



Connecting community colleges with employers: A toolkit for building successful partnerships

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July 2017

Introduction

Amid persistent concerns about the [well-documented skills gap](#), community colleges have the potential to provide low-cost, high-quality education and training to students. Robust relationships between colleges and local industry partners are critical to building strong workforce development programs for students. In this context, this toolkit offers practical advice on how community college leaders can take a deliberate approach to communication with potential partners in their community, including local businesses and industry leaders. In this toolkit, you will find three sections:

- Creating a Navigator for Industry Partners
- Key Characteristics of Productive Partnerships
- Practical Steps for Building Relationships between Colleges and Industries

Tips on using this toolkit

Each section discusses practical strategies that college leaders can tailor to their own circumstances to build and maintain productive relationships with industry partners.

These recommendations are based on lessons learned from existing research and from conversations with experts in the field, including industry and community college leaders as well as intermediaries.

The sections are complementary, but at the same time, each section is self-contained. You can navigate directly to the section that are most relevant to your needs.

Why focus on developing relationships between community colleges and industry partners?

Numerous case studies of [exemplary workforce programs](#) indicate that a key component of a successful workforce development program is a [strong relationship](#) between the college and local employers. Many [reports emphasize](#) the importance of community college-industry partnerships. Without this foundation, other components of a workforce development strategy may not align or may be unsustainable.

However, [financial challenges](#) as well as [cultural differences between](#) businesses and colleges may form barriers to developing these relationships.

By taking steps to navigate these differences, college leaders can overcome these barriers to build a strong foundation for workforce development partnerships with industry leaders.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply grateful to the following individuals for sharing their expertise with me for this project:

Dr. Colleen K. Eisenbeiser, dean
for Learning Advancement and the
Virtual Campus and dean for the School
for Science and Technology, Anne Arun-
del Community College

Scott Ellsworth, principal and owner,
Scott Ellsworth Consulting

David Gruber, director, Growth Sector

Ryan Kish, senior program manager,
Arconic Foundation

Chris Lowery, senior vice president,
Workforce Alignment, Ivy Tech
Community College

Drew Scheberle, senior vice
president, Federal/State Advocacy &
Education/Talent Development, Austin
Chamber of Commerce

Dr. Edith Westfall, former acting dean
of Workforce Development and Lifelong
Learning, University of the District of
Columbia Community College

John H. White Jr, executive chairman of
Taco Group Holdings, Inc.

Kelly Zelesnik, dean, Engineering, Busi-
ness, and Information Technologies,
Lorain County Community College



Creating a navigator for industry partners

[Jump to section](#)



Key characteristics of productive partnerships

[Jump to section](#)



Practical steps for building relationships between colleges and industries

[Jump to section](#)

Creating a navigator for industry partners

Dr. Edith Westfall, former acting dean at the University of the District of Columbia Community College (UDC), notes that it is important to manage potential business partners' expectations. The potential industry partner may hope that the college will hold a job fair, for example, but the college may not necessarily be willing or able to do so. The navigator, or "liaison," could meet with the potential partner to draft a list of the business's requests, and the liaison could then review this list with the college and communicate with the partner what is within the college's scope and capacity. At UDC, for example, an employer outreach specialist helps to identify what potential partners are looking for and then communicates this information to the dean, who in turn identifies how the college can meet the various needs and who the industry partner should connect with at the college.



We recommend identifying a “liaison” (or a team of liaisons) who can take on primary responsibility for developing and navigating relationships with local employers. These liaisons can cultivate industry-specific knowledge and devote significant time to building productive relationships with local employers. Businesses will then have a point person within a college, and similarly, the liaison will have a reliable contact with their business partners.

Why should colleges provide a “navigator” to serve as a liaison to industry partners?

- Community colleges have a broad mission to serve their students, and their organization often reflects the many ways in which colleges strive to fulfill this mission. Consequently, community colleges are often complex organizations.
- Local employers who might be potential partners often have a hard time navigating this structure. In fact, [research](#) suggests that this is often a barrier for developing productive relationships: “Businesses have difficulty working in an educational bureaucracy and thus try to avoid it when possible.”
- Scott Ellsworth, former director of Business Leaders United for Workforce Partnerships after serving as general manager and vice president of U.S. operations for Tipco Punch, Inc., notes that often college leaders may already have good relationships with employers. In this case, the liaison is by no means a substitute for that existing relationship. Rather, the liaison can assist college leaders in maintaining those connections, coordinating projects across institutions, and identifying future possible areas of collaboration.

A liaison can help industry partners navigate the college environment.

- The liaison can serve as the industry partner’s point person inside the college. The industry leader should be able to pick up the phone and call their point person, and in turn, the college will always be able to reach the industry leader through the liaison. Indeed, an industry leader noted that from their perspective, it is always helpful to have a “tentacle” in partner institutions.
- Several community college leaders, including Dr. Colleen Eisenbeiser, dean for Learning Advancement and the Virtual Campus at Anne Arundel Community College and Kelly Zelesnik, dean of Engineering, Business, and Information Technologies at Lorain County Community College (LCCC), note that while many community colleges have organization charts, these documents may confuse potential external partners rather than clarify the college structure. These observations

suggest that industry partners could benefit from working with a liaison responsible for helping them navigate the community college environment.

- Dean Zelesnik explains that LCCC has a division, Growth Services, dedicated to connecting the college with industry partners. Growth Services ensures that industry partners meet with the right people from the college, navigating the college for the industry partner, thus eliminating potential confusion and allowing for more efficient communication.
- David Gruber, director of Growth Sector, notes that

advanced manufacturing companies often want job training for their employees that incorporates elements of the vocational and academic sides of a community college. In his view, a navigator could communicate with both sides of the community college on behalf of the potential business partner, streamlining the coordination between the industry and the college. Ideally, the liaison would be situated within the college such that they could work effectively with both the vocational and academic sides. To this end, Gruber suggests that the liaison(s) might function most effectively if they work in or are associated with the college president's office.

The liaison can help the college and potential industry partners identify shared norms and missions.

While businesses are profit-oriented, community colleges are not. It is important to keep this distinction in mind and to [develop a strategy](#) for bridging this gap. One way to [address this difference](#) is for the liaison to facilitate “frequent and candid conversations concerning their respective organizational and community visions.”

- Setting this baseline can help avoid misunderstandings and establish a set of shared expectations. [Research suggests](#) that it is crucial to identify mutual incentives for both organizations to join and sustain a partnership.

- The liaison can coordinate between the industry partner and the college president to draft a memo of understanding. Jenkins and Spence (2006) [explain the value of this process](#): “In our work with pathways partnerships across the country, Workforce Strategy Center has found it helpful in starting conversations with employers to construct an agreement that clearly spells out what employers can expect to gain and what is expected of them in return. This document, which we call a ‘term sheet,’ helps pathways partners develop a common language and understanding with employers.”



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The liaison can help the college identify and even anticipate the labor needs of local industries.

- Chris Lowery, senior vice president for Workforce Alignment at Ivy Tech Community College in Indiana, describes Ivy Tech’s approach to developing workforce consultants within the college. By building knowledge about local industries, engaging industry leaders in conversation about their labor needs, and then identifying how the college can help meet these needs, these consultants can help lay the groundwork for partnerships with local employers. Lowery describes these consultants as important partners in a president’s workforce development strategy. Generalizing from Ivy Tech’s experience, a college president could adopt a similar strategy by training liaisons to work with specific industries.
- Scott Ellsworth, an expert in college-industry partnerships, notes that colleges may work with many types of businesses. This insight underscores the importance of assigning liaisons to a specific industry. Like the workforce consultants at Ivy Tech, liaisons can develop knowledge about local industries’ needs based on trends and projections about the relevant markets in the region. This knowledge can be an important “hook” that liaisons can use to start a conversation with local industries about potential partnerships.

How can colleges support the liaison in meeting their goals?

- It is hard to overstate the [importance of the president’s leadership](#) in workforce development initiatives. With this in mind, the college president should offer a full-throated endorsement of the liaison(s) and their role to send a clear message, internally and externally, that the college prioritizes building relationships with industry partners.
- David Gruber at Growth Sector, an expert in industry-college workforce development partnerships, notes that if liaisons are located in the president’s office, the liaison may be better positioned to help facilitate coordination across the college.
- Colleges should make it easy for industry partners to get in touch with the liaison. According to Dean Zelesnik at LCCC, a key to successful workforce relationships is making sure that everyone at the college knows where, within the college, to direct potential industry partners. To this end, make sure that faculty and administrators know the name and contact information of the relevant office within the college that handles workforce inquiries. It may also help to make sure that the contact information for the liaison and their office is easy to find and up to date on the college website.

Who would be a good fit for this role?

- The liaison may have several other roles at the college—ideally, the college will not need to create a new full-time position to meet the demands of this role. Reflecting on this possibility, Dr. Colleen Eisenbeiser, dean for Learning Advancement and the Virtual Campus at Anne Arundel Community College, notes that in theory assigning this role to an existing staff member was a reasonable proposition.
- The exact number of liaisons should depend on the size of the institution and on the number and variety of local industry partners.
- Scott Ellsworth recommends that the liaison should be a person who is motivated to initiate and sustain relationships with industry partners. This may include making phone calls and site visits as well as email communication to establish a strong relationship and mutual understanding.
- Liaisons can create an invaluable foundation that complements the president's own efforts at relationship building. This foundation might lead to conversations about potential opportunities for collaboration. These conversations might not always happen in tightly scheduled advisory board meetings, and they may allow the time and space for opportunities to collaborate to arise organically.
- The liaison should be able to work independently, but should also coordinate their strategy with the president's office, as the president plays a crucial role in developing relationships with industry partners.
- **See Key Characteristics of Productive Partnerships** for more details on the role college presidents can play in anticipating the labor force needs of local industries and using this knowledge to build productive relationships.

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Key characteristics of productive partnerships

Long term relationships with industry partners can give presidents insight into where jobs will be for their students in the future. In his book, “What Excellent Community Colleges Do,” Josh Wyner suggests that “to prepare a skilled workforce, colleges need to understand whether their programs are aligned with labor market needs.” With this in mind, the college president’s workforce strategy should include identifying how the college can help students be attractive job candidates to local industries.



Community colleges and businesses are different types of institutions, often with different aims, but that does not need to be an obstacle to developing a shared purpose and mutual understanding. Indeed, building and maintaining strong relationships with local industries has a long-run benefit for colleges: college leaders can develop an in-depth understanding of the local employment environment. This relationship can help inform college leaders' decisions, helping them develop programs at the college targeted at providing students with an education that prepares them to enter the workforce.

What are helpful mindsets for building these relationships?

- Chris Lowery, senior vice president for Workforce Alignment at Ivy Tech Community College, explains that the campus president plays a vital role in successful workforce development strategies, likening the campus president to a quarterback. From his perspective, consistent interaction between the campus president and community leaders, whether business leaders, school superintendents, or mayors, is essential for the campus president to understand a community and to help build positive change in that community.
- Research supports this perspective. [Levin et al. \(2010\)](#) find that along with a strong commitment to funding, college leaders should build strong relationships with the community to sustain successful programs: “solid connections to local communities and a strong internal commitment to funding are essential to the life of a program.”
- When developing relationships, college leaders should keep in mind the [perspective of potential business partners](#): “Businesses are accustomed to making decisions and acting on them—now. Whereas a for-profit business’s prime audience is its stakeholders, the community college has multiple constituencies, both internal and external. The main way that this concern was dealt with was by both sides staying in constant dialogue.”

What are characteristics of productive relationships with industry partners?

- Research suggests that college leaders can create [stronger, more effective programs](#) through long-term relationships with local industry partners: “The college program with promising practices, often as a result of faculty behaviors, develops and maintains relationships with local communities, industries, institutions, and agencies.”
- These relationships can give presidents insight into where jobs will be for their students in the future. In his book, “[What Excellent Community Colleges Do](#),” Josh Wyner suggests that “to prepare a skilled workforce, colleges need to understand whether their programs are aligned with labor market needs” (p. 6). With this in mind, the college president’s workforce strategy should include identifying how the college can help students be attractive job candidates to local industries. According to Wyner, college leaders should use data and build relationships with local industry leaders to understand the market: “[e]ffective community college leaders don’t just look at the data; they talk about where the economy might be headed with the people who know best: employers...By examining data and maintaining strong relationships with employers, they understand what students need to get jobs. They act swiftly to do whatever is needed—from program design to resource allocation—to align their programs accordingly” (p. 97-98). Wyner also suggests that colleges can work toward this goal by partnering with state systems who can help them understand how to effectively use data from the U.S. Department of Labor (p. 96).
- In addition, Levin et al. identify [connections](#) between colleges and local industries as one of the pillars of successful workforce programs, in part because this connection provides colleges (and their students) with a source of industry expertise. Just as in any honest relationship, improvement comes through the mutual exchange of constructive criticism.
- As Wyner notes, relationships between colleges and industry are particularly valuable when they allow for the mutual exchange of constructive criticism. Indeed, there is a clear consensus among experts: it is vitally important to keep the lines of communication open between college and industry leaders.
- See [Practical Steps for Building Relationships between Colleges and Industries](#) for more details.
- See [Creating a Navigator for Industry Partners](#) for details on how a liaison can help in this regard.



When developing relationships, college leaders should keep in mind the perspective of potential business partners: “Businesses are accustomed to making decisions and acting on them—now. Whereas a for-profit business’s prime audience is its stakeholders, the community college has multiple constituencies, both internal and external. The main way that this concern was dealt with was by both sides staying in [constant dialogue](#).”

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Practical steps for building relationships between colleges and industries

Chris Lowery, senior vice president for Workforce Alignment at Indiana's Ivy Tech Community College, explains that in his experience, a helpful starting point for building strong workforce partnerships is convening a round table of local business leaders, including for-profit and non-profit business leaders who are big employers in the community. The goal of the round table is for the college leadership to meet industry leaders in the community and to identify areas for collaboration.



College presidents can play a vital role in creating and maintaining open lines of communication through regular, frequent contact with industry partners, an important but relatively feasible approach compared to other types of institutional change. Working with intermediaries and local community leaders can help college presidents develop a connection to the community and can simultaneously help presidents create productive and sustainable workforce strategies.

How can college presidents and their teams take the lead on building relationships with local industry leaders?

- Research [suggests](#) that it is imperative for college leaders to build robust relationships with industry partners: “The identification of shared organizational missions and goals necessitates that community college leaders and their business counterparts engage in frequent and candid conversations concerning their respective organizational and community visions.”
- Chris Lowery, senior vice president for Workforce Alignment at Indiana’s Ivy Tech Community College, explains that in his experience, a helpful starting point for building strong workforce partnerships is convening a round table of local business leaders, including for-profit and non-profit business leaders who are big employers in the community. The goal of the round table is for the college leadership to meet industry leaders in the community and to identify areas for collaboration. Lowery notes that these round

tables are most productive when they are specifically structured as high impact meetings in which college leaders can assess the needs of industry partners and identify areas where the college can help. The success of these round tables can hinge on whether the right people are in the room—without input from local business leaders, college presidents may not have an opportunity to truly understand local labor market needs. With this in mind, Lowery advises college leaders not to be shy about leaning on local leaders to help assemble this group. If the college does not yet have the power to convene the right people, it is often useful to ask for help from a local leader who does. This local leader may be the mayor, superintendent, chamber of commerce, local hospital, a large manufacturer, or another organization entirely. To identify this person, Lowery suggests asking a simple question: who in town knows everybody?



Wyner offers the following advice: “Exceptional colleges use advisory board members, and anyone else they can get in touch with, as a weekly (if not daily) resource to learn about trends in the industry, hear about how graduates are doing, connect students with field experiences, and provide materials and equipment so that students can walk out with their diplomas ready to work on day one. These boards work best when they serve not just as trusted partners but also as constructive critics.”

... Asking this local leader to co-host the round table and to jointly send out invitations, for example, could help get the right people in the room. Partnering with this person or organization to help convene the round table may help ensure that the college leadership meets with key employers in the community. Whether the college needs a partner, and who the best partner is, will likely depend on the local environment.

- An industry leader interviewed for this project agrees with Lowery’s advice that colleges should draw on the resources that local industry leaders can offer. This leader of a large employer notes that his company often plays a role in helping to assemble convenings on issues related to manufacturing.
- Echoing this strategy of active community engagement, Sundberg [explains](#) how the president of Carl Sandburg College hosted town meetings along with college representatives to “meet with businesspeople and residents to listen to and learn about the issues that are of particular concern to the community.”
- In his book, [“What Excellent Community Colleges Do,”](#) Wyner offers the following advice: “Exceptional colleges use advisory board members, and anyone else they can get in touch with, as a weekly (if not daily) resource to learn about trends in the industry, hear about how graduates are doing, connect students with field experiences, and provide materials and equipment so that students can walk out with their diplomas ready to work on day one. These boards work best when they serve not just as trusted partners but also as constructive critics” (p. 105).

Which other external organizations can help college leaders develop these relationships?

- Local intermediaries can help college leaders develop and maintain relationships with businesses. In particular, intermediaries who are experts on the local business landscape can help college leaders develop an understanding of long-term trends and labor market needs.
- For example, [chambers of commerce](#) can be valuable partners. Drew Scheberle, senior vice president for Federal/State Advocacy and Education/Talent Development at the Austin Chamber of Commerce, describes how the chamber can advise college leaders as the college develops and revises workforce strategies. Keeping in mind Wyner’s advice that colleges engage in open dialogues with business leaders to identify strengths and weaknesses of their workforce strategies, the local chamber of commerce may provide college leaders with a valuable source of feedback from their peers in the business community.
- Sundberg [notes](#) that when college administrators and faculty actively participate in the community through “community boards of directors and in service clubs and professional organizations,” relationships between the college and local leaders develop organically such that “a natural exchange of needs and ideas starts flowing.”
- Other [potential partners](#) include: “community-based organizations; labor unions and apprenticeship committees; other colleges; workforce development agencies; human service agencies; and economic development agencies.”
- College leadership could also consider working with [regional skills alliances](#) and [local service agencies](#), who may have funding available to support workforce development projects.
- The right mix of intermediaries and external partners may vary depending on the needs of the student population and the nature of local industry and employment options. In some communities, the local chamber of commerce might be the best fit, and in others, for example, the mayor’s office may be better situated to help.

- The liaison (see **Creating a Navigator for Industry Partners**) could help the college leadership strategically develop and implement a workforce strategy tailored to meet the needs of their student body.
- Another potential strategy for success could be identifying a similar school with an exemplary workforce program and reaching out to these institutions for advice (the liaison, described in **Creating a Navigator for Industry Partners**, could assist with this task).

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