



Centering Students in Employer Engagement

An Equity-Focused Field Guide for Community Colleges and Intermediaries

AT A GLANCE

This step-by-step guide serves as a resource for colleges and intermediaries looking to adopt an equity lens for employer engagement efforts. We propose a new approach for industry partnerships that centers student needs and outcomes, emphasizing job quality and equitable economic advancement above all else. Additionally, we provide reflection questions and a fillable action plan as supports for institutions implementing an equity-focused employer engagement strategy

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About JFF

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About Lumina Foundation

Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation in Indianapolis committed to making opportunities for learning beyond high school available to all. We envision higher learning that is easy to navigate, addresses racial injustice, and meets the nation's talent needs through a broad range of credentials. We are working toward a system that prepares people for informed citizenship and success in a global economy.



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Executive summary

This field guide provides community colleges with a new approach to employer engagement. Traditionally, community colleges seeking partnerships have placed the employer and its needs first. This document adopts an equity lens that centers the needs and outcomes of learners. For industry partnerships to facilitate student success, they must always be in service of equitable economic mobility for learners. The purpose of this resource is to support colleges in creating and implementing an equity-centered employer engagement strategy through the following step-by-step actions:



Build an Equitable Employer Engagement Infrastructure

- Evaluate Existing Data
- Create Equity-Focused Employer Engagement Goals
- Allocate Resources to Support Equitable Employer Engagement
- Facilitate Internal Collaboration for Identifying and Cultivating Impact Employers



Develop Partnerships With Impact Employers

- Identify a Bilateral Value Proposition
- Connect with DEI-Focused Employer Leads
- Schedule a Discovery Meeting
- Present Targeted Equity-Centered Solutions
- Formalize a Mutually Beneficial Partnership



Drive Impact Through Sustained Engagement

- Invest in Ongoing Partnership Management
- Track Progress on Equity Outcomes Transparently
- Promote Equity through Policy and Systems Change

As they use the guide, colleges can turn learning into action with the help of the supplied [Equity-Centered Employer Engagement Action Plan](#). This fillable template assists college representatives in reflecting on their current employer engagement efforts and outlines actions they might take to proactively center student outcomes in their approach to industry partnerships. With the help of these resources, colleges can update their practices to better align with their mission and support learners in obtaining quality jobs that facilitate equitable economic advancement.

Introduction

Much remains to be done before the workforce ecosystem can ensure equitable economic mobility for all. Over half of the U.S. labor force—92 million people, who are disproportionately Black or Latine—are stuck in low-quality jobs with inadequate access to family-sustaining wages or advancement opportunities.

Community colleges play a critical role in providing learners with the training, credentials, and employer connections needed for economic advancement. Strong partnerships with employers are crucial aids for learners to both land quality jobs and succeed in them, but they can do that only if community colleges approach these relationships with a learner-centered equity lens. All too often, employer needs are prioritized at the expense of student needs, with the result that learners are relegated to low-wage jobs with no pathways to advancement. When that is the case, the partnership cannot be a true engine of economic advancement. Colleges must challenge existing paradigms for employer engagement and put student needs and opportunity first.

The goal of this guide is to support community colleges in conceptualizing and implementing a learner-centered, equity-focused employer engagement strategy. It is divided into three sections:



Build an Equitable Employer Engagement Infrastructure



Develop Partnerships with Impact Employers



Drive Impact Through Sustained Engagement

The approach advocated by this guide is informed by best practices identified through the [Workforce Equity Initiative](#) (WEI), a 2019–2023 Illinois grant program that funded the development of short-term credentialing programs with associated wraparound supports at 18 community colleges. WEI focused on increasing opportunities for learners of color, particularly Black learners, with the goal to connect learners to jobs that pay 30% above living wage in that community or region. This guide features case studies on employer engagement successes of two of those colleges.

The ultimate goal of this guide is to inspire action. To that end, each section concludes with reflection questions that link to a fillable template. Colleges can use this action plan to map their employer engagement progress. While the step-by-step action recommendations are tailored to community colleges, many of them are applicable to other intermediaries. Users of this resource can lead the way in leveraging learner-centric industry partnerships to drive equitable economic advancement.



Build an Equitable Employer Engagement Infrastructure

Before seeking to develop or redefine relationships with local employers, it is crucial that community colleges take time to build the internal infrastructure required to ensure that employer engagement is strategic, coordinated, and student-centered. This section is designed to support colleges in developing such an infrastructure through the following steps:

- Evaluate existing data
- Create equity-focused employer engagement goals
- Allocate resources to support equitable employer engagement
- Facilitate internal collaboration for identifying and cultivating impact employers

Colleges will benefit from using the corresponding, first section of the [Equity-Centered Employer Engagement Action Plan](#) to reflect on progress and formulate next steps.



Evaluate Existing Data

To purposefully engage employers in a manner that centers students' needs, community colleges must first understand what those needs are and the extent to which the college is currently meeting them. Data analysis is critical for providing administrators with an objective lens for understanding student and institutional outcomes. Each of the following types of data is valuable input for informing employer engagement decisions:

- **Disaggregated outcome data:** A community college's mission is to do much more than enroll and graduate students. If its learners are not securing jobs that provide family-sustaining wages and advancement opportunities, a college is not succeeding at one of its core duties. For this reason, colleges must regularly collect and analyze data on student and alumni job placement, wages, retention, and advancement. Colleges must then disaggregate this data by gender, race, and ethnicity to determine whether it is achieving equitable outcomes across demographic groups. When colleges observe disparities between group outcomes, it is important that they get curious about the reasons. Are any employers providing fewer opportunities to students and alumni of certain demographic groups? Do some course offerings lead to better employment outcomes for one demographic group over others? Such questions might be answered by further disaggregating data by employer and course of study.
- **Learner and employer input:** Some student needs such as family-sustaining wages are fairly apparent to administrators, but others might not be known without consulting the students. Colleges must analyze survey data to understand the kinds of roles learners are looking for and their experience with the various employer partners while ensuring that respondent demographics are representative of the college as a whole. Data gathered from interviews and focus groups can also fill in gaps and provide a more complete picture of the student experience. Similarly, colleges need to study employers' survey, focus group, and interview data to learn the extent to which various courses of study have adequately prepared graduates for successful careers.
- **Labor-market information:** While listening to both students and employers about their needs is crucial, colleges will need to do research on labor-market trends to prepare for changes that the future will bring. Online resources such as [Lightcast](#) and [Reference Solutions](#) can be helpful in these efforts, as can building relationships with local economic development offices and talking with employer partners, who may have insight into local and regional nuances that may not be captured by national resources. Accurately forecasting labor-market trends will help colleges more effectively target employers that are hiring for in-demand roles that offer family-sustaining wages



If an examination of the data that is collected reveals gaps, the college should make a plan for who will capture the missing information and how they will do it. Data should inform not only employer engagement, but also curriculum development, staffing, and student support services. In addition, data collection should be coordinated across departments to ensure that the college has reliable, representative data that will better enable it to meet its goals for equitable workforce outcomes.

The data analysis will likely also elucidate areas where the college has fallen short of its goals for equitable student success. Any such shortfalls should be candidly acknowledged so they can be properly addressed and so the college can continue to make progress.

The next step focuses on how colleges can use what they have learned from their data evaluation to develop an equitable employer engagement strategy.

Create Equity-Focused Employer Engagement Goals

Once community colleges have evaluated their data and taken stock of how their existing employer engagement efforts influence student success, it is time to set transparent, data-informed goals to achieve more equitable outcomes. The SMARTIE goal framework can be useful for helping colleges hold themselves accountable for ensuring students secure quality jobs. SMARTIE goals encompass these qualities:

Specific	Colleges will only accomplish their goals if they are specific about who is responsible and what they must do.
Measurable	By setting quantifiable targets, colleges can track progress and adjust course to make sure they reach their goals.
Achievable	While goals should be bold and ambitious, they must also be realistic so that colleges do not abandon them.
Relevant	Goals should address barriers to student success revealed by the college's data analysis.
Timebound	Firm deadlines for goal completion are essential for tracking progress.
Inclusive	Goals should meet the needs of all students, with special attention to those facing systemic barriers.
Equitable	Goals should also seek to address disparities and disrupt the systems and power structures that are creating barriers to student success.



As an example of how the framework can be employed, a college whose data reveals that current employer partners are not adequately committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) might set the following SMARTIE goal:

In the next year [timebound], the employer relations team [specificity about responsibility] will offer DEI training [inclusive and equitable] to all current employer partners [specificity about how], including a DEI action-planning process [relevant] through which employers can demonstrate a commitment [measurable] to implementing DEI practices. The college will suspend student referrals to employers that do not engage in this process within 12 months [achievable].

Or, if a college's data shows that students are not advancing within current partner companies, it might set the following SMARTIE goal:

In the next 18 months, the employer relations team will formalize partnerships with 20 new companies that have taken consistent, demonstrable DEI-related actions and are hiring for roles that are aligned to college curricula and associated with documented pathways to advancement.

In addition to targeting students' articulated needs, colleges should always align SMARTIE goals with existing strategic or DEI plans. Such alignment will help ensure that the goals and plans become institutional priorities that receive the buy-in, funding, and staffing support needed to succeed.



Allocate Resources to Support Equitable Employer Engagement

To achieve the SMARTIE goals they set for employer engagement, colleges will need to designate a department or office to take charge of employer engagement, and they must ensure that this employer relations office is adequately resourced. Institution-wide budgets and funding applications should include line items that support employer engagement, including but not limited to the following areas:



Staffing



Data management



Marketing and outreach activities
(including memberships in business
and industry associations)



Technology
(a customer relationship management
platform, or CRM)

Employer relations offices would ideally dedicate at least one full-time staff member to employer engagement or, in some cases, two part-time staff members. Two employees may be necessary if one does not have both the relationship-building and follow-through skills that are needed in equal parts. A person with a sales background, for example, who excels at generating leads and courting new partners would make a good match with someone who has a program development background and can ensure that partnerships are meeting employers' talent needs and providing equitable economic mobility for learners.

As important as it is to have an employer relations office, successful employer engagement efforts extend far beyond it. Collaboration with faculty and staff across departments is crucial to ensure that employer engagement is widely viewed as inseparable from the college's mission to drive student success.

Facilitate Internal Collaboration for Identifying and Cultivating Equitable Employers

The employer relations office is unlikely to be the only community college department with employer relationships. Faculty often develop their own industry connections for work-based learning purposes, and administrative offices such as development, recruitment, and alumni services also interact with employers. Additionally, many college board members might hold leadership positions in local industry. To benefit from all those connections, colleges must intentionally develop processes for coordinating employer engagement efforts across stakeholder groups. Best practices include the following:

- **Forming an employer engagement steering committee:** A centralized body with cross-organizational representation can help ensure that employer engagement becomes an institution-wide priority and not the exclusive province of the employer relations office. Employer relations representatives should seek the participation of well-networked faculty, board members, and staff from community-facing offices, including workforce development. The steering committee should also include student and alumni representatives from a variety of demographics to ensure that employer engagement efforts meet student needs.
- **Developing employer engagement training:** The steering committee will have limited membership, but it is important that all faculty, staff, administrators, and board members receive training on employer engagement so that everyone in the college community views equitable employment outcomes as a core component of student success, which in turn is a necessary component of the college's success. Additionally, everyone at the college should be equipped with basic talking points that they can use when they meet employer representatives in the community, and they should understand the process for connecting industry contacts to the employer relations team.
- **Implementing a CRM platform:** As colleges engage more effectively with employers, their employer networks will become more robust, and they may need to develop a plan for relationship management. A CRM such as Salesforce can help employer engagement efforts stay organized. CRMs help track each employer's contact information, partnership status, and college contacts. They are also useful for optimizing communication with employers, so that they are neither neglected nor overwhelmed with requests from different departments. If the college's budget cannot accommodate a CRM, it might be able to improvise by using a shared spreadsheet to track employer contacts and communications, but it must take steps to ensure that cross-departmental engagement efforts are coordinated rather than disconnected.

The following case study highlights Parkland College's successful adoption of several of the strategies listed above. Following the reflection questions for this first section of this guide, the next section will focus on leveraging the kinds of creative, DEI-centered strategies employed by Parkland to move employer engagement off campus and into the community.



CASE STUDY

The Power of Coordination: The Parkland College Employer Engagement Steering Committee

Having determined that a lack of coordination of its employer engagement efforts was affecting its ability to drive equitable student success, Parkland College in Champaign, Illinois, invited key stakeholders to join a collegewide employer engagement steering committee. The committee was spearheaded by the college's Advisory Council for Accessibility, Inclusion, and Diversity and its Support for Workforce Training program, both of which shared the goals of strengthening cross-campus collaboration on inclusivity initiatives and building external relationships to propel student success. With the overarching objective of improving student employment outcomes, the steering committee focused on developing common messaging protocols and shared processes for employer engagement with the entire campus community.

Parkland identified two major barriers to building and maintaining industry partnerships: missing information and poor cross-departmental communication. With that in mind, the steering committee focused on records management to streamline employer engagement. Because the education department already used Salesforce, a popular CRM, the committee worked with the department to extend licenses to key personnel from several academic and administrative departments. Parkland is currently working to formalize its protocols for Salesforce use and employer communication to ensure consistency across campus.

While the Salesforce expansion was underway, the committee spurred the college to partner with Parkland Community Education and the Champaign County Economic Development Corporation to conduct a series of DEI training sessions for local businesses. That training helped the college build mutually beneficial relationships with employers, which found that implementing DEI practices helped them attract and retain workers while creating more inclusive workplaces that could benefit the college's students and alumni.



Reflection Questions

- What data does your college currently collect that could inform equitable employer engagement goals? What data is missing, and how might your college go about collecting it?
- Based on current data, identify a few areas where the college might be falling short of its goals to engage employers in service to equitable learner success. What kinds of SMARTIE goals might help drive equitable employer engagement progress? How might these efforts advance the DEI activities at your institution?
- Create a draft budget covering the staffing, materials, and activities you will need to achieve your SMARTIE goals. How might you go about securing additional funding for equitable employer engagement?
- Make a list of students, alumni, faculty, staff, administrators, and board members that may have access to employer connections. How might you align messaging and outreach processes across stakeholders for a more coordinated and strategic engagement approach?





Develop Partnerships with Impact Employers

While building a strategic, coordinated, and student-centered infrastructure is crucial for equitable employer engagement, the internal focus required to do that must eventually be shifted to an external focus on developing relationships with impact employers—companies that center workers' social and economic well-being. This can be done by taking the following actions:

- Identify a bilateral value proposition.
- Connect with DEI-focused employer leads.
- Conduct on-site discovery meeting.
- Present targeted, equity-centered solutions.
- Formalize a mutually beneficial partnership.

Readers of this section will benefit from using the corresponding, second section of the [Equity-Centered Employer Engagement Action Plan](#) to reflect on progress and formulate next steps.

Identify a Bilateral Value Proposition

All too often, community colleges bring a customer service mindset to employer engagement, privileging the employer's needs above all else. Equitable employer engagement, however, requires a partnership mindset. Employers should still feel that the relationship is benefiting them, but those benefits must be balanced with jobs and work-based learning opportunities that set up students and alumni for equitable economic mobility. The value proposition for a college/industry partnership must be bilateral.

That means that colleges should not seek partnerships with every employer that shows interest. Colleges cannot succeed at their mission if their offerings have not prepared students of all backgrounds for jobs with family-sustaining wages and advancement opportunities. Therefore, they must ensure that employer partners offer roles and a workplace culture that will facilitate student and alumni economic advancement.

In short, colleges must seek out impact employers that offer quality jobs.

What we refer to as “impact employers” view workers’ economic and social well-being as a core business priority. (Colleges can consult [JFF’s Impact Employer Talent Framework](#) to learn more about actions that these companies take to put their workers first.) Impact employers prioritize offering quality jobs— jobs that provide workers the pay, benefits, flexibility, autonomy, stability, and advancement opportunities they need to thrive. (Colleges can reference [JFF’s Quality Jobs Framework](#) for further detail on job-quality criteria.) While it is important to note that job quality exists on a spectrum and that few companies will score perfectly on all criteria, no college should partner with an employer that does not signal that continuously improving job quality is a priority.

At the same time, colleges must identify the value they can bring to employers. Generally, colleges can provide the skilled talent employers need to grow their business. The following talking points may be useful for colleges in thinking through the college’s value proposition:

- The United States already does not have the working-age population to keep up with employer demand, and according to the [World Bank](#), the number of people of working age in the United States will continue to decline, by more than 3% over the next decade. Companies need reliable sources of skilled talent to ensure continued growth.
- Colleges can connect employers to demographically diverse talent, and companies with diverse labor forces perform better. [McKinsey research](#) shows that top-quartile companies for gender diversity were 15% more likely to have financial returns above industry medians and that top-quartile companies for racial and ethnic diversity were 35% more likely to do so.
- Colleges can provide training that is tailored to employers’ needs.
- Colleges can help employers to provide workers with [wraparound](#) supports and access to resources that enhance social capital, services that can help companies retain workers. (See the “Present Targeted, Equity-Centered Solutions” section for more information.)

It must be repeated, however, that colleges must never try to meet an employer’s needs in a way that compromises its commitment to student well-being. Instead, they should emphasize that the investments they ask companies to make in their employees are part of a win-win proposition: The employer wins by being better able to retain diverse top talent, thereby increasing its bottom line, while students and alumni win with jobs that support their economic advancement.



Connect with DEI-Focused Employer Leads

Not all companies are impact employers, so colleges need to be strategic about how they generate industry leads. An excellent resource for identifying impact employers is the college's current internal and external partners. Faculty, staff, board members, alumni, and administrators all have an excellent understanding of the college's mission and values, and many of them can introduce the outreach team to companies in their network that share those values. External parties such as current employer partners, economic development organizations, and other community partners can likely help point colleges in the right direction as well.

Networking events can also be an opportunity to meet prospective employers face to face. Attending events hosted by local chambers of commerce or chapters of the Society for Human Resource Management can help

colleges connect directly with industry leaders and talent-management professionals.

DEI-focused events in particular can help colleges identify companies with shared values.

If it is felt that such outreach is missing specific industries and locations, cold-emailing prospects is another option. Business-to-business databases such as [ZoomInfo](#) can help colleges search for employers by location, industry, size, and even identify potential contacts.

Most companies' websites will provide clues to the extent of the firm's commitment to the values shared by impact employers and can be an initial screen for determining which employers share the college's goal of equitable economic advancement. After doing that initial research, employer relations staff can prioritize outreach accordingly.

Large companies will probably have a director of human resources or a head of talent acquisition, but the best contact for initial outreach at small companies or branches may be a local general manager. A director of DEI efforts may be particularly receptive to initial outreach, but it's important to ensure that the company's hiring team eventually joins the conversation.

Conduct On-Site Discovery Meeting

Whether colleges connect to employers through other partners, networking events, or cold calls, all introductions should lead to a discovery meeting. The goal of a discovery meeting is for college representatives to learn more about the company's background, values, and talent needs in order to assess how the company's values and goals align with the college's. Colleges should be flexible and accommodating with employers, but only to the extent that there is no compromise of the college's commitment to facilitating learner success through the achievement of its equity-focused employer engagement goals. The discovery meeting is an early opportunity to see whether an employer demonstrates an adequate commitment to DEI or job quality, and it is better to know that up front rather than moving forward with a partnership that could hurt student outcomes.

The following steps will help colleges make a good first impression on employers while also helping both parties discern whether a partnership will be mutually beneficial:

- **Before the meeting:** Colleges should research the company and its industry to understand market demands, emerging trends, competitors, and opportunities for future growth. Employer relations representatives should also think through which programs at the college might benefit the employer and go to the discovery meeting with the relevant information at hand.
- **During the meeting:** Employer relations representatives should use the Discovery Meeting Guide in Appendix A of this field guide. It is a tool for helping them learn more about the company's culture, talent needs, and commitment to job quality. To better ensure that the college gets the information it needs about a company and its ability to help meet the college's equity-focused employer engagement goals, the college should tailor their questions to its own circumstances and the particulars about the company.





Different companies will require different levels of focus in topics such as wage ranges, benefits, career pathways, schedules, employee autonomy, and other elements of job quality. During the meeting, employer relations representatives should listen attentively, ask thoughtful questions, and demonstrate value to the employer by introducing potential programmatic offerings that could address articulated workforce needs.

- **Closing the meeting:** By the end of the meeting, the college and employer should agree on next steps and a timeline and set a date for their next meeting. If the college's representatives sense insufficient value and goal alignment to move forward, they should politely inform the employer about that, while not closing the door to a future partnership. For example, they could say, "Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with us today. While it sounds as if the wages your company is offering do not currently align with our students' needs, please let us know if wages increase so that we can further explore partnerships."
- **After the meeting:** Quick follow-through on to-do items is essential for colleges to build trust with employers.

The next section discusses how colleges can build on momentum from the discovery meeting to develop customized offerings that meet companies' workforce needs.

Present Targeted, Equity-Centered Solutions

In meetings subsequent to the discovery meeting, the college will need to continually make the case that its students and programs can bring value to the employer. To do this more effectively, employer relations representatives need to engage other faculty and staff to determine what courses, training, and work-based learning opportunities the college can realistically offer employers that fit in with their articulated talent needs. Once again, it must be emphasized that although it is important to accommodate employers when developing partnerships, colleges should never do so at the expense of student outcomes. If an employer pushes for offerings that do not support student success or help the college meet its equity-focused employer engagement goals, it must be met with a firm no.

Some common equity-centered solutions that colleges should consider include these:

- **Revise existing curricula to align with employer needs:** This is a win-win for students and employers. Curricula revisions demonstrate that colleges are responsive to employer needs while ensuring that college offerings provide labor-market value for learners.
- **Create customized curricula:** If labor-market data indicates that an industry will generate a growing number of quality jobs in the coming years, colleges should consider collaborating with potential employer

partners to develop customized curricula, credentials, and training to prepare learners for those roles. An additional value-add is providing training in employability skills to better prepare students to succeed in a variety of workplaces. (See the case study of Richland Community College at the end of this section for an example.)

- **Develop a curriculum advisory committee:** Including employers on such a committee so that they can formally advise on curriculum development will help companies see that colleges take the industry's workforce needs seriously while also providing the college with the industry input required for accreditation. It is also important to include students from a variety of backgrounds on this committee so as to understand learners' needs.
- **Coordinate work-based learning opportunities:** Work-based learning gives students valuable on-the-job experience while providing companies with the opportunity to develop talent according to their needs. Colleges can provide the related technical instruction required for Registered Apprenticeship programs and ensure that learners receive the industry-recognized credentials that companies require.
- **Support employers' DEI efforts:** While colleges should work only with those employers that demonstrate a commitment to DEI, some companies will be further along than others in implementing DEI-

related best practices. Colleges can serve as thought partners and subject-matter experts, offering DEI training to employers (as in the Parkland College case study in the previous section of this guide) and providing feedback from learners on how companies can increase their sense of inclusion and belonging. This investment in DEI will help employers retain talent and build a culture in which learners can thrive.

- **Connect employers to wraparound supports:** Often, challenges outside of work present the biggest barriers to learners' workplace success. By connecting employers to organizations that provide wraparound support services, colleges support retention, performance, and growth, benefiting both employers and learners. Colleges should focus on introducing employers to community-based and faith-based organizations (CBOs and FBOs) that provide transportation, childcare, and support for mental, social, and financial well-being. Additionally,

colleges can leverage their extensive alumni networks to help companies build mentorship programs. These kinds of programs are especially beneficial to Black learners in gaining the social capital required for ongoing growth and advancement. (For more information, colleges can reference [JFF's Professional Social Capital Framework](#).)

Colleges have much to offer employers, including talent, training, and supportive services. Likewise, employers can play an essential role in helping community colleges to achieve their mission by providing quality jobs that facilitate equitable economic advancement. By offering employers a tailored suite of equity-centered solutions, colleges plant the seeds for a long-term, win-win partnership. The following case study highlights an example of a new program implemented by Richland Community College in response to student and employer needs, illustrating the kind of creative, win-win solution that colleges should develop.





Case Study

Building Self-Efficacy: Richland Community College's Trauma-Informed Employability Skills Program

Richland Community College in Decatur, Illinois, realized that symptoms of post-traumatic stress can affect learners' employment outcomes, so they developed a trauma-informed, culturally sensitive employability skills program.

Workplace incidents can trigger past trauma. An overly critical boss, insensitive coworkers, or a high-stress work environment are examples of potential triggers. Unfortunately, employers often see workers' responses to trauma as disruptive behavior and a character flaw deserving punishment. Among employers that might recognize that trauma is at the root of these behaviors, very few have the language and tools to help their workers heal.

Richland's employability skills program helps learners develop the tools and strategies to cope with a variety of adverse workplace scenarios. The 74-hour program teaches DEI-related skills and equips learners with knowledge about how to de-escalate conflict, including with supervisors. The program's success comes from being highly relational. Instructors are committed to building community among participants and creating a culture of inclusion and belonging.

As of September 2023, 2,345 people had gone through the program, 81% of whom were Black and 55% of whom had been involved in the criminal legal system. Nearly 92% of program participants were still employed six months after program completion, far surpassing the rates for similar programs. Due to the success of the program, Richland has since partnered with several employers to offer it to their incumbent workers. The program has been particularly beneficial for inherently high-stress industries such as health care, where self-efficacy and coping strategies can increase retention and growth.

Formalize a Mutually Beneficial Partnership

Once terms have been agreed to, colleges must formalize partnerships with employers through a memorandum of understanding, ensuring that both parties are aligned on goals and expectations. Colleges can use JFF's report [The MOU: A Tool for Formalizing Partnerships](#), which includes guidance on MOU development and sample templates for adaptation.

Because disaggregated data is crucial to their ability to measure progress on equitable employer engagement goals, colleges should ensure that the MOU has a data-sharing component. Both parties must be clear on the types of data requested, processes for reporting missing data, and policies regarding data storage, sharing, access, confidentiality, and destruction.

Once an MOU is signed, the real work of solution implementation begins. The next section focuses on sustaining and deepening employer engagement to ensure solutions drive long-term, equitable, student-centered impact.



Reflection Questions

- What might be your college's bilateral value proposition for building partnerships with impact employers?
- What current partnerships, events and industry association memberships can you leverage to generate impact employer leads?
- What information does your college need from a discovery meeting to determine whether a company can help you meet your equitable employer engagement goals? To gather this information, what questions should you ask employers?
- What kinds of equity-centered solutions might your college be able to offer employers? How can you ensure that these solutions meet student needs as well?
- What types of data will your college need to collect to track progress on its equitable employer engagement goals? How will you write data sharing into your MOUs with employers?



Drive Impact Through Sustained Engagement

Employer engagement efforts must be sustained to generate real impact. Colleges can translate industry partnerships into demonstrable progress on equitable employer engagement goals through the following actions:

- Invest in ongoing partnership management
- Transparently track progress on equity outcomes
- Promote equity through policy and systems change

Readers of this section will benefit from using the corresponding, third section of the [Equity-Centered Employer Engagement Action Plan](#) to reflect on progress and formulate next steps.

Invest in Ongoing Partnership Management

After a college and an employer have signed their partnership MOU, the college must continue to invest in the relationship to ensure long-term effectiveness. A college with poor partnership management can burn through employers and miss chances to connect learners to valuable employment opportunities. By following through on commitments and helping employers train, source, and support talent, colleges can build the trust and credibility required to effectively deliver difficult feedback and help improve employer DEI and job-quality practices over time.

One important step is for the college to transition the character of its partnerships from person-to-person to organization-to-organization. A partnership between two organizations that is based on a strong relationship between two people can easily fizzle out should one person leave their job. Employer relations staff members will likely own most employer relationships, but they should regularly connect the employers to faculty and staff who can facilitate industry input into curricula and work-based learning opportunities.

As described in the Parkland College case study in the first section of this guide, a steering committee and CRM can help colleges coordinate contacts with employers' staff members as an increasing number of faculty and staff become involved.

At the same time, colleges should encourage their contacts within companies to engage with several company employees, including those representing talent acquisition, learning and development, and DEI, as well as relevant executives and hiring managers.

Communications with employers should be relational, not transactional. Colleges can reach out to employers when they need something but should also share wins, send event invites, say thank you, and extend offers to include the employer in social media posts. Additionally, colleges should ask for feedback regularly so that they can continuously improve solutions to meet employer needs. By demonstrating a willingness to adapt based on employer feedback, colleges open the door to conversations on how the employer can better facilitate learners' equitable economic advancement.

Transparently Track Progress on Equity Outcomes

The only way for colleges to know whether or not their employer engagement efforts are leading to student success is through ongoing data collection and analysis. Colleges should document the data necessary to track SMARTIE goal progress, learner employment rates, wages, six-month retention, and promotions. They should also disaggregate this data by various learner demographics, such as race, ethnicity, and gender, to ensure equity across groups, and by employer to identify which companies are best facilitating student success.

To ensure trust and accountability, employer relations personnel must share this data transparently across campus and beyond. Data should be available on the college's intranet, and the employer relations office should send out regular collegewide updates on SMARTIE goal progress. Additionally, colleges should build and regularly update an externally facing data dashboard so companies can view outcomes. Current employer partners will appreciate being able to tout wins within their company, and prospective partners will see evidence of successful partnerships. Most importantly, discussing data with employers can lead to continuous improvement, deepening the partnership and furthering impact on student and employee outcomes.



Promote Equity Through Policy and Systems Change

There are several policy barriers to learner success that can be overcome only with a systems approach, but colleges can use their relationships with employer partners to effect change. Collectively, employers have the power to influence legislators, and colleges that have built strong relationships with employers have the power to influence them. The nature of advocacy efforts will vary based on the policies in question and the distinct needs of various demographic groups, but any policy change effort should be grounded in learners' articulated needs, with learner input at every step of the process. Examples of policy reform that could benefit from employer engagement include the following:

- Revising occupational licensing requirements to remove unnecessary degrees, credentials, or coursework that limit equitable access to the industry
- Passing “clean slate” legislation that facilitates expungement of certain criminal records, removing a significant barrier to quality jobs for learners impacted by the criminal legal system
- Advocating for additional funding to expand bus routes between major employers and areas where large numbers of Black learners live

In seeking any policy change, employer relations personnel should engage the college's legislative affairs officer or team and build coalitions across the learn-and-work ecosystem. Employer engagement is a crucial piece of system change, but widespread ecosystem collaboration is imperative to redesign the systems that affect learner and worker economic mobility.



Reflection Questions

- What partnership management practices might your college put in place to ensure that employer relationships result in sustained impact?
- What processes can your college devise for collecting, analyzing, and sharing data on SMARTIE goal progress during equitable employer engagement?
- What systemic barriers have learners at your college identified as most detrimental to their employment success? How can you create a feedback loop for input from learners and workers? How might you mobilize employers to advocate for policy change addressing these barriers?

Conclusion

Current labor-market conditions present community colleges with an opportunity. Employers are increasingly struggling to find the talent they need for sustained growth now that baby boomers are retiring and the population that is of workforce age is decreasing. Colleges that effectively market their ability to train, source, and support talent will be seen as valuable partners by employers.

And as valuable partners, colleges will have the leverage to demand that any partnership do more than simply meet the employer's needs. Colleges should always foreground their own mission of facilitating student success and only agree to partnerships that center learner needs. Employer engagement is fruitless if colleges place learners in low-wage jobs without advancement potential or subject them to biased, non-inclusive workplace cultures. By flipping the script on typical business-centered employer engagement, this guide has set forth a new approach to industry partnerships that prioritizes student outcomes.

That includes building an equitable employer engagement infrastructure. In light of the Supreme Court's ruling striking down race-based affirmative action in higher education, colleges must hold themselves accountable for finding other means of driving equitable student success. By developing partnerships with impact employers and driving impact through sustained engagement, colleges can leverage industry connections into equitable economic advancement for learners and workers.

Colleges can take action by following the step-by-step guidance outlined in this field guide and implementing the practices they reflect on in their [action plan](#).



Appendix A:

Discovery Meeting Guide

- Have you ever connected with someone from our college before? Whom did you meet with, and how long ago was that? What were the results of that engagement?
- Tell me about your company in the [insert industry sector] ecosystem. What vendors or partners are part of your supply chain? Who are your competitors? In what ways do you partner with your competitors?
- What are your greatest workforce challenges? What is the most difficult position to keep filled in your company? Why do you think employees don't stay in that position for very long? Why do you think it is difficult to find the talent for this position? Note for colleges: Question generalized assumptions such as "No one wants to work anymore" and note elements of job quality that may be lacking in their workplace.
- What have you tried already that seemed to work well? What have you tried that did not seem to work? What were the barriers to success?
- Tell me about your workplace culture. Is DEI a priority? What kinds of supports for employees exist?
- Tell me about your process for recruiting, onboarding, and training new talent. How are you assessing the skills of new hires? Where are you sourcing talent now? What reciprocal benefits are included?
- What pathways and skills training are available at your company for developing the talent you have already? What other retention strategies are you using?
- What training needs do you have? If I asked others within your company this same question, what would they say?
- Pre-pandemic to now, have your workforce needs changed? How and in what ways? Are you using recruitment and retention strategies that are different from those you used before the pandemic?
- Is your workforce unionized? Do workers participate in work-based learning programs such as Registered Apprenticeships or engage in other formalized training? Do you recruit from your local workforce board?



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That Works
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