

# Employer Perspectives on Building Partnerships with Community Colleges: Insights for Local Leaders and Practitioners

Many local leaders and practitioners at institutions of higher education, workforce development agencies, training providers, and community organizations are interested in how community colleges can effectively engage employers to provide students education and training that can lead to high-paying, in-demand jobs, while building the skilled workforce that employers need.<sup>1</sup>

As a part of their Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant activities, community colleges developed and enhanced relationships with local employers to better connect students and employers (see **Box 1**). For the TAACCCT national evaluation, the research team interviewed more than 40 employers that had strong relationships with community colleges that received Round 4 grants (see **Box 1**). This brief highlights these employers' perspectives on community college relationships and offers insights for leaders and practitioners that can help them tailor their own approaches to helping colleges and employers in their local communities develop and maintain strong and productive relationships.

For this brief and other TAACCCT Round 4 Evaluation findings visit:

 [www.dol.gov/agencies/oasp/evaluation/completedstudies](https://www.dol.gov/agencies/oasp/evaluation/completedstudies)

## TAACCCT Round 4 National Evaluation

The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL)'s Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grants program, a \$1.9 billion investment aimed to help community colleges across the nation increase their capacity to provide education and training for unemployed workers and other adult learners to prepare them for in-demand jobs. DOL provided four rounds of grants, which operated between 2011 and 2018. In order to build evidence on its grant-funded programs and strategies, DOL funded a national evaluation of each round of grants to collect and assess data across all participating colleges. The Evaluation of Round 4 included the following components:

- An **implementation analysis** of the service delivery approaches developed and the systems changed through the grants.
- An **outcomes study** of nine Round 4 grantees and 34 programs using survey data and administrative records to better understand the characteristics of participants, their service receipt, and their training and employment outcomes.
- **Syntheses of third-party evaluation findings** to develop a national picture of the implementation of the capacity-building strategies and build evidence of the effectiveness of the strategies on participants' training and employment outcomes.
- A **study of employer perspectives on strong community college relationships** with selected Round 4 employer-partners, to better understand employers' perspectives on how to develop and maintain strong relationships with colleges.

This Brief summarizes lessons from the report, *The Employer Perspectives Study: Insights on How to Build and Maintain Strong Employer-College Partnerships* (Scott et al. 2018).

<sup>1</sup> The grant announcement required applicants to provide data and analysis on both current and projected employment opportunities for each targeted industry and specific occupation. This had to include data on current and expected job openings with at least two employers in the community in each targeted industry, and may have also included commitments from employers who expect to hire program participants. See the Round 4 grant announcement for more information at <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ETA/grants/pdfs/SGA-DFA-PY-13-10.pdf>.

## WHY EMPLOYERS PARTNER WITH COLLEGES

Employers may engage with a community college for a variety of reasons.<sup>2</sup> It may be to fill a specific training need for current employees. It may be to build a pipeline of skilled workers for a local industry. Employers may be attracted by a college's state-of-the-art training facilities or the unique programs it offers. This section provides insight into the motivations of employers who have strong relationships with colleges on partnering with these colleges and the various roles employers can play.



### Employers valued colleges' efforts to address hiring needs using quality facilities and programs

- Employers report that they benefit from college partnerships in a number of ways. First, colleges help address their hiring needs. For example, some employers thought colleges could train students for jobs requiring mid- to high-level skills in sectors where few low-skilled, entry-level positions exist. Colleges could also help employers address challenges such as replacing an aging workforce, reducing turnover, and increasing the skills of their current employees. These perspectives suggest that strategies and programs developed through these partnerships could ultimately lead to improvements in employee retention and reduce the cost and time it takes employers to fully train employees.

*Other companies have the same issues we do – there's a lack of talent out there. We can spend a lot of money recruiting and have high turnover, or we can develop the local workforce and upskill those with potential [in partnership with colleges]. —Human resources manager at a manufacturing firm*

- Employers' two most-cited reasons they were attracted to colleges as partners were quality facilities and unique programs.

*Recently, because of grants, either federal or state, these educational institutions [in its state] all have updated curriculum and have state-of-the-art equipment. [The partner college], if you go there, they have comparable equipment and are able to educate and do pretty well to keep up-to-date to what manufacturers are doing. —Small, single-location manufacturing employer*

- Direct business interests, where employers want to customize programs to their individual needs, were employers' most commonly reported motivation to partner with colleges. Some employers, motivated by sector-building interests, where a group of employers come together to build a pipeline of workers for an industry, often had direct business interests. Employers indicated that they may also combine altruistic motivations with their individual business or sector-building interests. Employers were equally happy with college partners that offered customized, employer-specific programs as with colleges that developed programs that served multiple employers within a local or regional industry.

*Our business likes to support our surrounding community; we support a lot of what [the college] does. This is one more way we could connect*

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<sup>2</sup> See Eyster et al. (2017) for more information on grantees' plans to develop employer partnerships.

*to the community and [our college]. —Hiring executive at a large natural resources extraction and processing employer*



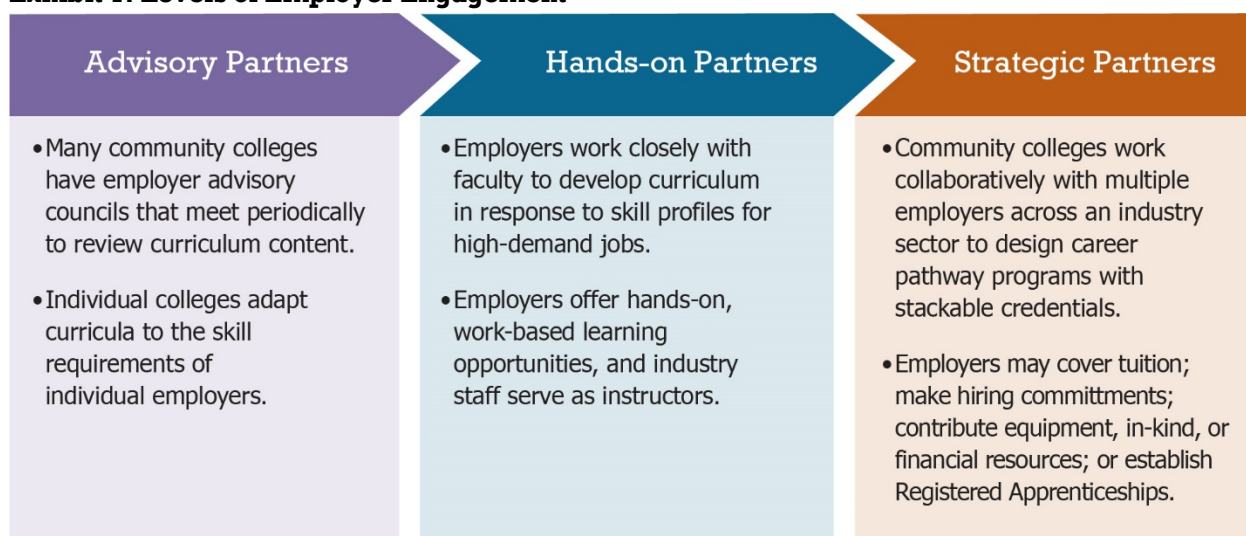
## Employers engaged with colleges in many ways, ranging from advisory to strategic

- Employers may engage with colleges as advisory, hands-on, or strategic partners or in a combination of these roles (**Exhibit 1**). Colleges often use advisory boards, which might be sectoral or cross-sector, to engage employers. Advisory boards can also be a way for colleges to get employer input on and support for fundraising opportunities. Employers with strong relationships with colleges generally reported that being on a college’s advisory board was a good use of time, and small employers especially appreciated the opportunity to network with other businesses.

*We talk about how to get more grants either from federal or the [state] to build various certification programs that are important to business. We’re drivers of different programs. We’re not the experts, but a big part of the discussion is what’s happening in the college.*

*—Vice president at a manufacturer*

**Exhibit 1. Levels of Employer Engagement**



Source: Employment and Training Administration (n.d.).

- Strong relationships may focus on a single education and training program or may span multiple programs that make up a career pathway.<sup>3</sup> Employers indicated that limited capacity within their workforce in the immediate term motivated them to collaborate with colleges to develop or enhance a single program. Employers that supported the development of more than one program indicated that they sought to ensure the programs aligned with their training and hiring needs.

<sup>3</sup> Round 4 funding, like the preceding rounds, focused on developing and implementing a career pathways approach to build capacity for providing education and training. Such an approach offers a sequence of programs in an industry sector, combined with support services, to enable individuals to enter and exit the job market at various levels and to gain higher skills, recognized credentials, and advance to better jobs with improved pay and benefits.

## HOW EMPLOYERS LIKE TO BE APPROACHED BY COLLEGES

College leadership and staff often ask themselves, “How can I get in the door with an employer?” or “How do I start the conversation with an employer?” Strong relationships can be products of decades of trust building, or they can develop more quickly. This section provides insight for local leaders and practitioners on how employers who have strong relationships with colleges like to be approached by a college that wants to start a relationship with them.



### Employers appreciated when colleges come to their locations and respect their time

- Employers liked it when college leaders and staff “meet them where they are,” such as coming to their offices or worksites or attending their industry association meetings. Employers reported that because their time was limited, a college’s first “ask” may need to be less intensive, such as advising on curriculum or equipment purchase, especially before trust was built. As the relationship developed, employers thought that “asks” might include invitations to attend events, such as graduations or job fairs, or to serve on a larger, cross-sector business advisory board for the college or in a local industry partnership with other employers. As employers begins to see the value of the relationship, it may be appropriate for the college to make larger requests, such as the employer providing training equipment or having its employees serve as instructors. Conversely, employers familiar with what the college offers might ask the college for support, such as developing a training program customized to the employer’s needs.

*If [college staff] are looking to do a program and don’t join local employer circles, that’s a mistake. It helps in getting buy-in and support. —Human resources manager at a manufacturing firm*



### Employers wanted industry-savvy college staff to reach out to them

- Employers reported that they value college staff who have a strong customer-service orientation and deep industry knowledge. Some employers wanted staff who “speak their language” to support effective communication. These perspectives suggest that colleges may want to involve high-level, industry-savvy staff in employer outreach to signal the college’s commitment to the relationship and give credibility.

*If a college isn’t in lockstep with business to know what the job market is demanding, [the college] can graduate all [the students it wants], but they won’t have a job. The students are not your customer. The student is the product; employers are your customer. I think that needs to change. —Senior staff from a local manufacturer*



### Employers wanted to engage with the college before education and training programs are fully developed

- The timing of outreach to employers was important to them. Employers wanted colleges to engage them early to allow colleges to align new programs with employer priorities and needs. In addition, employers wanted the college staff to understand industry trends to build programs that fill gaps between worker supply and employer demand. Based on the employers’ perspectives, having those industry-savvy college staff could support doing that.

*Colleges can listen to employers' business needs and try to address those needs. Too many times colleges have established programs, and they discuss what they offer, and do not listen to what the employers need from them. —Employer*

## HOW EMPLOYERS WANT COLLEGES TO MAINTAIN RELATIONSHIPS

Employers who have strong relationships with colleges see a college's efforts to maintain relationships as part of a long-term strategy to align its programs with industry needs, and understand relationships with the college may ebb and flow over time. This section provides insight to local leaders and practitioners on how colleges can collaborate with employers over the long term and what strategies are successful from the employer perspective.



### Long-term relationships may ebb and flow, but multiple points of contact helped maintain connections between college and employer

- Employers reported that the intensity of relationships varied over time, often with the highest intensity in the initial design stage. Employers believed that after this initial stage passes, having multiple points of contact with the college can ensure the continuity of their collaboration, especially in the event of employer staff turnover. These perspectives suggest that employer staff in different positions could coordinate various aspects of the employer-college relationship – e.g., a human resources contact, a technical contact, and an executive contact.

*I came to [this company] in January 2000, and the partnership [with the college] was already in existence then. [The company] had been working with them back in the early 90s and that project died. That was a one and done. In the later 90s, we established relationships with other companies and [the college] through the Manufacturers Council. That fell apart with the Enron scandal in 2002 but was resurrected in 2005. Since then, this group has been responsible for the primary training programs for incumbent workers – many workers come through that [program]. —Human resources manager at a local manufacturing firm*



### Employer investment in a college's programs was an investment in an ongoing relationship

- A major step toward an ongoing and collaborative relationship is having employers provide financial support and other resources toward the college's programs. Employers' ongoing investments are often part of an overall strategy to sustain their relationship with the college and continue programs that can help them build their workforce. Employers that invested in these colleges tended to support multiple education and training programs that focus on their industry (i.e., a career pathway). Investments could include staff time; in-kind donations, such as equipment; and/or monetary support. Employers sometimes supported their own employees' tuition costs and give them paid time off to complete training, which could then benefit employers in developing a more highly trained workforce.

*We tried to run it through our tuition reimbursement program. That way the employee was acknowledged for going to classes. We have specific paperwork that employees have to fill out – that’s to get a commitment from them, as well. The costs really came when we realized how many days a person would be off work; we had to pay other staff overtime to cover the shortfall. But once we understood the commitment, it started paying off. —Manager at a steel manufacturing firm*

- Most employers with strong relationships with a college said they got a positive return on their investment from their collaboration, but most did not monetize the benefits of their relationships and few calculated the costs. Benefits that employers reported include new hires who come with needed job skills who can be productive from day one. Another benefit noted by employers was that they could save money on recruitment, as they could retain better employees who graduated from the college’s programs.

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