equity Tool](#): Provides practical resources and frameworks to help colleges assess equity gaps, implement race-conscious strategies, and drive systemic change to improve outcomes for learners of color.
- [Diversity and Equity Strategic Planning Toolkit](#): Offers a structured approach to help colleges create and implement diversity and equity strategic plans, emphasizing actionable steps, stakeholder engagement, and measurable outcomes.

Key Action #2

Conduct Collaborative Equity Reviews & Audits

Colleges can use structured, data-driven equity reviews to identify challenges faced by underrepresented and underserved students. By pinpointing specific barriers, these reviews help colleges create targeted solutions that improve access and success for all learners (Lopez, Moore, & Nabors, 2024; Zinth & Barnett, 2018).

Many ACE-UP colleges are analyzing course and program data to understand how elements like course design, syllabi, and faculty communication contribute to disparities. Senior administrators and working groups also lead reviews, comparing student data with college policies to find areas for improvement. These reviews not only address external pressures, like policy changes and DEI requirements, but also help colleges proactively tackle inequities. Tools like equity frameworks, scorecards, and support from experts ensure these reviews build a strong foundation for continuous progress.

↑ ACE-UP College Examples

Internal Equity Review

Palomar College conducted an equity review as part of its involvement in ACE-UP. A cross-functional workgroup evaluated college services for underrepresented learners using the ACE-UP self-assessment tool and the [NACE professional standards](#). This review led to the development of a strategic plan with a goal to provide equitable career services to Palomar College students through holistic approaches that value diverse and intersecting identities.

Campus Climate Survey

One college conducted a campus climate survey and recognized the need for developing equity-minded recruitment, training, and retention practices. Administrators and staff have worked to collaboratively review these findings with the campus community. This process revealed divides at the college regarding equity as a lived value, giving the college the opportunity to address these divides.

Course Content Review

At one college, the Chief Diversity Officer worked with faculty to apply a diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging lens to program design. In the process, faculty reviewed syllabi, course content, textbooks, and online resources to remove bias, include diverse views, and ensure accessibility for students with disabilities.



Conduct Collaborative Equity Reviews & Audits

Resources Needed:

- Equity audit tools to assess policies, practices, and course designs.
- Data dashboards that are available for use by all staff.
- Training for faculty and staff on how to apply an equity lens to program development.
- External communities of practice and technical assistance to support.

Outcomes:

- Ongoing monitoring and refinement of institutional policies to continuously address equity gaps.
- Increased faculty involvement in promoting equity within their courses and departments.
- Reduced barriers in institutional policies and course designs, improving student success and equity outcomes for underrepresented and marginalized groups.

Metrics:

- Number of programs updated based on student, alumni, and/or employer feedback gathered by surveys, focus groups, and other reports.
- **Digging Deeper Metric:** The percentage of the budget dedicated to equity goals.

Helpful Tools:

- [ACE-UP Self-Assessment Tool](#): A self-assessment tool to help colleges evaluate their practices, identify equity gaps, and enhance employer partnerships to better align workforce development with community needs.
- [Developing an Equity Action Plan: Activity Templates](#): A set of activity templates designed to help colleges create actionable equity plans, addressing systemic barriers and fostering inclusive practices in collaboration with employers and stakeholders.

Key Action #3

Dedicate People & Policy to Addressing Inclusion

Colleges can hire staff and create policies to support Black, Latino/a/x, and other marginalized students. Leaders focused on inclusion can help identify improvement areas and meet goals (Pickett, Smith, & Felton, 2021).

Many ACE-UP institutions have dedicated staff who develop and implement DEI policies. They have hired DEI leaders, for instance, who understand learners' inclusion needs and effectively communicate them to business and industry executives. DEI leaders also provide related professional development to administrators, faculty and staff, ensuring that policies are consistently understood and applied across the organization.

ACE-UP College Examples

Vice President of People, Culture, & Equity

Grand Rapids Community College reimaged the vice president of equity role into a new position: vice president of people, culture, and equity. This realignment, informed by campus and community discussions, reflects a commitment to systemic change and aligns with broader trends of re-focusing on organizational culture within DEI (Petrov et al., 2024).

Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation Campus Center

Montgomery College has taken significant steps to address historical inequities and promote healing by establishing a [Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation \(TRHT\) Campus Center](#). In partnership with the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), the college aims to build cross-racial relationships that lead to racial healing and explore ways to transform the college and community for greater inclusion and equity.

Empathy Interview Training

City Colleges of Chicago has implemented [empathy interview training](#) for administrators, faculty, and staff who frequently interact with students. Those who complete the training gain a better understanding of the unique challenges faced by community college students, many of whom experience significant personal and financial hardships.



Dedicate People & Policy to Addressing Inclusion

Resources Needed:

- Funding to support offices and leadership roles dedicated to inclusion initiatives and programs.
- Partnerships with external organizations to provide resources for inclusion-focused professional development and to support ongoing initiatives.
- Staff development programs that focus on building skills for inclusive teaching, advising, and student support.

Outcomes:

- Increased representation and retention of faculty, staff, and students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.
- Improved retention and success rates among marginalized student populations due to inclusion-focused support programs and resources.
- Strengthened institutional accountability for inclusion goals, supported by leadership roles and clear pathways for measuring and reporting progress.

Metrics:

- Percentage increase in racial and ethnic diversity among faculty, staff, and students—measuring success in recruitment, retention, and representation efforts aligned with inclusion goals.
- **Digging Deeper Metric:** Level of faculty and staff engagement in inclusion-focused professional development programs—tracking participation rates and application of learned inclusive practices in daily interactions.

Helpful Tools:

- [NCORE \(National Conference on Race and Ethnicity\) Professional Development Resources](#): A repository of materials, including training modules and case studies, for professional development in diversity and inclusion.
- [Appreciative Advising Framework](#): Provides a student-centered approach that uses positive, open-ended questions to optimize students' educational experiences and guide meaningful interactions.

Advancing Institutionalized Equity: Reflect & Assess

To use this self-assessment tool, rate your institution's performance (1- We do not have this at all; 2- We have some of this sometimes; 3- We have this in place now) and make notes on ways you might grow in each area. [Download the full version of this tool here.](#)

Action	Rating	How would you like to grow your approach?
We have identified institutional or programmatic gaps in training or support services and have leveraged resources to fill those gaps, either within our organizations or through our external partnerships.		
We regularly review and identify institutional policies, practices, and course designs that impact student success and perpetuate inequities in campus life/campus culture.		
We utilize those reviews to actively address issues identified using equity-minded action plans.		
We have designed the necessary supports for the coordinated and sustained implementation of racial diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts institution wide, including accountability mechanisms.		
We incorporate recruitment, development, and advancement policies and practices for all faculty and staff to demonstrate our commitment to an inclusive and diverse campus culture.		



Aligning Policy & Practice



Aligning Policy & Practice

Strengthening institutional and workforce alignment through equitable policies and practices

Aligning college policies and practices with those of their business partners helps learners, employers, and the colleges themselves. Colleges can take action to bolster their support for business and industry demands while advocating for more inclusive hiring and retention practices. Doing so provides learners with access to strong pathways to workforce opportunities, while employers build a diverse talent pool to meet hiring demands.

Key Actions for Aligning Policy & Practice:

- 1** Identify Opportunities to Drive Equity & Employer Value
- 2** Create Full-Time Positions/Teams to Help Employers Recruit Talent
- 3** Leverage the Role of Faculty in Fostering Employer Partners



As you read this section, consider:

How might we strengthen our workforce programs and employer engagement by:

- Regularly evaluating workforce program policies and practices to minimize barriers while boosting learner recruitment and retention?
- Using student-centered feedback mechanisms and data tools to inform program adjustments?
- Engaging with employers to discuss policies and practices that advance equity, including job quality indicators such as pay, schedule, benefits, worker agency, and work conditions?
- Encouraging employers to offer mentorship or similar support structures for learners entering a career pathway?

Key Action #1

Identify Opportunities to Drive Equity & Employer Value

Colleges can partner with businesses to create supportive policies that benefit both employers and their workers. Using data, colleges can make a compelling case for inclusive policies that benefit employers—enhancing employee retention, engagement, and productivity—while improving work environments for learners (Cotner et al., 2021; Bragg et al., 2018). ACE-UP members are working with their employer partners to promote inclusive workplace policies and practices. They work with human resources teams to advocate fair pay, flexible scheduling and comprehensive benefits. They also collaborate with employers to promote the use of competencies, skills-based hiring, and strengthening college to employment pathways. Formal agreements, like memorandums of understanding (MOUs), help articulate joint value and solidify commitments, ensuring that institutional policies and practices advance employer objectives and equity goals.

ACE-UP College Examples

“Business-First” Language

Grand Rapids Community College (GRCC) engages with employer partners by presenting measurable outcomes that show the financial and operational advantages of their programs. By translating improvements in student retention rates, resulting from equity measures, into specific dollar savings, GRCC presents “business-first” language that directly connects to the value of equity measures (Spaulding & Sirois 2024).

HireU Collaborative Initiative

Montgomery College is a part of the [Montgomery County HireU initiative](#): a collaborative effort with local K-12 schools, colleges, and workforce organizations to advance equity for learners. HireU focuses on defining employer-identified, career-readiness competencies across the workforce ecosystem. This initiative aims to foster a skilled workforce while helping employers better understand career readiness across educational levels, bridging the gap between education and employment.

Guaranteed Interviews & Job Shadowing

Reynolds Community College’s partnership with VCU Health includes an MOU that guarantees interviews and clinical learning experiences for students in health professions programs, including short-term workforce credential programs provided by the college’s workforce division: Community College Workforce Alliance. This formal partnership has resulted in greater student enrollment, completion, and post-program employment, as VCU Health actively contributes to curriculum design and career readiness initiatives. The collaboration serves as a model for colleges looking to build strong, long-term relationships with employers.



Identify Opportunities to Drive Equity & Employer Value

Resources Needed:

- DEI consultants or equity training programs for employers.
- Data tracking systems to measure worker outcomes post-implementation.
- Dedicated employer engagement teams to nurture and manage partnerships.
- Resources for convening employer advisory boards and ensuring regular communication.

Outcomes:

- Employers implement new policies resulting in higher retention rates of learners from historically marginalized communities.
- Learner satisfaction and improved workforce performance as a result of more equitable practices.

Metrics:

- Retention rate of underrepresented and marginalized learners in employment before and after the implementation of employer policy changes.
- **Digging Deeper Metric:** Satisfaction of learners in employment pathways, including perceptions of belonging and inclusion in the workplace and job quality.

Helpful Tools:

- [Equity in the Center's "Awake to Woke to Work" Framework](#): Helps colleges and employers collaboratively develop inclusive policies and practices, focusing on retention, engagement, and equity-driven workplace transformation.
- [MOU: Formalizing Partnerships](#): A resource from Jobs For the Future (JFF) offering a template and guidance for developing Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) to formalize partnerships between colleges and employers, ensuring alignment on goals and equity-focused outcomes.

Key Action #2

Create Full-Time Positions/Teams to Help Employers Recruit Talent

Colleges can align with business and employer needs by creating dedicated employer engagement roles. These roles foster partnerships that enhance job placement rates and equip students with the skills needed for in-demand fields (Kazis & Liebowitz, 2020; Griffith & Conrad, 2019).

Numerous ACE-UP colleges exemplify this approach, employing job developers, career navigators, employment specialists, and other key roles dedicated to building a more cohesive support system for students. Some roles, such as job developers, work to establish strong partnerships with employers, serve as a primary contact to streamline engagement across academic and workforce programs, and tailor their efforts to help industries recruit and retain students (Urban Institute, n.d.). Others, such as career navigators, are focused on supporting students by providing direct academic- and workforce-related guidance and coordinating campus and community-based services (Goodman, 2015). By distinguishing these roles, colleges can help ensure focused attention and adequate support for both employer partnerships and students.

ACE-UP College Examples

Employer Specialists

At one college, the establishment of employer specialists as a complement to their career center was transformative. Previously, the career center was not accessible to the non-credit side of the institution. After shifting the career center to be part of the division overseeing non-credit programs, employer specialists were tasked with bridging the gap, resulting in better alignment with industry needs and increased student engagement in work-based learning opportunities.

Work-Based Learning Team

One college created a dedicated work-based learning team that focuses on developing paid internships and leveraging partnerships with workforce boards and WIOA funding. Their success in securing about 80% paid internships demonstrates the potential impact of these dedicated roles.



Create Full-Time Positions/Teams to Help Employers Recruit Talent

Resources Needed:

- Funding for dedicated positions like job developers, employer specialists, and career navigators.
- Employer collaboration frameworks and partnership agreements.

Outcomes:

- Increased employer partnerships resulting in a more diverse and skilled workforce pipeline.
- Better job placement rates for learners, particularly learners of color and others from historically marginalized communities.

Metrics:

- Total number of formal employer partnerships established.
- **Digging Deeper Metric:** Percentage of employers actively recruiting and retaining students, disaggregated by industry, geography, race, and ethnicity. Measure year-over-year changes to identify and optimize equitable employer engagement across diverse groups.

Helpful Tools:

- [National Career Development Association \(NCDA\) Career Specialist Training:](#) Provides training programs for career specialists, equipping staff with skills to support students in job placement and workforce readiness.
- [Community College-Employer Partnerships: Building Competencies and Careers:](#) A detailed resource for creating and sustaining employer partnerships, including through the use of job developer and career navigator roles.

Key Action #3

Leverage the Role of Faculty in Fostering Employer Partners

By leveraging the role of faculty, colleges can help align institutional policies and practices with industry and employer needs. Faculty-driven partnerships actively engage employers to enhance learners' academic and career experiences. Research shows these partnerships can improve students' short-term employment and earnings outcomes, underscoring the impact of alignment between curriculum and industry demands (Cotner et al., 2021).

Faculty members at many ACE-UP colleges are leveraging their industry connections to invite employers to classroom events, job fairs, and panels. This engagement connects learners' educational and training experiences to real-world career opportunities. It also helps meet employers' needs, connecting them to a source of recruiting diverse talent (Spaulding & Sirois 2024). By ensuring faculty members are equipped to develop and sustain employer partnerships, colleges can foster a collaborative ecosystem where colleges and employers both support students on their career pathways.

ACE-UP College Examples

Students of Color Career Conference

At Everett Community College, a faculty member developed the [Student of Color Career Conference](#), which connects western Washington middle- and high-school students with industry leaders. This initiative, which has been running for over 20 years, has strengthened connections between the college and local employers while supporting youth career exploration.

Faculty Professional Development

Reynolds Community College leverages faculty expertise in its employer partnerships by offering professional development through the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning to strengthen faculty's engagement with industry. This approach equips faculty with current industry knowledge, enabling them to better prepare students for the workforce with career readiness skills and strengthen employer relationships.

Sergeant School Instructors

Palomar College boosted Marine recruitment from nearby Camp Pendleton by hiring former Sergeant School instructors who understand Marine culture and language. This approach made the program more relatable, increasing participation as Marines felt supported by instructors who could connect with their experiences and link them to opportunities.



Leverage the Role of Faculty in Fostering Employer Partners

Resources Needed:

- Faculty development programs to enhance industry collaboration skills.
- Institutional recognition and support for faculty initiatives that involve employer partnerships.

Outcomes:

- Increased student exposure to employers and industry professionals.
- Faculty help create job and internship opportunities, leading to higher student placement rates.

Metrics:

- Total number of employer-student interactions (e.g., classroom visits, job fairs, panels).
- **Digging Deeper Metric:** Number of employer interactions that lead to placement/employment.

Helpful Tools:

- [Fordham University's Faculty Career Toolbox](#): This comprehensive resource offers tools and materials to help faculty integrate career readiness into their curriculum, develop effective career-focused presentations, and connect classroom theory with practical job market realities.
- [NACE: Facilitating Faculty Buy-In to Career Readiness](#): Provides best practices for engaging faculty in promoting career readiness, including strategies to align academic instruction with workforce expectations.

Aligning Policy & Practice: Reflect & Assess

To use this self-assessment tool, rate your institution's performance (1- We do not have this at all; 2- We have some of this sometimes; 3- We have this in place now) and make notes on ways you might grow in each area. [Download the full version of this tool here.](#)

Action	Rating	How would you like to grow your approach?
<p>We have identified best or promising practices to help our employer partners recruit and retain a skilled, diverse workforce.</p>		
<p>We have identified best or promising employer initiatives which, when implemented, lead to improved, long-term outcomes for current and future workers.</p>		
<p>We have worked with employer partners to recommend best practice and policy examples which if applied could lead to improved longer-term outcomes for current and future workers.</p>		
<p>Next steps with employers:</p>		



Optimizing Employer Partnerships



Optimizing Employer Partnerships

Addressing workforce needs through employer partner collaboration

Optimizing employer partnerships for greater equity impact requires sustained, collaborative engagement. Colleges that strengthen relationships with equity-focused employers achieve benefits for both parties. Employer partners gain access to a more diverse and equipped talent pool, while colleges are better able to support students for broader success. Learners gain access to essential career-building resources and training, improving hiring and recruitment outcomes. This collaboration creates an ecosystem in which all parties—colleges, employers, and learners—win.

Key Actions for Optimizing Employer Partnerships:

- 1 Address Workforce Equity with Advisory Boards
- 2 Establish Multiple, Regular Touchpoints with Employers Beyond Advisory Boards
- 3 Co-Design Programs with Employers



As you read this section, consider:

How might we strengthen our employer partnerships and engagement by:

- Improving our connections with employer champions to help students access pathways to quality jobs?
- Engaging the right program-related employers on advisory boards and committees?
- Adapting our messaging to engage employers of different sizes?
- Building stronger connections with our local Chamber of Commerce?

Key Action #1

Address Workforce Equity with Advisory Boards

Colleges can optimize their employer partnerships by leveraging regular advisory board meetings and feedback from employer partners. This collaboration can foster responsive curriculum design and support equitable workforce practices (Scott et al., 2018). Multiple ACE-UP colleges are seeking to strengthen these interactions through strategic equity work with their advisory boards. Holding equity-focused discussions with advisory boards can identify and fix inequitable hiring and workplace policies. Maintaining open, two-way communication with employers via these boards allows colleges to assess whether employer training needs are being met. In turn, colleges can explore opportunities to expand career pathways for underemployed and incumbent workers which may better meet the needs of employer partners.

↑ ACE-UP College Examples

Intentionally Diverse Advisory Councils

ASU-N is diversifying their advisory councils to ensure broader representation and exploring ways to engage employers beyond regularly scheduled meetings. The college is also working on enhancing metrics to better track equity goals, including progress in enrollment diversity, business and industry representation on councils, and outcomes like student completion and employment (Spaulding & Sirois 2024).

Local Employer Advisory Boards

Kingsborough Community College created a tech advisory board and later a hospitality advisory board to engage local employers in conversations around industry needs and workforce development. These advisory boards emphasized diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) while focusing on bringing employer perspectives into program design. Employers such as Meta not only provided feedback on curriculum but also offered internships to students.



Address Workforce Equity with Advisory Boards

Resources Needed:

- Advisory board members from diverse industries.
- A discussion-friendly meeting space that encourages open communication and collaboration.
- Tools to collect and analyze employer feedback, learner feedback, and workforce data.

Outcomes:

- Programs are better aligned with industry needs, increasing student placement success.
- A familiar platform that provides to discuss workforce needs for colleges and employers.
- Employers are more knowledgeable of equitable hiring and workplace practices that promote worker recruitment and retention.

Metrics:

- Percentage of learners placed in jobs within their field of study, with employer partners.
- **Digging Deeper Metric:** Qualitative feedback from learners on how policy changes (e.g., flexible scheduling, improved onboarding) impact their ability to succeed in training or employment.

Helpful Tools:

- [CTE Advisory Committee Meeting Toolkit](#): Provides a framework and resources for planning and conducting effective advisory committee meetings to strengthen collaboration between colleges and industry partners.

Key Action #2

Establish Multiple, Regular Touchpoints with Employers Beyond Advisory Boards

Traditional advisory councils can be effective, but colleges can work with groups like chambers of commerce, economic development agencies, and community workforce boards to broaden their employer pool. Structured, ongoing interactions with employers enable community colleges to better align their educational programs with workforce needs (Lerman, 2019).

Some ACE-UP colleges are going further by working closely with local workforce leaders. For example, several colleges are holding meetings with CEOs, hiring managers, and HR leaders through industry roundtables and workforce groups. These partnerships help them understand hiring needs and trends, leading to solutions that benefit employers, students, and the community.

ACE-UP College Examples

Biannual Industry Summits

South Central College has built strong connections with employers by hosting industry summits twice a year and staying in regular contact with business leaders. This approach includes dedicated positions, like the Vice President of Strategic Partnerships, who work directly with employers to include their ideas in program planning and curriculum updates. This multi-touchpoint strategy keeps communication open and up-to-date between the college and its industry partners.

Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development Participation

ASU-N approaches regional collaboration with employers through regular participation with the regional Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development. This is exemplified by the role of an ASU-N staff member serving on the Chamber Workforce Development Committee, allowing staff to regularly gather insights on workforce needs across various industries.

Industry-Specific Roundtables

Rockland Community College, in collaboration with the local Workforce Development Board and the Rockland Business Association, regularly hosts industry-specific roundtables to gather feedback on hiring needs. These roundtables provide valuable insights that help shape curriculum and workforce programs, ensuring they meet the evolving needs of the region's industries.



Establish Multiple, Regular Touchpoints with Employers Beyond Advisory Boards

Resources Needed:

- Executive and administrative representation on workforce boards, partnerships, coalitions, and advisory committees to align strategies.
- Strategic partnership frameworks that leverage local and regional resources for impactful collaboration.
- Dedicated staff for building and sustaining employer engagement initiatives.
- Event planning resources to support employer engagement activities.

Outcomes:

- Strengthened regional partnerships that boost workforce development.
- Increased alignment between workforce development programs and local economic demands.
- Stronger alignment between employer needs and program outcomes, resulting in more targeted recruitment and hiring.
- Increased opportunities for employers to interact with students and faculty, leading to internships, apprenticeships, and employment offers.

Metrics:

- Total number of active partnerships with chambers of commerce, economic development agencies, and workforce boards.
- **Digging Deeper Metric:** Number of internships and job placements facilitated through industry summits and college-led events.

Helpful Tools:

- [Employer Engagement Best Practices Toolkit](#): Provides actionable strategies and templates to help colleges establish and sustain employer partnerships, including a continuum model, real-world case studies, and an MOU template to formalize collaborations.
- [A Community College's Guide to Engaging Employers](#): Provides actionable strategies for community colleges to build meaningful employer partnerships, align educational programs with workforce needs, and enhance student career readiness.

Key Action #3

Co-Design Programs with Employers

Industry partners can work with colleges as active collaborators, developing and improving programs together. Applying feedback from employers about skills and training requirements can ensure educational programs remain relevant and aligned with workforce needs. (Dunham et al., 2015).

Many ACE-UP colleges are working to involve employer decision-makers in creating, reviewing, and improving programs. Employers are invited to design and run programs together alongside colleges, providing feedback and direction on resource management. Meanwhile, competency-based programs, informed by employers, provide students with job-ready skills that meet employers' needs.

↑ ACE-UP College Examples

Co-Developed Clean Energy Programs

Benjamin Franklin Cummings Institute of Technology (BFCIT) partnered with Johnson Controls to develop clean energy-focused programs, including a \$100,000 investment from Johnson Controls to help launch these initiatives. This partnership has led to the creation of industry-relevant programs that prepare students for careers in the growing clean energy sector.

Healthcare Workforce Partnership

Bluegrass Community and Technical College has partnered with regional hospitals, including the University of Kentucky (UK), to address the nursing and healthcare workforce shortage. This collaboration has improved pathways to healthcare careers for marginalized students, including students of color and multilingual students, beginning in high school. It also increases opportunities for workers to upskill and explore new specialties within the healthcare field.



Co-Design Programs with Employers

Resources Needed:

- Continuous improvement frameworks that incorporate employer feedback.
- Platforms or tools to facilitate ongoing collaboration between employers and faculty.
- Employer partners willing to provide input on competencies and curriculum design.
- Grants or funding to support new program development and employer engagement.
- Roundtable discussions and workforce coalitions to gather feedback from decision-makers.
- Platforms for gathering and applying employer input in program design.

Outcomes:

- Greater student employment and retention in quality jobs.
- Employers more actively participate in program updates and resource allocation, resulting in stronger student outcomes.
- Employers report greater satisfaction with students' career readiness and the workforce pipeline.
- Stronger alignment between employer needs and program outcomes, resulting in more targeted recruitment and hiring.
- Scaled impact through partnerships with industry associations and workforce coalitions.

Metrics:

- Percentage of students placed in jobs in industries identified as high demand by employer decision-makers.
- **Digging Deeper Metric:** Total dollar amount of employer contributions, including support for apprenticeship wages, equipment purchases, tuition assistance, and other financial investments.

Helpful Tools:

- [Colleges Must Improve Their Employer Partnerships: Here's How](#): A New America guide detailing strategies for colleges to strengthen employer partnerships, emphasizing alignment with workforce needs, equity in hiring practices, and collaborative program development.

Optimizing Employer Partnerships: Reflect & Assess

To use this self-assessment tool, rate your institution's performance (1- We do not have this at all; 2- We have some of this sometimes; 3- We have this in place now) and make notes on ways you might grow in each area. [Download the full version of this tool here.](#)

Action	Rating	How would you like to grow your approach?
We actively communicate back-and-forth with our employer partners, including checking to see if their training-related needs are being met, assessing needs, and exploring opportunities to solidify and expand career pathways for the un-/underemployed, incumbent workers.		
We collaborate with employer partners on program design, implementation, evaluation, continuous improvement, and strategic investment of resources.		
Our employers articulate needed skills and competencies and drive the design of curriculum and assessments with our programs. We also have specific vehicles for engaging in two-way feedback on equitable programs, strategies, and practices.		
We are able to easily identify and convene key decision-makers (CEOs, hiring managers, HR leadership) from large and small employers within a given sector, and leverage industry associations or intermediaries to deepen impact and achieve scale.		
We are able to proactively work with employer partners to identify and address hiring and workplace policies that might be contributing to disparate outcomes for current and future workers of a certain race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic or special population status.		
We have, and support the development of, employer champions who are willing to speak about the value of our programs formally and informally with other employers.		



Enhancing Student Services



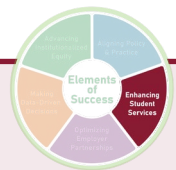
Enhancing Student Services

Increasing learner support and retention

Student services play a pivotal role in addressing learners' academic, career, and holistic needs. Colleges may encounter challenges which hinder their support services, like competing priorities, limited financial resources, staff turnover, insufficient professional development opportunities, and internal and external politics. The following actions may help colleges enhance inclusivity, reinforce learner support, and establish sustainable pathways for long-term student success and career advancement (Petrov & D'Elia 2024).

Key Actions for Enhancing Student Services:

- 1** Strengthen Recruitment of Underrepresented and Marginalized Students into Programs
- 2** Address Barriers in Workforce Programs
- 3** Improve Non-Credit to Credit Pathways



As you read this section, consider:

How might we strengthen our supports for underrepresented and marginalized student populations by:

- Identifying strategies to expand our recruitment of underrepresented populations more effectively in our sectors of focus?
- Addressing the barriers students face in our programs through one-on-one advising and wraparound supports, especially through technology?
- Collaborating more effectively and formally with employers to align with their inclusion strategies?

Key Action #1

Strengthen Recruitment of Underrepresented and Marginalized Students into Programs

Colleges can enhance student supports by strategically using materials, events, and program pathways to recruit marginalized and underrepresented learners. Culturally responsive recruitment strategies—including multilingual and community-targeted outreach, along with comprehensive support—have been shown to increase enrollment among underrepresented students, particularly those balancing work and family responsibilities (Nuñez & Yoshimi, 2017; Bailey & Alfonso, 2005).

A number of ACE-UP institutions are taking steps to improve their recruitment of underrepresented learners by translating promotional materials into multiple languages and using digital platforms to reach younger and tech-savvy audiences. They create on- and off-campus banners and radio ads that reflect current and prospective students' identities, languages, and cultures. They also plan and produce community events, which help recruit specific demographic groups and ensure that outreach efforts are inclusive and resonate with students.

ACE-UP College Examples

Holistic Admission Review

One college addressed barriers to enrollment for underrepresented students by implementing a holistic admission review for their nursing and allied health career programs. The aim of this holistic practice is to increase diversity across the student population without decreasing academic success or workforce preparedness.

TikTok Outreach

Kingsborough Community College created TikTok-style videos to demystify UX (User Experience) programs for individuals unfamiliar with the field. These videos, alongside strategic marketing and outreach have been successful in recruiting underrepresented populations into the college's IT pathways. This strategy highlights the importance of using targeted, culturally relevant outreach methods to reach specific audiences.

Demographic-Specific Community Events

South Central College has hosted targeted community events like Latino/a/x and Somali Nights to foster connections with specific demographic groups. Through these efforts, colleges help ensure that their outreach is inclusive and resonates with students and families.



Strengthen Recruitment of Underrepresented and Marginalized Students into Programs

Resources Needed:

- Engaging marketing teams to develop accessible outreach materials (flyers, ads, radio spots) in multiple languages.
- Hiring and retaining dedicated staff for outreach and engagement with community-based organizations and underrepresented groups.
- Identifying and using technology and systems to manage wraparound services.
- Leveraging event planning resources for targeted community engagement.

Outcomes:

- Increased enrollment from underrepresented and historically marginalized populations due to targeted outreach and accessible pathways.
- Expanded use of wraparound services, leading to higher retention and graduation rates.
- Strengthened partnerships with community-based organizations, churches or other religious groups, and one-stop centers to ensure outreach efforts reach target demographics.

Metrics:

- Percentage increase in enrollment of students from underrepresented populations (e.g., people of color, veterans, individuals with disabilities).
- **Digging Deeper Metric:** Percentage of positive feedback from diverse demographic communities on the inclusivity and accessibility of recruitment strategies, used to evaluate and refine outreach efforts.

Helpful Tools:

- [Beyond Enrollment: Addressing Black College Students' Sense of Belonging](#): A thought piece exploring strategies to enhance Black students' sense of belonging in higher education through inclusive admissions practices and supportive campus environments.
- [Toolkit for Conducting Outreach and Recruitment Focus Groups with Underrepresented and Underserved Communities](#): Provides guidance for organizing and facilitating focus groups to enhance outreach and recruitment efforts, ensuring culturally responsive engagement between colleges and employers.

Key Action #2

Address Barriers in Workforce Programs

Student support services can be enhanced by addressing the logistical and emotional barriers students may face. Comprehensive nonacademic supports benefit learners, especially those balancing work and family obligations (Karp & Stacey, 2013).

ACE-UP colleges are addressing some of these challenges through improvements to one-on-one advising and case management approaches. Colleges ensure academic and personal wellbeing by connecting students to internal and external wraparound services, such as on-site food pantries, emergency funds, career services, and student success teams. Academic advising and career counseling can be integrated to identify issues as they arise, facilitated by career navigators and tools like Ellucian's DegreeWorks and EAB's Starfish, for degree mapping and educational planning.

ACE-UP College Examples

Community College Health CARES Consortium

Onondaga Community College leads the [Community College Health CARES Consortium](#), a partnership of 11 New York State community colleges focused on increasing access to industry-recognized credentials for low-income learners in healthcare and social assistance careers. The Health CARES Consortium, supported by a [U.S. Department of Labor \(DOL\) Strengthening Community Colleges Grant](#), collaborates with employers, workforce agencies, and labor organizations to identify non-credit to credit career pathways. This gives learners the opportunity to secure high-paying jobs in these essential fields while continuing their education.

One-Stop Service Center

Reynolds Community College aims to identify and address barriers for community members even before they become students in credit and non-credit programs. The college's downtown campus—located in a low-income, historically marginalized community—now includes the Career Connection center. Career Connection offers access to holistic supports for individuals who register for credit and non-credit bearing programs, including financial assistance, emergency loans, food pantries, and digital literacy services. The center also offers career coaching and a connection to employers who are hiring.



Address Barriers in Workforce Programs

Resources Needed:

- Hiring and retaining student success coordinators, career navigators, and support staff to work closely with students.
- Sourcing and implementing technology platforms for degree mapping and educational planning.
- Sustaining funding for robust wraparound services, including financial aid, emergency support, food pantries, and digital literacy training.
- Fundraising for student success programs that permit greater access to wraparound supports for Black, Latino/a/x, and Indigenous students and students from low-income backgrounds.

Outcomes:

- Higher retention and completion rates due to individualized, culturally-responsive student advising and support.
- More students from underrepresented and historically marginalized groups complete their degrees on time with the help of technology-assisted planning tools.
- Increased student engagement with wraparound supports, leading to improved academic and personal outcomes.

Metrics:

- Number of students, particularly from underrepresented groups, completing their programs after receiving individualized support.
- **Digging Deeper Metric:** Percentage of surveyed students reporting positive experiences with individualized support, particularly among adult learners and those in workforce or non-credit-bearing programs, to evaluate the effectiveness of support strategies.

Helpful Tools:

- [ATD Strategic Partnerships for Holistic Student Supports Toolkit](#): Provides actionable resources and strategies to help institutions develop strategic partnerships that deliver integrated, equity-driven supports addressing students' academic, career, and personal success needs.
- [Supporting the Whole Student Through Holistic Advising](#): A resource highlighting best practices in holistic advising to address students' academic, career, and personal needs, fostering equitable success outcomes in higher education.

Key Action #3

Improve Non-Credit to Credit Pathways

Colleges can enhance student services by creating clearer pathways connecting non-credit certifications and programs to credit-bearing opportunities. By aligning non-credit and credit programs, colleges promote career mobility and foster more equitable access to education and workforce opportunities (Education Strategy Group, 2020).

Numerous ACE-UP colleges are equipping faculty in credit-bearing programs to assess and establish credit equivalencies for non-credit courses, certifications, and programs. Colleges partner with employers to design programs that integrate non-credit and credit options, enabling students to move seamlessly from short-term certificates into career-focused certifications and degree programs. They also provide learners with more guidance on the implications of transitioning between non-credit and credit pathways, including information on financial aid and employment and earnings prospects.

ACE-UP College Examples

Community Health Non-Credit to Credit Pathway

Kingsborough Community College has developed a non-credit to credit pathway within its Community Health program, allowing students who successfully complete workforce training to earn up to 12 credits toward a degree. This collaboration, which began in 2015, reflects a strong relationship between the workforce and academic departments, enabling students to transition more easily from non-credit training to credit-bearing programs.

Faculty Innovation Fellowship

Rockland Community College launched an Innovation Fellowship for faculty, co-sponsored by the Workforce Division and Academic Affairs. This fellowship encourages faculty to design stackable pathways that integrate workforce programs with credit-bearing degree pathways. The initiative's value proposition to faculty is that these pathways serve as a feeder into their degree programs, bringing students who may initially enter through workforce certifications, but aim to transition into credit programs within a few years.

Tech Launch Pad

City Colleges of Chicago (CCC) is improving the recruitment of underrepresented students of color into IT programs through its [Tech Launchpad](#), a collaboration with a local Tech employer to grow and diversify the local tech pipeline through credit and non-credit programs. This includes the college's partnership with [AWS Machine Learning Initiative](#), which is focused on recruiting underrepresented students into high-demand fields.



Improve Non-Credit to Credit Pathways

Resources Needed:

- Supportive senior leadership and faculty, who understand the importance of constructing non-credit to credit pathways for upward mobility.
- Technical training for faculty and staff to advance policy and practice, such as reviewing workforce certifications for credit, aligning non-credit and credit-bearing course and program requirements, and constructing opportunities for stackable credentialing.
- Data management systems to track students from non-credit to credit programs and analyze trends in pathway success, barriers, and areas for improvement.
- Financial aid navigation support to help students access funding options like Title IV, where eligible, for non-credit courses.

Outcomes:

- Improved transition rates, increasing the percentage of students who move from non-credit to credit programs successfully.
- Enhanced student awareness and pathway success, resulting in higher completion rates for students transitioning into degree programs.
- Increased employer alignment to support non-credit to credit pathway students, enhancing the relevance and appeal of these programs in the job market.

Metrics:

- Percentage of non-credit students enrolling in credit-bearing programs within six months of program completion.
- **Digging Deeper Metric:** Impact of policies designed to facilitate non-credit to credit transitions, measured by analyzing transition rates disaggregated by demographics to determine their effectiveness in reducing barriers for historically marginalized students.

Helpful Tools:

- [ACCT Center for Policy and Practice: NCAL Resource Hub](#): Offers tools and resources to support community colleges in addressing the unique needs of adult learners, with a focus on equitable access, persistence, and success.
- [A More Unified Community College: Policy and Practice Toolkit](#): Provides actionable strategies and frameworks for community colleges to align policies and practices, fostering equity and improving student outcomes through unified institutional efforts.

Enhancing Student Services: Reflect & Assess

To use this self-assessment tool, rate your institution's performance (1- We do not have this at all; 2- We have some of this sometimes; 3- We have this in place now) and make notes on ways you might grow in each area. [Download the full version of this tool here.](#)

Action	Rating	How would you like to grow your approach?
<p>We have identified strategies and developed outreach materials to engage populations that are traditionally underrepresented (people of color, veterans, individuals with disabilities, and others) in the sectors in which we are focused.</p>		
<p>We assess the needs of each individual program participant and work with employers, partners, and training providers to ensure that training is customized for the target occupation and addresses any barriers individuals may have.</p>		
<p>We engage in specific dialogue with our employer partners about their overall diversity/inclusion strategy and how their programs are connected to that strategy.</p>		



Making Data-Driven Decisions



Making Data-Driven Decisions

Using disaggregated labor market data to inform key decisions

Colleges can use data to align courses and programs with industry demands, ensuring learners acquire skills that are relevant and valuable in the workforce. Data-informed decisions address the unique needs of learners of color and provide timely interventions to support their success. Making data-informed decisions may be challenging due to confusion over data and findings, difficulties accessing the right types of data, and trouble translating data into actionable insights. Below are examples of ways colleges are overcoming those barriers.

Key Actions for Making Data-Driven Decisions:

1

Use Labor Market Data to Shape Programs

2

Combine Qualitative & Quantitative Insights to Inform Improvements

3

Build Capacity to Use Data Through Partnerships



As you read this section, consider:

How might we enhance our data practices and feedback mechanisms by:

- Increasing survey completion rates for course, graduation, and employer surveys?
- Gathering and using feedback from students, alumni, and employers to strengthen our feedback loops?
- Making data more approachable to guide sustainable, programmatic decisions within our curriculum?
- Using disaggregated data and additional metrics to effectively track and close equity gaps?

Key Action #1

Use Labor Market Data to Shape Programs

Colleges can make data-informed decisions that improve equity and upward mobility by using labor market data to shape programs. By developing programs in partnership with employers and aligning them with labor market trends, colleges help guide students along career pathways and improve their outcomes (Fein & Hamadyk, 2018).

Numerous ACE-UP colleges are leveraging multiple sources of labor market information to guide program development and improvements. They access data from platforms like Lightcast, industry associations, O*NET, and state and regional databases, while engaging employers to validate this information and ensure programs align with workforce needs. By integrating labor market insights with student success metrics, colleges gain a comprehensive view of student experiences and outcomes within the context of local and regional workforce demands.

↑ ACE-UP College Examples

Employer Needs Alignment

One college uses labor market data from the state workforce agency and [Lightcast](#) and noted a growing disconnect between data and employers' felt needs. Engaging regional employers in periodic systemic data review and feedback sessions has helped the college identify skills gaps and better align programs to meet employer demands

Data Presented to Deans

South Central College provides labor market data to deans twice a year during program reviews to share with faculty. This data, sourced through partnerships with [Lightcast](#) and [SkillPointe](#), is also used on program pages, which provide learners with information on skills-based pathways that do not require a four-year degree. While there isn't an official tool for verifying this data with external employers or stakeholders, the college informally validates its alignment through regular check-ins during conversations with these partners.

Data on In-Demand Jobs

Grand Rapids Community College (GRCC) has strengthened its [Medical Assistant \(MA\)](#) program by responding to employer feedback and labor market data confirming high demand for medical assistants. A dedicated staff member oversees non-degree healthcare programs and has used participant data to identify and address enrollment and completion gaps among underserved student populations, resulting in increased enrollment from these groups (Petrov & Sirois 2024).



Use Labor Market Data to Shape Programs

Resources Needed:

- Access to labor market data platforms (e.g., [O*NET OnLine](#), Lightcast).
- Employer advisory boards or regional collaboratives to verify data and guide program decisions.
- Staff and tools to analyze and combine labor market data with student success/completion data.

Outcomes:

- Better alignment of college programs with labor market demand and employer needs.
- Increased confidence in program investments, expansions, and modifications, resulting in programs that are more responsive to regional workforce needs.
- More data-driven decisions that result in improved student success outcomes and workforce alignment.

Metrics:

- Number of programs that have been updated or launched based on labor market data and employer input.
- **Digging Deeper Metric:** Percentage of programs developed or revised based on labor market data that show increased enrollment and completion rates among underrepresented populations in high-demand fields, contributing to a reduction in occupational segregation.

Helpful Tools:

- [How to Use Data to Improve Non-Degree Workforce Programs at Community Colleges](#): Offers practical guidance for community colleges on leveraging data to enhance non-degree workforce programs, with a focus on equity, program alignment, and improved student outcomes.
- [How Program Review Committees Can Use Labor Market Data to Improve Student Outcomes](#): Provides insights on integrating labor market data into program reviews to align educational offerings with workforce needs, enhance student employability, and close equity gaps.

Key Action #2

Combine Qualitative & Quantitative Insights to Inform Improvements

Colleges can make data-driven decisions by integrating quantitative and qualitative data to inform program improvements. By drawing on diverse data sources, such as demographic, academic, and labor market data, colleges can develop targeted interventions that address equity gaps and improve student outcomes (Bragg & Durham, 2012).

Most ACE-UP colleges are using quantitative data, disaggregated by characteristics like race, gender, income, and disability status, to identify disparities in student experiences and outcomes. They are also gathering qualitative data through surveys and focus groups with students, alumni, advisors, case managers, and employers, providing valuable insights for program adjustments to better meet student needs. By combining different data sources, colleges can create a more comprehensive understanding of learners' academic, holistic, and career needs.

ACE-UP College Examples

Parent-Learner Feedback

One college has used focus groups to gather feedback from parent-learners, asking about their needs and using props to encourage conversation. This targeted approach helped the college better understand and address the unique challenges faced by parent-learners, allowing for program adjustments that supported their success.

Employer Skills-Gap Identification

One of the City Colleges of Chicago, Truman College, revamped its [Auto Tech program](#) after receiving feedback from local employers who noted specific skills gaps in graduates. The updated curriculum now better aligns with industry expectations, resulting in higher placement rates for graduates and stronger employer relationships. This collaboration highlights the importance of continuous feedback and curriculum updates to meet evolving workforce needs.



Combine Qualitative & Quantitative Insights to Inform Improvements

Resources Needed:

- Survey and focus group tools to collect data from students, alumni, and employers.
- Technology – CRM, data management systems, dashboards – to facilitate data collection and analysis.
- Data dashboards to support analysis and dissemination of disaggregated data.
- Hiring and training faculty and staff, whose role is to use data to refine programs and improve equity outcomes.
- Support from institutional research teams to ensure data is collected and analyzed effectively.

Outcomes:

- Improved program design based on real-time feedback from students, alumni, and employers.
- Enhanced ability to adapt programs to meet the changing needs of specific populations.
- Reduced equity gaps through targeted interventions informed by disaggregated data.
- Clearer goals and accountability for faculty and staff, supporting ongoing program improvements.

Metrics:

- Frequency of program revisions and improvements due to data on student outcomes and experiences, as well as employer and alumni feedback.
- **Digging Deeper Metric:** Improvements in key learner success indicators (e.g., retention, completion, job placement) for underrepresented and marginalized groups in programs revised based on integrated data insights.

Helpful Tools:

- [Advance CTE & ACTE: Learner Voice in CTE Toolkit](#): Highlights strategies and tools to incorporate learner perspectives into career and technical education (CTE) programs, ensuring that programs are equitable, relevant, and aligned with workforce needs.

Key Action #3

Build Capacity to Use Data Through Partnerships

Colleges can pursue a more responsive, data-informed approach that drives impact through the use of partnerships. Collaborations with organizations like [Achieving the Dream \(ATD\)](#) can enhance colleges' capacity to analyze data effectively and implement improvements (Bragg & Durham, 2012).

ACE-UP colleges have engaged external partners to help build their capacity to identify gaps in training, internships, and career services. By collaborating with organizations like American Institutes for Research (AIR), ATD, and communities of practice like ACE-UP, colleges have greater opportunities to share promising practices—for example, best practices for expanding dual enrollment—and implement improvements.

ACE-UP College Examples

Sector Strategy & Dashboards

City Colleges is collaborating with AIR's PROMISE Center on an initiative to proactively use labor market data. This includes developing a sector strategy, creating dashboards to track student success through programs, and working with employers to ensure that students are prepared for the workforce. By combining both qualitative and quantitative data, City Colleges is enhancing its ability to communicate the value of its programs to employers and stakeholders.

Innovation Teams

South Central College (SCC) is partnering with ATD to leverage data in driving institutional improvements. Through focused "innovation teams," SCC develops strategies for transfer pathways, course planning, and wraparound services. By integrating labor market insights and engaging employers, SCC ensures students are workforce-ready and strengthens the value of its programs for stakeholders.



Build Capacity to Use Data Through Partnerships

Resources Needed:

- Data systems capable of collecting and analyzing both qualitative and quantitative data.
- Advisory board engagement tools to facilitate data-informed conversations about program value.
- Communication strategies that clearly present data to external stakeholders.

Outcomes:

- Stronger partnerships with external organizations, employers, and K-12 systems, leading to more comprehensive support for marginalized student populations.
- Improved messaging to stakeholders about the success of programs and their impact on equity and workforce outcomes.
- Increased employer engagement in program refinement and continuous improvement processes.
- Improved equity in access to internships, career services, and workforce training programs for underrepresented students.
- Improved alignment between student success initiatives and labor market needs, ensuring students have equitable access to high-demand job opportunities.

Metrics:

- Number of partnerships created or renewed based on data showing program effectiveness and workforce alignment.
- **Digging Deeper Metric:** Changes in access gaps, measured by comparing participation rates of underrepresented students in training programs, internships, and career services to those of other student groups, assessing the impact of partnerships and program enhancements.

Helpful Tools:

- [Data Culture, Data Literacy, and Building a Community of Practice at Your College or University](#): Explores approaches to fostering data literacy and creating a strong data culture through communities of practice, empowering institutions to make equity-focused, data-driven decisions.
- [Developing a Data-Informed Campus Culture](#): Provides a framework for colleges and universities to cultivate a data-informed campus culture, enabling equity-driven decision-making and continuous improvement in student outcomes.

Making Data-Driven Decisions: Reflect & Assess

To use this self-assessment tool, rate your institution's performance (1- We do not have this at all; 2- We have some of this sometimes; 3- We have this in place now) and make notes on ways you might grow in each area. [Download the full version of this tool here.](#)

Action	Rating	How would you like to grow your approach?
Multiple sources of labor market information are routinely used to inform our decisions about starting, expanding, or modifying programs; employers and other stakeholders verify data we have collected.		
We gather and analyze data, including feedback from both employers and participants, and we use that data to refine programs.		
We disaggregate by race, age, gender, income levels, disability, gender identity, during and after program completion, and we use that data to refine programs.		
We utilize various feedback mechanisms to leverage the unique experience and expertise of students and alumni in program design, implementation, evaluation, and continuous improvement.		
We use a combination of qualitative and quantitative data to actively communicate the value of programs for employers, employees, learners, and other stakeholders.		
We regularly review a range of program data such as number of enrollees, completion rates, and other aspects of program implementation disaggregated by race, age, and sex to ensure program effectiveness. We take corrective action if we identify any issues.		

Conclusion

This guide is intended to support colleges' capacity to improve equity for learners, with a particular focus on collaboration with industry. We encourage college practitioners and employer partners to see the key actions in this guide as a foundation for making equity improvements.

The information presented can help college practitioners and employer partners take meaningful steps toward:

- **Equity-driven educational and career pathways:** By implementing equity-minded plans and leveraging data tools, colleges can address systemic barriers and co-design educational pathways with employers, aligning programs with workforce demands to improve outcomes and create value for learners.
- **Inclusive and accountable collaboration:** Through intentional actions to engage faculty, administrators, industry, and employer partners – including innovating employer touch-points and increasing internal hires to support these actions – colleges can foster shared accountability for all learners' workforce success.
- **Enhanced institutional capacity for equity:** Colleges can align policies and practices, dedicate resources to DEI initiatives, and build seamless pathways between non-credit and credit programs, ensuring equitable access and success for learners while meeting workforce and industry needs.
- **Adaptability and sustained improvements:** Using equity audits, data-informed decision-making, and strategic leadership, colleges can track outcomes, set metrics for success, and refine strategies over time to keep upward mobility and equity central to their mission in a rapidly evolving landscape.

Whether you are just beginning a phase of equity work or refining long-standing initiatives, this guide serves as a resource for college leaders, faculty, and staff to strengthen the foundation of their equity efforts and drive meaningful, lasting change.

As we move forward, CSW remains committed to supporting colleges and their partners in advancing equity. We will continue to provide research, practical tools, and actionable guidance to help institutions navigate the complexities of today's DEI landscape.

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We Want to Hear From You:

How are you using this guide? What has worked well? Are there tools, practices or examples you have put in place to advance equitable outcomes in your community?

Our ongoing work includes collaborating with colleges and public funders to expand knowledge, develop innovative messaging strategies, and implement equity-focused initiatives that lead to meaningful, lasting change

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