

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 Dr. 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.”



Jenkins and Spence explain, “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.”

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.

Further Reading

- Buettner, David L., Michael C. Morrison, and Margery Wasicek. "Successful experiences with making partnering an operational strategy." *New Directions for Community Colleges*, no. 119 (2002): 5-12. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ661522D>.
- Jenkins, Davis and Christopher Spence. "The Career Pathways How-To Guide." Workforce Strategy Center (2006). http://www.sectorstrategies.org/system/files/WSC_Career_Pathways_howto.pdf
- Soliz, Adela. "Preparing America's labor force: Workforce development programs in public community colleges." Brookings (December 09, 2016). <https://www.brookings.edu/research/preparing-americas-labor-force-workforce-development-programs-in-public-community-colleges/>.
- Spangler, Mary S. *Developing Successful Partnerships with Business and the Community*. New Directions for Community Colleges. No. 119. San Francisco: Jossey Bass. (2002). <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED472019>
- Sundberg, Lori. *Building Partnerships with Business that Make a Difference*, in M.S. Spangler (Ed.), *Developing Successful Partnerships with Business and the Community*. New Directions for Community Colleges, No. 119. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, (2002). <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED472019>

References

Alssid, Julian L., David Gruber, Davis Jenkins, Christopher Mazzeo, Brandon Roberts, and Regina Stanback-Stroud. "Building a Career Pathways System: Promising Practices in Community College-Centered Workforce Development." Workforce Strategy Center (2002).

Blair, Amy, Stephen Michon, and Maureen Conway, "Communities That Work Partnership Playbook." Workforce Strategy Initiative at the Aspen Institute (2016). <http://www.aspenwsi.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/CTWP-Playbook-Final-Nov-28-2016.pdf>

Buettner, David L., Michael C. Morrison, and Margery Wasicek. "Successful experiences with making partnering an operational strategy." *New Directions for Community Colleges*, no. 119 (2002): 5-12. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ661522D>.

Burrowes, Jennifer, Alexis Young, Dan Restuccia, Joseph Fuller, and Manjari Raman. "Bridge the Gap: Rebuilding America's Middle Skills." Harvard Business School (2014). <http://www.hbs.edu/competitiveness/Documents/bridge-the-gap.pdf>

Giffi, Craig, Ben Dollar, Michelle Drew, Jennifer McNelly, Gardner Carrick, and Bharath Gangula. "The Skills Gap in US Manufacturing: 2015 and Beyond." Deloitte (2015). <http://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/us/Documents/manufacturing/us-pip-the-manufacturing-institute-and-deloitte-skills-gap-in-manufacturing-study.pdf>

Jenkins, Davis. "Career Pathways: Aligning Public Resources to Support Individual and Regional Economic Advancement in the Knowledge Economy." Workforce Strategy Center (2006). http://www.sectorstrategies.org/system/files/WSC_Career_Pathways_howto.pdf

Jenkins, Davis, and Christopher Spence. "The Career Pathways How-To Guide." Workforce Strategy Center (2006). http://www.sectorstrategies.org/system/files/WSC_Career_Pathways_howto.pdf

Kisker, Carrie B. and Rozana Carducci. "UCLA community college review: Community college partnerships with the private sector-organizational contexts and models for successful collaboration." *Community College Review* 31, no. 3 (2003): 55-74. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/009155210303100304>

Levin, John S., Elizabeth M. Cox, Christine Cerven, and Zachary Haberler. "The recipe for promising practices in community colleges." *Community College Review* 38, no. 1 (2010): 31-58. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0091552110374505>

Rab, Sara. "Building a Career Pathways System: Promising Practices in Community College-Centered Workforce Development." *Educause Quarterly* (2003). <http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/EQM03111.pdf>

References (cont.)

“Ready to Work: Job-Driven Training and American Opportunity.” The White House (2014). https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/skills_report.pdf

Soares, Louis. “Community college and industry partnerships.” Center for American Progress (2010). <https://www2.ed.gov/PDFDocs/college-completion/02-community-college-and-industry-partnerships.pdf>

Soliz, Adela. “Preparing America’s labor force: Workforce development programs in public community colleges.” Brookings (December 09, 2016). <https://www.brookings.edu/research/preparing-americas-labor-force-workforce-development-programs-in-public-community-colleges/>

Spangler, Mary S. *Developing Successful Partnerships with Business and the Community*. New Directions for Community Colleges. No. 119. San Francisco: Jossey Bass. (2002). <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED472019>

Sundberg, Lori. *Building Partnerships with Business that Make a Difference*, in M.S. Spangler (Ed.), *Developing Successful Partnerships with Business and the Community*. New Directions for Community Colleges, No. 119. San Francisco: Jossey Bass. (2002). <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED472019>

Warford, Laurance J., ed. *Pathways to student success: Case studies from the college and career transitions initiative*. League for Innovation in the Community College, (2006). <http://docplayer.net/8260923-Case-studies-from-the-college-and-career-transitions-initiative.html>

Wyner, Joshua S. *What Excellent Community Colleges Do: Preparing All Students for Success*. Harvard Education Press, (2014).

The Brookings Institution is a nonprofit organization devoted to independent research and policy solutions. Its mission is to conduct high-quality, independent research and, based on that research, to provide innovative, practical recommendations for policymakers and the public. The conclusions and recommendations of any Brookings publication are solely those of its author(s), and do not reflect the views of the Institution, its management, or its other scholars.

Support for this publication was generously provided by Arconic Foundation. Brookings recognizes that the value it provides is in its absolute commitment to quality, independence, and impact. Activities supported by its donors reflect this commitment.

Comments? Contact Elizabeth Mann at EMann@brookings.edu.