

Local College Partnerships in Education Benefit Programs

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It is not surprising that many national companies choose to partner with large, predominantly online colleges and universities through their tuition benefit programs. These institutions, including Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU), Purdue University Global, Western Governors University (WGU), and others, have models that are appealing to working learners and have internal operations that are appealing to employers. These institutions are bending the curve in higher education innovation, with some offering exclusively competency-based education, which enables students to progress at the speed of learning rather than time, and most offering frequent start times, shorter terms, and progressive transfer policies for those with previous higher education experience.

Further, whether companies self-administer their education benefit programs or use an intermediary, these comprehensive institutions offer the opportunity to negotiate once on behalf of thousands of students rather than working with many institutions.

These models have been buoyed by dramatic shifts in how students and employers think about online education. Bucking the [trends reported](#) by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, showing declines in enrollment across both four-year institutions and community colleges, predominantly online institutions have [continued to grow](#). The pandemic hastened higher education's adoption of substantive online programming, with nearly all recent graduates in the last couple years having completed at least a portion of their coursework online. Employers also [signaled shifts](#) in how they view online education, with 75% reporting they are more likely to hire applicants with online education since the pandemic and more hiring managers indicating that online learning is more important than before the pandemic.

But as important as these institutions are, and as attractive as they are to working learners, predominantly online institutions enroll only about [15%](#) of students. Community colleges, regional comprehensives, and flagship institutions continue to serve most learners. And some national employers are finding unique value in working with colleges and universities located in the places where their employees live and work.

While large companies like Amazon or Disney have employees in many locations, they also have areas with high concentrations of employees. In places like Phoenix, for example, Amazon's partnership with Maricopa Community Colleges enables the company's thousands of Phoenix employees to utilize its Career Choice program with a local institution, while also driving deeper connections and engagement between the company and the institution.

While there are consistently challenges in ensuring alignment between workforce needs and academic programming, local institutions are often more able to fine-tune their programs to specific local needs. This is particularly true for community colleges that often support preparation in career and technical education. Alamo Colleges in Bexar County, Texas, for example, has pursued an aggressive strategy to better prepare and support adult working

learners. The system is working directly with employers to develop microcredentials, enabling learners to demonstrate discrete skill sets in demand by local businesses.

Employers are also listening to their workers. There is [solid evidence](#) that students want to stay closer to home as they study on campus. Working learners often make decisions about college based more on “proximity to home and work,” according to the study, than on other factors. Black, Latino, and Native American students, as well as students from rural communities, are more likely to attend college closer to home due to “family responsibilities, cultural norms, or factors related to working while enrolled in school.” The median incoming freshman at a two-year public institution travels only eight miles between home and school; for four-year public institutions, that distance is 18 miles. Place clearly matters to many students – some employers have picked up on that.

Disney Aspire

The Walt Disney Company recently made news when it announced it would add two new local colleges in Southern California to its [Disney Aspire](#) program. Eligible employees, part- or full-time US employees who have completed 90 days of service, are now able to enroll in Cal State Fullerton and Fullerton College, located in Orange County. Disneyland Resort is the largest employer in Orange County with more than 34,000 employees. In Florida, Walt Disney World Resort employs approximately 75,000 people – Valencia College and the University of Central Florida partnered early to provide employees with local education opportunities.

The Disney team prioritizes several key factors in selecting institutional partners. In addition to connecting with locally respected institutions, the company seeks alignment with key business needs, such as hospitality, a mix of accessible and cost-effective partners, and minority-serving institutions.

The decision to keep adding local colleges to the roster of partner institutions was an easy one. “We’ve heard from our employees that there is an extra sense of motivation and pride in making the decision to return to school somewhere that you already know and love,” said Chris Trout, vice president of enterprise learning and development at Disney. “Our local network institutions are quite literally in our backyard, and many of our employees were already enrolled there. The decision to include them in Disney Aspire just made sense.”

Intentionality is at the core of Disney Aspire – every decision the company makes is designed to create the best opportunities for employees. Supporting local institutions is part of that opportunity calculation. “The program has to be intentional – it should remove the cost barriers to returning to school, and also be convenient and flexible,” Trout commented. “We have a large eligible base of employees (more than 85,000) and knew that to be successful at scale, we would need to make sure the program was multifaceted enough to accommodate the unique and varying needs of this diverse group.”

While Disney Aspire is focused on partnering with local institutions, its reach extends nationally. In the last year, the program has added the first in-network Historically Black College and University, North Carolina A&T, as well as the first in-network culinary-dedicated

institution, Johnson & Wales University. These institutions joined other local and national institutions that allow employees to participate in Disney Aspire no matter where in the US they are located.

The intentionality and flexibility in the model appear to be paying off for employees. Disney deserves accolades for its transparency in reporting inputs and outcomes for the program. Disney Aspire, which is facilitated in partnership with [Guild](#), currently enrolls more than 13,000 employees. Much is still being learned about utilization of education benefits offered by corporations, but existing research indicates that approximately 2-5% of eligible employees typically take part. With more than 85,000 employees across the US eligible to participate in Disney Aspire, Disney far exceeds that typical rate. Among program participants, over 2,500 have already been promoted within the company, indicating that the program is creating real mobility for learners and talent value for the company. Disney Aspire participants are also diverse – more than 50% identify as a person of color, and 60% identify as female.

With new local education options in California and strong existing options in Orlando, the program is likely to keep expanding its impact. Trout added: “Here at Disney, everybody was quick to agree that an opportunity existed to deepen our investment in this population and that Disney Aspire was the right way to do it. And now, just four years later, the ROI is so clear – Disney Aspire not only helps to elevate our employee experience, but it strengthens the local communities in which we operate, actively draws and retains valuable talent to our company, and increases engagement and productivity within our hourly employee population.”

Amazon Career Choice

Employers also value being able to provide options for their working learners, enabling employees to have the kind of postsecondary experience they want, whether that is online, hybrid, or fully on campus. Tammy Thieman, global program director for Career Choice at Amazon, commented, “By partnering with local colleges and universities, Career Choice participants can attend courses where it works best for them and their schedule, whether that’s in person at a college nearby or online. One of the things we try to do is remove barriers for our employees to participate in education.”

Amazon has fully invested in providing local options for its 750,000 US Career Choice-eligible employees. In addition to partnering with national institutions, including SNHU, WGU, Colorado State University Global, and National University, Amazon partners with a network of over 400 institutions selected both for their track records in serving adult students and their proximity to large employee populations. Amazon partners with both community colleges and four-year institutions through its college programming, working to create transfer pathways for employees who want to follow that route. Jeff Bulanda, senior manager who leads College and Foundations programming for Career Choice, commented, “We also recognize that our employees may want to pursue programs that may require an in-person component, such as nursing or skilled trades programs; therefore, we did not want to restrict academic programs to only those that can be completed fully online. We also see the value in

brand recognition of local colleges and universities and employer partnerships that local institutions may have cultivated that will support our employees in advancing their careers upon credential attainment.”

Amazon has employees in every state in the country, making its decision to partner with many local institutions unique. The decision to adopt this model was mission-aligned for Amazon. Thieman commented, “Amazon as a company is driven by our ‘customer obsession,’ and at Career Choice, our employees are our customer. We chose to partner with local institutions, in particular, in order to meet our employees where they are in their educational journey.”

Amazon employees are supported with prepaid tuition and reimbursement for fees and books up to an annual limit, and they can study through Amazon’s college program toward a credit-bearing certificate, associate degree, or bachelor’s degree in any subject. Hourly employees are eligible after only 90 days of employment. They can enroll part-time or full-time and can shift their work schedules based on enrollment. Thieman commented, “We already know Career Choice participants are working learners, and they’re more likely to have competing priorities outside of the classroom. By creating this expanded network of schools to choose from, we empower our employees to make the best choice for themselves and their families about where and when to attend courses to work toward their degree or credential.”

Supporting employees translates into supporting the community, even as it creates business value and meets the needs of working learners. The company views its investments through Career Choice as one way it serves as a responsible corporate partner. Thieman noted, “Career Choice is not only good for Amazon and our employees, but also for the communities where we operate. We take an active role in upskilling the talented people in these communities, and in turn, multiple stakeholders benefit from the investments we make. Helping upskill employees is a group project. Local employers can define the most in-demand skills. Local educators have experience and capability to teach these skills, and Amazon, as the third piece in the triangle, has a commitment to investing in upskilling entry-level talent. This collaboration builds strong communities, which is good for everyone involved.”

College Partner Insights

Local colleges and universities, especially those working through enrollment declines, are typically thrilled to work with employer education benefit programs, which represent both a new pipeline of students and, importantly, a new source of tuition revenue.

But not all local institutions are set up to work effectively with businesses, especially large, national employers that have high expectations and demands. Employers cited several challenges in working with local institutions (though they were always careful to note these do not describe all education partners).

A primary challenge is bureaucracy. Titles and responsibilities, especially for external partnerships, are different across institutions. Employers indicated frustration with finding the right person or people to talk to, as well as the frequent requirement to talk to the same

people multiple times. College partners recognize this challenge, as well. Ellen Treanor, associate vice president and chief communication officer at Cal State Fullerton, said, “It’s an easier thing to do online. It’s hard to figure out how to do this in person, on the ground, close to home. It shouldn’t be this hard. Why should it be this hard when we’re neighbors?”

Employers also noted capacity challenges that impact speed, turnaround time, and even meaningful relationship-building. Employers acknowledge this with compassion, knowing that institution staff are often stretched and doing more than one job. Data capacity is a major hurdle.

Finally, there is real desire for education benefit programs to meet strategic needs, but because the benefits are transactions – payments for tuition – they are often handled in finance departments by staff who may not have insights into student outcomes, academic and student supports, and other alignment issues.

While many colleges are stretched by employer partnerships, several emerged as exemplars.

Maricopa Community Colleges

Maricopa Community Colleges serve more than 220,000 students in the Phoenix region across ten campuses. Maricopa Corporate College (MCOR) is designed to streamline employer partnerships, including tailored education and training programs and tuition assistance programs. For tuition benefits programs, MCOR operates a Corporate Learning Concierge, which provides a single point of contact for employers, but does not limit the information, access, or insights to one part of the institution. Administratively, MCOR provides large employers with one point of contact that can access data and information from all ten campuses, as well as centralized financial reporting.

MCOR does more than streamline bureaucracy. Focusing on project management, working directly with employers to meet their needs; business development, working to attract employers to form partnerships with MCOR; and marketing, working to ensure the right people are aware of the employer partnership, MCOR provides comprehensive services to partners. Jason Weinstein, deputy chief director of corporate engagement, commented, “MCOR tries to complement what is happening at the colleges and within the programs – we ask, where do we need to be? I like to say that MCOR really serves as a triage for employers and their needs, and we serve as ambassadors for organizations doing business with the district. We help business navigate our pretty complex system and make matches with humans who can help.”

MCOR also focuses on creating “one front door” to the complex system, creating a common experience with less variable outcomes for employer partners. Program leadership commented, “There are so many different processes and procedures. It was a struggle at the beginning, but the vision was always there that we could sit at the top, take the interests and inquiries from employers, and help them reach all ten community colleges. Prior to that, we had partners going to every door, and colleges would even compete with each other even though we’re the same system. Now, MCOR can come in, meet with the client, see what their needs are, and then reach out to campuses. We work really closely with the campuses and colleges to serve clients’ interests.”

Alamo Colleges District

The Alamo Colleges District includes five colleges located in greater San Antonio and is notable for both its responsiveness and capacity to handle employer requests and innovation on employers' behalf. The Alamo Colleges step up by providing streamlined administration and specialize in working directly with employers to expand career advancement opportunities. "Alamo Colleges do an exceptional job with all of their support structures, and their online and microcredentials are phenomenal," commented Jill Buban, vice president and general manager for EdAssist Solutions, Bright Horizons. EdAssist Solutions is a leading education benefit administrator and strategic partner, supporting employers to provide tuition support to employees.

At the Alamo Colleges, high-quality education and affordable costs provide great value to students and alumni who are major contributors to the economy and culture of the community. The Alamo Colleges serve more than 68,000 students and offer a vast array of programs, including certificates, short-term training programs, and associate and bachelor's degrees. Credits from the Alamo Colleges transfer to universities for those pursuing bachelor's degrees, as well. Workforce development programs help individuals build new careers and meet the needs of local businesses.

Luke Dowden, chief online learning officer and associate vice chancellor for the Alamo Colleges, commented, "For us, it's learner readiness. We are student-centered." Cali Morrison, senior director for learning marketplace at EdAssist at Bright Horizons added: "Specifically, they're willing to look outside of the regular box to solve problems for both our clients and close to 500,000 learners. So that's one of the things we're looking for. How do we solve things for the learner that then feed into solving issues for the client?"

The Alamo Colleges provide unique value to the region through innovative approaches to meeting employers' need for skilled workers. The district works with employers in the region to identify the skills and competencies workers need and creates badges and microcredentials that signify and guarantee that a student has met the skills requirement. These badges can be stacked up into courses and degrees, but meet an important need for employers. Dowden commented, "Just because you changed the game doesn't mean people are ready for it. I'm all for skills-based hiring, but learners must have proof of skills." The effort is paying off, with local healthcare and hospitality partners guaranteeing an interview for individuals who complete micro-courses and are awarded digital badges. Learn more about the work at Alamo Colleges by reading their [Micro-Credential Insights briefs](#).

Joliet Junior College

Joliet Junior College (JJC) is a local partner consistently mentioned in glowing terms by Amazon's Career Choice team. "JJC is especially proactive on uncovering and removing obstacles for Career Choice participants so they can effectively progress toward their credential," commented Amazon's Jeff Bulanda. JJC, based in the southwest side of Chicago, is the oldest public community college in the nation. Throughout its programming, JJC enrolls nearly 50,000 students each year.

Dr. Angie Luzbetak, dean of student success, finds value in the relationship with Amazon, as well. “We are always looking to cultivate relationships to create the bridge for our students, and Amazon has been a wonderful partner because their investment is in their team. It boils down to mission and vision. Our entire mission is community-focused, and it is our servant leadership role to improve our community one student, associate, and company at a time,” she commented.

JJC’s leadership puts together “care teams” to support external partnerships and projects. These are teams that span the institution, including career and academic coaches, representatives from the bursar’s office, financial aid, and recruitment, to create more comprehensive solutions for partners and, importantly, to fully think through what the experience will look and feel like from a student’s perspective. “The worst thing possible is to put up red tape. We really look at what the company needs to make the payment and enrollment process smoother. Sometimes we’ve had to pull back with the care team and say, this isn’t working, let’s talk to our partners and strategize,” commented Luzbetak.

What We Learned

Across these institutions, some common features stand out as important in creating positive relationships with large employers.

Businesses favor responsiveness and direct lines of communication. Whether colleges have corporate models like Maricopa Community Colleges or just seem like they do, having a point of contact who can speak across the many issues that will arise (academic, financial, data, and administrative) is a positive. Colleges should consider investing in a concierge role or office with the specific aim of being a one-stop shop for corporate partners – a single front door for the institution. This office should be armed with the ability and capacity to work across institutional departments, make decisions, and analyze data. Colleges should also be proactive about data. At the very least, and supported by appropriate data releases, colleges and universities should be able to identify employer-affiliated students in their information management systems and run basic reports on credits attempted, credits earned, GPA, progress toward credentials, and credential conferrals.

Businesses also favor adaptability and capacity for change with their institutional partners. College and university partners that are open to suggestions and shifts in strategy and can roll with employer demands are especially valuable to employer education benefit programs. Colleges looking to partner with employers need to move more quickly than they might otherwise. Institutions should audit and study processes to understand bottlenecks and work to resolve them.

Many businesses are thinking more critically about how colleges and universities are set up to best serve their unique employees. Institutions that serve young students who aren’t working full time, and which don’t support flexibility and adult-friendly programming such as rolling starts, evening classes, competency-based education, recognition of prior learning, and other factors, are not great options for employer programs. Colleges and universities should also proactively speak to how their innovation and student success strategies speak to

employers' needs and recognize where they don't. One employer mentioned that a college partner's "15 to Finish" strategy, where students are encouraged to take 15 credits a semester to graduate on time, was promoted intensively to students. For working students, however, 15 credits may be out of reach and even irresponsible, and the campaign was leading students to make some unwise decisions. Instead, colleges should discuss with the employer how they can facilitate pathways specifically for working students.

Employers want to understand how their working learners are progressing and what the education partner is doing specifically for employees. The ability for the college to articulate how it is providing strategic benefit to the students attending and the company itself is an important factor. Colleges should consider how they engage leadership in these strategic discussions. College presidents and academic leaders do not need to be involved in day-to-day conversations in managing employer partnerships, but they should be aware, supportive, and engaged in elevating these partnerships as a strategic priority to the institution.

College leaders should also be empowered to say no or "not yet" if they are not able to meet employers' needs or if they don't believe the program is the right fit for the school and students. MCOR leadership emphasized this point: "We have to be okay saying that this doesn't play to our strengths. We sometimes need to say no and be comfortable with that. We need to all together say that we can manage it with quality and provide the level of service it calls for, or collectively say this isn't going to work and have reasons behind it." This can be difficult for institutions, especially those with declining enrollments or financial hardships, but in a hyper-competitive environment, keeping promises is key.

Luzbetak from JJC agrees. "One of the challenges, maybe it's more about the preparation prior to the relationship, goes back to 'What are your expectations?' Your community college or university partners have limited capacity to serve their student body. On the outside, someone might see a big entity, but inside, we're small and mighty teams. You have to be realistic in terms of the ask, and we need to have mindful conversations about what are realistic options for the company and the college – we have to be on the same page," she said.

Partnerships go both ways. Employers may not understand why colleges work the way they do or recognize the limitations that some internal and policy structures can place on external partnerships. Local institutions may not be as nimble or flexible in their ability to partner. Employers can improve relationships by:

- Being transparent about the goals of the program. What does the employer want to achieve as a result of the education benefit program? What are the employer's priorities? And how does the employer view the role of the institution in meeting those priorities?
- Being transparent about the goals of the partnership. What are the must-dos? What are the deal-breakers? What kind of data and information sharing is required? And what are the expectations for strategic engagement between the company and institution?

- Communicating frequently, clearly, and consistently, especially around program changes. This includes worker eligibility shifts, program limitations or restrictions, expansions or retractions, and process and administration changes.
- Giving adequate time and guidance to respond to requests. Under-resourced education partners, especially community colleges, may not have fully staffed institutional research departments or strong on-demand data capacity. Employers must give some lead time, along with specific guidance on what they want, as they make requests.
- Recognizing the academic calendar. Employers should avoid scheduling major initiatives, announcements, or data collection efforts around the start and end of traditional academic terms.
- Building in planning time. In addition to avoiding peak times of year, employers should also be aware that it will take time on the colleges' part to set up workflows that enhance and improve students' experiences. In other words, employers should not engage in July and expect seamless enrollments to start in August.
- Managing expectations. Employers should be as clear as possible about potential enrollment impacts, the process for seeking assistance, what programs cover, and what colleges and students must do to remain in compliance.

Importantly, employers with significant enrollments at partner institutions, especially community colleges where tuition is low and public dollars may be limited, should acknowledge that those tuition dollars are likely not sufficient to build the kind of capacity the institutions need to thrive. Large employers, especially those with philanthropic or corporate social responsibility resources, might consider providing capacity grants to key college partners.

Predominantly online institutions are here to stay, and [recent reports](#) indicate they may be gaining market share outside of working adults, as well. But local institutions, especially those that are connected to local economies, have insight into the needs of businesses and, as importantly, play vital roles in the health and vitality of communities.

By investing locally, corporate education programs are not only investing in local students, many of whom will stay local, but in the institutions that support the education and advancement of the entire community. There is cause for optimism that companies that are investing in their employees, especially employees attending colleges and universities in places where they live and work, are creating significant value outside the company, as well as within it.

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About UpSkill America

UpSkill America supports employers and workforce organizations to expand and improve high-quality educational and career advancement opportunities for America's front-line workers. We seek to create a movement of employers, civic organizations, workforce intermediaries, and policymakers working collaboratively to implement education, training, and development strategies that result in better jobs and opportunities for front-line workers, more competitive businesses, and stronger communities.



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