

Powerful Partners: Businesses and Community Colleges

How investments in sector partnerships can help our economy thrive



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In today's economy, the demand for skilled workers is greater than ever before—with approximately 80 percent of jobs requiring candidates to have some form of education or training beyond the high school level. However, employers in in-demand industries are not exclusively seeking to hire individuals with four-year degrees. In fact, approximately 53 percent of all jobs in our labor market can be classified as “middle skill,” meaning they require training beyond high school but not a college degree.¹ Even though middle-skill jobs dominate today's economy, only 43 percent of workers have the training they need to qualify for these positions—leaving many employers without a reliable worker pipeline.²

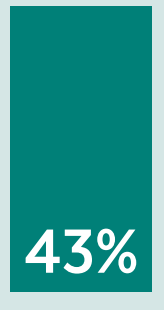
To help more individuals access the training they need to succeed in the current labor market, employers across a range of industries have been partnering with community college leaders and other stakeholders to remove barriers to success and provide flexible career pathways for millions of Americans. By working together, these industry-driven partnerships—sometimes referred to as sector partnerships—can provide innovative course curriculum, professional development, and support services to individuals looking to build marketable skill sets.³ As Congress looks to reauthorize the Higher Education Act for the first time in a decade, lawmakers should consider the benefits of expanding the development and implementation of these partnerships—as they play a significant role in strengthening our nation's economy.

Why partnerships matter

In 2016, 46 percent of U.S. employers reported that they faced difficulty filling jobs due to lack of available talent.⁴ The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that the total number of job openings for nurses will be more than 1 million by 2024⁵; while Deloitte says that over the next decade, 3.5 million manufacturing jobs will need to be filled.⁶ However, despite the staggering number of available jobs, 17 million Americans were either unemployed or working part time but aspiring to full-time work in 2015.⁷ Even though the lack of skilled workers has reached crisis level in some industries, many employers do not have the capacity to consistently recruit and independently train individuals to fill jobs in a vacuum—particularly small business employers with limited resources.



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For this reason, it is often in the best interest of business leaders to team up with academic institutions and non-academic workforce development stakeholders—such as labor management partnerships, community-based organizations (CBOs), and adult education providers—as they share a common goal of helping individuals succeed in today’s economy. Community and technical colleges often make the most sense as academic partners, given their historic mission of serving students of all backgrounds with a variety of objectives, including those who have been in the workforce for quite some time but need to update their skills, adults seeking access to basic skills instruction, and students aiming to obtain the credits they need to transfer to a four-year degree program.⁸

While community colleges regularly welcome the chance to assist local employers with their training needs, there are challenges with providing this type of support on a case-by-case basis—such as limited resources, competition for skilled workers, and lack of alignment across related industries. Therefore, it is advantageous to form multi-stakeholder partnerships consisting of employers with similar talent needs, academic institution leaders, and workforce development stakeholders who can leverage various funding streams to providing high-quality job training.

Industry partnerships are often formed when an employer or group of employers identify a workforce need and resolve to find an effective way to provide timely, high-quality training to residents in the surrounding community. From there, a partnership is created—along with a framework for resource-sharing—which can be extremely valuable. For instance, administrators at academic institutions have the means to recruit and enroll students of all ages and backgrounds—including underserved students—into training programs; industry partners have the first-hand knowledge to provide ongoing guidance when it comes to course curriculum; community-based organizations and adult education providers are equipped to help students access support services such as transportation, housing and childcare, and basic skills instruction; and workforce development boards (WDBs) have the tools to ensure that training programs are properly targeted to meet the needs of the local economy.

Because industries’ needs are constantly evolving, partners regularly establish an official forum where they can discuss what is working well about their training models and what may need to change. Often, involved parties will form an advisory board of sorts—where they can meet to review cohort success, job placement rates, and relevancy of course

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curriculum. In addition to representatives from academic institutions, employers, CBOs, adult education providers, and WDBs, these boards can include individuals from state and local government agencies and other workforce development stakeholders. These partnerships, when effective, continue to gain momentum with the success of their initial cohorts, the ongoing satisfaction of students and employers, and the positive impact they have on their communities.

Helping today's student succeed in the labor market

Industry partnerships take on a variety of forms in terms of organizational structure, student engagement, work-based learning options, and course offerings. When well thought out and structurally sound, not only are these partnerships beneficial for employers and teachers, but they also play a significant role in the success of students. Research has shown that the strongest partnerships tend to be formed in response to a specific regional workforce need, such as a lack of manufacturing technicians, a shortage of skilled nurses, or an absence of IT professionals⁹. From there, training models are developed that will equip students with the skills they need to succeed in these in-demand industries. These models can consist of a mix of classroom instruction, hands-on learning, professional development techniques, and support services.

Industry partnerships often dedicate resources to helping students address barriers they may be facing from the time they enroll in a program to the time they complete it. For example, students looking to enter an industry-specific program may complete an initial needs assessment or screening process with an academic advisor or CBO partner to anticipate and resolve challenges they may face during their time in the program. Additionally, due to the targeted nature of industry-focused courses, cohort size tends to be smaller—which allows for teachers to provide more tailored instruction to their students. As part of their commitment to the partnership, employers can agree to hire students who excel in or successfully complete their training, providing an incentive for all partners to make their programs strong and effective.

Students who participate in industry partnership-driven training models often continue to receive guidance and

support after they complete their program and find a place in the labor market. Partners who provided career counseling or navigation services to individuals during their training find it beneficial to maintain contact with students to make sure they are not experiencing unforeseen barriers in their new workplace that would prevent them from succeeding. This provides workers with another layer of assistance they may not have access to outside of industry partnership training models.

Community college-industry partnerships have had bipartisan support

While much of the financial support for sector partnership activities comes from private, local, and state funding, the federal government has a history of recognizing their value—both by defining them in statute and allocating resources to support and expand them. The George W. Bush administration provided \$250 million over two years to expand community college training in high-growth industries as part of its Community Based Job Training Grant initiative.¹⁰ In 2011, Congress built on this model by allotting \$1.9 billion to the U.S. Department of Labor's Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant program.¹¹ The purpose of these grants was to increase the ability of community colleges to partner with employers to offer students industry-aligned curriculum and training programs that could be completed in two years or less.¹² Due to TAACCCT grant funding, students across 700 community colleges earned more than 320,000 industry-recognized credentials over four years.¹³ However, Congress has not approved funding for this successful grant program since 2014.

Additionally, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), a bipartisan bill that was signed into law in 2014, aims to increase the role of industry in the public workforce development system.¹⁴ More specifically, WIOA requires states and local workforce boards to support sector partnerships as a method of workforce improvement at both the state and local levels. Partnerships under WIOA must include multiple employers connected to a local or regional industry, as well as education and training providers. While this provision in WIOA has allowed states to create new partnerships or build upon those that exist, this policy does not contain targeted funding

Case studies of effective partnerships

Fortunately, community college-business partnerships are increasingly thriving across the United States. These partnerships promote the economic well-being of our nation by building the skilled workforce needed to be globally competitive.

North Baton Rouge Industrial Training Initiative in Baton Rouge, Louisiana

In addition to being well-known for its fusion of cultures and Southern hospitality, Baton Rouge—located on the banks of the Mississippi river in southeastern Louisiana—is a significant port and major petrochemical center¹⁸. It is also the home of the ExxonMobil Baton Rouge Refinery, which is the third largest refinery in the United States and the eleventh largest in the world¹⁹. By 2012, despite the productivity level and size of operations at the refinery, ExxonMobil executives were unable to deny that they were facing a worker shortage—specifically in the areas of welding, pipefitting, and electricity. Even though there was a significant number of individuals looking for work in the Baton Rouge area, the lack of foundational skills needed to begin a career at the refinery was evident.

As a solution, industry leaders sought assistance from Baton Rouge Community College (BRCC)—a two-year academic institution that strives to equip students with the skills they need to be successful in the workforce or transfer to a four-year degree program to continue their education.²⁰ Together, ExxonMobil, BRCC, and other local partners including the Capital Area Technical College and community-based organizations created the North Baton Rouge Industrial Training Initiative (NBRITI)²¹. The goal of this collaborative effort is to train eligible North Baton Rouge residents at no cost to them for well-paying careers through an intensive, short-term training program designed to fast-track them to success.

The existing NBRITI training model consists of a 72.5-hour course of fundamentals, followed by enrollment in one of three pathways:

- ◆ **Welding** – A 450-hour program that will train students in the welding trade. Upon completion of training, program participants that can demonstrate mastery of a welding skill set will have the opportunity to have their welds tested for X-ray certification²².
- ◆ **Electrical** – A 220-hour course that will train students in the electrical trades. Those who successfully complete the course receive a certificate from the National Center for Construction Education & Research (NCCER)—a well-known, portable credential—in Electrical Level One and Level Two.²³
- ◆ **Pipefitting** – A 220-hour course that will prepare students for the pipefitting trades. Students who complete the program receive a certificate from NCCER in Pipefitting Level One and Two.²⁴

Why it works

To become eligible to enroll in the NBRITI, students must go through a screening process, which includes academic testing, drug testing, academic assessments, and interviews. This process helps identify and resolve any existing barriers to success that a potential trainee might face during the length of the program, such as limited access to transportation, unreliable housing, or lack of childcare. Once enrolled in the program, which is financed with the help of participating companies and partially supported by Louisiana’s Rapid Response Fund, students receive one-on-one guidance and professional development resources to set them up for long-term success. Students who successfully complete their programs can be immediately employed if they meet the requirements of NBRITI’s “Ready to Go!” framework. This means they are consistently punctual, can use hand tools safely and effectively, and are strong team players. Ready to Go! is designed to be a fair and easy system that empowers students to be accountable for their own success.

Partners involved in this training model remain connected and engaged on a regular basis both during and outside the academic year through an Industrial Training Initiative steering committee. Consisting of approximately 40 individuals, committee members review curriculum content to ensure it is up-to-date, discuss the effectiveness of recruiting techniques, assess job placement rates, etc. Due to consistent stakeholder engagement, student support services, and intensive coursework, NBRITI has proven to be tremendously successful. More than 80 percent of individuals who have been trained through this program have been placed in jobs throughout the community.

M-Powered in Minneapolis, Minnesota

Established in 2004 and jointly managed by HIRED—a community-based organization with a mission of providing innovative work solutions to dislocated workers—M-Powered is an award winning, fast-track training program that successfully trains Minnesotans at Hennepin Technical College for manufacturing careers. M-Powered primarily serves the unemployed, underemployed and veterans.²⁵

Driven by an impending skilled workforce shortage in the manufacturing industry due to upcoming retirements and a lack of trained replacements, the program brings together state and local economic development professionals, the Precision Metalforming Association (PMA), community-based organizations, and community college administrators to form a comprehensive training program for residents.

More specifically, M-Powered offers two distinct manufacturing career pathways—Computer Controlled Micro-Machining (CNC) Operators, and Precision Metal Stamping (PMS) Technicians²⁶. Both pathways allow program enrollees to participate in three phases of training:

- ◆ **Classroom instruction** – Students learn how to read blueprints, tackle applied math equations, use hand measuring tools, and excel in shop safety. Participants earn nine college credits upon completion of this phase of training.
- ◆ **Skills development** – Program participants are permitted to work directly with manufacturing machines and learn computer numerical controls. Participants earn nine college credits upon completion of this phase of training as well.
- ◆ **On-the-job training** – Students complete 480 hours of immersion in the workplace. Depending on the training structure, students who finish the program can earn two college credits for this portion of M-Powered.

Once they complete M-Powered program coursework, students are prepared to take the widely-recognized National Institute for Metalworking Skills (NIMS) high-stakes credentials exam—the industry standard for training and skill validation within precision manufacturing—and have earned up to twenty college credits that they can choose to put towards a longer education and skills development career pathway.

Why it works

Due to its small class size (between ten and twelve students per cohort) M-Powered can provide targeted training to students throughout the duration of the program. Additionally, HIREd works to assign a “Career Navigator” to each student—a trained individual who can help identify and reduce employment and educational challenges. Career Navigators have helped students find childcare, cover transportation costs, and strike the appropriate balance between work and academic instruction. The state-of-the-art training that M-Powered provides, coupled with one-on-one student support services has led to unparalleled program success rates. M-Powered participants can double their entry-level wages within five years of completing the program. Additionally, 97 percent of students were offered full-time employment after completing all three phases of the program.

To ensure ongoing program quality, M-Powered stakeholders have formed a board consisting of manufacturers and employers, Hennepin Technical College administrators, HIREd personnel, and representatives from the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development. During their regular meetings, board members review and discuss course curriculum, program outcomes, and funding mechanisms. The M-Powered program is currently funded through a variety of state and local grants.

Mopar Career Automotive Program (CAP) in Sugar Grove, Illinois

The automobile industry has become increasingly complex since the 1970s—a direct result of the expanding use of electricity and electronic devices in automotive technology. Due to this technological evolution, Chrysler Corporation recognized the need for targeted skills training, and selected five community colleges and universities nationwide to partner with in 1984.²⁷ As more employers became aware of these partnerships, dealer demand increased, resulting in the steady growth of participating colleges. Today, this training program is formally referred to as the Mopar College Automotive Program, or Mopar CAP.

In 2017, following the recognition of a regional automotive technician shortage, Waubensee Community College in Illinois entered into a partnership with Fiat Chrysler Automobiles (FCA) and the National Coalition of Certification Centers to establish Waubensee as a Mopar Local CAP training site. This program provides advanced training to students and prepares them to work as Level 1 Automotive Technicians upon graduation. While still in the beginning stages of operation, Mopar Local CAP at Waubensee Community College will help local dealerships fill the thousands of auto technician jobs that are expected to be available by the end of 2018.²⁸

To graduate as Level 1 technicians, students must complete a two-year associate degree program consisting of both hands-on training and classroom instruction. Throughout the program, students learn specific technologies used exclusively on Chrysler, Jeep, Dodge, Ram, and FIAT products. Trainees also have multiple opportunities to interact with experienced faculty and utilize industry standard state-of-the-art equipment in an 11,000 square foot automotive lab. Upon completion of this program, students are eligible to work as Level 1 Automotive Technicians and can choose to enroll in additional training or pursue employment at FCA dealerships.

Why it works

The Mopar CAP program model is tried and true—one that has been recognized as valuable by multiple automotive employers since its inception. While the training model itself is longstanding, Waubensee Community College’s Mopar Local CAP program is the first of its kind in the state of Illinois. To ensure the success of this program, local stakeholders actively correspond and collaborate through a variety of meetings and events throughout the year; which can include business advisory meetings, automotive open houses, and community recruitment events. Because of these initiatives, the Mopar Local CAP program as a whole helps students network with industry experts and can lead to advanced training opportunities as well as long-term employment.



Postsecondary institutions across the country are changing to accommodate the increased demand for skilled workers by offering more career-oriented programs and collaborating with employers to develop and finance high-quality curriculum.

for partnerships—leaving state and local leaders to balance resources for partnership development against other priorities. Currently, overall funding for Title I of WIOA is approximately 40 percent below historical levels.¹⁵

Congress has also looked to federal higher education policy as a method of supporting partnerships between businesses and academic institutions. The Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, the most recent reauthorization of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA), authorized grants to institutions of higher education that partner with employers to provide job training in high-growth, high-wage industries and occupations.¹⁶ Despite the laudable intentions of this grant program, it has not been funded since its creation.¹⁷

Notably, the Republican-led House of Representatives included support for industry partnerships in their most recent HEA reauthorization bill, the PROSPER Act, which called for \$184 million per year over four years for partnerships between institutions of higher education and businesses to expand earn-and-learn models. While the PROSPER Act proposal was imperfect—as it missed the mark on ensuring equity among

small, mid-sized, and large businesses, overlooked the value of bringing multiple businesses and academic institutions to the table to form robust partnerships, and failed to recognize the importance of comprehensive support services for students participating in job training—it reflects the shared interest on both sides of the aisle in investing in these efforts.

HEA is once again due for a reauthorization. This is a crucial time to look at the components of successful community college-business partnerships, who they serve, their impact on today's economy, and how providing permanent and targeted funding for them at the federal level can improve our nation's workforce readiness.

Policy recommendations

As our economy evolves, it is crucial that our postsecondary education system progresses along with it. As we have seen, postsecondary institutions across the country are changing to accommodate the increased demand for skilled workers by offering more career-oriented programs and collaborating with employers to develop and finance high-quality

curriculum. However, federal higher education policy has not been updated to meet the needs of today's students and employers.

As we are presented with a chance to reauthorize the HEA, we must consider making it more amenable to preparing students to succeed in today's workforce, responsive to the needs of employers, and ensure that it helps to close the skills gap. Congress should consider:

Providing targeted funding to successful partnerships between community colleges and businesses

The first step to making our higher education policy work better for all students is to invest in community and technical colleges. Community colleges across the nation work with industries every day to provide high-quality training and academic instruction to future workers. However, Congress has not invested in these community college-business partnerships at a scale that would sustain economic competitiveness since the expiration of the TAACCCT grant program in FY 2014.

Due to the proven impact of community college-business partnerships, we would strongly support any effort by Congress to increase the resources available for these collaboration models by providing academic institutions and businesses with competitive grant funding so that they can continue to work together to deliver valuable educational or career training programs to students and workers. These grants should help facilitate:

- ◆ Participation of multiple employers connected to a local or regional in-demand industry;
- ◆ Development of industry-responsive course curriculum and purchase of equipment for hands-on training;
- ◆ Recruitment of non-traditional or underrepresented student populations with the goal of diversifying talent pipelines and ensuring that job opportunities in in-demand industries are broadly available;
- ◆ Collaboration with multiple partners, including adult education providers, labor management partnerships, WDBs, and CBOs, to leverage additional resources and meet the needs of students and employers;
- ◆ Alignment across other investments in workforce development, such as WIOA and the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act to minimize duplication and overlap in federal programs.

Additionally, Congress should consider supplementing targeted grants for industry partnerships with other policy initiatives, such as establishing a permanent fund for student support services that can help non-traditional students persist and succeed in higher education; increasing the transparency of postsecondary education data by collecting employment, earnings and credential attainment metrics; and extending federal financial aid to students who enroll in high-quality, short-term training programs that lead to industry recognized credentials.

Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/2017-middle-skills-fact-sheets/file/United-States-MiddleSkills.pdf>
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