

BUILDING STRONG PARTNERSHIPS WITH COMMUNITY COLLEGES

6 Recommendations for Employers

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Research has shown that most living wage jobs in today's marketplace require at least some postsecondary education.¹ Community colleges are among the most promising institutions for delivering this training, as they are present in nearly every region in the United States and have strong connections with their local communities.² However, recent research has shown that community college programs are not always well aligned with local labor market demands and that collaboration between community colleges and employers can be challenging.³ Building on scholars' and policymakers' calls for stronger partnerships between community colleges and employers, AIR interviewed three employers and two community colleges that have built strong collaborative relationships to hear what they would recommend to others interested in doing the same. This brief provides suggestions that the employers made for creating effective employer–college alliances.

¹ Carnevale, A. P., Jayasundera, T., & Gulish, A. (2016). *America's divided recovery: College haves and have-nots*. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. <https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/Americas-Divided-Recovery-web.pdf>. Groshen, E. L., & Holzer, H. J. (2021). Labor market trends and outcomes: What has changed since the Great Recession? *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 695(1), 49–69.

² American Association of Community Colleges. (2023). *AACC fast facts 2023*. https://www.aacc.nche.edu/wpcontent/uploads/2023/03/AACC2023_FastFacts.pdf.

³ Strohl, J., Mabel, Z., & Campbell, K. P. (2024). *The great misalignment: Addressing the mismatch between the supply of certificates and associate's degrees and the future demand for workers in 565 US labor markets*. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/greatmisalignment/>. Fuller, J. B., & Raman, M. (2022). *The partnership imperative: Community colleges, employers, and America's chronic skills gap*. Harvard Business School. <https://www.pw.hks.harvard.edu/post/partnership-imperative>.

In building partnerships with community colleges, employers recommend that other employers do the following:



1 Come into partnerships with community colleges knowing what you need.

- Employers should be deliberate in thinking about what they need from a partnership with community colleges and be able to articulate that when going into a conversation. *“One strategy I would say is of utmost importance [is to] come to the table prepared. [You should] have exactly what you want that community college to do for you [such as] spelled out learning objectives [and] how we’re going to pay for it.”*
- Employers also noted benefits that this approach can deliver to both parties. *“We have had this [partnership] in place since 2008 ... [when] it was rare that the employer was at the table saying here, here’s what we need. ... We were able to tout that as a new and exciting way to do business [and] currently we see about 90% of our line work workforce come from these school to work programs.”*

2 Establish a shared vision that builds on each partner’s strengths.

- Employers argued that community colleges should have *“an equal seat as the employers because we know that they can’t have programs without employers to hire students [and] we can’t have employees without the programs to supply the talent.”*
- One employer noted the strong connections that community colleges have within their localities. *“[We are] excited about community colleges ... because they know the community locally. ... We are able work with colleges to create awareness that [different health care] roles exist, rather than getting random applicants.”*
- Employers indicated that an important goal for both parties is to build strong relationships that foster trust and build on each other’s strengths.
 - We are *“really approaching it from a humble standpoint too—to say ... we are not educators, we do not know how best to educate. ... That’s where we need you and we want to be very transparent about that.”*
 - *“We told them what we needed and we’ve looked to them [to figure out] how they wanted to offer this program based on how they worked. ... We did not mandate one way or another how they had to offer it. That’s not our expertise.”*

3 Ensure that there is strong leadership support on both sides to build these partnerships.

- As one employer put it, *“First and foremost, you’ve got to [get to] ... the right place with the right stakeholder at the community college ... somebody at director level or above to get buy in from leadership so that they then push and promote the program.”*
- The employer noted that it is helpful to *“start ... the conversation ... at the top”* and *“get the presidents [of the community college and company] connected.”*

4

Think together strategically with community colleges about how to manage costs.

- Employers mentioned that community colleges' relatively low tuition created incentives for partnering. In the words of one employer, *"The big draw of community colleges is ... their cost effectiveness ... they have more reasonable tuition rates and there tends to be quite a few grants that are available to community colleges, which wouldn't be available to proprietary schools."*
- Employers also emphasized the ways in which they can support cost sharing. As one employer noted, *"Community colleges will think they need to spend millions [of] dollars on equipment. However, we see what we have and usually the employer can cut [the cost] in half [by donating] refurbished machines."*
- Another creative way to financially support programming is to consider available funding at the federal, state, and local levels.

5

Build relationships with community colleges that facilitate adapting to changes in the labor market.

- Employers suggested seeking out community colleges that are willing to build programs that meet employer and labor market needs: *"We often ... seek out community colleges ... knowing that ... they often have more flexibility when we are trying to think innovatively and trying to create a new program that maybe doesn't exist. ... We found that they're usually first to the table to say ... we can try to make that work."*

6

Use both noncredit and credit courses creatively to design new programs or adapt old ones.

- Employers recognized the value of for-credit courses, noting that they allowed students to earn credits, certificates, and degrees that could help them advance on the career ladder. *"When it's ever possible, we do want the programs to be for credit because that way hopefully those classes would stack into future programming."*
- However, employers also highlighted some of the distinct challenges with credit programs and cautioned employers to be aware of this as they approach community college partnerships.
 - For instance, because colleges work on an annual calendar, *"you may have to wait for the start of the academic year [because] it is hard to start off cycle. ... [We could] come to consensus in November but then have to wait [until the start of the school year] and it could be 2 years before we [the employer] actually see a student."*
 - Additionally, there can be long delays in program implementation because of the accreditation process. As one employer said, *"The best advice I have is ... if you think you need a program now, then get started—it is probably going to take a year or 1.5 to get approval."*
- For the above reasons, creating noncredit courses and programs also has distinct advantages. They can be built and implemented more quickly and can be offered on a more flexible schedule: *"We also recognize that when they're not for credit, they have more flexibility in like you can start in the middle of a month on a random month like you don't have to wait for semesters or things like that, you're not bound to the standard college schedule."*
- However, employers also highlighted some challenges with noncredit courses, such as the lack of tuition supports for students (noncredit programs are generally not eligible for federal aid). In addition, there is the question whether noncredit courses can be applied toward a college certificate or degree (which generally require for-credit courses).
- That said, many states also provide financial support for training in high-demand careers, allowing colleges to offer some programs at little to no cost. Some colleges also find creative ways to bridge the credit–noncredit gap by providing credit for prior or noncredit learning or by transitioning noncredit programs into for-credit programs over time.

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