

# 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?



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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.”

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... 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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