

BUILDING STRONG PARTNERSHIPS WITH EMPLOYERS

7 Recommendations for Community Colleges

Elizabeth Zachry Rutschow, AIR

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 community college leaders made for creating effective employer–college alliances.

Community college leaders suggest that colleges, in working with employers, do the following:



1

Start small to create early successes that can lead to much larger successes in the future.

- In the words of one college leader, when you “*have one employer and one success—you can then let that employer become your champion.*”
- Another emphasized that “*it didn’t happen overnight. We have been doing this for a long time and been setting realistic expectations.*”
- Community colleges leaders also suggested starting “*with the biggest sector. Find a partner, or have your president find a partner. Work to build a pipeline of talent for them and [make] a commitment to do that. [It took us about] two years of working with an employer [before] we could show the Board ... [the] difference.*”

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>.

2 Foster executive leadership support from the beginning and use the trusting relationships developed to broach more difficult issues.

- Like employers, college leaders noted the benefit of having strong leadership support to build these partnerships.
- Strong support from high-level administrators can help other leaders be creative. As one noted, *“You have to have [an] executive that is pushing you and encouraging you to think outside of box.”*
- This support can also help in cementing stronger relationships with employers. With *“executive support, our president can have CEO to CEO conversations”* to support the vision and execution of the work.
- One way to build deep and long-lasting relationships is through regular contact. One college leader said that the *“secret sauce is developing a deep relationship. Every week I have coffee or a beer with an employer.”*
- Strong relationships help community college leaders when they engage in difficult conversations with employers. For instance, when one college was collaborating with an employer to build a new training, the college was able to advocate that students get *“paid a living wage”* for the work they were training to do. Colleges also want to ensure that they *“offer trainings [that] have opportunities for advancement.”* Though they *“are hard conversations”* to have with employers, college leaders emphasized how having these conversations will *“benefit employers as well as students”* in the long run.

3 Seek out ways to bring in employers’ needs and perspectives.

- Colleges should build programs that fully take into account the perspectives and needs of employers in ways that go beyond the focus on academics.
- In the words of one college leader, *“We look at this as employer-led and we try to incorporate that in everything we do. ... Many [individuals] are coming to [our college] to upskill. ... [We want to do that] with skills that employers say they want. We rebuilt our existing courses to meet GM needs.”*
- Another emphasized that *“we discuss the outcomes of the program and specific measurements ... [and] what they want measurements for. We do this to meet not just accreditation but also for employers so that we have students that are employable by the end of the program. We explore additional things that they would like us to deliver at the program end so that our students will be 100% ready when they graduate.”*
- One college even went so far as to provide a guarantee that their students would be employment-ready by creating a Workforce Promise program. *“It is a voluntary program where students get a certificate and our promise to employers is that if [students lack] in the skills they need, [the college] will provide remediation. We were the first ... to do this and we have now had 100+ students go through program.”*
- One college leader noted that, due to the trust that has been built, *“It is not uncommon for them to give feedback [saying that they would] rather hire GRCC graduate[s] than anywhere else because of their preparation [and] the ecosystem that has been developed.”*

4 Have faculty and staff who can speak the employers’ language in employer–college discussions.

- In meetings with employers, colleges should have staff with industry knowledge and the ability to speak the employers’ language. Without this, the conversations may not be as productive.
- As a leader of workforce and economic development explained, you *“have to have the right people as the liaison. [We are] fortunate that [we] have [a] handful of staff that [have] experience in business. Having the right people in the room that can talk business—can be a liaison to the college and navigate [the] college system for [the] company. I have been in meetings where it is going great. We had brought in industry experts but then [our staff would] only see it from the academic side and had trouble to meet employer needs. The conversation derailed quickly.”*

5 Build faculty trust and engage with their concerns.

- College leaders emphasized that this can be challenging work but that the benefits for students and their communities make the work worthwhile. *“You can’t be afraid to change what you are doing and try something new. We are being intentional to reach out to companies and have to get staff to be comfortable being uncomfortable. Don’t be stuck in what has been. Take the ego out of it [and ask] how can we do the best for our stakeholders?”*
- You need to *“incorporate faculty from the beginning.”* For instance, one college leader explained that upon hearing that the college might award credit for prior learning, faculty became worried that they would lose enrollment in their programs. However, faculty relaxed *“once [they] heard from employers and students—and realized that students with credit for prior learning had stronger retention and that graduation rates [were] higher.”* It is important to put such initiatives *“into the language of student success—how [these initiatives will] help their students.”*

6 Leverage noncredit to credit approaches to be more nimble in meeting employers’ and students’ needs.

- One important lesson is to build strong pathways across noncredit and credit programs. For example, when asked how to manage workforce and academic programs, one college leader emphasized that *“we have no sides of the house. Students may start in short term degree [because]... workforce training can do things faster to start. We have many students in healthcare programs that start in [a] nondegree program and use that to get eligible for those hours and to get that credential that is on that [academic] side. Students who do [the nondegree program first] are immensely more prepared. [We like] to have those [noncredit] programs as a foundation, as a way to start out”* new credit programs.
- Another college did something similar. They *“met with area machining companies and developed a noncredit to credit program that would allow students to move from tech to operator role.”*
- This approach can also lead to building more diversity and equity in training programs. For instance, one large electric company came to one college because they *“wanted an electric line worker program. They had lots of openings, and they also want diversity—more people of color and females. Within 6 months, we stood up [a] program. We are trying to make agile pathways for students by leveraging the agility of noncredit courses along with the strong academics of the credit side.”*
- Leaders also discussed ways to bridge the noncredit to credit divide by providing credit for noncredit training later on. As one leader emphasized, *“We developed an accounting course that is [a] non-traditional course that [an] employer wanted. We did this on the noncredit side and then gave students credit for the course later. We made sure it met all standards and the learning objectives were the same.”*

7 Be creative on how to cover costs and limit risks in developing new programming.

- One leader pointed out that in writing *“grants to do what employers want to do, we are writing curriculum and getting equipment, and we now have \$22M in active grants.”*
- College leaders also suggest looking for employers *“that play an active role ... [and that] are going to help with info sessions, supply someone to teach if we don’t have someone, help fund equipment. We want employers who see that from the beginning to end.”*
- For instance, one college wanted to develop a *“surgical technologists program. There was a need, but it is a high-cost program ... we joined in collaborative agreement with Muskegon College where they [students] can start training [at our college] in sterile processing, and ... then they can ladder on surgical tech through consortium. ... [That way] if we don’t fill a class, then share we can share a consortial space so we are not under pressure of enrollment.”*

AIR would like thank the Walmart.org for its financial support of this brief and leaders at Mott Community College and Grand Rapids Community College for providing recommendations. We would like to thank Amy Lee of the Michigan Workforce Training and Education Collaborative for her insights.



American Institutes for Research®

1400 Crystal Drive, 10th Floor | Arlington, VA 22202-3289 | +1.202.403.5000 | AIR.ORG