

Aligning Talent and Opportunity

AN EMPLOYER GUIDE
TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY
COLLEGE PARTNERSHIP



THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

COLLEGE EXCELLENCE PROGRAM

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



The College Excellence Program gratefully acknowledges the support of **ECMC Foundation** for funding the development and publication of this guide.

The Aspen Institute would like to thank the employers who, during site visits and phone interviews, shared their time and insights:

Matthew Allen, University of Florida Health

Robin Baker, Amazon.com

Eric Bass, Kuraray America Inc.

Dan Bavineau, Brinkman International Group Inc.

Mike Berman, Amazon Web Services Educate

Bob Bradshaw, INEOS

Jason Damlo, Butler Machinery Company

Paula Hafeman, Hospital Sisters Health System

Steve Jordon, Northern Virginia Technology Council

Mike Mandina, Optimax Systems Inc.

Kelley Maxwell, Caterpillar Inc.

Kenny McDonald, Columbus 2020

Scot McLemore, Honda North America

JJ Plunkett, Houston Pilots

Rebecca Rensvold, Butler Machinery Company

Jonathan Thomas, Concord Management

Jack Tribe, Centuri Construction Group

Jim VanKouwenberg, Optimax Systems

Taylor Wagner, Marquette Transportation Company

Aspen extends its thanks to the following individuals, who provided guidance in reviewing and commenting on the research practices and strategies in this guide:

Scot McLemore, manager of talent acquisition and deployment, Honda North America

Joelle Phillips, president, AT&T Tennessee

Manjari Raman, program director, Project on Managing the Future of Work, Harvard Business School

Sandy Shugart, president, Valencia College

THE ASPEN INSTITUTE COLLEGE EXCELLENCE PROGRAM

The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program aims to advance higher education practices, policies, and leadership that significantly improve student outcomes. Through the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence and other initiatives, the College Excellence Program works to improve colleges' understanding and capacity to teach and graduate students, especially the growing population of low-income students and students of color on American campuses.

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Introduction

The workforce of the United States is becoming considerably older and more diverse. By 2024, over 40 percent of the American population will be people of color. And in the decade ahead, Americans 55 and over are projected to increase their rate of labor market participation more than any other group.¹

At the same time, technological advances are changing the skills that workers need to succeed in the labor force, recasting the types of jobs they do and how they do them. It's estimated that nearly two-thirds of today's kindergartners will hold jobs that currently don't exist.²

Together, these changes mean that employers must attract increasingly diverse workers with up-to-date skills, while ensuring that existing workers can quickly and efficiently update their skills throughout their careers. The task is not an easy one. According to McKinsey & Company, approximately 40 percent of all U.S. employers report difficulty finding enough qualified talent to fill positions.³ Some studies have estimated the losses from these talent gaps in the trillions of dollars over the next ten years.⁴ The cost of these vacancies also has serious implications for individual companies—given that as of 2016, the average hire cost employers more than \$4,000 and took nearly 50 days—as well as for the U.S. economy as a whole.⁵

U.S. community colleges, which confer hundreds of thousands of credentials every year, can be an indispensable part of a solution to these challenges. That's because community colleges:

- **Educate the most diverse populations among all higher education institutions.** Nearly half of community college students are people of color, and one-third have family incomes low enough to qualify for federal aid.⁶
- **Draw students from the local community.** This regional focus allows area employers to reduce the costs of search, relocation, and other expenses of hiring from afar.
- **Embrace workforce development as a central part of their mission.** About half of the credentials granted annually by community colleges are technical in nature.
- **Provide employers with training programs that give employees the skills needed to stay competitive.** Community colleges often provide training at the worksite at times that are convenient for employers and employees.

¹ Buckley, P. & Bachman, D. (2017). "Meet the US workforce of the future: Older, more diverse, and more educated." Retrieved from <https://www2.deloitte.com/insights/us/en/deloitte-review/issue-21/meet-the-us-workforce-of-the-future.html>

² Leopold, T., Ratcheva, V., & Zahidi, S. (2016). *The Future of Jobs: Employment, Skills and Workforce Strategy for the Fourth Industrial Revolution*. Cologne, Switzerland: World Economic Forum.

³ Laboissiere, M. & Mourshed, M. (2017). "Closing the skills gap: Creating workforce-development programs that work for everyone." Retrieved from <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/social-sector/our-insights/closing-the-skills-gap-creating-workforce-development-programs-that-work-for-everyone>

⁴ Deloitte. (2018). *2018 skills gap in manufacturing study*. Retrieved from <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/pages/manufacturing/articles/future-of-manufacturing-skills-gap-study.html?id=us:2el:3pr:skillgap18:awa:er:111418>

⁵ Society for Human Resources Management. (2016). *2016 Human Capital Benchmarking Report*. Retrieved from <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/trends-and-forecasting/research-and-surveys/Documents/2016-Human-Capital-Report.pdf>

⁶ American Association of Community Colleges. (2019). "Fast Facts 2019." Retrieved from <https://www.aacc.nche.edu/research-trends/fast-facts/>

What distinguishes partnerships that succeed? How can they be built?

This publication answers those questions, offering guidance to employers seeking to build strong partnerships with community colleges. It is divided into three sections:

1 UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Part 1 explains how community colleges are structured and incentivized and provides guidance on how these factors may influence partnership discussions.

2 EFFECTIVE PRACTICES FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGE PARTNERSHIPS

Part 2 outlines the process for developing and strengthening partnerships, offering specific examples and takeaways from Aspen Institute research.

3 ASSESSING COMMUNITY COLLEGE PARTNERSHIPS

Part 3 offers a step-by-step process by which employers can evaluate their resources and develop (or improve) partnerships. It includes useful questions to ask potential collaborators.

The guide builds upon the extensive research conducted for *The Workforce Playbook: A Community College Guide to Delivering Excellent Career and Technical Education*, which Aspen published in June 2019 after conducting interviews with dozens of employers and numerous community college leaders as well as multiday visits to top-performing colleges. Employer interviews crossed multiple industries, including healthcare,

manufacturing, technology, energy, and hospitality. And they spanned a range of job titles and responsibilities, including CEOs, vice presidents, human resource professionals, and hiring managers. We have extracted insights from companies varying in size, geography, and duration of partnership. The following framework explores the practices and strategies used by the most successful employer-community college partnerships. ■

Part 1

UNDERSTANDING
COMMUNITY
COLLEGES

Employers who develop successful partnerships with community colleges come to understand the community college perspective. They know that colleges are motivated by distinct norms, rules, and funding structures, all of which affect how they deliver education and engage with partners. Although institutions differ widely, including in the programs and credentials they offer, most community colleges share several attributes.

Mission

Community colleges are driven by a mission to provide access to educational opportunity. They understand that one of their most important roles is to educate students who historically have been underserved and underrepresented in higher education, so that they can learn, earn marketable degrees, and enjoy greater economic mobility. A typical community college class includes traditional high school graduates and adult learners—representing multiple races, ethnicities, and income levels.

For employers, then, community colleges can be a particularly rich source of diverse talent. But just because these colleges welcome all students doesn't mean they are willing or able to produce an unlimited number of job candidates from which employers can choose. Community colleges want their graduates to succeed, which means preparing them for employment opportunities that will help them move up the economic ladder. Thus a college may be resistant, for example, to graduate 100 students in a field with only 10 available jobs. Colleges may also be reluctant to offer programs that lead primarily to low-wage work.

When considering new programs, college leaders may seek employer assurances that their graduates will be rewarded with solid employment opportunities and reasonable pay. After all, community colleges understand that enrolling and retaining future students will depend on delivering value to today's graduates. Even if employers can't commit to hiring

graduates, they should be straightforward about their hiring projections and the earnings that skilled graduates can expect. Nothing will damage a long-term relationship with a community college more than college leaders feeling they have been misled about the employment prospects for their graduates.

Revenue sources

Typically, community colleges receive revenue from three primary sources: tuition dollars (paid directly by students and through federal and state financial aid), direct state subsidies, and local tax revenues.⁷

More and more states are tying some of these funds to student outcomes, such as degree and credential completion. But most of a typical community college's revenue is connected to student enrollment, making it the most significant metric for many college leaders. Enrollment for a college is akin to revenue for an employer. Larger enrollment numbers mean greater funding opportunities, in the form of state or local government subsidies and student tuition. Because community colleges were created to expand opportunities for the broader population, enrollment growth is not only a financial imperative, but also a sign of how well a college fulfills its mission.

Enrollment numbers, therefore, affect how college leaders make decisions. For example, a leader might hesitate to invest scarce resources to start a program that trains only a handful of students. And programs that don't attract enough students are often the first ones to be discontinued when budgets are tight or other priorities demand resources.

⁷ Each state's community colleges are funded differently, so these revenue streams are not equally relevant in all contexts. For example, some institutions get to keep the tuition revenue generated by their course enrollments, while others' tuition is submitted to the state system, then they receive funding based on a formula that takes enrollment into account as one of several factors.

Over the past decade, the traditional funding streams for community colleges have been constrained. In most places, state and local revenues are flat or declining. And tuition in some places can't be increased due to legislative mandates or concerns about affordability. So, without employer support, community colleges struggle to cover the costs of developing and delivering new programs and expanding existing ones.

Student outcomes

More community colleges today are shifting their thinking, accepting that simply enrolling students is no longer enough to develop talent pipelines. Some regularly analyze data on student retention and completion, even looking at postgraduate outcomes such as employment rates and earnings, to measure workforce participation. More significantly, many are changing their operations to improve these outcomes. Outside forces are also at work: new state funding formulas that more directly tie funding to completion rates; requirements that link accreditation and access to federal aid to minimum student success metrics; and federal, state, and philanthropic grants for improving student success.

While enrollment numbers may speak to a college's overall capacity, student success metrics such as retention and credential completion offer an important signal that an institution is likely to produce the talent employers need. High completion rates can offer a signal that the college has established strong systems to curb dropouts and build momentum towards completion. These metrics can testify to the overall quality of the college, including its leadership, faculty and staff, and strategic operations.


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Credit vs. noncredit programs

Among higher education institutions, community colleges are often the most flexible; they have a heightened responsiveness to community needs and multiple models for career training. Yet they are also subject to myriad federal, state, and accreditation regulations that pose substantial limitations to programs they offer. Among the most significant are those related to receiving and maintaining accreditation.

Because regulations and funding structures differ depending on whether students receive academic credit for coursework—that is, whether their programs are “credit” or “noncredit”—colleges and employers must consider the distinct implications of building programs within each structure. Noncredit programs, such as many continuing education or customized training programs, are governed by fewer regulations than credit programs. Therefore, they can usually be created more quickly and designed more creatively. But because noncredit programs are ineligible for many of the public funds available to credit programs, colleges often rely on employers to contribute more resources to them, including facilities, training tools and equipment, and student scholarships.



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AVOID HIRING STUDENTS BEFORE THEY GRADUATE

Even when talent needs are urgent, employers should resist the impulse to recruit students before they finish their credential program. Poaching students mid-program weakens the college's ability to develop talent over the long term. It decreases a college's retention and completion rates, which in turn can reduce the college's funding and harm its reputation. If employers need talent developed faster than colleges are graduating students, they should talk to the college about potential solutions. Learn-and-earn programs, accelerated certificate programs, and customized noncredit training, for instance, can provide employers with quicker access to talent without sacrificing the partnership and the health of the college. ■

Key points of contact

Virtually all community colleges have developed significant capacity to train workers for their regional economies, often having entire divisions and multiple individuals responsible for economic and workforce development. Within colleges are several key individuals and committees employers may work with to achieve different goals. Their roles are defined as follows:

President and chancellor: The heads of colleges are often key leaders in their region, seeing their role as ensuring students' access and success, preparing workers for the area economy, and developing talent for civic engagement. In some regions, this leader will be the college president, who oversees a single institution. In others, multiple colleges (sometimes across an entire state) may be connected as one system led by a chancellor, who can help determine which particular college might best partner with the employer. Either way, these leaders often have a special interest in partnerships that connect students with employment opportunities. They can help develop a partnership strategy at the outset, linking employers to other college leaders and potential partners, such as K-12 systems, other colleges, legislators, and regional workforce entities. They also exert significant influence on lawmakers and policymakers regarding public resources for workforce development, and are particularly well-positioned to make sure they understand the needs and concerns of employers and their sectors.

Although employers don't typically work with college presidents or chancellors from day to day, it's important they develop a relationship with these leaders so that needed resources flow to the partnership. That way, employers can go directly to the president or chancellor when they confront challenges not addressed at a division level.

Vice president of workforce development: At many community colleges, the vice president of workforce development—sometimes known as the vice president for economic development or for career and technical education (CTE)—leads the institution's workforce and CTE programs. This person plays a key role in developing strategy, building relationships with industry partners, executing contracts with employers, ensuring accreditation for workforce programs, and developing and overseeing systems for program development and review. He or she (or sometimes a dean of workforce programs) is typically very familiar with the division's budget, including available line items and revenue streams such as state, federal, and private grants.

Department head or dean: The department head, or dean, oversees multiple programs that are often in related fields. The department head keeps tabs on the industry's overall needs, considering how they map to the mix of credentials and offerings across the college's portfolio of programs.

Program chair: The program chair, often a faculty member (who may also be known as a program head), manages an academic program or several smaller, related programs. The chair is typically responsible for making sure the overall needs of the program are met, including ensuring that faculty are hired and trained, leading program design to determine which courses will be taught, and maintaining relationships with employers to secure internships, recommend students for jobs, and understand how well student workers and graduates are performing. Program chairs typically report directly to a department head or dean.

Advantages of partnering with a community college

As with any new partner, it can take time for employers to fully understand the perspectives, structures, and operations of a community college. But investing in that understanding can pay off in ways that other training arrangements cannot. Below are some institutional characteristics of community colleges that make partnering with them worth considering.

Community colleges have an explicit workforce mission, but they do many other things. The vast majority of community colleges have dedicated units for workforce development and technical programs. The faculty and staff of these units have learned how to work with employers, and they understand the connection between educational programs and regional labor market needs.

That does not, however, mean that the entire college is aligned to workforce needs. While the percentages vary by institution, most community college students nationally are enrolled in liberal arts programs and plan to transfer to four-year institutions in pursuit of a bachelor's degree. Many others are adults looking to take just a course or two, and increasing numbers are high school students who take college courses at the same time. Because community colleges serve such diverse groups, employers may struggle to find the right point of contact. Much like the divisions of a large business, divisions within community colleges can sometimes impede efficient communication. Employers who aren't sure where to start, or who are getting bounced around, should reach out to the president's office.

Community colleges are flexible. Despite the many functions they perform, community colleges receive the lowest funding per student of all higher education institutions.⁸ Yet they can still change programs or

create new ones faster than most other public educational institutions. For example, as the world of work changes, community colleges have explored new models of delivery that blend online learning with hands-on, work-based training. As the workplace itself changes—in skills demanded, equipment used, and standards imposed—employers should share developments with college leaders. Colleges rely on this input to adapt quickly and effectively to the needs of the labor market.

Community colleges serve diverse students. For employers seeking to broaden, lengthen, and diversify talent pipelines, community colleges are a valuable resource. These institutions tend to be deeply connected to their locales, and, because they are committed to access, they serve a broad array of students. Of the total students enrolled for credit nationally, nearly 50 percent are racial and ethnic minorities—25 percent of community college students identify as Hispanic and 13 percent as Black—and 5 percent of all community college students are military veterans.⁹ Beyond simply connecting employers to these prospective workers, community college faculty and staff can help employers understand the perspectives, motivations, and needs of diverse populations, which can help guide recruitment strategies, training protocols, and efforts at employee retention.

Community colleges can be cost-effective. With substantial experience delivering workforce programs—and having the necessary infrastructure—community colleges can often develop and deliver a new curriculum at a lower cost than employers can through employer-run training programs. And community colleges often have existing programs that can be modified to cost-effectively meet an employer's needs. They can also work with multiple employers with similar talent needs to pool resources and build programs to serve an entire sector or industry.

With these potential benefits in mind, and informed by Aspen's field research, the next part of this guide presents a framework for developing effective partnerships with community colleges. ■

⁸ Melguizo, T. & Witham, K. (2018). *Funding Community Colleges for Equity, Efficiency, and Student Success*. New York, New York: The Century Foundation.

⁹ American Association of Community Colleges. (2019). "Fast Facts 2019." Retrieved from <https://www.aacc.nche.edu/research-trends/fast-facts/>

Part 2

EFFECTIVE PRACTICES FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGE PARTNERSHIPS

Employers nationwide turn to community colleges to help develop workplace skills. For some employers—particularly large ones in manufacturing and healthcare—these partnerships may be well-established and equipped to evolve with changing workplaces. For others, including smaller employers and those in emerging fields, collaborating with community colleges may be a new endeavor, and one that requires new educational offerings. Either way, our research shows that the strength of community college-employer partnerships depends in part on employers’ actions in six domains:

1

Understand talent pipelines and talent development needs

2

Find and assess community college partners

3

Co-design, develop, and resource programs with college partners

4

Coordinate talent recruitment with college teams

5

Engage in honest and actionable feedback

6

Collaborate regionally to solve persistent skills gaps

TABLE 1: CONDUCTING AN INTERNAL LISTENING TOUR

	HUMAN RESOURCES	HIRING AND FRONTLINE MANAGERS	SENIOR LEADERS
KEY INSIGHTS	<p>Understand current recruiting process and challenges of hiring or developing workers.</p>	<p>Understand specific skills gaps and the timelines and processes needed to onboard workers successfully.</p>	<p>Understand goals for company growth, cost implications of talent gaps, and potential sources and scale of resource contributions.</p>
WHAT TO ASK	<p>What are we currently doing to recruit workers? What are our primary sources of talent?</p> <p>What is working well, and what isn't?</p> <p>How long does it take to recruit for each job?</p> <p>What are our recruitment and onboarding costs per hire?</p> <p>What are our turnover rates?</p> <p>When people leave, do we know why?</p> <p>What credentials are we requiring for each position, and why?</p>	<p>Where are our talent gaps, in numbers of workers and skills? What are the implications of these gaps on quality, productivity, and morale?</p> <p>Are there areas in which new hires consistently need more (or less) training?</p> <p>What are the specific processes needed to onboard workers before they reach full productivity? How long does this take?</p> <p>How do we know employees are well-prepared after onboarding?</p> <p>What credentials do hiring managers believe employees need for these jobs, and why?</p>	<p>What are our talent needs? Where are there current or projected gaps? What are the current and projected revenue and growth implications of these gaps?</p> <p>What is the cost of talent acquisition, retention, training, and turnover?</p> <p>What strategies have been used to close skills gaps? To what extent have they been successful? What is the return on investment?</p> <p>What are the cost, revenue, and growth implications of closing talent gaps in varying timeframes? What is the preferred timeline for addressing current challenges?</p> <p>What funds and resources does (or could) our company provide to community college partners? Where would these resources come from? How might this look over time?</p>

1. Understand talent pipeline and talent development needs

Employers with the strongest community college partnerships have a clear sense of what skills gaps or pipeline challenges they need to address. Do they need more workers, workers with different or better skills, or both? And in what timeframe? To answer these questions, employers with exemplary community college partnerships consult individuals across their organizations. *Table 1* outlines the individuals who can provide helpful information.

It's important to ground the analysis of skills gaps—and of how college programs can best fill those gaps—in data, including:

- Average recruitment costs per hire
- Cost of training and retention per hire
- Employee turnover rates and common reasons for departure
- Average time for new hires to reach full productivity
- Capacity to provide financial and workplace learning resources
- Projected measures for employee growth over the next one, five, and ten years

By analyzing and discussing these metrics, employers can understand the return on investment that could result from a community college partnership. For example, lowering recruitment costs or shortening the average learning curve for a new employee could yield specific, measurable gains in productivity. Thus, these data and discussions can help employers set goals and determine what they ask of college leaders. They can also help build internal support that is rooted in concrete understanding of talent needs.

2. Find and assess community college partners

Employers confront talent challenges at many stages of growth. Some companies may need more talent in their first years in business and are looking for their first college partner. Others may enjoy well-established partnerships that provide a steady stream of talent but need their workers to develop new skills to adapt to changing technology. This section outlines strategies for both categories of employers and offers guidance for evaluating partners under each scenario.

Identify preferred partners

Often an employer's location will determine the preferred college partner. Community colleges typically have defined service areas, and usually work with employers in those regions. In large metropolitan areas, multiple community colleges may serve overlapping geographic areas. In some cases, particularly with larger or more geographically dispersed employers, several community colleges might serve as partners.

Regardless, a good starting point is to conduct background research on potential college partners. Here are some ways employers can do that:

- **Talk to local government and economic development boards.** Groups focused on workforce and economic development can help employers understand their talent issues within a regional context, provide a high-level overview of industry-wide challenges, and identify the institutions in the region that are already working to solve those issues. These can include public and quasi-public entities, such as workforce investment boards and mayor's or governor's offices of economic development, as well as private entities such as chambers of commerce. Often colleges with strong labor market practices are already engaged with these organizations.

- **Speak with regional industry groups.** Specific industry groups are often organized at the state or regional level, and those entities may already have relationships with local colleges and can connect employers to those with a strong record of working with industry. Even among companies that are competitors, jointly collaborating with a community college on larger-scale talent development can be the most effective and efficient way to fill a regional sector-based skills gap.
- **Identify current employees who are alumni of community colleges.** Because many community college students may enroll for a single class or not complete a degree, employers may not be aware of existing employees with connections to community colleges in their area. By identifying these people, an employer may find an existing college connection that could be enhanced and refocused to better serve the employer.
- **Search local college websites.** A website's level of detail about employer partnerships often signals the depth of a college's work. Employers can learn much from a list of current partners, testimonials from partners, and information about how a company can become a partner. They should be aware, however, that colleges present their best face to the public and that their information isn't always up to date. Website content can serve as a starting point for consideration, rather than a fixed indicator of a college's potential.

- **Read local news articles.** Employers can find helpful information in announcements about major donations to the college, construction of new facilities, or recognition of specific programs, the college, and its leaders. A school's portrayal in the media is a window into its reputation for working with employers and its influence in the community.
- **Research awards and other distinctions.** Awards such as the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, which recognizes the top community colleges in the country, are one indicator of a college's effectiveness and leadership. The American Association of Community Colleges and other nonprofit organizations, such as Jobs for the Future and Achieving the Dream, also profile and recognize top-performing community colleges.

Assess partnership potential

Aspen's site visits and interviews with employers show that employers should look for three key characteristics in community college partners:

- Strong institutional and programmatic leadership
- Infrastructure and staff capacity to deliver the necessary programs
- Responsiveness to employer needs

By engaging in conversations with both institutional leaders (the president or the vice president of workforce development) and relevant program leaders, employers can start to assess a college's strengths and limitations. *Table 2* offers questions that can help employers determine whether a college is ready to deliver the job-ready workers they seek.

COLUMBUS STATE COMMUNITY COLLEGE PARTNER TESTIMONIALS

Many community college websites offer a section of testimonials from their employer partners. These endorsements, such as those on the website of Columbus State Community College, can provide useful background information. Employers can contact these featured employers to learn more about a college's approach to partnerships and about how to work with that institution.

HONDA LOGISTICS

“Companies throughout the nation are focusing on increasing access to middle-skilled jobs, like logistics. We at Honda Logistics are doing this by strengthening and expanding successful training programs and aligning them with the required needs and industry standards. In collaboration with the CSCC and the SCPro Fundamentals training program, we have prepared our Associates for this rapidly growing and highly diverse field, as well as helped our region realize its global supply chain vision. Nationally, over 200 of our workers have been trained and certified through this program, and that includes nearly 170 associates right here in Ohio.”

—Kim Miller, training and development assistant manager

FST LOGISTICS

“The SCPro Fundamentals training program has been a great learning tool for me. The knowledge I am gaining has helped me to engage in more productive interactions with customers, as well as within the different departments in my own company, on a day to day basis.”

—Annie Posgai, customer service representative

“The SCPro Fundamentals training program has helped me expand my knowledge and understanding of SCM. I'm leveraging what I learned to not only be a more valuable member to my organization, but a better member to the SCM discipline.”

—Brad Wright, business development manager

BOAR'S HEAD BRAND

“The SCPro Fundamentals training program at Columbus State is the most useful tool I have found to develop individuals within the Transportation Department. SCPro Fundamentals has solved my annual review dilemma of finding an appropriate development path for associates. The staff at Columbus State has been very helpful and responsive to our needs. This training is a win.”

—Jim Dykstra, logistics manager

TABLE 2: ASSESSING THE STRENGTHS OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE PARTNERS

CHARACTERISTICS	HOW TO ASSESS ATTRIBUTES
RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the institution have stable leadership at the presidential and vice president of workforce levels? • Do leaders ask questions to understand what you need, rather than immediately giving you a menu of existing programs? • Do leaders proactively introduce you to key contacts inside and outside the college and suggest next steps? • Are leaders willing to explore different answers to your problems, even if those solutions require partnership with other colleges or providers? • Can leaders speak honestly about successes, challenges, and lessons learned from prior partnerships? Are they transparent about potential roadblocks and willing to suggest solutions?
CAPACITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the institution have the capacity to serve the number of students necessary to deliver needed workers? Sometimes there may not be one college large enough to meet needs, in which case employers may need to collaborate with multiple colleges. (See page 31.) • Does the college understand what facilities, equipment, and instructors are needed? Does it have a clear sense of the funds required? Does it have the resources or a realistic plan to secure them? Employers should not expect colleges to supply all program resources. Often facilities, equipment, and even faculty salaries are funded at least in part by employers. • How will the college guarantee a sufficient number of high-quality instructors and advisors? An institution's reputation and its relationships with alumni can indicate whether the college will be able to attract talented instructors.
RESPONSIVENESS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who will be the contact person for the partnership? Will employers speak directly with that person? • What is the flow of communication? How long does it take for the point person to respond to inquiries? Does he or she reach out with updates and follow-up questions? • What have been challenges with past employer relationships? How did the point person help employers navigate the bureaucracy to find solutions? Colleges shouldn't bounce employers from one contact to another. If they do, employers should discuss the issue with a senior leader as soon as possible.

EXAMPLES

Scot McLemore, manager of talent acquisition at Honda North America in Ohio, talked with several potential college partners, but most of the individuals he spoke with seemed uncertain of their capacity to create a work-study program. By contrast, Dick Bickerstaff, chair of engineering and transportation technologies at Columbus State Community College, was immediately enthusiastic. Bickerstaff had a “let’s do it” attitude, McLemore said, consistently approaching potential roadblocks with a problem-solving attitude. “It wasn’t about doing exactly what we wanted or deferring to what the college had always done. [Bickerstaff] understood that this would be a true collaboration. He was willing to show up, innovate, and figure things out together.”

Materials manufacturer Kuraray America Inc. in Houston was experiencing rapid growth, and plant manager Eric Bass sought a partner with the space to train new and existing workers. Kuraray was drawn to San Jacinto College in Houston because the school had already developed a training center with assistance from other regional employers. Kuraray made an investment in the facility—sizable, but far less than what it would have likely spent to train workers in-house.

Rebecca Rensvold, a training and development manager at Butler Machinery in North Dakota, supports several college partnership programs. “Corey, our contact at [Lake Area Technical Institute], really helped to get the ball rolling for the partnership,” said Rensvold. “He was proactive in answering our questions and updating us on everything from the curriculum to ongoing recruitment efforts. Our collaboration is driven by the goal to have a solid graduation class of students.”

Of course, communication goes both ways. Here are a few things for employers to keep in mind as they initiate conversations with college leaders:

- **Be specific about needed talent.** For instance, employers might submit quantitative data on unfilled jobs and qualitative assessments of skills gaps in existing employees. The more specific employers are, the sooner they can have productive conversations with the college about how those skills gaps can be filled.
- **Show interest in the college and its bottom line.** Taking interest in the college’s overall work—and showing concern for its financial health and incentive structures—can help employers establish the trust they’ll need to garner honest information about the college’s assets and limitations.
- **Be clear about the company’s willingness to invest.** In the strongest partnerships, employers know that delivering job-ready workers requires their investment, whether it’s in work-based programs, flexible work schedules, scholarships, or equipment.

Note that not every solution to a skills-training problem is a new degree.

3. Co-design, develop, and resource programs with college partners

The best partnerships flow from programs designed cooperatively by employers (or collections of employers in an industry) and community colleges. Aspen’s research shows several areas in which employer engagement and collaboration are particularly important.

Define skills gaps

The best program designs begin with a precise understanding of the specific skills employees need, both to be hired and to advance. These capacities include not just technical expertise, but so-called “soft skills” or “professional skills,” such as teamwork, critical thinking, and communication.

To define the necessary skills, employers should start by conducting internal research through data analysis and conversations with hiring and frontline managers and human resources personnel. The next step requires collaborating with the college. Employers can benefit from inviting college staff to their facilities to observe operations and talk to managers and employees to deeply understand not only what technical skills are needed in theory, but also how these skills are actually used on the job.

This kind of collaboration and level of specificity is particularly important to defining the somewhat nebulous professional skills. Terms like “critical thinking” and “communication” are often too general for program designers and instructors to translate into curriculum and instruction. Instead, effective employers help colleges specify the professional skills needed in the workplace. Faculty and frontline managers discuss:

- In what workplace scenarios are these skills used?
- What are the indicators that a worker has mastered a particular soft skill? What does it look like when they haven’t? Can you provide an illustration of each?

- What are the common scenarios in which a less experienced worker might fall short on these skills? What are examples of common mistakes?
- How can faculty or employer mentors and managers give students the opportunity to practice these skills in a relevant context?

When information technology companies in the Orlando area were concerned about “teamwork,” they met with leaders and faculty in the cybersecurity program at Valencia College, explaining that teamwork meant teaching students how to respectfully give and receive critical feedback. The college redesigned the program so that students are engaged in multiple team-based projects; after each, instructors give oral and written feedback to all team members. In another example, dental offices in the region served by Ozarks Technical College in Springfield, Missouri, wanted hygienists to communicate more effectively to patients and dentists. The college videotaped dental hygiene students in clinical settings so that students could assess not only on their own technical skills but also how effectively they interacted with patients.

Determine the appropriate credentials

Once employers have worked with the college to define needed skills, the partners must determine the credentials students need to be eligible for a particular job. Here are some useful questions to ask:

- Are the typically required credentials really needed for success on the job? Demanding certain minimum credentials can narrow the talent pipeline. For example, requiring a bachelor’s degree may disqualify many military veterans, even though they may have learned the necessary skills in their training and service.
- Are there any employer- or industry-recognized credentials that students must have to work in the field? Are there any that are optional but that lead to additional compensation or boost an employee’s chance of promotion?

- What are the additional credentials and associated skills that entry-level employees will need to be promoted (including certificates and bachelor’s degrees)? Can these be built into the college’s program pathway so that students have a clear idea of the next steps toward job advancement?

Some community colleges create “stackable” credentials that are aligned to rungs on a career ladder, with each credential offering opportunities for promotion and better pay. Employers may want to consult with the college to make sure that each credential provides students with the needed skills and tangibly benefits employees.

Note that not every solution to skills-training problems is a new degree. And employers should not assume that when they engage with a community college the result will be a new program customized for their company. Some partnerships may result simply in a new course within an existing program or in changes to instructional design, such as updating the equipment students use to train.

Consider resource needs and sources

In the strongest partnerships, employers see their work with a community college not as a philanthropic endeavor, but as a strategy for ensuring a stream of talent while offsetting the costs associated with extended job vacancies, churn, and traditional recruitment. Effective employers therefore invest resources to help programs succeed. These investments take a variety of forms. As outlined in *Table 3*, employer contributions can range from thought partnership to funding to facilities and equipment. Employers should speak to college partners about what contributions would align with their needs and available resources.

TABLE 3: HOW EMPLOYERS CAN INVEST IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE PROGRAMS

TYPE OF CONTRIBUTION	POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS
HUMAN RESOURCES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arrange for faculty to visit worksites so they can stay on top of industry trends. • Create job-sharing agreements in which an employee works at the company part-time while teaching at the college. This arrangement addresses a common problem: colleges often can't pay industry experts what they can make in the field. • Allow employees with relevant expertise to assist faculty by serving as guest lecturers or mentors for students. These arrangements further expose students to industry-specific knowledge while allowing employees to foster relationships with prospective hires.
THOUGHT PARTNERSHIP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help develop curriculum. • Offer input on important and relevant topics, including how facilities can best simulate work experiences and which industry events can serve as good opportunities for professional development. • Serve on the college program's advisory board.
FACILITIES AND EQUIPMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help sponsor classrooms or new building construction to support the program. • Donate materials and equipment for students to use at the college. • Lease equipment to the college at a low cost so students consistently have access to the latest technology in the field.
FINANCIAL RESOURCES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide support for students by offering scholarships, paying for selected students' textbooks and materials, and considering arrangements in which sponsored students commit to becoming employees. • Provide institutional support by making an annual financial contribution to bridge the gap between the program cost and the revenue the college receives through tuition and state funding.
ADVOCACY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accompany college staff to events where prospective students are recruited. • Support the college as it lobbies policymakers for funding or for permission to advance projects. • Promote the college and the program throughout the community.

EXAMPLES

Matthew Allen is both the manager of cardiac and vascular labs at University of Florida Health and an adjunct professor at Santa Fe College in Gainesville. This dual role gives him special insights into how best to train students. From a preceptor's point of view, Allen said that "it is crucial to know students' foundations and skillsets when they start at the hospital."

Concord Management, a property management company in Orlando, became heavily involved in curriculum development when it partnered with Valencia College. Staff members in varying departments and at different levels of the company weighed in on the degree and certificate programs it designed with Valencia.

Houston Pilots, an association of mariners who guide ships, recognized it was crucial for students in the San Jacinto College maritime program to train with equipment that prepared them to be on the water—skills that were difficult to teach in the classroom alone. The Pilots provided a simulator to San Jacinto through a low-cost lease. Both students and incumbent workers use the simulator for training, which is kept up-to-date with the latest software.

At North Dakota State College of Science, employers can sponsor incoming students with anything from textbooks to full scholarships. These contributions make the program more appealing to a broader range of students and allow employers to court top job candidates early on.

Scot McLemore of Honda North America regularly participates in Columbus State's outreach. "I feel like I'm a spokesperson for the program," McLemore said. "I probably speak on Honda and Columbus State's behalf two or three times a month."

Support work-based learning

The strongest workforce programs—those that deliver the most qualified, best-prepared talent—incorporate work-based learning opportunities for all students. The effectiveness of these models depends on employer involvement. Employers are uniquely suited to assess which model best suits existing college and employer capacities. *Table 4* summarizes the varied ways employers can contribute to work-based learning opportunities as well as what to assess when considering each.

“An employer can expect a college to contribute to the process, but owning recruitment is the most significant way organizations can ensure they get the talent they need.”



TABLE 4: HOW EMPLOYERS CAN PROVIDE HANDS-ON EXPERIENCE

LESS INTENSIVE	
PROJECT-BASED LEARNING AND SIMULATION	
DESCRIPTION	Typically delivered on the college campus, students use equipment and complete projects that are structured to reflect and simulate the skills and expectations they will encounter on the job.
RESOURCES EMPLOYERS CAN PROVIDE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Up-to-date equipment and facilities • College instructors with technical expertise • Elements of a project-based curriculum
OTHER CONSIDERATIONS	<p>By mimicking the workplace environment, the college gives students the opportunity to practice technical skills and teamwork, and demonstrate leadership, in a cost-effective and efficient manner. Advances in technology have made it increasingly feasible to bring quality, hands-on learning into classrooms.</p> <p>San Jacinto College’s maritime program uses an employer-funded simulation lab, set up much like the control center of a ship. Students learn how to pilot a ship without leaving campus, enabling them to efficiently get to campus-based classes.</p>

4. Coordinate talent recruitment and retention with college teams

To attract strong employees, effective employers look upstream and help colleges with student recruitment. As Jason Damlo of Butler Machinery explained, “It should be a given that employers develop their own recruitment strategies. An employer can expect a college to contribute to the process, but owning recruitment is the most significant way organizations can ensure they get the talent they need.”

→ MORE INTENSIVE

CO-OPS, INTERNSHIPS, AND CLINICAL PLACEMENTS

Paid or unpaid, students split their time between classroom instruction and workplace training, gaining real-time exposure to the workplace environment and learning about expectations. The arrangement also gives employers an early look at students’ potential.

- Dedicated time slots and well-crafted projects for student training at the worksite
- College instructors with technical expertise
- Employer mentors for on-site supervision

These arrangements work best when they consider business needs. For example, employers may be hesitant to take equipment offline during peak hours. They may also need to consider how current employees can monitor and mentor students—a particular challenge when employees are evaluated based on productivity.

Those involved should discuss the best times for employers to host students, how to support employees who are training or mentoring students, and how to collect feedback from employers and students.

LEARN-AND-EARN AND REGISTERED APPRENTICESHIPS

Students are simultaneously enrolled in college and employed at a company. They learn general and technical skills in the classroom, then apply them on the job, where they must increasingly meet employer-specific expectations.

- Salaries/benefits
- College instructors with technical expertise
- Employer mentors for on-site supervision
- Administrative help with registration processes

These arrangements open doors for prospective students who need to earn money while going to school. They work best for employers with specialized training needs that go beyond the typical college curriculum or change faster than colleges can accommodate them. Many Caterpillar dealers invest in apprentices because it needs to train people for company-specific equipment.

Setting up a registered apprenticeship can require extensive investment from both employers and the college, so some partnerships start small, with just a few apprentices, and grow as the return on investment becomes evident.

MAKING THE CASE: HOW TO PRESENT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE PARTNERSHIP TO SENIOR LEADERS

Often, mid-level managers are responsible for developing strategies to recruit and develop workers in their region or division. To secure critical financial resources and other support for an effective college partnership, these leaders must make the case for the partnership to senior executives. Here are some ways to do so.

Describe how the college can help the employer access untapped talent.

Using data, educate leaders about the changing demographics in the region. Show how this mirrors the demographic profile of the diverse student body enrolled at area community colleges.

Provide evidence about the college's reputation.

Some executives may believe community colleges lack rigor. Combat misperceptions with testimonials from satisfied leaders at other companies and with articles about recognition the college has earned for workforce training or partnership with employers in the same industry.

Cite evidence of a healthy return on investment (ROI).

Show the bottom-line value that a community college partnership brings. In some cases, ROI might be reflected in a specific data point, such as the increased likelihood of hiring 20 needed employees in the next six quarters. In other cases, the value might be calculated over a longer term, such as in the combined fiscal impact of saving on out-of-region recruitment, filling job openings, and reducing internal training costs.

Understand prospective talent pools

Employers who partner well with community colleges rely on the college to help them understand the individuals who make up their pool of prospective workers. They ask questions of their college partner such as:

- What are the overall demographics of the students served by the institution? Why are some populations enrolling and others not?
- Who might be interested in this type of program? What might be their motivation?
- What barriers keep certain student groups from entering a program—such as the cost of tuition or equipment or the scheduling of courses or internships?
- What mindsets or knowledge gaps might need to be addressed—for instance, gender bias in certain fields and misconceptions or lack of awareness about certain jobs?
- How can the college help access untapped talent?

Savvy employers also proactively share their own diversity goals with college leaders so that recruitment and program-design strategies can be developed and aligned. For example, when Amazon Web Services said that it wanted to recruit veterans to its cloud computing teams, Northern Virginia Community College was able to access its networks to respond.

Collaborate with colleges on program recruitment and hiring

Effective employers work alongside colleges to recruit prospective students into workforce programs. They help build awareness about different fields and jobs, generate excitement around the program, and motivate students to perform well. Then these employers build relationships with students that last throughout the program—a strategy that not only supports student learning, but also helps employers court talent for open positions. *Table 5* offers a few key tactics.

TABLE 5: CULTIVATING A TALENT PIPELINE

HELP RECRUIT PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS INTO COLLEGE PROGRAMS	FORM RELATIONSHIPS TO RECRUIT FOR YOUR OPEN POSITIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Join college faculty members at college recruitment fairs and career days. • Promote college programs to your own employees and support them if they decide to enroll. • Have diverse employees—including hiring managers and frontline workers—speak with local K-12 students. • Indicate preference for specific credentials in job postings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have employees volunteer to help students with professional development through mock interviews, resume reviews, and mentoring. • Offer internships, apprenticeships, or other work-based learning opportunities to introduce students to the workplace. • Consider investing directly in students through scholarships or sponsorships.

Beyond these general strategies, it's important to understand that different groups of prospective hires will have varied perspectives on their educations and careers. These viewpoints help determine which communication strategies are most effective for which groups, as described below.

Recruiting high school students. According to research by Advance CTE, high school students want to understand both the real-world applicability and personal fulfillment that a college program and career can offer. Endorsements from current or past students, especially those employed with a company, can go a long way toward attracting potential students.¹⁰ Further, K-12 students are heavily influenced by their parents and peers. So it is helpful to interact with or make presentations to students' parents, teachers, and counselors (for instance, at high school college and career fairs). Seeing what really occurs at college facilities and worksites can help dispel misconceptions about certain fields, such as the notion that "manufacturing is dirty." Students can also see firsthand how a community college program differs from the traditional K-12 experience—with more interactive lessons, access to top-notch machinery, and so on. Some employers have pursued this strategy simply by having employees visit high school classrooms with community college faculty. Others have invited high school classes to tour worksites.

Recruiting adults. Prospective adult students, who often have children and may work multiple lower-wage jobs, are particularly sensitive to return on investment. Will a program be affordable and offered at accessible times? Will it lead directly to a job with family-sustaining wages? Will going to class be worth forgoing income? These learners will be more attracted to programs and career pathways that guarantee economic mobility. Communication with them, therefore, should highlight practical details, such as the number of available jobs, how many program graduates are immediately employed, and what wages they can expect upon hiring and over time. To deliver these messages, community colleges often leverage their connections to community-based organizations, such as Goodwill Industries, religious groups, and veterans'

offices, that can reach the broad pool of prospective adult learners.

Reskilling or upskilling incumbent workers. Often the best source of talent is the company itself. Existing workers in lower-wage or entry-level positions already understand their employer's processes and goals and have often proven their ability to succeed in a job; they may simply need additional training to move up in the organization. Like other adults, incumbent workers can be reluctant to take time off—and absorb a pay cut—to pursue this training. Tuition reimbursement, in which employers repay education costs when students complete a program or course, may seem like an effective way to support these individuals. But many employees can't take advantage of the benefit because they can't afford the upfront direct and opportunity costs.

In addition to (or instead of) tuition reimbursement, employers should consider scholarships that allow employees to work and learn simultaneously. Amazon, for example, offers the Career Choice Program for employees with at least one year of service. The company prepays 95 percent of tuition, textbooks, and associated fees for workers to earn certificates and associate's degrees in high-demand fields. It has also built classrooms at its fulfillment centers so college and technical classes can be taught on site. Career Choice allows eligible employees to choose their program from a variety of high-demand fields.

For all prospective students, the messenger matters. In particular, populations that are underrepresented in a field can be inspired by frontline employees of their own gender, race, ethnicity, or background. "I want to hear from someone who looks like me," one potential student said in a focus group. "I look at them and think, 'They're going to give me the real story.' And if they can do it, maybe I can too."

¹⁰ Advance CTE. (2017). "The Value and Promise of Career Technical Education: Results from a National Survey of Parents and Students." Retrieved from https://cte.careertech.org/sites/default/files/files/resources/The_Value_Promise_Career_Technical_Education_2017.pdf

Coordinate with internal teams to hire workers

Attracting the right talent also depends on a company's messaging to potential applicants and its approach to integrating new hires. Strong practice depends on the commitment and alignment of individuals in two areas: human resources and hiring (or frontline) managers.

In coordination with human resources departments, employers should:

- Make sure the job descriptions are aligned with actual eligibility requirements.
- Consider additional channels for advertising job postings to recruit more diverse candidates.

Eric Bass, plant manager at Kuraray America Inc., speaks with his company's HR business partner on a weekly basis. Kelley Maxwell, a global learning consultant at Caterpillar, regularly meets with human resources teams at Caterpillar dealers and considers these departments "critical members of the program development process." Their meetings typically cover recruitment and hiring practices, including those in collaboration with their community college partners.

With the engagement of frontline hiring managers, effective employers:

- Evaluate whether the interview process truly illuminates whether new hires have the skills they'll need and discuss solutions to any discrepancies.
- Convey to frontline managers the importance of mentoring new hires, explaining that these employees will benefit the company overall. Frame the mentorship role as a testament to the manager's strong performance and, where possible, incentivize strong mentorship by recognizing those who do it well, such as through bonuses, stipends, and commendations.

Dan Bavineau, chief manufacturing and technology officer of Brinkman International Group, a manufacturing company in Rochester, New York, meets with all frontline

While some conditions, such as a cybersecurity graduate being eligible to obtain a security clearance, are nonnegotiable, others, like high school GPA, might not correlate with a prospective student's ability to succeed.

managers before they become mentors to make sure they understand the benefits of the role—both to themselves and the company—and have the resources to excel. "We're not trying to replace their job," he said. "It's something that will help all of us in the long run."

Strategic employers also recognize that diverse populations may come in with different perspectives on communication, collaboration, and problem-solving. Employers with the most effective hiring and retention strategies consider what they must do to retain workers and set up new hires for success. They ask: Is our workplace culture keeping pace with the changing demographics and characteristics of the workforce? Are we a welcoming and productive place for populations that are typically underrepresented in this field?

It's important for employers to consider how eligibility requirements for programs or jobs could restrict their recruitment and hiring efforts. While some conditions, such as a cybersecurity graduate being eligible to obtain a security clearance, are nonnegotiable (and should be flagged before students enter a program), others, such as having a minimum high school GPA or certain test scores, might not always correlate with a prospective student's ability to succeed in a program or on the job. For example, Honda and Columbus State Community College designed a co-op program in which students could enroll in courses and work at the same time. When the program was initially developed, Honda asked to set a 3.0 minimum college GPA for student participation. But college and company leaders later discovered that GPA was not strongly correlated with job performance, so they dropped the minimum to 2.5. The move increased not just the size but also the diversity of the talent pool.

5. Engage in honest and actionable feedback

The best employer-community college partnerships are undergirded by honest feedback about the program's effectiveness and the relationship overall. Employers commonly provide colleges with feedback through advisory boards, annual program review, and regular unstructured conversations. But simply establishing processes for feedback does not guarantee that the information will reflect honest concerns or result in actions to improve results. Below is some guidance for getting the most out of feedback routines.

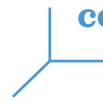
Effective advisory boards

Employers who work well with multiple colleges understand that each has its own strengths, and they use that understanding when deciding which colleges to join on future projects. They consider each college's leadership, capacity, and responsiveness before taking the next steps. When existing partnerships are not giving them what they need, they may have separate discussions with individual program and college leaders to determine the cause of the problems and create solutions.

Nearly every community college has mechanisms for soliciting feedback on program practice and design. Most CTE programs, for instance, have an advisory board, a college-convened group of employers that provides feedback to program leaders. But too often advisory boards become perfunctory operations that do little to better the partnership. Employers can help change that dynamic, asking that advisory board meetings be structured for more productive outcomes. Aspen's research reveals the characteristics of high-functioning advisory board meetings, shown in *Table 6*.

In some cases, advisory board meetings may benefit from the intensive guidance of a professional facilitator. "I often find that business leaders and higher education leaders use very different vocabulary and may be accustomed to different formats or etiquette for meetings,"

"... it is helpful to use a professional meeting facilitator to manage the meeting pace, keep the discussion on topic, and watch for instances in which unfamiliar vocabulary may be an obstacle to good communication."



said Joelle Phillips, president of AT&T Tennessee. "In light of this, I have found that it is helpful to use a professional meeting facilitator to manage the meeting pace, keep the discussion on topic, and watch for instances in which unfamiliar vocabulary may be an obstacle to good communication."

Fruitful program reviews

Community colleges typically conduct formal evaluations of each program every three to five years. Program heads collect and review data, meet with faculty and staff to discuss changes to the program design and curriculum, and produce a final report. Ideally, this process surfaces ways to improve the curriculum based on enrollment, student retention and graduation, graduate employment, and employer and student satisfaction. Although colleges are responsible for designing and executing the program review, employers should ask how often the reviews occur and how their feedback is used to ensure program effectiveness.

Ongoing feedback for continuous improvement

While formal mechanisms are necessary to maintain a strong partnership, effective employers also use less formal channels to garner feedback throughout the year. The employer partners we interviewed spoke to their contacts regularly, with many frontline managers meeting with faculty and college workforce leaders weekly.

TABLE 6: HIGH-FUNCTIONING ADVISORY BOARD MEETINGS

WHO SHOULD PARTICIPATE?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A cross-section of business and industry representatives that includes managers who play a role in hiring and managers who work with entry-level hires and understand what skills are needed on the job. • College representatives, including the vice president of workforce development, program dean, program chair, program faculty members, career program advisors, and internship coordinators.
WHAT TOPICS SHOULD BE COVERED?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annual and long-term planning. Review goals and objectives of the program both to identify metrics to be reviewed and to ensure consistent communications with college, employer, and community stakeholders. • Resources. Identify and pursue resources—including finances and personnel—that will support and contribute to the success of the program. • Workforce trends. Inform the college staff of changes and trends in the economy and local workforce. • Student recruitment. Examine existing recruiting strategies to assess whether they are reaching all significant talent pools in the region and who else needs to be reached. • Student and graduate performance and placement. Examine student and graduate performance on the job. • Program improvements. Based on data and employer feedback, consider how to improve recruitment, curriculum, classroom education, facilities and equipment, and work-based learning opportunities.
WHAT DATA AND INFORMATION SHOULD BE SHARED?	<p><i>From the college:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disaggregated enrollment data. Number of students enrolled in the program by age, gender, and race and ethnicity; populations in the community that are underrepresented in program enrollment. • Disaggregated retention and completion metrics. Number of students retained by year and number who graduate, by age, gender, and race and ethnicity; when students typically drop out and why. • Alumni and student feedback. Surveys that reveal the reputation the company has among students and alumni; information including perception of workplace culture and management and adequacy of wages and benefits. <p><i>From the employer:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hiring and earnings metrics. Number of students from the college program that the employer hires, by age, income, and race and ethnicity; wages offered at entry and every few years thereafter; number of entry-level workers who move into management. • Employee retention. How long new hires are retained by the employer; among those who leave, how many do so voluntarily.

Table 7 outlines several of those channels and how they might be used.

Beyond these tactical strategies, Joelle Phillips of AT&T Tennessee notes that partnerships are enhanced by opportunities for employers to build individual connections with students and staff at community

colleges. One way to engage in this is to invite community college students and staff to join in your company’s civic service projects. Giving employees and community college staff and students the chance to work together on existing service projects can be an easy way to build affinity between these groups.

TABLE 7: METHODS FOR CONTINUOUS FEEDBACK

FEEDBACK CHANNEL	POTENTIAL DISCUSSION TOPICS	WHY IT'S IMPORTANT
REGULAR CHECK-INS WITH FACULTY OR PROGRAM HEADS BY EMAIL OR PHONE, OR IN PERSON	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruitment opportunities • New hire performance • Internship, co-op, and apprenticeship schedules 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The college benefits from hearing how recent hires are performing and can receive regular feedback on how well the curriculum is preparing students who are hired. • All stakeholders are updated so minor problems can be remedied before they become bigger ones; advisory board meetings are reserved for broader, strategic conversations about the partnership and outcomes.
CLASSROOM VISITS BY EMPLOYERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experiences of graduates or current students (such as interns and apprentices) at employer sites • Alignment of curriculum to skills needed on the job • Workplace expectations (as presented by employers to students) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employers can see firsthand what’s being taught and suggest improvements that faculty can implement immediately. • Employers can communicate directly to students that the skills they are learning matter in the workplace.
WORKSITE VISITS BY COLLEGE FACULTY AND STAFF	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recent changes in equipment and workplace expectations • How current students and new hires are performing • Frontline manager practices for onboarding and training new hires and current students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faculty can advise frontline managers or mentors on additional ways to guide students through their training. • Faculty can better understand employer needs and align their classroom practices to what students will experience on the job.

HOW TO REPAIR PARTNERSHIPS IN NEED OF IMPROVEMENT

If the usual processes for program improvement are not delivering what an employer needs, the employer should talk separately with program and college leaders to assess the root cause of the issues and help develop solutions. When Monroe Community College's optics program was experiencing low enrollment and was expensive to run, the Rochester, New York, college considered shuttering the program despite employer demand for skilled workers. Employers from multiple companies worked with Monroe leaders to keep the program going. Recognizing that boosting enrollment would both provide needed talent and ensure the program's financial health, employers helped fund a position for an individual with industry experience and marketing abilities.

When the head nurse at a Wisconsin hospital repeatedly heard from students in clinical training that a particular course was not sufficiently preparing them for the tasks the course purported to teach, the nurse worked with program leaders to arrange for the faculty member in charge of the course to shadow her for several weeks. After the experience, the faculty member changed his teaching approach, resulting in students feeling more prepared and performing better on the job.

6. Collaborate regionally to solve persistent skills gaps

Even where employers and community colleges have high-functioning partnerships, some worker shortages are simply too large for the two partners to solve alone. Smaller businesses may not need enough employees to warrant the creation of a new program. Larger businesses may be unable to find a community college capable of generating the number of workers it needs. But there may be several employers that together will hire enough workers to justify a new program, or several colleges that together could produce adequate worker volume and quality. In these cases, employers should consider collaborating regionally—with multiple employers in a sector and/or multiple colleges in a region.

For years, the Orlando region struggled to build a big enough pipeline of nurses, and each year, area colleges produced about 1,000 fewer nurses than employers needed. Hospitals tried to outbid one another for nurses, gradually raising wages without solving the problem. Colleges independently lobbied hospitals for resources, and tensions rose when colleges attempted to start programs that already existed on other campuses. Employers expressed concern about colleges underproducing graduates, while colleges complained that employers were not providing enough resources, including clinical spots for training.

After hiring an industry veteran to serve as a facilitator, Valencia College held meetings that used churn rates, wage trends, and historic and projected skills-gap data to discuss with hospitals and colleges why a new approach might be useful. College presidents and hospital CEOs gathered at a summit, at which they discussed how to align curriculum and expand capacity. The case was made for hospitals to provide more facilities, equipment, and clinical slots; for community colleges to expand existing programs; and for four-year colleges to support the addition of bachelor's degree programs in nursing at community colleges. The result: Since 2016, three new post-licensure bachelor's of nursing programs have

been added in the Orlando region, doubling the number of nursing students to 6,600, many of whom came through Valencia.

Another successful partnership is one developed by Monroe County and Monroe Community College's Economic and Workforce Development Center. Called LadderzUp, the program is designed to provide county residents with education and training that leads to in-demand jobs. It connects employers in a single industry, such as the 11 local plastic injection companies with worker shortages, to develop and support programs that train workers at scale. All employers benefit from the steady stream of talent, and all share the costs.

In each of these cases, regional collaboration required several key steps:

1. Recognize the need for a new solution to a significant and persistent talent problem. Identify problem talent gaps across an industry. Especially if employers have worker shortfalls and regularly poach talent from one another, or import talent from outside the region, a collaborative approach to growing local talent may be needed.

2. Quantify the problem and its costs. Calculate the size of the gap and how it may change with employer growth. Calculate how these gaps will affect employer costs. Given competition between employers, gathering this information across a regional employer sector may require a neutral organization or individual (such as an industry leader from outside the region, workforce development leader, or respected college) to collect data from each stakeholder.

Several employers may together hire enough workers to justify a new program, or several colleges together could produce adequate worker volume and quality. In these cases, employers should consider collaborating regionally—with multiple employers in a sector and/or multiple colleges in a region.



3. Convene college leaders and industry representatives to craft a solution. Collectively explore solutions to the problem and, once they are defined, the specific contributions each employer and college must make. Consider resource needs and develop strategies that create value for all stakeholders, including colleges, employers, workers, and students.

4. Set up systems for governance and accountability. Sustained projects usually require a backbone organization or individual who keeps track of the roles and responsibilities of each partner, sets meeting agendas and logistics, tracks progress, and is trusted by leaders and implementers to address challenges as they arise.

Conclusion

Distinct as their core missions are, community colleges and employers share an essential goal: developing talent so that businesses can deliver quality products and services and workers can enjoy more prosperous and rewarding lives. They also operate in similar contexts—a world in which demographics and necessary workplace skills are changing rapidly. In short, community colleges and employers have good reason to work together.

Yet partnerships between employers and community colleges don't always work as well as they could. Our hope is that this guide helps employers work more effectively with community colleges, just as our recently published *The Workforce Playbook: A Community College Guide to Delivering Excellent Career and Technical Education* seeks to help community colleges improve their efforts to produce needed talent.

The examples highlighted here make us optimistic. They demonstrate that through partnerships, employers can consistently hire and enhance the skills of the workers they need, while community colleges can reliably deliver the high-quality instruction and long-term value that employers and students expect. Achieving this kind of success in more places will take work by both employers and colleges. But the effort is well worth it—in the payoffs for regional economies, family incomes, and employers' bottom lines. ■

Part 3

ASSESSING PARTNERSHIPS: A CHECKLIST

Understand talent pipeline and talent development needs



Conduct an internal listening tour to assess current talent pipeline challenges and skills gaps. Consider whether your challenge is an inadequate number of particular employees, employees lacking appropriate skills, or a combination of both.

- Talk to HR to understand current recruiting processes and the challenges in hiring or developing workers.
- Talk to hiring and frontline managers to understand specific skills gaps and the timelines and processes needed to onboard workers successfully.
- Talk to senior leaders to understand goals for company growth, cost implications for talent gaps, and potential sources and scale of resource contributions for a partnership.
- Research prior efforts to close talent gaps, including costs and outcomes associated with each.



Collect quantitative data on how talent pipeline issues impact business costs and strategy. Key data points may include:




- Average recruitment costs per hire
- Cost of training per hire
- Employee turnover rates and common reasons for departure
- Average time for new hires to reach full productivity
- Projected measures for growth in employees needed over the next one, five, and ten years







Assess internal capacity to invest financial and workplace learning resources for a partnership.

- Gather information about payments made to outside partners—including institutions of higher education—for training and professional development.
- Understand the number of workplace training opportunities available through internships, clinical rotations, apprenticeships, and similar programming, and the costs associated with each.

Find and assess community college partners

-  **For each college in the area surrounding your headquarters or facility, conduct background research.**
 - Explore the college website for workforce programs' focus, resources, and existing partners.
 - Read local news articles about the college's workforce initiatives.
 - Connect with economic and workforce development organizations or industry groups and ask about the reputation of the community college in workforce partnerships. Follow up with individual employers referenced in those conversations.
-  **Reach out to the college to set up initial meetings to:**
 - Help the college understand your business and talent pipeline goals and pain points
 - Evaluate college leadership, capacity, and responsiveness
 - Identify key points of contact at the college for next steps
 - Brainstorm potential solutions to talent needs
-  **If you have existing partners but are concerned about their ability to meet your needs, reach out to college presidents to discuss issue areas and brainstorm solutions. In some cases, this may require collaborating with other employers to pool resources or encouraging colleges to work with one another to fill persistent regional talent gaps.**

Co-design, develop, and resource programs with community colleges

-  **Discuss your talent challenges with the program chair and/or vice president of workforce at the college and devise overarching goals for the partnership.**
-  **Work with college leaders and faculty to develop a shared understanding of the technical and professional (“soft”) skills sought in graduates.**
 - Ensure that college curriculum designers speak with frontline managers and current workers when developing curriculum.
 - Invite key college staff (such as program faculty and chairs) to tour the workplace to see how technical and professional skills are applied in practice.
-  **Through conversations with frontline managers and HR at the company, as well as program leaders at the community college, determine the credentials students will need to be eligible for an entry-level job. Note that not every solution will be a new degree.**
-  **With frontline managers and HR, explore which credentials will be needed for successive promotions. Note that colleges can work with you to map pathways that begin with entry-level certificate-holders and move through bachelor's degrees for managerial positions.**

(continued)

- ✓ Map the resources that will be required for the program and determine what the company can contribute. Consider human resources (such as allowing current employees to teach and mentor); thought partnership on program design; funding facilities and equipment; financial resources in grants, scholarships, and faculty salaries; and advocacy with funders, legislators, and regulators.
- ✓ Work with college leaders to ensure that every student in the program receives quality work-based learning, which can include simulations, projects, internships, and apprenticeships.
- ✓ Garner internal executive leadership support to secure critical resource investments for the partnership, using evidence of return on investment.

Coordinate talent recruitment and retention with college teams

- ✓ Ask college for metrics and insights about the student populations it enrolls and which groups of students might be good candidates for the program you have developed. Ask questions about which prospective students from the college's service area may be overlooked for your program.
- ✓ Evaluate eligibility requirements for program entry and revise them in light of your available talent pools.
- ✓ Collaborate with college leaders to devise and execute a plan to recruit students into the program, considering strategies for diverse and underserved students, including adults and students of color.
- ✓ Collaborate with college leaders to devise and execute a plan to recruit graduates from the program into jobs.
- ✓ Coordinate HR and line managers to ensure that:
 - Recruitment practices and strategies are aligned with skills needs (for instance, job descriptions and requirements match program learning objectives and credentials)
 - Interview and onboarding processes support effective hiring and retention

Engage in honest and actionable feedback

- Work with the college to draft agendas for advisory board meetings that aim to engage participants in strategic, data-informed conversations rather than providing generic updates.
- Ask college leaders about their program review process and how employer representatives can be helpful. Discuss whether programs are reviewed frequently enough to keep up with changes in the industry.
- Have line managers engage in regular conversations with the program chair, vice president of workforce, and other college leaders to keep lines of communication open and address challenges as they arise.

Collaborate regionally to solve persistent skills gaps

- Collaborate with other employers or industry groups to identify and scope regional talent gaps. Explore the size of the gaps, how they have grown over time, and how much they are predicted to grow in the future.
- Estimate the costs of the skills gaps across the industry (in turnover, recruitment, and more). This metric can be used as stakeholders consider the level of upfront investment that will be required to resolve the issue and the expected return on investment for a regional strategy.
- Encourage and help lead a regional convening of colleges and employers to drive consensus around shared goals and a strategy that creates value for all partners, including education providers, employers, and students. Consider whether the community college (or other intermediary) can serve as a neutral convener of industry competitors.
- Determine the resources needed to execute the strategy and what resources each stakeholder will contribute.
- Set up systems for continuous collaboration and accountability, including who will monitor progress and outcomes, create meeting agendas, conduct administrative tasks, and resolve problems as they arise.

Appendix

Community College Degrees and Credentials

Associate's degree

The most common community college credential. Typically consisting of 60 required credits (the equivalent of two full-time years), associate's degrees come in several types, including associate in applied science (AAS), associate of arts (AA), associate of science (AS), and associate of occupational science (AOS).

Certification

A mark of mastery or competency in a specific skillset. Certifications aren't tied to formal education programs; they are typically awarded through assessment in conjunction with a business or trade association or other industry group.

Industry-recognized credential

A credential accepted by multiple employers in an industry or sector as part of hiring or advancement. Industry-recognized credentials are often endorsed by national trade associations.

“It wasn’t about doing exactly what we wanted or deferring to what the college had always done. [We] understood that this would be a true collaboration...show up, innovate, and figure things out together.”

—Scot McLemore, Honda North America





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