



# The Employer Perspectives Study: Insights on How to Build and Maintain Strong Employer-College Partnerships

Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and  
Career Training (TAACCCT) Round 4 Evaluation

DOL-ETA-14-F-00013



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## Executive Summary

Many employers face challenges building their workforce. This includes hiring people with the right skills, upgrading skills of current employees as needs change, and ensuring all staff have “21st Century” skills such as creative thinking, communication, teamwork, time management, and problem solving. Training providers, such as community colleges, can help prepare workers to meet these employers’ skill needs.

There are an array of ways that community colleges can and do collaborate with employers to ensure their education and training programs align with industry needs and their graduates are qualified for local jobs. Employers can offer guidance on the curriculum, skills, and competencies that should be the focus of training and credentialing. They may serve on advisory boards or coordinate with other employers as part of industry partnerships. They can provide valuable resources such as their own employees as instructors, equipment and facilities for training, and work-based learning opportunities. Moreover, employers can refer their own workers to college programs to upgrade their skills.

The Employer Perspectives Study describes strong employer-community college partnerships. It draws insights from employers identified by colleges as partners that have contributed to their programs. Abt Associates and the Urban Institute, with their partners Capital Research Corporation and the George Washington University, (the research team) interviewed 41 employers to better understand their perspective of what constitutes a strong partnership with a college. In doing so, the study provides community colleges, future grantees of federal workforce initiatives including other training providers and the public workforce system, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) and other policymakers, and other stakeholders with insights about how to approach, build, and sustain strong partnerships with business.

The community colleges that collaborate with employers received funding through DOL’s Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grants program,<sup>1</sup> a \$1.9 billion federal workforce investment from 2011 to 2018. It sought to help community colleges across the

### Study Research Questions

- What constitutes “strong” employer relationships for workforce development initiatives, and how can DOL and other leaders support and leverage these relationships across the workforce system?
- What types of employers are involved in strong relationships with TAACCCT-funded community colleges?
- What is the employer’s role in developing and implementing workforce development initiatives?
- What is the nature of the relationship between the employer and TAACCCT college(s)?
- How did the relationship between the employer and TAACCCT colleges(s) develop, and how sustainable does it appear to be?
- What is the value of the involvement in workforce development initiatives to employers?

<sup>1</sup> DOL awarded TAACCCT grants to community colleges and other postsecondary institutions. Grantees could be a single institution or a lead institution of a consortium of colleges. The focus of this report is the colleges that received TAACCCT grant funding (“TAACCCT colleges”), which could include the single institution grantees or lead institution grantees or the member colleges of consortia.

nation increase their capacity to provide education and training programs for unemployed workers and other adult learners to prepare for in-demand jobs. DOL administered the grant program in partnership with the U.S. Department of Education. Across four rounds of grants, TAACCCT reached more than 60 percent of the nation's publicly funded community colleges and included at least one college from every U.S. state in each round (Cohen et al. 2017). A key component of the TAACCCT Round 4 grants is building employer partnerships to support the goals and successful implementation of these projects. This study is part of a larger evaluation of the TAACCCT Round 4 grant program conducted for DOL.

## Overview of Methodology and Employers Selected for Study

The Employer Perspectives Study uses two data sources to answer the research questions (see text box): (i) a fall 2017 survey of TAACCCT colleges conducted for the TAACCCT Round 4 Evaluation and (ii) spring 2018 telephone interviews with 41 employers that were identified as strong partners of a TAACCCT-funded community college.

Because the study focused specifically on a small number of employers identified as having *strong* partnerships with colleges, it should not be considered representative of all employers working with TAACCCT colleges.

The research team used the college survey to identify and select employers with strong partnerships with TAACCCT colleges. It asked colleges that identified themselves as either a single-institution grantee or the grantee lead of a college consortium a series of questions about the myriad ways employers contributed to the their TAACCCT-supported programs, ranging from helping design the program to providing resources (e.g., supplies, equipment, space, or scholarships). The research team summed the contributions and selected the top 25 percent of the 288 employers named by colleges, or 64 employers, with a goal of interviewing 40 to 50.

The research team interviewed 41 of the 64 employers to learn their perspectives on what constitutes a strong partnership with a college. Slightly less than half were in the manufacturing industry (20 employers). Other industries represented included information technology (6 employers); mining, quarrying, oil, and gas extraction (5 employers); utilities (4 employers); health care and social assistance (3 employers); and other industries (3 employers). The relative prominence of manufacturing reflects that industry's overall representation among TAACCCT grants, but other industries such as health care and social assistance are underrepresented.

Most of the employer partners interviewed were local establishments or subsidiaries of large regional, national, or global enterprises (29 employers); less than a third were purely local firms (12 employers).

The training programs that employers helped to develop with colleges ranged from non-certificate programs (9 employers) to industry certifications (16 employers) and associate's degree or apprenticeship programs (16 employers). About a quarter of employers interviewed (10 employers) could discuss trainings in terms of occupational focus but could not classify them by type.

## Findings

### Dimensions of Strength

All the employers interviewed for the Employer Perspectives Study had made multiple contributions to grant-funded initiatives, as reported by the college survey. All 41 employers expressed high levels of

satisfaction with these college partnerships and considered them “strong” because the college met their needs.

In addition to overall satisfaction, the research team also explored different dimensions of partnership strength: the length of the relationship with the college; the number of education and training programs on which employers and colleges collaborate; the number of different staff who engage with the college; and the degree to which employers make financial contributions or help colleges pursue funding. Key findings include:

- Employers reported that partnerships ranged in length from a few years (21 employers) to decades (12 employers).
- More than half of the employers reported that partnerships focused on a single education and training program (29 employers), whereas others collaborated with the college on multiple programs (12 employers).
- Almost two-thirds involved more than one staff person in cultivating a relationship with the college (27 employers).
- Relatively few employers made financial contributions (5) or helped the college apply for grants (7).
- Employers that collaborated with colleges for six to 10 years (8 employers) involved multiple staff in the partnership, worked with the college to pursue grant funding, and collaborated on more than one education and training program more frequently than did employers with shorter or longer collaborations.

### Initiating Employer-College Relationships

Employers interviewed discussed how their relationships with local colleges began and advised how colleges might approach employers to start relationships. Key findings include:

- About half of the employers (22) reported that the colleges initiated most strong employer-college relationships.
- Some employers (15) recommended that colleges initiate the discussion and be willing to meet at the employer location (e.g., at their offices, industry association meetings).
- A few employers (4) indicated that colleges should involve high-level staff in outreach to employers to signal commitment to the relationship and credibility.
- Some employers (13) said that colleges should consider engaging employer partners early, before education and training programs are fully developed, in order to align them with employer priorities and needs.
- Employers expressed a number of reasons for working with colleges, ranging from specific business interests (34 employers) to sector-building (12 employers) and altruism (4 employers), with some reporting more than one reason. Often these motivations overlap.
- Some employers (11) reported that grants that fund state-of-the-art training equipment or facility upgrades made relationships with colleges more attractive.

*“If [colleges] 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,  
local manufacturing firm*



### Maintaining Strong Employer-College Relationships

After discussing their initial engagement with colleges, employers described the nature of their ongoing relationships and shared their experiences with learning how to effectively work together. Key findings include:

- Customer-focused relationships, where the college customizes training and services to fit the specific needs of a particular employer, were not common among strong employer partners in this study (6 employers). Colleges involved in these partnerships designed and implemented programs for both new hires and incumbent workers.
- Most employers reported having sectoral (or broader industry) relationships with a more generalized focus (33 employers). In these cases, colleges still worked closely with employers, but the resulting programs were not specific to a single employer's needs.
- Employers with customer-focused relationships with colleges (6 employers) were not more invested in their relationships than other employers were (35 employers).
- Most employers described regular communication of moderate intensity (36 employers).
- More than two-thirds of employers talked about participating on colleges' advisory boards (26 employers), and most of these had an industry focus; smaller employers tended to perceive greater value from participating on these boards than did larger employers.
- Some employers strongly recommended that colleges hire and invest in staff with a strong customer-service orientation and deep industry knowledge to maintain relationships (14 employers).

### The Value of the Relationships to Employers

Employers and colleges collaborated with the intention of developing training programs and talent pipelines to support the next-generation workforce in key industries. In interviews, employers reflected on how they weighed the potential benefits and costs of a collaborative approach relative to their other options for meeting hiring and training needs.

Key findings include:

- About half of employers (22) cited many benefits from their collaboration with colleges, but satisfying hiring needs was the most common.
- Few employers (9) reported systematically using business metrics such as retention to measure these benefits, and none monetized the benefits.
- Most employers (35) described their contributions to the relationship in terms of staff time, but no employers had calculated the cost of this input.
- A few employers (8) could quantify any costs, and all of these costs corresponded to monetary or material contributions.
- Because they did not monetize costs and benefits, none of the employers formally calculated a return on investment, but all perceived the balance as positive.

*"A certain part of the business doesn't care about return on investment—they just need these people available on the market."*

*Manager, HVAC servicing firm*

## 1. Introduction

Many employers face challenges building their workforce. This includes hiring people with the right skills, upgrading skills of current employees as skill needs change, and ensuring all staff have “21st Century” skills such as creative thinking, communication, teamwork, time management, and problem solving. Community colleges have emerged as an important training provider to help prepare workers to meet these employers’ skill needs.

A critical element in designing training programs, including those provided by community colleges, is collaborating with employers to ensure their education and training programs align with industry needs and their graduates are qualified for local jobs. Employers can offer guidance on the curriculum, skills, and competencies that should be the focus of training, and credentialing. They may serve on advisory boards or coordinate with other employers as part of industry partnerships. They can provide valuable resources, such as their own employees as instructors, equipment and facilities for training, and work-based learning opportunities. Moreover, employers can refer their own workers to college programs to upgrade their skills.

Building productive and sustainable relationships among employers, community colleges, and others in local workforce systems (e.g., workforce development boards) can be challenging. For example, revising training programs quickly in response to employers’ changing needs can be difficult. Often, studies on employer engagement in workforce programs document employer roles only from the perspective of the training provider. In contrast, this study sought to understand the perspectives of employers that already have built strong relationships with community colleges engaged in a workforce development initiative—in this instance, employers involved in Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) activities.

While knowledge of promising practices regarding employer partnerships is growing (Barnow and Spaulding 2015; Bernstein et al. 2016), the literature on what constitutes a “strong” partnership and how practitioners might implement these partnerships is limited. However, existing literature on employer engagement can provide a starting point. Wilson (2015b) provides a useful general framework of employer engagement for training providers. The framework lays out employer engagement along a five-stage continuum—from advising to leading work—with the employer’s role changing at each stage. At the highest level, the framework characterizes the contributions of a group of employers within a sector, taking leadership for addressing their shared business needs. Spaulding and Martin-Caughey (2015) also provide a framework that assesses the degree to which employers take active roles in workforce programs and initiatives. Roles can be less active, such as oversight employers provide on workforce development boards within the public workforce system or advisory boards at community colleges, or more active as in program design, participation in the delivery of training programs, engagement in recruitment and hiring, and provision of financial or in-kind resources.

To promote the development of partnerships between employers and training providers as encouraged in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) developed

### Employer Perspectives Study: Overview

The study examines “strong” employer-college relationships under the TAACCCT initiative from the perspective of the employers, as well as the nature and value of these relationships to employers.

The study highlights implications for how the U.S. Department of Labor can support the development of strong employer relationships across the workforce system.

a framework that combines elements from Wilson (2015b) and Spaulding and Martin-Caughey (2015). As shown in Exhibit 1, starting on the left, *advisory partners* engage on boards to review approaches and guide partnerships. *Hands-on partners*, in the middle column, help design curriculum and provide training resources. *Strategic partners*, on the right, provide more extensive training resources such as tuition and equipment, and hiring commitments.

### Exhibit 1. DOL’s conceptual framework for employer engagement for community colleges



Source: TAACCCT Fact Sheet: TAACCCT Is Deepening Employer Engagement, [https://doleta.gov/taaccct/pdf/TAACCCT\\_Fact\\_Sheet\\_Employer\\_Engagement\\_10.21.2016.pdf](https://doleta.gov/taaccct/pdf/TAACCCT_Fact_Sheet_Employer_Engagement_10.21.2016.pdf).

To inform how community colleges can build strong partnerships with employers, Abt Associates and the Urban Institute, with their partners Capital Research Corporation and the George Washington University, (the research team) conducted the Employer Perspectives Study to explore what constitutes a “strong” partnership with local community colleges, including how to develop and maintain these partnerships.

The employers included in the study were selected from those who worked with community colleges that received TAACCCT Round 4 grants (see section below for more detail). DOL required the community colleges receiving these grants to establish relationships with employers as part of the initiatives. This study is part of a larger evaluation of the TAACCCT Round 4 grant program conducted for DOL by the research team.

This report presents the findings from the Employer Perspectives Study. The research team interviewed 41 employer representatives who had participated in grant activities and whose relationships were identified by community colleges as being “strong.” The interviews explored definitions of strong employer relationships, factors that shape these relationships, views on how colleges manage the relationships, and the value of the relationships to employers. The research team then assessed the implications of the findings for community colleges, the public workforce system, and others in the workforce development field on how to build and maintain strong relationships with employers.

This chapter provides an overview of the TAACCCT grant program and the central role of employer partnerships in it. It then describes the Employer Perspectives Study’s design and data sources.

#### 1.1 The TAACCCT Grant Program and Employer Partnerships

Congress authorized the TAACCCT grant program as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 to increase the capacity of community colleges to meet local and regional labor demand for a

skilled workforce. The Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act of 2010 provided the TAACCCT program with \$1.9 billion in funding over fiscal years 2011–2014, approximately \$500 million annually over four rounds of grants.<sup>2</sup> DOL, which administers the grants, funded 256 three- to four-year grants to institutions of higher education offering programs of study that can be completed in two years or less. The fourth and final round of grants ends in September 2018.<sup>3</sup>

The overarching goals of the TAACCCT grant program, as described in the Rounds 1–4 solicitations for grant applications, are to:

- Better prepare Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA)-eligible workers and other adults for high-wage, high-skill employment or reemployment in growth industry sectors by increasing their attainment of degrees, certificates, diplomas, and other industry-recognized credentials that match the skills needed by employers;
- Introduce or replicate innovative and effective methods for designing and delivering instruction that addresses specific industry needs and leads to improved learning, completion, and other outcomes for TAA-eligible workers and other adults; and
- Demonstrate improved employment outcomes for TAACCCT participants.<sup>4</sup>

TAACCCT grantees use a number of strategies to connect students to employment, including:

- Developing curriculum to help students learn technical skills through on-the-job and simulated work experiences;
- Purchasing equipment or renovating classrooms, in support of the new curriculum;
- Preparing students for the workforce by providing guidance on career options, building job readiness skills, and helping support job search activities; and
- Building partnerships with employers, industry associations, the public workforce system, and other organizations to support successful transitions to the workforce.

For Round 4, DOL required grantees to develop or enhance sector strategies. Per the TAACCCT Round 4 grant solicitation announcement,<sup>5</sup> grantees were required to develop new and/or take to scale successful industry sector strategies. These included strategies that focused on addressing employers' workforce

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<sup>2</sup> The amount of funding available for TAACCCT grants was reduced in FY 2013 and FY 2014 because of sequestration.

<sup>3</sup> DOL awarded TAACCCT grants to community colleges and other postsecondary institutions. Grantees could be a single institution or a lead institution of a consortium of colleges. The focus of this report is the colleges that received TAACCCT grant funding (“TAACCCT colleges”), which could include the single institution grantees or lead institution grantees or the member colleges of the consortia. DOL awarded 71 Round 4 grants, which comprised 264 colleges.

<sup>4</sup> DOL announced the solicitations for grant applications in spring of FY 2011 (Round 1), FY 2012 (Round 2), FY 2013 (Round 3), and FY 2014 (Round 4). For more information, see “Applicant Information,” Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training Grant Program, last updated April 27, 2017, <https://www.doleta.gov/taaccct/applicantinfo.cfm>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.doleta.gov/grants/pdf/SGA-DFA-PY-13-10.pdf>

needs by expanding or improving education and training programs to include both traditional and real-time labor market information.

To ensure the success of sector strategies, the grantees were expected to develop strong partnerships with employers and both regional and national industry representatives.<sup>6</sup> (See Appendix A for the strategies used by TAACCCT grantees.) For this reason, the evaluation of the TAACCCT Round 4 grants included this study of strong employer partnerships.

## 1.2 Employer Perspectives Study Goals, Design, and Limitations

The Employer Perspectives Study was designed as a qualitative study to examine how strong community college-employer relationships were developed and maintained and to discern how to encourage and support such relationships through DOL's different grant programs and potentially WIOA implementation. The remainder of this section describes the study research questions and provides an overview of the data sources and analysis methods.

### 1.2.1 Research Questions

The Employer Perspectives Study addresses several key research questions:

- What constitutes “strong” employer relationships for workforce development initiatives, and how can DOL and other leaders support and leverage these relationships across the workforce system?
- What types of employers are involved in strong relationships with TAACCCT-funded community colleges?
- What is the employer's role in developing and implementing workforce development initiatives?
- What is the nature of the relationship between the employer and TAACCCT college(s)?
- How did the relationship between the employer and TAACCCT college(s) develop, and how sustainable does it appear to be?
- What is the value of the involvement in workforce development initiatives to employers?

### 1.2.2 Data Sources, Selection of Employers, and Analysis

To answer the research questions, the Employer Perspectives Study employs data from two sources: (i) a fall 2017 survey of TAACCCT colleges conducted for the TAACCCT Round 4 Evaluation and (ii) spring 2018 telephone interviews with 41 employers identified in the college survey as having strong relationships with colleges. This section provides an overview of the data sources and analysis (see Chapter 2 for more in-depth description of Methodology and description of employers).

***Data Sources and Selection of Employers.*** As a part of the TAACCCT Round 4 Evaluation, the research team administered an online survey to all 264 colleges that are part of a TAACCCT Round 4 grant. Because of their direct roles in cultivating relationships with employers, the 69 colleges that identified themselves on the survey as either receiving a single-institution grant or serving as the grantee lead for a consortium of colleges answered a series of questions that measured the strength of their relationships

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<sup>6</sup> Grantees had to focus on one or more specific industry sectors. For each targeted sector, they had to involve at least two employers and a regional industry representative for each site served by the program. These employers either would be located in each site or would hire workers from that region.

with their employer partner(s). These questions included employers' contributions to grant-related activities and ratings of employers' level of involvement with the colleges on various roles presented in the Wilson (2015b) conceptual framework.

Colleges identified 288 employers on the college survey. The research team selected 64 of these employers, with a goal of interviewing 40 to 50. This group included employers from different industries and occupations, as well as employers seeking to hire new workers, identifying training opportunities for existing workers, and offering training resources to colleges. The employers also varied in size and the extent to which they had pre-TAACCT relationships with the college.

In spring 2018, the research team completed telephone interviews with representatives of 41 employers from this group of 64. The one-hour interviews focused on the following topics:

- Employers' roles in TAACCT and other workforce development initiatives;
- The nature of the relationship with the college partner, including the initial steps in the relationship and communication between the employer and the college partner and with other employers, and the sustainability of the employer-college relationship; and
- The value that the employer places on the partnership.

The interview guide is provided in Appendix C.

**Analysis.** The research team coded and analyzed interview data in NVivo, a qualitative data software package, to identify trends and patterns. The analysis compared employers' responses and categorized findings along key dimensions such as length of the relationship and industry. Based on this analysis, this report highlights key findings and discusses implications.

### 1.2.3 Study Limitations

There are several limitations to this study design. First, the 69 colleges that identified themselves on the survey as directly receiving a TAACCT grant, either as a single institution or as the lead of a consortium, were the only TAACCT colleges asked to identify employers in the survey. These colleges and employers may differ from consortium member colleges in unknown ways. Second, the employers interviewed were selected based on the strength of their partnership and should not be viewed as representative of all employers who worked with a TAACCT college. Third, the study examines the strong community college-employer partnerships based on qualitative employer interview data, and does not provide causal information on the factors that lead to strong partnerships. Fourth, the study incorporates the views only of the employers interviewed; it does not include the views of the college representatives with whom they partnered. Finally, the study involves a relatively small number of employers (41) making statistical estimates unreliable. Thus, the study generally reports on the number of employers, rather than percentage, with specific experiences or recommendations.

Other study limitations that should be noted include:

- It was often difficult for employers to distinguish between TAACCT activities and other college activities. Funding sources were often not known to employers, and thus they could not consistently identify TAACCT-funded activities versus activities undertaken for other purposes.
- Some employer representatives were not involved at the start of the employer-college relationship (13 employers), and so could not reflect on the certain aspects of how the partnership developed.

- Almost half of the employers had relationships with colleges of six years or more (20 employers). Accurately recalling the exact timeline of events and progression of the relationship with the college would be challenging over such a span.

While the results of the study should be interpreted with these limitations in mind, the study provides important information on how to build and maintain relationships with employers, particularly for community colleges.

### 1.3 Roadmap for This Report

This chapter described the Employer Perspectives Study, its key research questions, design, and limitations. The remainder of the report is organized as follows:

- **Chapter 2** describes the methodology used to identify strong employer partners in more depth and describes these partners and how they compare to other TAACCCT Round 4 employers.
- **Chapter 3** explores dimensions of strong employer-college relationships described in interviews, including their length and scope, employer commitments to sustainability, and involvement of staff.
- **Chapter 4** summarizes how employers started their relationships with colleges, including the catalysts for engagement, employers' core motivations, factors that helped make the college an attractive partner, and recommendations to colleges about how to approach businesses.
- **Chapter 5** discusses the types of working relationships colleges and employers have once their work together commenced, including how they communicate and work together and what employers want and expect.
- **Chapter 6** explores employer conceptualizations of the costs, benefits, and return-on-investment of their collaborations with colleges.
- **Chapter 7** summarizes findings from the Employer Perspectives Study and its implications for colleges, grantees of future workforce initiatives, and policymakers.
- **Appendices** highlight the types of activities and strategies TAACCCT Round 4 grantees used (Appendix A), describe the study methodology in more detail (Appendix B), and reproduce the employer interview guide (Appendix C).

## 2. Overview of Methodology and Strong Employer Partners Selected

As discussed in the Introduction, the research team used the college survey to identify employers with the strongest college relationships for inclusion in the study. This chapter discusses this process and describes how selected employers may differ from other TAACCCT employer partners.

### 2.1 Identifying Strong Employer Partners

The first step in the Employer Perspectives Study was to use data from the TAACCCT Round 4 college survey to identify employers with strong college relationships.

- *Colleges that provided information about their employer partners in the college survey differ from colleges that did not*

Seventy-one colleges received a TAACCCT grant from DOL. A college could have received a single-institution TAACCCT grant or received a grant to lead a consortium of colleges. The grantee colleges were principally responsible for implementing grant activities, including employer engagement, although consortium member colleges may also have partnered with employers.

The Round 4 TAACCCT survey was administered to all colleges involved in TAACCCT grants, including single-institution grantees, consortium lead grantees, and consortium member colleges. However, the survey asked only colleges that identified themselves as grantee colleges (i.e., single institutions or consortium leads) to provide information about their employer partners. In total, 69 colleges responded to survey questions on employer partnerships (Exhibit 2). More than half of the respondents were single-institution grantees; another 35 percent were the lead college for a consortium; and another 13 percent were consortium member colleges that misclassified themselves in earlier questions on the survey.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> To accommodate the study timeline, the research team relied on survey data from mid-November 2017 to select the employer sample. This was before the survey officially closed and before the team had had a chance to clean and validate self-reported data with the administrative grants database. Sixty-five of the 71 grantees had completed the survey at the time the sample data were pulled; 60 of these grantees (92 percent) shared information about at least one employer. Of the five that did not provide employer information, four refused, and one was misclassified as a consortium member college and therefore did not have the opportunity to include this information in its survey.



**Exhibit 2. Selected characteristics of TAACCCT Round 4 colleges that provided information on employer partners**

Characteristic	
Colleges responding to employer questions (N)	69
<b>Type of college grantee</b>	
Single institution	52%
Consortium lead college	35%
Consortium member college	13%
<b>DOL Employment and Training Administration Region</b>	
Region 1: Boston	15%
Region 2: Philadelphia	12%
Region 3: Atlanta	12%
Region 4: Dallas	18%
Region 5: Chicago	28%
Region 6: San Francisco	16%
<b>Urbanicity<sup>a</sup></b>	
Any urban	58%
Any suburban	51%
Any rural	67%
<b>Geographic reach</b>	
Single county	23%
Multiple counties but not all in same state	45%
Multiple counties within same state	23%
Multiple states	9%
Colleges implementing apprenticeships <sup>b</sup>	26%
<b>Focus industry</b>	
Manufacturing	52%
Health Care and Social Assistance	36%
Other	16%
Information Technology	14%
Professional, Scientific, & Technical Services	13%
Construction	14%
Transportation	13%
Educational Services	1%
Mining, Quarrying, Oil & Gas Extraction	7%
Utilities	10%
Management of Companies & Enterprises	1%
Finance & Insurance	1%
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing & Hunting	6%
Admin, Support, & Waste Management, Remediation Services	3%
Public Admin	3%
Wholesale Trade	1%

Source: TAACCCT Round 4 college survey, 2017.

<sup>a</sup> The survey respondent could indicate more than one category for these questions, so the responses do not add up to 100 percent.

<sup>b</sup> This category encompasses all apprenticeship activities implemented by TAACCCT Round 4 colleges, not only Registered Apprenticeship.

Colleges sharing information about their employer partners were geographically diverse. They represented different regions and urban and rural areas; as well, more than three-fourths included areas larger than a single county. In terms of their programs, most colleges that provided employer partner

information focused on manufacturing, followed by health care and social assistance. The focus on these industries is consistent with trends across the four rounds of TAACCCT (Cohen et al. 2017; Eyster et al. 2017). Professional, scientific, and technical services were slightly less prominent among the colleges that provided employer partner information. About a fourth of the colleges were implementing some sort of apprenticeship.

The 69 colleges that provided information named 288 different employers on the survey. Colleges then answered a series of questions about the ways each employer contributed to their TAACCCT-supported programs, ranging from helping design the program to providing resources (e.g., supplies, equipment, space, or scholarships). The survey also included questions that reflected Wilson's (2015b) framework for employer-college relationships. Colleges indicated which roles (listed here from least to most involved) each employer played:

- **Advising:** Employer discusses hiring needs, skills, and competencies with college; advises on or reviews curricula; hires graduates.
- **Capacity building:** Employer provides job site tours, speakers, mock interviews, internships, and needs assessment to TAACCCT participants; loans or donates equipment and facilities; helps to recruit TAACCCT participants.
- **Co-designing:** Employer works closely with college staff to develop curricula and college and career pathways; has employees serving as adjunct faculty and preceptors for work-based learning opportunities for TAACCCT participants.
- **Convening:** Employer participates in an employer-college sectoral partnership; serves as a trusted provider and collaborator to the college.
- **Leading:** Employer takes on a leadership role for a multi-employer or multi-college partnership; serves as full strategic partner to the college.

Of the 288 employers named by colleges in the survey, the team selected the top 25 percent in terms of total contributions to TAACCCT programs. This yielded a total of 64 employers, working with 32 community colleges, with roles along the spectrum from advising to leading.

- ***Selected employers more frequently had a relationship with the college before TAACCCT, and tended to hire, train, and contribute more than did other employers named by colleges***

The 64 employers differed from other employers named in the college survey in several ways (Exhibit 3). As expected, they represented employers with the strongest relationships with their colleges based on the survey responses. Three-quarters had a relationship with the college before TAACCCT and more frequently hired new workers from the colleges' education and training programs. According to the college survey, employers in the sample more often made all of the individual contributions specified in the survey—from helping implement program strategies and goals to providing scholarships, tuition, or time off for students—than did other employers named in the survey. The 64 employers also consistently had leading roles in their relationships with their college partner.

**Exhibit 3. Employers included in study differed from other employers named by colleges in important ways**

	All	Selected for Study	
		Yes	No
Total employers (N)	288	64	224
Have a prior relationship with the college	53%	77%	46%
Train incumbent workers	43%	50%	41%
Hire or intend to hire new workers after training	73%	88%	69%
Activities in which employers engage (in order of response categories listed in the college survey)			
Help implement program strategies and goals	64%	100%	54%
Develop the overall program design	47%	94%	33%
Identify and map the necessary skills and competencies	62%	98%	52%
Assist with curriculum development and design	60%	100%	48%
Assist with design of an assessment or credential	28%	81%	13%
Develop industry-recognized credentials	25%	73%	11%
Provide resources (e.g., equipment, facilities, instructors)	50%	78%	42%
Engage in activities to increase awareness of career opportunities	74%	100%	67%
Provide scholarships, tuition assistance, time off from work	29%	53%	22%
Other activity	3%	5%	3%
Highest role played (in order of increasing involvement)			
No roles specified	9%	0%	12%
Advising	10%	0%	13%
Capacity building	13%	6%	15%
Co-designing	8%	6%	8%
Convening	38%	42%	37%
Leading	22%	45%	15%

Source: TAACCCT Round 4 college survey, 2017.

After outreach and engagement, the research team recruited 41 employers to participate in the study (see Appendix B). This final group was similar to the larger pool of 64 employers identified in terms of the existence of a prior relationship with the college, training of incumbent workers, intent to hire new workers, types and number of engagement activities, and the highest role played in their collaboration with the college.

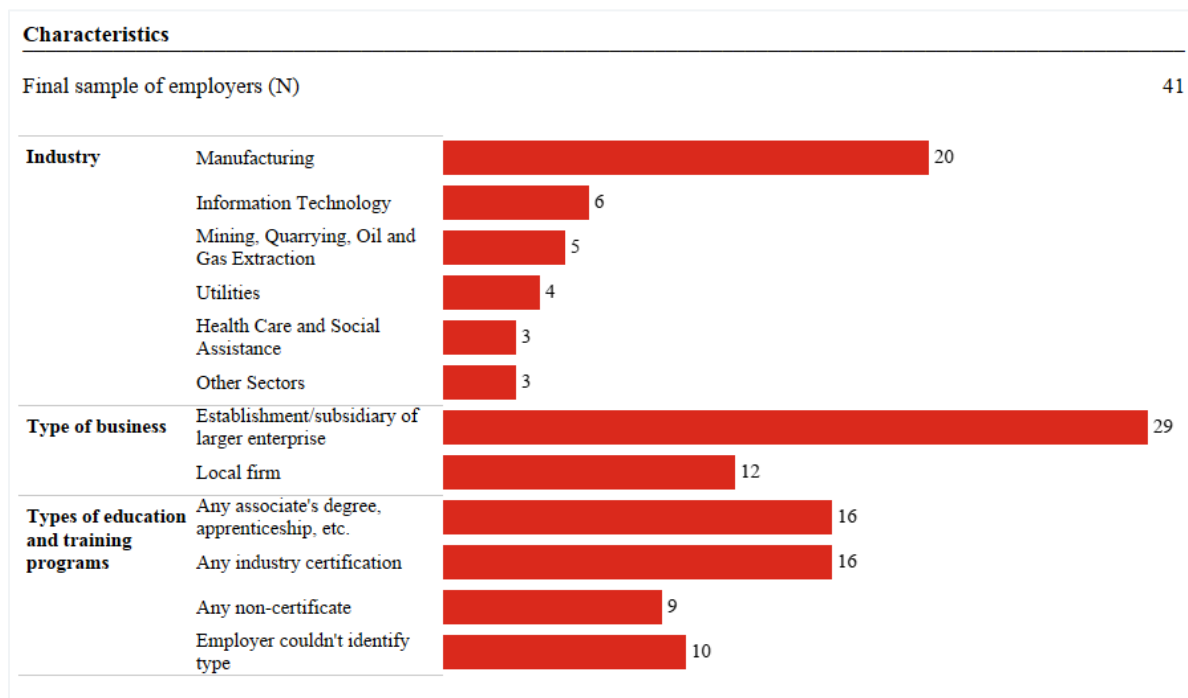
▪ ***Employers interviewed for the study were diverse***

The 41 employers included in the study were diverse in terms of industry, type of business, and types of education and training programs supported (Exhibit 4). Manufacturers were the most prominent, reflecting the overall share of manufacturing-centered initiatives among TAACCCT Round 4 grants (see Exhibit 2). The relative prominence of manufacturing reflects its overall representation among TAACCCT grants. Manufacturing was the most common industry of focus within each round and across all four rounds of TAACCCT grants. However, the other two most common industries—professional, scientific, and technical services; and health care and social assistance—accounted for a much smaller share of interviewed employers than might be expected (Eyster et al. 2017).

Most of the strong employer partners were establishments or subsidiaries of larger regional, national, or global enterprises (29 employers). Finally, the nature of education and training programs employers developed with colleges ranged from non-certificate programs to industry certifications and associate’s

degree or apprenticeship programs. About a quarter of the employers interviewed could discuss the industry or occupations related to the training but could not classify the credential type.

**Exhibit 4. Characteristics of the strong employer partners included in the final sample**



Source: Employer Perspectives Study interview data, 2018.

**2.2 Coming Up**

The research team selected employers for the study using college survey reports of employer contributions. This resulted in a study of employers with strong college partnerships. Indeed, the analysis shows the employers interviewed were more likely hire students from the college and contribute to the college’s TAACCCT-supported activities than those that were not interviewed. To further explore what it means to have a strong employer-college partnership, the study analyzed the content of the interviews from the Employer Perspectives Study. The next chapter provides a snapshot of the multiple dimensions of strong partnerships.

### 3. Exploring the Dimensions of Strong Employer-College Relationships

A challenge of the existing frameworks (see Chapter 1) is that they describe employer-college relationships in terms of the types of activities and roles employers take on, not the *strength* of employers' commitments to their roles. By definition, all the employers interviewed for the Employer Perspectives Study had multidimensional collaborations with their college partners. During interviews, they expressed high levels of satisfaction with their college relationships and intended to continue working together because the partnerships met their needs. Through interviews, the research team explored several measures of the *strength* of the partnership and found:

- Partnerships ranged in length from a few years (21 employers) to decades (12 employers).
- Partnerships focused on a single education and training program (29 employers) and on multiple programs (12 employers).
- Many employers involved more than one staff person in cultivating a relationship with the college (27 employers).
- All employers wanted to sustain their collaborations with colleges, but few made financial contributions to colleges (5 employers) or actively helped colleges apply for grants (7 employers).
- Employers that have collaborated with colleges for six to 10 years (8 employers) involved multiple staff in the partnership, worked with the college to pursue grant funding, and collaborated on more than one education and training program more frequently than did employers in the sample with shorter or longer collaborations.

This chapter first describes the dimensions of strong relationships as reported by employers and then describes how these relationships change by length of partnership.

#### 3.1 Dimensions of Strength of the Employer-College Relationships

An overarching goal of TAACCCT was to build strong employer partnerships that will help maintain the colleges' programs past the grant period.<sup>8</sup> Because all 41 employers had strong college relationships, they all reported that they want to continue the work. However, many (29 employers) used language such as "I hope..." rather than "We plan..." The chief sales officer of a software development company acknowledged this ambiguity: "I sure hope it's sustainable. I hope they got enough growth and interest to make it sustainable. If not, I want to know about it so we can figure out how to ensure it is sustainable."

In interviews, employers described the nature of their relationships with colleges, including several dimensions of strength that might indicate greater commitment and openness to ongoing collaboration. These include:

- The length of the current relationship;
- The number of education and training programs on which they collaborate;

<sup>8</sup> See DOL and Jobs for the Future's "Sustainability Toolkit" for more on DOL's definition of sustainability. [https://taaccct.workforcegps.org/resources/2016/07/25/13/22/Resource\\_TAACCCTsustainabilityToolkit](https://taaccct.workforcegps.org/resources/2016/07/25/13/22/Resource_TAACCCTsustainabilityToolkit)

- The number of different staff who interact with the college; and
- The degree to which they actively support college programs' financial sustainability.

Within each dimension, employers fall along a continuum. The sections below describe each dimension in more detail.

▪ *Strong employer relationships ranged from a few years to more than 20 years*

The research team asked employers how long they have worked with the college. Of the 41 employers interviewed, 21 had worked with the college for five years or fewer, including 10 that had no relationship with the college prior to TAACCCT. Another eight employers had relationships of between six and 10 years; and 12 employers had worked with the college for more than 10 years.

Employers with the longest-standing college relationships (more than 10 years) were more often local firms than subsidiaries of larger companies. Local firms (12 employers) accounted for less than a third of the employers, and nearly two-thirds of those had these longest relationships.

The research team also identified trends in the length of relationship by industry. Manufacturers were well represented among the most enduring partnerships. Two-thirds of the employers who had worked with the college for more than 10 years and five of the six employers with relationships of 20 years or more were in the manufacturing sector.

▪ *Some strong employer partners focused on a single education and training program, whereas others collaborated with colleges on multiple programs*

The team inquired about employers' prior experiences working with the colleges, as well as the number of programs on which colleges and employers collaborate. Of the 41 employers interviewed, more than two-thirds (29 employers) described collaborating on a single education and training program with their college partner. This included all three health care employers interviewed, which focus on medical assistant or nursing occupations. One of these employers suggested that the single-program focus resulted from its limited capacity. The employer's facility provides the clinical component of training for multiple colleges but has difficulty allocating the available spots. However, 12 employers discussed how they support development of more than one education and training program aligned with their training and hiring needs.

There were no clear patterns by industry or type of employer in the number of programs. Industries included manufacturing; information technology; mining, quarrying, and natural gas; utilities; and other services. Type of employer ranged from small local firms with five employees to large subsidiaries of global companies with more than 4,000 employees.

▪ *Most strong employer partners engaged more than one staff person with the college*

Employers described how engaging multiple staff can ensure continuity in the event of turnover at the college or employer, as well as can infuse a culture of collaboration within the employer and between the employer and its college partner. Of the interviewees, 14 employers discussed a single point of contact. For 11 of these employers, the main point of contact was a company human resource or training professional. The remaining three employers were small, and a chief executive officer or vice president interacted with the college.

However, most employers interviewed involve more than one staff person in the relationship (27 employers). In many cases, they supplemented the main contact in human resources or training with a staff person providing technical expertise for curriculum development or program design, or with a company leader to align overall business strategy and resources to support the partnership. Of the 41 employers interviewed, 10 involved three or more different staff. The depth of their staff investment typically mirrored the scope of their activities with the college. At the high end, a senior technician at a large subsidiary of an international oil company estimated that 15 different people on her staff regularly engage with the college. This engagement includes senior leadership, human resources staff, and six subject matter experts who serve on multiple advisory boards for different training programs. Other highly involved employers are smaller entities with a similarly intensive program focus, such as one family-owned high precision manufacturing firm, where five different employees collaborate with the college, including the chief executive officer, human resources staff, and technicians who help instructors at the college calibrate training equipment.

- *Relatively few employers had made financial contributions or helped the college apply for grants to provide ongoing support for its education and training programs*

Only seven employers said they intend to partner with the college to seek new grant funding. Four of these employers were in manufacturing and the other three were in the mining, quarrying, oil, and gas industry. The employers ranged from a local establishment with 80 employees to a local subsidiary of a global company with 4,300 employees. A representative from a large manufacturing firm talked about providing a generic letter of support that the college could use for any of its grant applications. A staff person at a manufacturer talked about partnering with the college to apply for state industry partnership funding to scale the education and training program first developed under TAACCCT.

Five employers invested directly in college programs. Estimates of financial investments ranged from \$6,000 to \$1.8 million, over different time periods. Three of these employers were in manufacturing; two in utilities; and one in mining, quarry, oil, and gas. Four of the five were local subsidiaries of larger national or domestic firms. Only one was a local firm, but it was a fairly large business with 450 employees on site.

Four of the five employers reported that their financial investments were part of an overall strategy for sustaining their collaboration with the college. The employers that invested most tended to support multiple education and training programs, such as an employer that supported three mining-related programs.

Although not many employers made financial investments, all 41 employer partners expressed a desire to support programs after the grants ended. This finding illustrates that some employers may be willing to invest time and resources to support programs financially, but perhaps need guidance from the college.

### **3.2 Strength of the Relationships across Multiple Dimensions**

The previous subsection described strong employer-college partners by dimension—length of relationship, number of programs involving collaboration, number of staff involved, and financial investments. The research team further explored how the level of buy-in and commitment varied.

▪ *Strong employer partnerships took many varied forms*

The research team created indicators of exceptional buy-in for each dimension: the longest-lasting relationships (more than 10 years), high degree of collaboration on education and training programs (two or more programs), the most staff involved (three or more staff), any collaboration around grant seeking or fundraising, and any financial investment in the program. These indicators, as presented in this section, were then summed to describe the spectrum of strong relationships across all dimensions.

Of the 41 employers interviewed, only four had three or four of these indicators, and 10 employers had two indicators. More than half had one indicator or fewer (27 employers), and 11 employers had none.

Of the four employers with the greatest buy-in, three were manufacturers. Two were small firms with 75 to 80 employees. The third was a local establishment with nearly 1,000 employees, affiliated with a much larger multisite enterprise. The fourth employer was a similarly sized local establishment of a global utility company.

There were 11 employer partners on the opposite end of the spectrum (no indicators). Of these, 10 employers had relatively new relationships (less than five years). All had collaborated on a single program and designated only one or two staff to work with the college, and none had participated in fundraising or directly invested in college programs. Two were in the health care and social assistance sector, three in information technology, five in manufacturing, and one in accommodation and food services. They ranged from local establishments with 42 employees to a subsidiary of a global enterprise with 138,000 employees.

### 3.3 Employer Roles Vary by Length of Relationship with the College

The research team analyzed TAACCCT college survey data and interview data on dimensions of relationship strength and found that what it means to have a strong relationship varies by the length of the employer's relationship with the college. This is true even if the *number* of activities by the employer (see Exhibit 3) remains the same. This section explores how employers' roles in their relationships with the colleges are different depending on the time period in question.

As Exhibit 5 shows, the 21 employers with new relationships with colleges (five years or fewer) had the widest mix of the roles, ranging from capacity building to leading. In most cases, the relationship focused on a single education and training program. Nearly half (9) of these employers had only one staff person involved. A small share of these employers were directly involved in grant seeking (3 employers), and they reported investing directly in programs with the college less frequently than employers with longer relationships. Of the 21 employers with relatively new college relationships, almost half (10 employers) had no indicators of exceptional buy-in.

*"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 one local manufacturing firm with a workforce of about 1,000*



**Exhibit 5. Dimensions of employer-college relationship strength, by length of relationship**

Dimension	Length of Relationship with College		
	5 years or less	6-10 years	More than 10 years
Total employers (N)	21	8	12
Mean number of contributions	7.9	7.9	7.8
Highest role (in increasing order of involvement) (%)			
Capacity building	9.5	0.0	8.3
Co-designing	4.8	12.5	0.0
Convening	42.9	62.5	41.7
Leading	42.9	25.0	50.0
Number of programs (%)			
1	71.4	62.5	75.0
2+	28.6	37.5	25.0
Number of staff involved (%)			
1	42.9	25.0	41.7
2	33.3	12.5	41.7
3+	23.8	62.5	16.7
Investments (%)			
Grant strategy	14.3	37.5	8.3
Direct investment	4.8	12.5	33.3
Total number of indicators of exceptional employer buy-in (%)			
0	47.6	12.5	0.0
1	38.1	25.0	50.0
2	9.5	62.5	25.0
3-4	4.8	0.0	25.0

Source: TAACCCT Round 4 college survey data (number of contributions, highest role data), 2017; Employer Perspectives Study interview data (number of programs, number of staff, sustainability, indicators data), 2018.

The eight employers that had collaborated with colleges for six to 10 years played different roles. The majority (5 employers) had at least three staff involved. The employers worked with the college to obtain grant funding and collaborated on more than one program more frequently than other employers interviewed. On the survey, colleges identified these eight employers more often as “conveners” that take on important leadership roles. Finally, almost two-thirds of these employers (5) had at least two of the indicators of exceptional buy-in.

Of the 12 employers with the longest-term relationships (more than 10 years), half were designated on the college survey as “leaders” (6 employers) and a third invested directly in programs (4 employers). As one employer noted, “We used to help [the college] get grants, but now I have a vested interest.” However, the scope and scale of these collaborations resembled those of new collaborations in the number of programs and staff involved. A quarter of these 12 employers had at least three or more indicators of the strongest relationships.

The finding that the elements of a strong relationship were different at varying points in the relationship is consistent with literature on employer-college partnership, including Wilson’s (2015a, 2015b) framework and DOL’s TAACCCT-focused framework (see Exhibit 1).

### **3.4 Coming Up**

This chapter explored the different dimensions of strong employer-college relationships, and how they may establish under different circumstances. The next chapter describes ways in which strong relationships are initiated and shape employer-college engagement.

## 4. Initiating Employer-College Relationships

There are myriad reasons colleges collaborate with employers, ranging from assistance developing curricula and credentials to providing work experience to students to hiring program completers.

The research team asked the 41 employers interviewed to describe how and why they began a relationship with the college and to share recommendations for how other colleges might strategize about beginning similar relationships. Key findings include:

- More than half of the employers (22) reported that the college initiated their relationships.
- Some employers (15) made a point to recommend that colleges be willing to literally meet them where they are (e.g., at their offices, industry association meetings).
- A few employers (4) stated that colleges should involve high-level college staff in outreach to employers to signal commitment to the relationship and credibility.
- Some employers (13) said colleges should consider engaging employer partners early, before education and training programs are fully developed, to better align them with employer priorities and needs.
- Employers expressed a variety of motivations for working with colleges, ranging from specific business interests (34 employers) to sector building (12 employers) and altruism (4 employers). Often these motivations overlap.
- Some employers (11) mentioned that grants that fund state-of-the-art training equipment or facility upgrades made relationships with colleges more attractive.

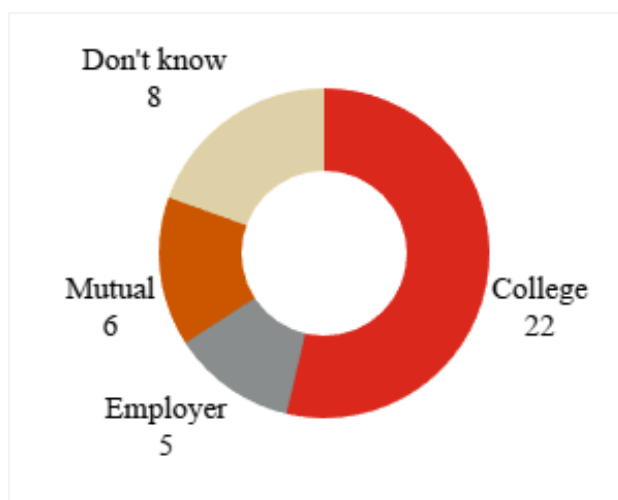
The chapter begins by describing how employers and colleges initiate relationships. It then discusses the employers' motivations for collaborating with colleges and employer recommendations for colleges in the initial phase of relationship building.

### 4.1 Catalysts for Engagement

The research team explored various scenarios for why employers engage with colleges. On the one hand, employers might take the initiative to start the relationship because they have clear goals for the partnership and understand what the college can provide. Alternatively, employers may have limited knowledge of the college's capacities. Without more knowledge, their "asks" of the college could be narrowly focused, such as providing information about job openings and needed applicants, as opposed to more broadly focused, longer-term activities such as designing education and training programs tailored to the employer's needs. This section explores how and why relationships between the employer and the college started.

- *Most of strong partnerships were initiated by the college*

Of the 41 employers interviewed, 22 reported that colleges approached them first, and five employers reported they made the initial contact (Exhibit 6). Six other employers described their initial interaction as a mutual effort. The remaining eight employers either could not recall or did not discuss how the relationship started; this occurred most often when the employer staff person responsible for interacting with the college changed over time (3 employers).

**Exhibit 6. Most strong employer-college relationships were initiated by the college**

Source: Employer Perspectives Study interview data, 2018.

All of the 22 employers approached by the college said that they were open to the overture and interested. As the human resources manager of a mining company explained, college staff travelled to the employer to explain the college programs and pitch collaboration: “They shared the curriculum with us, shared how they’re doing [things], and my superintendent [was] invited ... to the graduations.”

In some cases, colleges approached employers in the context of an industry association. Three employers described how involvement of college staff in an existing coalition led to the conversation about TAACCCT. A representative of one employer said:

*Our collaboration [with the college] has really been through the [the local manufacturing coalition]. I am the individual who was responsible for initiating the [coalition], and I served as the president...until recently, and my involvement with the college primarily [was] associated with involvement in [the coalition].*

- ***When employers take the initiative to approach colleges, it was often because they had a specific “ask” in mind***

Of the five employers that initiated the relationship, four requested that the college customize either a program or curriculum to meet their needs. The vice president of human resources at a midsized retail trade company said, “I felt like when I started...there weren’t a lot of trainings that were being offered, even though we had a local resource that was right there [i.e., the community college]. That’s when I reached out to them. That’s when we started classroom trainings.”

Employee requests can also prompt employers to approach local colleges. In the case of a local manufacturing company, the human resources manager contacted the college because of an employee’s request:

*We had an employee who wanted to go there. He wanted to take advantage of tuition reimbursement we offered, but the college is an hour and a half away. [We] needed to figure out how we could provide him with the education he wanted while he was still working at the factory, so we approached [the college] on this deal.*

- *TAACCCT relationships that began as mutual efforts often arose in the context of larger initiatives*

A representative of a small manufacturer with 140 employees described how the company started a relationship with the college through a local industry coalition for advancement of training for various trades. According to the employer representative, “[The relationship] was primarily driven from the dialogue occurring across the training landscape, prior to the grant, around the idea of advancing our training programs, reducing redundancy, improving quality.” Relationships can also emerge from personal connections. The director of operations at a midsized manufacturer recalled, “It was through our previous human resources specialist. I think it was by accident or coincidence, they were introduced by a mutual friend, so they developed a successful relationship.”

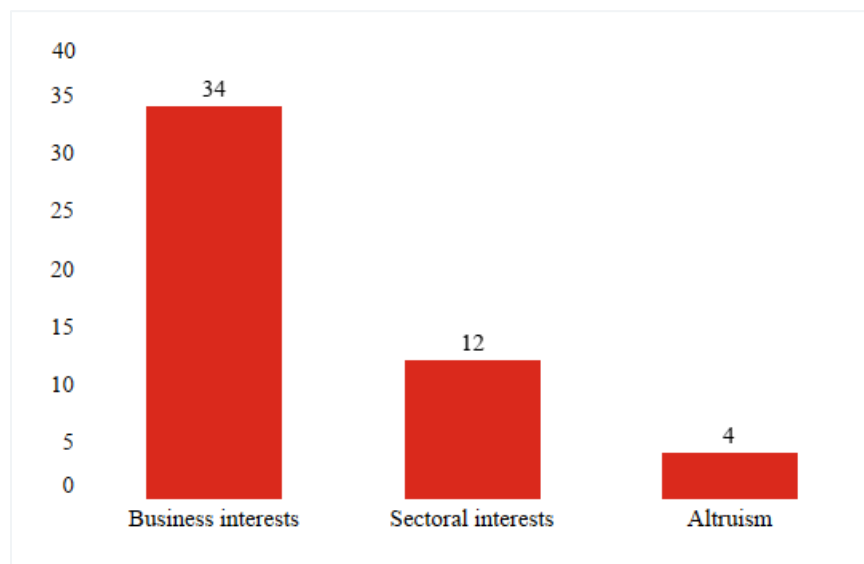
## 4.2 Strong Employer Partners’ Core Motivations

Motivations often shape time and resources that employers invest in relationships with colleges. For example, employers with large, unfilled hiring needs may invest more heavily in these relationships than employers that are motivated by supporting local institutions in the community. This section explores employers’ motivations for establishing relationships with colleges.

- *Employers’ motivations ranged from specific business interests to altruism*

As Exhibit 7 shows, strong employer partners’ motivations to build relationships with colleges include their own business interests, practical sectoral (or industry-wide) interests, and altruism. These motivations are not mutually exclusive.

### Exhibit 7. Most employers are motivated by their own individual business interests



Source: Employer Perspectives Study interview data, 2018.

Direct business interests were, by far, the most common motivation named by employers. However, seven of the employers that discussed sector-building interests also reported the individual business interests influenced their decision to collaborate with the colleges. One employer who spoke about altruism also talked about individual business needs.

- *Immediate, large-scale hiring needs motivated high-level buy-in from employers*

Employer motivations were intertwined with the dimensions of strong employer-college relationships. Employers with business and sector interests alike often had multiple staff involved, worked on multiple programs, invested funds into sustaining the program(s), helped apply for grants, and had long-lasting relationships with their college partners (see Exhibit 5). However, looking at the four employers that demonstrated the most exceptional levels of buy-in (i.e., a composite score of strong relationship dimensions), all had immediate, direct business interests for engaging with the colleges. A precision manufacturing firm that had collaborated on multiple training programs over a 15-year period with its local college commented on how this collaboration was the key strategy to meet demands for skilled labor:

*We've got work coming, and we're doing capacity planning and working on getting the skilled labor part of it. The [federal department] is concerned that this contract is so huge that they want to ensure companies can fulfill it. They are even coming to our level to make sure we can do the work. This could [help us plan] out five to seven years and make sure everyone is ready. Our customers are ready, and we're setting up special programs to have people get trained just for us.*

Other employers motivated by their business interests reported a need to fill longer-term employment gaps due to their aging and retiring workforce. For example, the director of government and community relations for a large natural resources extraction and processing company explained, “Because of the wave of retirements, we needed more skilled, trained individuals to fill vacancies. We were looking for employees with the best skills possible, and this was the way to go.”

Of the 12 employers that had strong industry-oriented motivation, 10 had collaborated previously with the college before the TAACCCT grant. Half (6 employers) were in the manufacturing industry. Some employers said that programs promoting their industries were important in developing sustainable and qualified applicant pools, regardless of whether they had immediate hiring needs. A representative of a midsized manufacturing employer explained:

*A big part [of] our hope is a more rigorous training program so people are more prepared for the workforce and have in-depth training. One of the things we see with [the] machining trade is that there were not a lot of low-skilled, entry-level jobs to bring people in the workforce, and we need more advanced-skilled workers coming in the force, and the program was designed around meeting that need.*

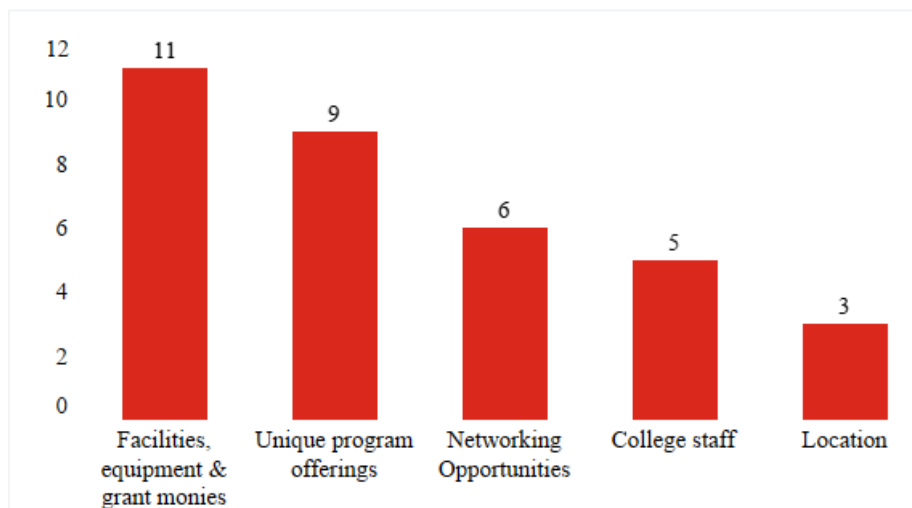
A few employers said they collaborated with the college because of the potential positive benefits it would provide to the greater community (4 employers). For example, a hiring executive at a large natural resources extraction and processing employer said that in addition to collaborating on the TAACCCT program, “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 to the community and [our college].” A local subsidiary of a large global energy company also saw collaborating with a local college as a way of ensuring that jobs benefitted local people, while also avoiding the high staff turnover often associated with bringing in labor from other parts of the country.

#### 4.3 Factors that Make Colleges Attractive to Employers

Even if employers are highly motivated to find solutions to their hiring needs and training challenges, they may not consider partnering with their local college as the best option for addressing their needs.

During the interviews, strong employer partners identified a number of different factors that made colleges attractive partners (Exhibit 8).

**Exhibit 8. The quality of facilities and equipment, the availability of grant money, and unique program offerings can help attract employer partners**



Source: Employer Perspectives Study interview data, 2018.

- *Grants that fund state-of-the-art training equipment and facility upgrades attracted some strong employer partners*

Of the 41 employers interviewed, 11 reported that available grant funds designated for new training equipment and facility upgrades prompted them to collaborate with the college and made their collaborations more successful. They reported that up-to-date and useful programs and equipment made partnering more appealing. More than half (6) of them that said these assets were motivating were in manufacturing, likely because manufacturing trainings are resource- and equipment-intensive. A small, single-location manufacturing employer said that funding was pivotal in creating a useful program:

*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.*

- *Unique program offerings also drew employer interest*

Nine employers said that the uniqueness of colleges' program offerings was important in their decision to partner. Notably, more than half (5) were in manufacturing. The representative of a large utilities employer said:

*[The college] has a strong focus in [the] utilities industry that many schools don't have. They have a wind program, and that works well for us because we are in the wind business, too. One unique thing they offer is...the combo position. Basically, we have the employee work in gas and then [the] electric side, and [the partner college] has that program, where students go to get a combo degree for gas and electric, that works really well for us.*

- *Networking opportunities and geographic location mattered to some employers*

Six employers were motivated to partner with TAACCCT colleges by the opportunity to expand their networking efforts with educational institutions, workforce entities, and other employers. A staff person from a midsized manufacturing firm said:

*[It was] the recognition that a training program is needed by the industry and difficult to replicate across three counties, and [the collaborating college] was relatively new and growing rapidly in the region and we had not engaged with community colleges around trade training and manufacturing. So, [working with the college] presented an opportunity to change the dynamics, to bring our tech center and adult training program under that tent [with the college and other employers in our sector].*

Two employers reported that location was important in their decision to collaborate with colleges. These employers were in rural or semirural areas, with limited access to educational facilities, or not located near institutions with appropriate instruction for their prospective or incumbent employees. Three employers mentioned that the college's proximity made it a more attractive partner. A representative from one remote midsized manufacturing firm noted, "We are located in a very rural area, and this is one of the only schools located nearby that provides the degree. This is the only college within hours of us."

#### 4.4 Employer Recommendations for Colleges Looking to Start New Relationships

The research team asked the 41 employers interviewed what suggestions they had for colleges that want to build strong employer relationships. This section presents employers' recommendations to colleges for approaching employers to begin partnerships.

- *Visit businesses personally and attend industry association meetings*

One challenge that colleges face is determining how to approach employers. For some employers (8), it is as simple as knocking on their door. A vice president from a human resources department at a local retail trade business suggested, "Get out and see each other. We go out and see them, and they come to see us. That's the biggest thing that I can share—going to each other's places and connecting."

Some employers (7) said that getting involved in local industry groups could also be an effective strategy for engaging employers. A human resources manager at a manufacturing firm offered this insight: "If they 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." If such groups do not exist, this same interviewee suggested that the college could play an important coordinating role: "If there is not a group like ours, I think that the community college has to get out and meet people and find ways to get them together and have them be a meaningful part of the college.... They really need to be made a viable part of the process."

- *Enlist industry-savvy college leadership in upfront conversations with employers*

Four employers stressed the importance of colleges involving the right people when initiating relationships with employers. Having high-level college decision-makers involved at the beginning of a relationship can signal to employers the college's commitment and investment. As the owner and founder of a local manufacturer with 140 employees said, "Changes in the academic world are top down, so [colleges] need a top-level person, like the dean [to be involved]. In our case, we had the president from the college for the earlier discussions."



Five employers also reported that they engaged with the college, at least in part, because of the quality of its staff. These employers praised staff’s nuanced understanding of their industry and strong orientation towards addressing employer needs.

- ***Involve employer partners in the design stage and be flexible and innovative***

Some employers (13) recommend that colleges involve potential partners early on, before programs are developed. One employer noted, “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.”

Others (8 employers) reported that colleges are most strategic when they understand industry trends and build programs that fill the gap between industry demand and worker supply. The director of operations from a local manufacturer explained that before reaching out, “College[s] need to find a niche in the market, the skillsets [in demand].” A senior staff from another local manufacturer with 750 employees agreed:

*If a college isn’t in lockstep with business to know what the job market is demanding, [it] 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.*

- ***Carefully calibrate the “ask”***

Two employers specifically stressed the importance of respecting the employer’s limited time. The former human resources director of a local mining company said:

*[The college should] certainly ask for industry participation, but don’t ask for an over-commitment, because we have jobs to do. If we’re trying to constantly assist the college, there has to be a balance between the time that they’re asking of us and what they can do on their own. It’s really a reciprocal relationship, if you will, and really respecting one another.*

Employers reported that often the college’s first “ask” of the employer is not to collaborate on a particular educational or training program, but more modest involvement. This 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.

Five employers suggested that having a manufacturing coalition or an industry partnership at the table could help minimize the ask of individual employers while allowing more of them to participate. “Very few companies have the time to collaborate with higher education. There’s a level of commitment with that a lot of smaller companies cannot make individually,” said the owner of a local manufacturer.

## **4.5 Coming Up**

After colleges have successfully engaged their employer partners, the next step includes establishing and maintaining a working relationship. The next chapter discusses the different kinds of relationships that emerge and how employers interact with colleges during the design and implementation of education and training programs.

## 5. Maintaining Strong Employer-College Relationships

Once colleges and employers make contact, they need to determine how to work together effectively and maintain the relationship over time. Many facets of the partnership, such as the design, implementation, and oversight of education and training programs, require significant coordination and communication between the college and employer. Employers highlighted that how these relationships are managed can affect employer participation in activities and ultimately the long-term sustainability of the partnership.

The research team asked the 41 employers interviewed to describe their relationships with the colleges, including their goals for and patterns of communication with the college (e.g., frequency, mode). The team also asked employers for their recommendations for colleges on how to maintain long-term, productive relationships.

Key findings include:

- Customer-focused relationships, where the college customizes trainings and services to fit the needs of a particular employer, were not common among strong employer partners in this study (6 employers). Customer-focused relationships were used to design and implement programs for both new hires and incumbent workers.
- Most employers reported having sectoral (or broader industry) relationships with a more generalized focus (33 employers). In these cases, colleges worked closely with employers, but the resulting programs were not specific to the context of a single employer.
- Employers with customized relationships with colleges (6 employers) were not more invested in their relationships than were the other employers.
- Most employers described regular communication of moderate intensity (36 employers).
- More than two-thirds employers talked about participating on colleges' advisory boards (26 employers), and most of these had an industry focus; smaller employers tended to perceive greater value from participating on these boards than did larger employers.
- Some employers strongly recommended that colleges hire and invest in staff with a strong customer-service orientation and deep industry knowledge (14 employers).

This chapter first describes the types of employer-college relationships that were described in interviews with employers. Second, it discusses employers' one-on-one relationships with colleges, as well as their relationships as part of advisory boards. Finally, the chapter examines employers' recommendations for colleges for how to manage successful employer-college relationships.

### 5.1 Types of Employer-College Working Relationships

Analysis of the interview data revealed three different types of employer-college relationships:

1. **Customer-focused relationship:** The college customizes training or services to fit the needs of a particular employer. Customer-focused relationships could be used to design and implement programs for both new hires and incumbent workers.
2. **Industry or sectoral relationship:** The employer, as part of a larger industry group or partnership, provides input and support to a college in the design and implementation of more generalized

programs. This type of relationship aligns with the focus of the TAACCCT Round 4 grants on sector strategies.

3. ***Altruistic relationship:*** The employer provides its services or products at no cost to the college to support its education and training programs.

Depending on the scope of their collaboration with colleges, employers may have two types of relationships simultaneously. An employer may be working closely with a college to develop a customized training program for a hiring need while participating in a larger sectoral effort focused on a different occupation in the industry. This section provides insights into these relationships.

- ***Customer-focused relationships were less common***

Only six of the 41 employers discussed co-creating programs customized to their needs, and four of these six employers were in manufacturing. In most (5 employers) of these relationships, the employer worked with the college to create an entirely new program. The representative for a large manufacturing employer said:

*Once we realized that we're not able to hire candidates, I worked with our upper management to roll out a Maintenance Technician program. We talked to [the college liaison] to see if the college would be interested in starting a program where they would come to our facility and teach out of our training room. [The college liaison] was very receptive and said he'd been doing that for other employers. It evolved into an 18-month program.*

Manufacturing employers may find customer-focused relationships especially appealing because many jobs in the industry require training on machinery that is specific to certain manufacturing occupations. In contrast, health care program curricula are more standardized because of licensing and certification requirements for occupations such as licensed practical nurses or medical assistants.

Most of the strong employer partners described sectoral relationships with colleges (33 employers). This finding may be driven by the sectoral focus of the TAACCCT grant program. The human resources representative of a large manufacturing company said:

*The training itself is not specific to our machining operations. It is to advance skills in machining. It's more about generalized skills, so they can go out and learn the nuances of a screw machine, or they can go to the other areas of our plant, called machining centers, and set those up and manipulate the program, go down to the shipyard and start making parts for ships. That's the idea of it. It's targeted for a more general understanding of basic skills to advanced machining.*

The research team also identified two cases of altruistic relationships. These two employers were large information technology firms interested in relationships with the colleges to build a pipeline of workers for the industry at large and support the skill development of workers. These firms did not plan to hire program graduates from the colleges; instead they offered training resources, such as curriculum and software, to support the education and training programs at the college. These two employers were also motivated by a desire to increase use of their products by information technology professionals.

- *Customer-focused relationships did not necessarily lead to greater investment and commitment from employers*

Because these relationships require considerable curriculum development and ongoing adjustments, one might think that they would require more employer engagement and investment than a sectoral relationship. However, the six employers with customer-focused relationships were not necessarily more invested in their relationships with colleges than were employers with other types of relationships. Only one of the six had more than two staff involved in the relationship, only one helped the college with grant proposals, and none invested funds in the colleges’ programs. The scope of the collaboration also varied. Only one of the six employers with customized programs had collaborated with the college for more than 10 years, and only two worked with their partner on more than one academic program.

## 5.2 Maintaining Communication

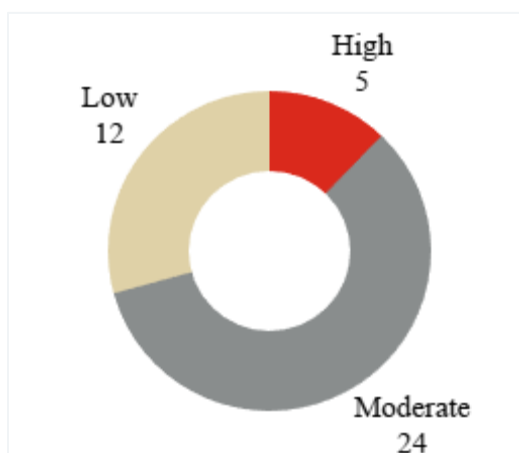
Whether the relationships are customer-focused, sectoral, or altruistic, colleges and employers need to maintain communication throughout their partnership. According to the 41 employers, communication with colleges takes many forms (emails, check-in calls, in-person meetings). The frequency of communication, personnel involved, and topics discussed vary, depending on program type, nature of the industry, geography, local economic outlook, and the stage of the program.

This section discusses the frequency of employers’ one-on-one communication with the college, including who they communicated with, the topics of these discussions, and their assessment of the college’s management of their relationship.

- *Most strong employer partners described moderate-intensity communication with the college*

In interviews, most employers (38) said they were satisfied with the current level of involvement with the college. For a local establishment of a multisite manufacturing company, the college’s management is crucial to the success of their collaboration: “On a scale of 1 to 10, it’s a 10 with the college’s engagement, quality of instruction, innovative ideas, commitment of their management.” As Exhibit 9 shows, the intensity of communication between colleges and employers varies considerably.

**Exhibit 9. Most employers describe moderate-intensity patterns of communication with the college**



Source: Employer Perspectives Study interview data, 2018.

*High-intensity* communication is steady and frequent, typically multiple times a month. It also involves various levels of personnel and significant commitment from the employer, more typical of customer-focused relationships. Of the 41 interviewees, five described high-intensity communication with their college. The human resources manager of a large manufacturing firm shared details of how college staff frequently engaged him from the beginning, from funding strategy, to finding a facility for the program, to program design and oversight.

*Moderate-intensity* communication usually occurs when employers assume regular capacity building or advising roles, such as giving feedback on curriculum, overseeing work-based learning, arranging equipment donation or occasional student site visits, or helping with recruitment. These relationships typically involve more than one staff person from the college and employer, with at least monthly communication. Twenty-four employers characterized their communications with their college as moderate.

Moderate-intensity communication occurs via phone, through email, or in person, depending on the circumstances. When training is for incumbent workers, college staff may visit employers' facilities. In other cases, when the employer and college are not near each other, they email about hiring and training needs and staff and see each other in person at annual meetings and special events. The three health care employers interviewed explained that their colleges regularly reach out by email and phone to arrange placements for the clinical component of their programs.

*Low-intensity* communication between colleges and employers often focuses on employer hiring needs. Twelve employers reported this type of communication, in which colleges contact them to provide updates about graduates, and employers contact colleges regarding job openings. Colleges may also invite these employers to attend meetings of advisory boards (see Section 5.3 next) or events. College staff may also reach out to employers to ask questions as they arise.

- *Intensity of communication between colleges and strong employer partners fluctuated across different stages of program development*

When describing their communication with colleges, a few employer partners (4) emphasized that the intensity of interactions was not constant. When designing and launching a new program, for example, colleges were in frequent contact with employer partners to discuss myriad details involved in implementing the program. After a program was launched, communication patterns changed. As the plant superintendent of a multisite manufacturer explained:

*After the first session, we had monthly calls. That worked out very well in the first go. Once we got into the second session, we were a little more established. We had a couple meetings before the start of each semester – that worked out really well. Then we would meet towards the end of the semester versus having those regular monthly calls. Now we're spending more time working with the college to see how our students are doing, like, are there any problems with employees?*

The director of community relationships at a local, medium-sized mining company described communication: "We helped design the program. [But now] we might go a couple of months without talking and then talk every other day. It varies."

In other cases, rather than experiencing fluctuations, communication may taper off after the launch of a new program and continue in a constant but infrequent way. For instance, the chief operating officer of a

local utility company described this scenario, the result of not having a defined role after the design stage of the program:

*Our involvement has been less and less since kickoff. Once a year, we sit in on an annual board meeting. [As time has gone on,] we've not been as involved as we were at time of initial kickoff. We're in contact at a minimum every one to three months. The relationship has faded off since initial contact.*

### 5.3 Participating in Advisory Boards

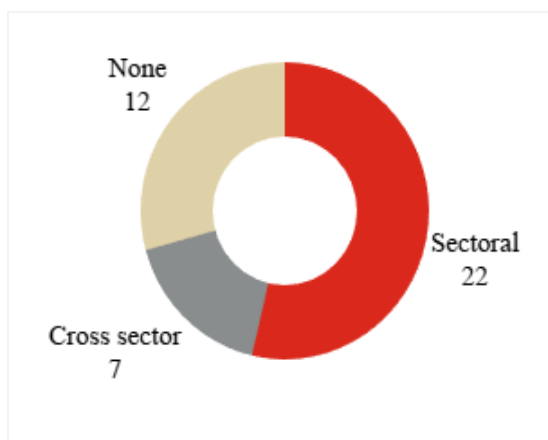
In response to questions about communication with the college, employers often described their involvement with advisory boards associated with their college partner, including whether they participated in these groups, how frequently they met, and the purpose of the meetings. This section discusses how advisory boards contributed to the employer-college relationship.

- **More than half of employers participated on a college advisory board**

College advisory board meetings allow colleges and employers to stay up-to-date on industry news, communicate with each other, build relationships, and advise on and provide oversight for specific education and training programs.

As Exhibit 10 shows, 22 employers described participating in sectoral advisory boards specific to the education and training programs on which they collaborate with the colleges. At advisory board meetings, employers keep the college apprised of industry needs and give feedback on program and curriculum design for specific occupations. Employers reported they also discuss general curriculum design and industry strategies.

**Exhibit 10. More than half of the strong employer partners reported participating in sectoral advisory boards**



Source: Employer Perspectives Study interview data, 2018.

Other employers (7) described college advisory boards that were cross-sector rather than specific to an industry, occupation, or training program. In most of these cases (5), employers reported being less involved in program design and implementation and more involved in the college's big-picture strategies for fundraising and curriculum development. One such group consisted of employers in manufacturing, retail, warehousing, military, health care, and government. One member of this group, the human

resources manager in a local establishment of a global manufacturer, described how employers from different industries work with one another:

*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.*

Twelve employers either said that they are not on a program advisory board or did not mention any such participation. Employers in the study from rural areas reported being on an advisory board less frequently than did employers elsewhere, due to the logistical challenges of assembling partners for meetings. No employers described colleges conducting group meetings using remote technologies.

- ***College expectations for the college-led advisory board shaped the level of participation of employer partners***

More than half of the employers participating in advisory boards (19 of 29 employers) described high-intensity engagement in which the college invites advisory board members to meet frequently and have a direct role in program design, implementation, and oversight.

The others said that college staff oversee design and implementation, and tap the advisory board less frequently for feedback. A representative from a small information technology company described how input was given at the end of the curriculum design process: “The college developed the curriculum and then showed it to us. They wanted our feedback to see if what they developed was good for the industry.”

Employers' roles may change over time. A manufacturing employer who has had a relationship with the college for more than 15 years and is hiring students on a yearly basis explained his current role: “I'm just sitting behind the scenes, listening to them and doing paperwork.”

- ***The value of participating in advisory boards may be greater for small employers***

All 29 employers that were on an advisory board expressed general satisfaction with it. However, the opportunity to connect with other businesses in an industry may be particularly valuable to small employers. The vice president at a manufacturer with 80 employees said:

*It's important to have other businesses involved. We get to share resources, and if there's something that comes up we can support each other. It's very helpful to have a number of us involved. Probably we'd share a lot more information together and work more in collaboration than we would on our own.*

Other employer partners found their participation on advisory boards less productive. As a human resources manager at a large manufacturer said, “It's good to sit together. But in terms of technical skills, everybody thinks they are a niche, so the advisory board is not that useful.” One employer, which sees itself as an industry leader, reported sometimes feeling reluctant to share what it was doing because its competitors also were on the board.

A few (5) employers saw their participation on the college's advisory board as an extension of their general approach to partnership in their sector and community. Staff from these five employers discussed their involvement in industry groups or organizations outside of the TAACCCT program advisory board. The director of continuous improvement for a midsized manufacturer said:

*I'm also on the Manufacturers Council, organized through the Chamber of Commerce. All of the industry boards and committees I'm on provide me with the opportunity to engage in dialogue with other businesses.... We are very collaborative.*

## 5.4 Employer Recommendations for Maintaining Strong Relationships

The research team asked employers for recommendations on how colleges can maintain strong relationships with them. Employers' advice was straightforward.

- ***College staff with a strong customer-service orientation and deep sector knowledge were important to the employers interviewed***

Fourteen employers reported that customer service was critical to successfully implementing an effective partnership. They noted the benefits of having college staff who were strong communicators and skilled at addressing employer needs and problem solving. Employers described communication as an ability to listen to employer and industry needs, respond in a timely and open manner, and use these conversations to improve program implementation.

To manage the relationship, employers emphasized the importance of colleges assigning someone knowledgeable about the industry and passionate about getting the programs right. As the human resources manager from a mining business said:

*When you look at individuals in key positions, the selection of the right person is very important. You need a person who does care about the interests of the employers... [someone who will] listen, participate, get engaged. I would just always, as someone who hired individuals, pick the right people in the leadership roles. Don't pick people who are disconnected from the employer – that relationship will not foster opportunities. I've seen situations where you get the wrong person in the instructor role, or team leadership role, and it stops at that point.*

A number of employers shared sentiments of this nature, including a large utilities provider who had worked with the college for more than 10 years. When asked about points of strength in the relationship, this employer noted the importance of “the flexibility the school offers when we have a special need. They truly see the industry as a customer, and they work towards that and try to meet the industry's needs.”

Employers occasionally expressed desires to work with specific staff the college employed because they had worked with these staff in the past and had good experiences or had been advised by others in the industry that working with them would be beneficial to the business. A large natural resources extraction and processing employer noted that staff at the partner college were a marked improvement over the staff at other colleges the employer had worked with in the past and were an important factor in programmatic success:

*I'll just reemphasize that they are [a] phenomenal institution to work with. Not just in terms of what they have there in terms of the curriculum, but they have the crème de la crème of people who really want to improve the types of people that are coming into [our] industry. I have worked with a lot of colleges and universities across the state. They have the best faculty, administration, and people to work with in the entire state in this industry.*



## 5.5 Coming Up

Even if colleges can manage their relationships effectively with employers and enlist their collaboration in activities from design to implementation to oversight, employers may not choose to continue their involvement if they perceive that the benefits from the collaboration do not outweigh the costs. The next chapter discusses employers' conceptions of value and the return on investment from employer-college partnerships.

## 6. The Value of the Relationships to the Employers

Employers and colleges collaborate to develop training programs and talent pipelines to support the workforce in key industries. These endeavors often require employers to weigh the potential benefits and costs of a collaborative approach, relative to their other options for meeting hiring and training needs.

The research team asked the 41 interviewed employers how they define and measure the success of their partnerships and whether they use metrics or monetize costs and benefits to make decisions. Analysis of the responses found:

- Employers cited many benefits from their collaboration with colleges, but satisfying hiring needs was the most common (22 employers).
- Some employers (9) reported systematically using business metrics such as retention to measure these benefits, and none monetized the benefits.
- Most employers (35) described their contributions to the relationship in terms of staff time, but no employers had calculated the cost of this input.
- Eight employers could quantify any costs, and these were specific to monetary or material contributions.
- Because they did not monetize costs and benefits, none of the employers formally calculated a return on investment, but all perceived the balance as positive.

This chapter describes how employers think about benefits, costs, return on investment, and the overall value of their relationships with colleges.

### 6.1 The Benefits of Employer-College Relationships

The research team hypothesized that employers that measure the benefit of their collaboration with a college may be more open to sustaining and deepening this commitment. The team asked employers to describe how they measured success. This section describes both the qualitative ways employers think about direct benefits and the degree to which they use business metrics to capture and monetize benefits.

- *Employers cited many benefits from their collaboration, and hiring was the most common*

Employers described many benefits that they receive from collaborating with colleges. The most common is filling hiring needs. Of the 41 employers, 22 spoke about improvements in hiring and talent acquisition that resulted from the partnership; 18 said the partnership either currently helps or is expected to help improve retention and reduce turnover, and 18 discussed benefits in terms of reducing the cost and time to get workers fully trained in their job duties and skills.

Employers consistently reported the need to identify and retain “quality” and “suitable” talent for specific jobs or their field. They said they needed employees with industry-specific skillsets, work-based experience to gain familiarity with expectations of the job, and a commitment to the industry. The human resources manager at a consumer product manufacturing firm said his firm “wanted more qualified workers to fill our job openings. Things like increasing productivity, reducing errors, all comes from getting good, qualified people. We want to fill our openings—if we can’t fill them, it costs us money.”

TAACCCT-supported programs provide a local, streamlined pipeline for hiring. While working with colleges to develop this pipeline, employers reported they improve their own hiring processes to better identify the skillsets and people best matched to open positions. A director at a midsized manufacturing firm said, “We have improved our talent acquisition and selection process, and we are not done. We see more ways to refine and build off these programs. It begins to have an impact on culture – we are hiring the right people better.”

Employers reported a direct connection between hiring more skilled candidates and improving retention while reducing costs associated with turnover and on-the-job training. A human resources manager at a manufacturing firm explained, “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].”

As employers work with colleges to expand the pool of suitable candidates, employers find employees who have stronger skillsets and experiences that match the demands of the jobs. Employers reported these workers arrive at the workplace familiar with the profession and having skills that will allow them to succeed and advance. This can result in improved workplace culture and climate. A manager at a steel manufacturing firm said, “[We] haven’t lost any technicians [who] went through the program at our facility, so [we] think [workers] feel a sense of ownership and a sense of commitment from our company.”

Employers were able to speak more directly about the benefits of reduced time and costs associated with onboarding and upskilling workers. A manager at a hospitality services firm said, “We really wanted to get new employees [who] have a general understanding of the job. Training at the college [reduces the] time that the new employees have to work with our trainers.” And a representative from a utilities firm said:

*When they bring in students, they’ve already gone through the steps of training, so they are better than people we hire off the street. That’s nice, and with our apprenticeship in house, we are able to push them a bit further. But with the education they do come in with, it’s really able to accelerate what we are doing.*

Thirteen of the 22 employers that spoke about improvements in hiring shared estimates of the number of students hired from relevant programs, which ranged from five to 10 to 300 over the life of the partnership.

▪ ***Employers had difficulty quantifying the benefits of collaboration***

Despite articulating the benefits of collaboration, employers had difficulty quantifying the value of these benefits. For example, only nine employers said they were tracking retention rates for hires coming from college programs. Employers that could track retention specifically for employees hired through college training programs tended to have structured externship or internship programs. One example is a large hospital where the human resources business partner closely tracked retention:

*Retention of those who are hired after externships is 98 percent. Some of those who were hired are coming up on their first year of employment. I don’t have any benchmark data to compare these metrics to. [But] I developed a lot of spreadsheets, so I can look at hiring and retention outcome info that I didn’t have access to before. I*

*use spreadsheets to track placements, program completion, and retention at 30, 60, 90 days, and one year.*

A staff person from an insurance company reported tracking the number of students, conversion rates for interns to full-time employees, and retention rates for its internship program. However, more employers reported tracking retention more generally and gauging results for college training programs qualitatively (13 employers).

Interviews revealed that many smaller employers have little capacity to track retention. As the human resources department head at a mining company said, “We are a small company, and there’s only four people in human resources, one in accounting, so we don’t run calculations on the cost of bringing in and losing people.” Another employer said that the small number of hires from college programs or the stage of the partnership with the college did not warrant the extra investment in time and resources to track these metrics. The director of continuous improvement at a plastics manufacturer said, “It’s too early. We think people are having higher retention rates, but there aren’t enough numbers or population yet.”

Similar trends emerged around the costs saved by shifting to occupational trainings provided by colleges. Employers reported that college training programs saved them money. Asked about training cost savings, the owner of small commercial control equipment company said:

*It would cost us certainly more for a couple of reasons. First, there are some subsidies colleges can get. If we are going to do the training, we may have to send them to [state] or [second state] for 20-30 classes, so that’s extra travel cost, like airfare, on top of the training. We also send our higher-end guys to trainings at a higher-end company. It’s not cheap.*

However, none of the employers interviewed had calculated the training costs saved by working with the college. Some provided estimates, such as the human resources manager at a small precision manufacturing firm: “In my opinion, it’s definitely reduced the cost by at least 50 percent or more of what you’d normally have to deal with.”

Few employers were able to quantify in months the time saved in training employees on the job versus in the colleges’ training programs (2 employers). The vice president of a small precision manufacturing firm estimated that the firm saved six to eight months in training time to get people up to speed: “It’s almost immediate now. When they come out, I feel comfortable putting them on the machine, and they can do the job.” But again, none of the employers interviewed systematically tracked, compared, or monetized this information.

## 6.2 The Costs of Employer-College Relationships

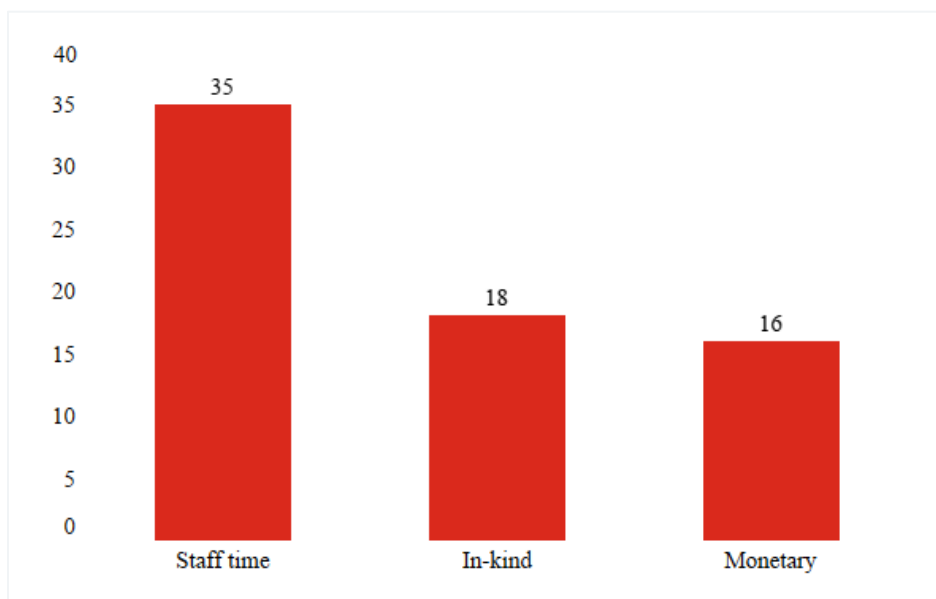
The other side of the benefit-cost equation is costs. The research team asked interviewees to describe the variety of ways employers contributed to the college collaboration and the degree to which they could quantify the costs of their contributions.

- ***Most employers thought of their contributions in terms of staff time***

Employers discussed three types of contributions to support education and training programs at their college partner: (i) staff time; (ii) in-kind donations, such as equipment; and (iii) monetary support. Note that these contributions were not mutually exclusive. As Exhibit 11 shows, 35 of 41 employers interviewed named staff time as a contribution, and 12 of these 35 employers contributed staff time

*exclusively*. Eighteen (18) of the 41 discussed providing in-kind donations such as equipment, materials, or access to facilities; 11 employers spoke of providing tuition assistance as a direct monetary contribution; 5 employers quantified other direct financial contributions such as helping to pay for new facilities or transportation; and 6 employers discussed providing all three types of contributions.

**Exhibit 11. Employers thought about the cost of contributions largely in terms of staff time**



Source: Employer Perspectives Study interview data, 2018.

Employers reported their staff contributed extensive time and expertise to develop programs that aligned with overarching goals of their business and field, through either one-on-one communication with college partners or participation on advisory boards. In doing so, staff collaborated with colleges to not only align program outcomes with industry skillsets, but inform course content and even provide direct instruction to students. Employers wanted to ensure students had experiences that matched what would be expected on the job, so they facilitated job shadowing, allowed classes to take place on job sites, and provided internships and externships.

Sometimes, employers supported colleges with in-kind donations of equipment and materials. Employers that made these types of contributions tended to be in industries where familiarity with particular machinery and working conditions is important to ensure potential employees are ready for the workplace. Of the 18 employers that donated materials and equipment, 14 were manufacturing, utilities, and mining industry partners. The recruitment manager at a utilities firm said, “We provided equipment when they were first establishing their energy program.”

Three employers spoke about providing access to their facilities or helping to build new ones to support college programs. A human resources manager at a consumer product manufacturing firm noted, “[The students] are supposed to travel to the college to do the lab work on site, but we made arrangements so that [our] employees enrolled in the program can do the lab work at [our] facility with our equipment under my supervision.”

Another manager at a steel manufacturer worked closely with the college to bring a new facility in the community online:

*We were already going to approach [our] Board of Directors about renovating a place built in the 40s that was falling apart. We could go ahead and spend a lot to renovate that, or we could take the TAACCCT funds and tie it in with a training operation. The timing was impeccable. We went ahead and asked for funds. We got approval from the Executive Committee and the Board of Directors to spend \$1.7 or \$1.8 million to renovate the facility [for the training program].*

Employers explained that new and incumbent workers often need financial support to participate in training, especially if they cannot work for an extended period. Employers primarily provided tuition assistance to make training programs available and affordable. A manager at a steel manufacturing firm described how, besides tuition, supporting students often meant paying extra staff time:

*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 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.*

- **Employers counted only the cost of monetary or material contributions**

Like calculations of partnership benefits, none of the 41 employers systematically tracks the partnership costs it incurs. None of the interviewees tracks the amount or cost of time the employer invests in collaborating with the college. Though employers keep track of costs associated with tuition reimbursement and paid-time associated with training by employees, they were not able to provide detailed or estimated cost breakdowns in the interviews.

The only employers that could provide a monetary estimation of their investment were those that had donated equipment (18 employers) or made monetary contributions (16 employers). As mentioned previously, one large manufacturing firm spent almost \$2 million to renovate an existing facility. Another employer donated \$30,000–\$40,000 in machinery to the college for students to use in classes.

### 6.3 Return on Investment of Employer-College Relationships

Employers that maintain metrics for benefits (e.g., retention rates or numbers of hires) or quantify the costs of their contributions (e.g., monetary or material contributions) do not have stronger relationships with colleges across the dimensions of strength than employers that did not. Employers that track are not necessarily the ones with the longest-lasting relationships, the broadest set of programs, or the most staff support.

Moreover, because employers do not monetize benefits and few calculate costs, none of the employers interviewed calculates the return on investment of its partnership with the college. Nevertheless, most employers said that they got a positive return on investment from their collaboration with the colleges. No interviewee ventured to provide even an estimate of the employer’s return on investment, but some anecdotally pointed to new hires made from a partnering college who came to the job with the skills needed and were productive from their start in the job. Some reported being able to retain the workers in their jobs, which saved costs of recruitment. For example, the manager at a global automotive parts

manufacturer that had directly invested about \$400,000 in its partner college said, “We’ve never sat down and calculated it. I would venture today that someone who makes it through the training program will be capable of doing what’s needed.”

Some employers indicated that return on investment was not important to their business, largely because of sector-building or altruistic motivations. When discussing the decision to provide \$30,000– \$40,000 in equipment to a local community college, the regional vice president of a family-owned business said:

*We did not consider a return on investment at all; it was just an investment that we’ve made [in the college]. We have other arrangements locally. We wanted to start developing something new at a ground level with them. If we do get an employee out of it, it’s a benefit.*

Another representative of an HVAC servicing firm echoed this sentiment: “A certain part of the businesses don’t care about return on investment – they just need these people available on the market.”

### **6.4 Coming Up**

The next chapter looks across the Employer Perspectives Study to synthesize employer insight and translate it into implications for colleges and other workforce development grant initiatives sponsored by DOL, in the context of continuing efforts to meaningfully engage employers.

## 7. Key Themes and Implications of the Employer Perspectives Study

The Employer Perspectives Study sought to better understand and explain strong employer relationships with community colleges. The 41 employers participating in the Employer Perspectives Study expressed high levels of satisfaction with their college relationships and intended to continue partnering beyond the TAACCCT grant. This finding is not surprising, given that the interview sample was drawn from responses of colleges to questions on a survey about strong employer partnerships. However, because it was small and qualitative – not a large-scale study with a representative sample of TAACCCT employer partners – one must exercise caution in interpreting its findings.

That said, this sample of employers provided valuable information about how colleges can potentially start and maintain strong partnerships with them. Key insights include:

- **Strong employer-college relationships take many forms.** There is no “one size fits all” definition of a strong partnership. The relationships described here range in duration from a few years to decades; focus on a single education and training program or multiple programs; involve a single staff person at the college and employer or a large team. The key is to tailor the relationship to the needs of both parties.
- **Strong employer partners want to sustain their collaborations with colleges.** Employers spoke of the value they perceive from their relationships with colleges and their desire to continue working together. Indeed, some partnerships have lasted years. However, few employers were involved in one metric of sustainability—financial investments and/or assistance raising funds to maintain programs or support new ones.
- **Employers generally appreciated when colleges met them where they are—literally—including at their offices and industry association meetings.** The latter may be particularly useful opportunities for colleges to connect with a group of employers already aligned on sector strategies. Regardless, colleges may want to consider engaging employer partners early, *before* education and training programs are fully developed, to better align them with employer priorities and needs.
- **Employers recommended that college staff have a strong customer-service orientation and deep industry knowledge.** Employers reported the right staff are also important for maintaining relationships. Interviewees reported it is vital for colleges to obtain frequent input from employers within particular industry sectors of focus to ensure that the curriculum offered prepares students for skill requirements of firms that are hiring in the locality or region. Moreover, some employers suggested that involving high-level college staff in outreach to employers signals credibility and commitment to the relationship.
- **Employers partner with colleges for a number of reasons.** Some were driven by individual business interests, particularly the need to hire employees for specific jobs. Other employers focused on less immediate benefits, such as building a pipeline of talent by encouraging students to enroll in relevant sector-specific programs, even if they had few, if any, actual openings for graduates. Employers also described altruistic motives for their involvement (i.e., a desire to give back to their community or their sector). Additionally, employers cited new state-of-the-art training equipment and upgrades to facilities purchased through grants as reasons to partner with colleges. Other reasons employers cited for partnering included unique college program offerings,



networking opportunities, and the geographic location of the colleges. The diversity of employer interests opens myriad opportunities to colleges to initiate discussions with potential employer partners.

- **Employer-college working relationships fall into three categories, with implications for maintaining relationships.** The first is a *customer-focused* type of relationship, where the college is customizing a training or service for a particular employer. The second is a *sector-based* relationship, where an employer, as part of a larger sectoral group, provides input and support to a college in the design and implementation of programs. This type of relationship aligns with the focus of the TAACCCT Round 4 grants on sector strategies. The third is *altruistic*, in which employers provide training for college partners as a service without connecting the effort to their own needs. Most employers have sectoral (or broader industry) relationships with a more generalized focus with their partner college. Some employers have more than one type of working relationship concurrently. The nature of the relationship often dictates the frequency and intensity of communication between partners.
- **Employer engagement levels are not static.** The nature of the employer-college relationship naturally changes over time, from needing more intensive employer involvement as a program is developed or redesigned. Other times of intensive interaction occur when academic terms are starting or ending, when new equipment is being introduced to a training program, or when a firm is hiring graduates. Employer roles can also change from focusing on one program to engaging in broader sector partnerships to address local or regional workforce needs.
- **Employers could not quantify the collaboration's return on investment, but believe the college partnership to be beneficial.** Employers do not quantify the value of benefits or the costs of the partnership. They cited numerous examples of benefits, including reduced time to recruit new employees, shorter ramp-up time for new employees, and longer retention and less attrition of new hires made through the college's training program. Most employers described the largest costs in terms of staff time, but none had calculated the dollar value of this input.

## 7.1 Implications for Future Grantees and Policymakers

What do these insights mean for grantees of future workforce and postsecondary initiatives and policymakers seeking to build and encourage strong relationships with employers to support workforce development initiatives? For future grantees, including colleges, other training providers, and the public workforce system, how can they use the insights from this study to improve how they partner with employers? And for policymakers, how can the insights from this report be used to implement policy, provide technical assistance on employer partnerships, or design new grant programs that encourage stronger employer partnerships?

This section suggests implications of the study's results that are relevant for both future grantees and policymakers:

- Grantees may be able to use their grant funds to initiate new employer relationships and further build on existing ones. Employers suggested grants that can use funds to purchase new training equipment and upgrade facilities to support training for in-demand skills can generate interest in partnering. Policymakers may want to include technical assistance that helps grantees approach employers in a way that "sells" the advantages of participating in the grant activities.

- Engaging employers may be easiest when they have growing or changing workforce needs. Grantees need to carefully select the industry in their service area that has a need for additional workers that have in-demand skills. Policymakers should consider including guidelines about how to identify and focus grant activities on industries that need skilled workers, as in the TAACCCT grant announcements.
- Grantees should engage employers before fully designing education and training programs in order to obtain meaningful input and contributions from employers to meet their workforce needs. Employers emphasized that listening to employer needs and workplace skill requirements may be critical if colleges are to have substantive partnerships with employers and sustain those partnerships over an extended period. Policymakers may want to include guidance about including employers in the design process for grant activities.
- Employers encouraged grantees first establishing a working relationship with employers to focus on building trust, working to understand the employers' needs, and presenting a specific "ask." Policymakers could focus early technical assistance activities on taking these steps when building employer relationships.
- Grantees could consider enlisting industry-savvy leaders at the organization or institution to engage employers initially and help maintain the relationship. Employers said it was important for college staff to speak their "language" and better understand the skills employers need. Policymakers could include guidance or incentives in grant announcements to include staff with industry experience in the grant team.
- Though employers do not typically track benefits and costs of the relationship, grantees could potentially help employers understand how involvement with a grantee brings value if grantees provide employers data on the students who succeed and information on improvements to the education and training program that align with employer needs. Policymakers could provide grantees with technical assistance on how to develop return-on-investment information for employers.
- Encouraging employers to help grantees sustain education and training programs may be challenging for grantees. However, the strong employer partners interviewed in the study were open and willing to help colleges with sustainability, such as partnering with them to seek new grant funds and other resources to support training, if asked to play this role. Policymakers could provide guidance and technical assistance to grantees on how to include employers in developing sustainability plans, including funding, before the grant ends.

## Appendix A. Types of Strategies Identified by the TAACCCT National Evaluation

ACCELERATED LEARNING	PERSISTENCE AND COMPLETION	CONNECTIONS TO EMPLOYMENT
<p>Colleges reduce adult learners' time to completing a program of study by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>redesigning curriculum, credentials, and programs to help students move through coursework more quickly and earn credentials as they progress through programs;</i></li> <li>▪ <i>aligning college enrollment, credit award, and other college policies; and</i></li> <li>▪ <i>using technology and course scheduling to support learning for working students or students with families.</i></li> </ul>	<p>Colleges support adult learners' enrollment, progress, and completion of programs of study by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>providing academic and nonacademic support services;</i></li> <li>▪ <i>redesigning developmental and adult education programming for students who are underprepared for college; and</i></li> <li>▪ <i>helping students easily transfer to more advanced programs of study and applying credits that they have already earned to persist in postsecondary education.</i></li> </ul>	<p>Colleges connect adult learners to the workforce by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>developing curriculum to help students learn technical skills through on-the-job and simulated work experiences;</i></li> <li>▪ <i>preparing students for the workforce by providing guidance on career options, building job readiness skills, and helping support job search activities; and</i></li> <li>▪ <i>building partnerships with employers, industry associations, the public workforce system, and other organizations to support successful transitions to the workforce.</i></li> </ul>

## Appendix B. Methodology

The research team used a multi-stage methodology to design the sample, engage employers, conduct interviews, and analyze the transcripts. This appendix provides an in-depth description of the research process after selecting the eligible sample of employers (see Chapter 2 for detail on identifying that sample).

### Outreach and Engagement

The research team initially targeted 50 employers from the sample 64 employers – nested within the 32 colleges – characterized by TAACCCT colleges as having strong relationships with them. The aim was to successfully recruit and interview 40 of the 50, for an 80 percent response rate.

As a first step in outreach, in February 2018, the research team coordinated with the U.S. Department of Labor to reach out to the 32 sampled colleges with the goal of identifying the best person to contact at each of the 50 employer partners. All 32 colleges assisted the research team in assembling the contact information and, in some cases, acting as an intermediary with the employer. During this process, the research team realized that four of the targeted “employers” were actually industry associations or nonprofit partners providing support services to TAACCCT participants. These organizations were dropped from the sample and replaced with other, eligible employers from the sample of 64.

The research team also added more employers from the sample to meet the interviewing targets. The first 20 interviews were relatively easy to schedule. Many of these employers were very enthusiastic and responsive to the team’s messages and calls. Towards the end of the field period, in April 2018, the study had fielded about 35 interviews and had, for the most part, exhausted the original targeted group of 50 employers. Still looking to complete 40 interviews, the team decided to add another seven employers from the sample.

By the close of the field period, on April 27, 2018, the team had successfully completed 41 interviews with employers, from a targeted group of 57, for a response rate of about 72 percent.

### Employer Interviews

In preparation for the interviews, the research team assembled background information on each employer and its partner college from the TAACCCT Round 4 college survey, the original grant proposals, and online research. The team used these profiles to become familiar with the employers beforehand.

The interviews with employers usually lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. They began with an overview of the study, making sure that interviewees understood how the information would be used and safeguarded so they would consent to participate. In larger companies, the respondents tended to be staff from a human resources department or a plant manager; in smaller firms, they tended to be the chief executive officer or chief operating officer.

The questions for the employer unfolded in stages. The first questions centered on understanding the employer’s core business – its industry and number of employees – and the substantive focus of its collaboration with its college partner. Next were questions about how the relationship first began, the employer’s motivations, and the genesis of the TAACCCT-specific effort. Next were questions about the different ways that the employer has supported the work done at the college, as well as the ways in which the employer’s staff has interacted and coordinated with the college. The interview ended asking the

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employer about how it conceptualized the costs and benefits of the college partnership, and for recommendations for DOL and other community colleges across the country.

All interviews were conducted in two-person teams, allowing one member to lead the interview and the other to take verbatim notes that looked and read like a formal transcript. After the interviews, both team members reviewed and edited the notes to ensure they would be ready for analysis.

## Analysis

After completing approximately 20 calls, the research team met to discuss early themes emerging from the interviews. Once the field period ended, the team developed a formal coding system with nodes mapping to each of the sections of this report, as well as a set of employer classifications to help the team analyze the content. These classifications included industry sector, type of business, number of employees, title of respondent, and other basic characteristics.

With coding system in place, the research team translated the coding it to NVivo and began coding the verbatim notes captured from each of the 41 interviews. First, in order to ensure reliability among team members, the team members all coded the same two interviews and compared them to refine the coding system. After this initial meeting, the team continued to meet weekly to discuss and resolve coding issues.

Upon completion of coding, the research team divided the data into the sections of this report (e.g., initiating employer-college relationships for Section 4), and then performed a second level of analysis within topical nodes such as employer motivations (for Subsection 4.2) to describe the full range of employer experiences. Team members also analyzed trends in the nodes by employer characteristics, as well as the relationship between the nodes and varying measures of strength of the employer-college relationship.

## Appendix C. Employer Interview Guide

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview today.

My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I'm a researcher from [*Abt Associates*, located in Bethesda before March 9/Rockville after, MD; *Urban Institute*, a non-profit research organization located in Washington, DC; *Capital Research Corporation*, located in Arlington, VA; or the *George Washington University*]. With me today is [*name and affiliation*]. I'm calling you today because the Abt Associates and its partners, on behalf of the U.S. Department of Labor, are conducting an evaluation of the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) Grant Program. One component of this evaluation is to learn what the key ingredients are for strong relationships between employers and institutions that support training initiatives like TAACCCT.

During this part of the study, we will interview approximately 40 employers who were involved in TAACCCT projects and who were identified as having strong relationships with the college leading the TAACCCT effort. As a part of this group, we are contacting you to learn more about your involvement in the TAACCCT-funded project and your relationships with the college that is leading these activities in your area. We will ask you about your and your colleagues' involvement in the project and then discuss how you participated in the development of the training program. We will go into more depth on the nature of your relationship with the college and benefits and costs of your involvement in the TAACCCT project.

We will use what we learn from you and other employers to contribute to a report on strong employer-grantee relationships for the Department of Labor and for others who want to build better relationships with employers to support the training of skilled workers.

Before beginning the interview, I (we) want to thank you for agreeing to participate in this study and remind you that your participation is voluntary. I (we) know that you are busy and will try to be as brief as possible. We have many questions, but please do not feel as though we expect you to be able to answer every question. The interview today should last about **60 minutes**. There are no right or wrong answers. We want to know what you think.

In addition, before we start, I want to let you know that although we will take notes during these interviews, information is never repeated with the name of the respondent in any reports or in any discussions with supervisors, colleagues, or the Department. When we write our reports and discuss our findings, information from all the people we speak with is compiled and presented so that no one person can be identified.

To help me accurately report on the information you share, it would help if I could record this call; of course, I can turn off the recorder at any point if you so desire. I do not have a recorder on now; is it okay with you for me to turn it on?

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Do I have your permission to begin the interview?

### Employer Background

1. Respondent name, title, and company/organization name (confirm)
2. Role in the company/organization (i.e., brief job description)

3. Employer characteristics (Collect this and other relevant information about the employer prior to the interview via Internet and college survey data, where possible. Confirm if needed)
  - a. Type of company/organization (e.g., for-profit, non-profit, government)
  - b. Industry
  - c. Occupations for which new or current workers are being trained by [Name of TAACCCT Project]
  - d. Approximate number of employees at the company/organization
  - e. Type(s) of worker being trained through TAACCCT (e.g., new workers, incumbent workers, both)

### Nature of Relationships

1. How long has [Name of Company/Organization] worked with [Name of TAACCCT College]?
2. How did you first learn about [Name of TAACCCT Project]? Was [Name of Company/Organization] initially approached by the [Name of TAACCCT College] to become involved in [Name of TAACCCT Project] or did you and your colleagues approach [Name of TAACCCT College]? [Based on answer, ask the following set of questions:]
  - a. [If approached by college] How was [Name of Company/Organization] initially approached to participate in [Name of TAACCCT Project]? What about the approach made you or others at [Name of Company/Organization] want to participate? Was there any part of the approach that made you hesitant to participate? If someone were to ask you to participate in a similar initiative, how would you prefer to be approached?
  - b. [If approached college on own] Why were you and your colleagues interested in being involved in [Name of TAACCCT Project]? How did you hear about the project? After making contact with the project leadership, was there anything that made you hesitant to go forward with your involvement in the project? Have you become involved in other initiatives in a similar way?
3. What factors led you to collaborate with [Name of TAACCCT College] on the [Name of TAACCCT Project]?
  - a. Did the availability of grant funding through [Name of TAACCCT Project] play a role in [company name] deciding to partner with [Name of the TAACCCT College] on this initiative? If so, how? *Possible factors: seed funding from DOL; opportunity to shape curriculum; access to incumbent worker training; need for new, well-trained workers*
  - b. *Did participation in the initiative align with your overall business and talent strategy? If so, how?*
4. Have you and others at [Name of Company/Organization] been involved in initiatives similar to [Name of TAACCCT Project] or other initiatives that support training workers— [with or without the partnership of the current college partner]? What were your experiences with these initiatives? Who was the lead organization (e.g., WDB, college, CBO)? What was your role in these initiatives? How did these experiences with previous initiatives affect your willingness to participate in [Name of TAACCCT Project]?

## Employer Role in Developing and Implementing TAACCCT

1. What is your role in [Name of TAACCCT Project]? Who are others at [Name of Company/Organization] involved in this initiative? What are the others' roles in the project? [Probe: if others at company/organization are involved, ask their name and titles.]
  - a. Probe: How involved is your chief executive officer, upper management in this initiative?
2. We understand some of the ways you and others at [Name of Company/Organization] have participated in [Name of TAACCCT Project] are [list from the college survey response to H5/confirm].
  - i. Does that sound right to you?
  - ii. Are there other ways you and your colleagues have been involved?
  - b. Let's talk about these activities and how you were involved in each.
  - c. What made you and your colleagues agree to be involved in these particular activities?
  - d. How did your involvement in these activities change over time?
  - e. What were the reasons you didn't get involved in other ways, such as [list some activities they didn't participate in]? Were other employers involved in these ways?
3. How do those activities compare to your business' initial commitments or expectations?
 

What was your understanding of [Name of Company's/Organization's] initial commitment to the [Name of TAACCCT Project]? How was it explained to you and others at your company? Was [Name of Company's/Organization's] commitment put in writing such as a memorandum of understanding?

  - a. [If for hiring new workers] Was there an agreement to hire a certain number of participants from [Name of TAACCCT Project]? How many new workers have you already hired from [Name of TAACCCT Project] to date? Do you expect to hire more? Why or why not?
  - b. [If for training current/incumbent workers] Was there an agreement to train a certain number of your current employees by [Name of TAACCCT Project]? How many of your employees have been trained through [Name of TAACCCT Project] to date? Do you expect more to be trained by [Name of TAACCCT Project]? Why or why not?

The goal of this study is to offer concrete suggestions to the U.S. Department of Labor on how colleges can build strong relationships with business like yours.

1. In your opinion, what are the most important things for colleges to do when trying to build strong relationships with businesses?
2. How strong would you say your partnership with the college is? Why would characterize it in this way? [PROBE: length of collaboration, level of trust, return on investment, etc.]

## Role of Communication and Personal Relationships with College

1. Who at your [Name of Company/Organization] communicates most frequently with [Name of TAACCCT College] for [Name of TAACCCT Project]?
  - a. Who is your point person at [Name of TAACCCT College]? And what is their role there?



- b. Did these two people know each other before collaborating on [Name of TAACCCT Project]?
2. How do these people communicate with each other?
  - a. How often does [Name of Company/Organization] communicate with this point person at [Name of TAACCCT College]?
  - b. Would you characterize these communications as formal or informal?
  - c. In what ways do you communicate with [Name of TAACCCT College] leadership or staff--one-on-one, as part of a group of companies, or both? [Probes on frequency and nature of communication: monthly, weekly, daily; probes on ways of communication: mostly in-person, phone, email; group vs. individualized, etc.]
  - d. What topics do you typically discuss with the person during these communications? How is information or a decision from [Name of TAACCCT College] leadership communicated to you and/or to all partners involved in the project? How do you work to resolve any issues?
  - e. Has [Name of Company/Organization]'s communication with TAACCCT leadership/staff worked well? Has this been the right amount of communication? Why or why not? [How could the communication be improved or could have worked better for you and your colleagues?

[IF CEO OR OTHER UPPER MANAGEMENT IS NOT THE MAIN POINT OF CONTACT WITH COLLEGE, ASK ABOUT HOW HE/SHE COMMUNICATES, INTERACTS WITH THE COLLEGE AND OTHER PARTNERS]

5. In what ways, if any, does your chief executive officer or other upper management interact with the college and other partners on [Name of TAACCCT Project]?
  - a. Probe: with whom? What method? Frequency? Topics?
  - b. Did this person have any relationship with the college and other partners prior to [NAME OF TAACCCT PROJECT]?
6. What has worked well? What has been challenging? [RESPONDENT MAY OR MAY NOT BE ABLE TO PERCEIVE]

### Role of Relationships with Other Businesses

1. Did you collaborate with other businesses as a part of [Name of TAACCCT Project]? Did the collaboration work well or were there challenges? How so?  
[IF NOT COLLABORATION, THEN SKIP OTHER QUESTIONS]
2. How much have relationships with other businesses participating in this initiative influenced your own participation?
3. Are some businesses *more* involved with [Name of TAACCCT Project] than other employers? For example, did you or another business take a lead role?
4. Were you hesitant to work with other employers on this effort? If so, what were your concerns? How did [Name of TAACCCT College] address these concerns?

## Role of Relationships with Other Partners

1. Have you been involved with any other agencies or organizations as part of [Name of TAACCCT Project]? How so?

[Probes for Types of partner organizations: community colleges (other than the TAACCCT college); public workforce system (workforce development/investment boards and American Job Centers); other employers and industry associations; unions; educational institutions; community and faith-based organizations; human service agencies; economic development agencies, others]

[Probes: developing curriculum, providing guidance to TAACCCT college staff, creating industry-recognized credentials]

2. How much have relationships with other partners participating in this initiative influenced your own participation?
3. Has [Name of Company/Organization] worked with any of these agencies or organizations or employers on past initiatives? If so, please describe these efforts. [Probe for involvement/partnerships with public workforce system such as being a customer at a local American Job Center]

## Value of Involvement in Workforce Development Initiatives

1. Before you became involved in [Name of TAACCCT Project], what benefits did you expect to gain from your relationship with [Name of TAACCCT College]? [Probes:]
  - Possible benefits: qualified job candidates available, new workers hired, increased skills of current employees (e.g., trained in latest technology), longer tenure of current employees, increased productivity, reduced errors, internal advancement/promotion, increased profits, and sustained partnerships with workforce development leaders
  - [NOTE TO INTERVIEW: listen for quantifiable/monetary benefits AND altruistic benefits; and short-run vs. long-run benefits]
2. How were these benefits similar or different from other initiatives you've been involved in?
3. As you became more involved with [Name of TAACCCT Project], did the expected benefits change? Did benefits you didn't expect materialize? Or some that never came to fruition?
4. What were some of the costs you expected from your involvement in [Name of TAACCCT Project]? Were there some you didn't expect? [Note: Costs can include both monetized and non-monetized costs.]
  - Time to participate (e.g., estimated hours/week or month)
  - Resources contributed
  - Sharing information about company with college and external partners (other employers)
  - Not able to be involved in other initiatives due to time/resource commitment on this project
5. Were these costs to participate about what you expected, or were they higher or lower than you expected? How did they change over time? How were these costs the same or different from other initiatives you've been involved in?
6. How are you measuring or documenting whether your involvement in [Name of TAACCCT Project] resulted in these benefits or costs? What types of information are you using to measure the benefits and costs? In what ways did you use this information to make decisions around [Name of Company/Organization's] continuing your relationship with [Name of TAACCCT College]?

7. Do you know whether the benefits outweigh the costs of your involvement in [Name of TAACCCT Project] yet? How so? Overall, do you feel your involvement in [Name of TAACCCT Project] was worthwhile to [Name of Company/Organization]? In what ways?
8. [IF EMPLOYER MENTIONED WORKING WITH THE COLLEGE OR OTHERS ON PRIOR INITIATIVES] How do the results from this relationship compare to other training/workforce development initiatives?

### **Sustainability and Future of Collaboration**

1. Do you see your relationship with [Name of TAACCCT College] continuing after the TAACCCT grant ends? [If yes:] What aspects of the relationship do you plan to continue?
2. Which aspects of the relationship may not continue? Why won't they continue? [Probes: lack of resources available, not hiring for this position anymore, quality of the training provided, changes in the industry and required skills.]
3. As a result of collaborating on [Name of TAACCCT Program], has [Name of Company/Organization] changed any workplace practices or culture? [Probes:]
  - Company or position-specific training requirements
  - Wage increases
  - Tuition support provided
  - Inclusion of financial or other support (e.g., trainers, equipment) to [Name of TAACCCT College] in company's/organization's annual budget
  - Changes to responsibilities of [Name of Company/Organization]'s human resources department to include partnership with college or other training initiatives
  - Other, please specify
  - Integration of TAACCCT activities into business strategy
4. Would you recommend that other businesses become involved with a project like this in the future? If yes/no, under what circumstances and why?

## Appendix D. References

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