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Employer-Friendly Practices

A Guide for Higher Education

UpSkill America, The Aspen Institute

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Across the country, employers are paying for their workers to go to school through tuition assistance, apprenticeship, and cohort programs built with local colleges, and they're doing so at a time when higher education needs engaged students more than ever. But many of these partnerships deliver less than either side hopes.

We began work by asking dozens of employers what they wanted out of partnerships with higher education, and where they experienced friction. That resulted in our first report in this series, [Employer-Friendly Practices: Bridging Higher-Ed Practices and Employer Realities](#). The employers we interviewed were not distant observers or critics of higher education. They were investing in it directly: paying tuition, dedicating staff time, building internal programs to encourage participation, and staking their own credibility with their workforces on the promise that college is worth it. Their frustrations did not come from indifference. They came from repeated experiences with institutions that were unprepared to deliver on that investment. Most employer partnerships don't struggle because higher education institutions lack commitment. They are challenged because the institution's operational systems, coordination, and day-to-day practices weren't built to support them, and those challenges fall hardest of working learners, who have little room to absorb institutional friction while balancing jobs, families, and coursework.

This resource is designed to help colleges and universities become more employer-friendly and build the kind of institutional capacity that sustains and grows partnerships while simultaneously better serving working learners. It offers role-specific guidance for leaders across the institution, a self-assessment spanning five domains of practice, and a process for turning results into action, grounded in the conviction that institution/employer partnerships can become easier without compromising academic missions.

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We are seeking higher education leaders who want to test these frameworks in their own institutions, share what they are learning, and help us understand where the guidance needs to be sharper, more nuanced, or more honest about the barriers involved. We invite you to connect and share with us through this [survey](#).

Employer-Friendly Practices: Why Now?

Higher education is at an inflection point. Traditional age student populations are [declining](#), and the institutions that are growing are recognizing the demographic cliff as an opportunity to rethink both whom they serve and how they serve them, rather than as a temporary downturn to muscle through.

With more than [40 million](#) adults aged 25 and older holding some college credit and no credential, and another 60 million¹ with only a high school diploma, the future market for postsecondary education is adult. Closing the employer partnership gap is a workforce alignment and postsecondary enrollment strategy. Done well, it is also a strategy to improve outcomes for working learners, including first-generation students, students from under-resourced communities, and students of color, who are balancing work, families, and education simultaneously, with little room to absorb institutional friction along the way. Operational excellence in employer engagement is not a nice-to-have for these students. It is the infrastructure their success depends on.

Slippery Rock University President Karen Riley [testified](#) before the Pennsylvania House Appropriations committee in March 2026 about her institution's momentum: the largest enrollment increase in twenty years, dramatically improving retention rates, and significant enrollment increases.

"We are moving at the pace of industry rather than the historic pace of higher education."

"We have to be partnering with industry so that people actually know what is available to them and how they can access it. It has to be delivered in a way that makes sense to them and in times that make sense to them."

"With the demographic cliff, what we haven't heard is that people will stop learning, quite the contrary. People's jobs will not be more static. In fact, they will be much more fluid in the future. We have to be nimble, we have to be reactive to the market, and being in the community with our industry partners is one way that we're really working to make sure that options are available to them and that they are aware of them."

Employers are stepping up to help their talent grow, paying for workers to earn credentials while working in a variety of formats, including tuition assistance, apprenticeship, and other work-and-learn approaches. Rapid advances in automation and artificial intelligence (AI) are also accelerating employers' urgency, creating growing demand for education and training that helps workforces adapt and advance alongside technological change. The 2015–2016 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) [estimated](#) that approximately 1.5 million undergraduates and 500,000 graduate students received financial support by their employers, generating an estimated [\\$28 billion in tuition revenue](#) for colleges and universities.

¹ U.S. Census Bureau. "Educational Attainment." *American Community Survey, ACS 1-Year Estimates Subject Tables, Table S1501*, <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST1Y2024.S1501?q=education+attainment>. Accessed on 30 Apr 2026.

Most institutions identify students as their primary stakeholder, followed by alumni, donors, parents, and government. What might happen if institutions began to see employers of their students, their alumni, and in their community, as stakeholders they are also authentically accountable to? Serving employers well becomes less about responding to external demands, and more about serving students directly, whether they are working learners enrolling on their own, with financial support from employers, or as a cohort organized by an employer. Students *rightly* remain the highest priority. If institutions can build systems that work for working learners, they can close the loop between purpose, completion, and career, and employers become strategic partners in that mission rather than external stakeholders to manage.

Drawing on research and practitioner insights from [Employer-Friendly Practices: Bridging Higher-Ed Practices and Employer Realities](#), this guide focuses on changes in higher education operations that will make a difference for employer partners. Our model for advancing these changes in higher education's operational infrastructure consists of five elements.

- Foundational Actions and Mindsets
- Responsive Business and Financial Practices
- Working Learner-Centered Academic Practices
- Actionable and Predictable Data
- Integrated Student Supports

Foundational actions and mindsets form the base of the model, with specific activities identified in the remaining operational domains. These five elements emerged from our [original research](#) as critical to employers' objectives and experiences in partnering with postsecondary institutions. They also address the specific places where employer partnerships most commonly break down, and where deliberate institutional choices can make a meaningful difference.

Importantly, this guide does not ask colleges and universities to subordinate their mission to employer preferences, reduce educational quality in the name of efficiency, or treat employers as the primary arbiters of what learning should look like. The institutions best positioned to serve working learners, and the employers who support them, are those that hold their academic commitments firmly while becoming better partners.

Who This Guide Is For

Employer partnership is relevant to nearly every institution of higher education in the U.S. This guide is especially geared toward colleges and universities that serve working adults, and institutions that play a vital role in the economic and workforce development of their regions, especially community colleges and regional comprehensive institutions.

Employer partnership is also not a solo activity. It requires coordination across leadership, academic affairs, finance, enrollment, advising, data, and more, and the experience of the employer and working learner is shaped by how well those functions work together.

This guide is designed for higher education leaders and practitioners who are responsible for coordinating and advancing employer partnerships, including:

- Presidents, provosts, and senior academic leaders
- Employer relations, corporate partnerships, and workforce development leaders, including continuing education
- Institutional research, finance, and enrollment management leaders responsible for evaluating and supporting working learners and programs
- Student support specialists, including advisors, career services, and coaches who help working learners navigate their way through their programs

[Role Guides](#) describe each function's primary accountability, what readiness looks like, and where to start. They're designed to be read individually and serve as navigation tools for the full practice guide, helping each function find itself and the practices most relevant to its contribution. They're equally useful in understanding how each function comes together to serve a common goal and create a cohesive experience for employers and the learners they support.

We use consistent role names throughout, but we recognize that your institution may use different titles for the same functions. Further, not every role listed will exist as a standalone position at every institution. A [glossary of roles and titles](#) is available to help you find yourself in the guide, regardless of what your position is called.

We also recognize that responsibility and authority are distributed differently across institutions depending on their geography, size, sector, and governance structure. The role indications throughout this guide are starting points. Each institutional team should assess where accountability and responsibility reside in their unique context.

While not a primary audience, economic developers and organizations responsible for attracting and keeping businesses engaged in a region, as well as advancement officers working to raise funds for their institutions, may find strategies useful particularly as they work at the intersection of workforce development and business priorities.

The guides are a starting place and describe what each role contributes, but they don't replace the conversations cross-functional institutional teams need to hold about who has decision-making authority, who needs to provide input, and who is responsible for outcomes.

A Note for Faculty

In our research, employer engagement with faculty was variable, and was often very relationship driven. Individual faculty members, through their own professional networks and disciplinary connections, build partnerships with employers in their fields, which often produce real value, improving curriculum, connecting students with work-based learning, and driving employer connection to programs. But when faculty or an employer partner move on, the relationships often go with them. With 6% of tenured [faculty leaving their roles each year](#), along with 10% of non-tenure track faculty, the relationships are in danger.

Faculty engagement with employers, in many institutions, is individual, not a practice, something that is designed, supported, and sustained at the institutional level. This guide seeks to shift faculty engagement with employers from an individual practice to an institutional expectation supported by thoughtful design, policy, and recognition. In the recommendations that follow, faculty play a key role in some of the most consequential and transformative recommendations, especially around how institutions recognize learning gained through work, how program competencies are defined and assessed, and how academic structures can be improved to serve working learners. We call out where faculty engagement matters most and emphasize the importance of including faculty in the design of employer engagement strategies and ensuring faculty are bought-in and supportive of those strategies. We hope this research is useful to faculty members who are already doing this work, and those who are thinking about what it might look like in their own context.

A Note on Language and Perspectives

Throughout this guide:

- "Employer-friendly" does not mean employer-driven at the expense of institutional values, mission, and/or requirements.
- "Responsiveness" refers to clarity, predictability, and usability, not just speed, and to the capacity of the institution to adapt to shifts in local and regional talent demands.
- "Working learners" includes current employees, adult learners, and others balancing employment with education.
- We use "institution" to reflect higher education broadly, including colleges, universities, and state systems of higher education where programmatic and administrative decisions are made both at the central office and campus levels.

This guide is intentionally written to support shared accountability, recognizing that lasting, effective partnerships are built when institutions and employers understand each other's constraints as well as their objectives and opportunities. The guide *does not* attempt to:

- Prescribe or encourage specific programs or credentials.
- Replace institutional mission, governance, or academic decision-making with employer objectives, or position employers as the sole drivers of program design and delivery.

Role Guides

A Guide to Roles and Decision-Making in Employer Partnerships

The role guides that follow describe what each function is responsible for in employer-friendly practices, laying out the specific activities and readiness attributes that each role can demonstrate.

However, partnership is never a solo activity. Employer partnership touches nearly every function in an institution. The executive sets the strategic conditions; enrollment management positions working learners for recruitment, enrollment, and success; workforce and continuing education leaders manage day-to-day relationships; academic affairs controls the curriculum and credit decisions; fiscal and financial leaders manage billing and cost issues; institutional research produces the data employers need; advisors and student support specialists work directly with working learners.

No single role owns the whole relationship with any particular partner, even as an individual might hold primary responsibility for managing it. That is both the challenge and the opportunity. When these functions coordinate, employers and working learners experience the institution as a coherent, responsive partner.

President / Chancellor

Employer partnerships rarely fail because an institution lacks goodwill toward employers. They stall or fail because no one has the authority to make the operational decisions that partnerships require. A president's explicit, sustained attention is what most often creates urgency and drives decision-making. Your role in this work is less about championing partnership in the abstract and more about making sure the operational authority to act on it exists, is understood, and used.

What is my primary accountability in this work?

Your accountability is to ensure employer partnership has both a clear strategic rationale and designated authority, not just goodwill. That means:

- Understanding, specifically, what your institution's most significant employer partners are trying to achieve, whether they are working toward building a staffing pipeline, a retention strategy, a credential tied to advancement.
- Ensuring one person holds decision-making authority over partnership terms and operational issues, so exceptions and escalations don't keep coming to you out of habit.
- Treating employer partnership as a standing priority in how you communicate the institution's strategic direction, not as an initiative or program.
- Being explicit with employer partners about what requires internal approval, which takes time, and what can be committed to immediately, so leadership does not make promises other functions cannot fulfill.

What does "ready" look like in my function?

A president who is positioned to lead in this area can:

- Articulate the strategic and financial case for employer partnership clearly and convincingly, including to a skeptical board.
- Speak knowledgeably about the institution's most significant employer relationships: who they are, what they need, and where the partnership currently stands.
- Use authority to remove a barrier or back a decision that an employer partner requires.
- Ensure employer partnership is a recurring, expected topic in cabinet-level conversations.

What do I do first?

- Confirm, in writing, who holds formal accountability for employer partnership outcomes, and what authority that designation carries.
- Request a concise briefing from that person on your three most significant employer relationships: what each employer is trying to accomplish, an example of a success, and where friction currently exists.
- Identify one decision currently sitting at your level that could be delegated to your accountable executive, and delegate it.

For the full picture of this in practice, see [Foundational Actions and Mindsets](#), particularly [Connecting to Business Imperatives](#) and [Leadership, Urgency, and Institutional Commitment](#).

Academic Affairs Leaders

Employer trust in an academic program is built or lost almost entirely through academic affairs decisions. Whether a required course is available when a working learner needs it, whether someone's professional experience counts toward credit, and whether a credential describes what an employer can expect a graduate to do are curriculum and academic policy questions. A challenge many institutions are working through is treating recognition of work-based learning as a series of individual exceptions rather than a consistent, designed institutional practice.

What is my primary accountability in this work?

Your accountability is to ensure that academic structures, scheduling, credit recognition, and program design are built to work for working learners. That means:

- Knowing whether your institution's approach to recognizing skills and competencies gained through work experience is a consistent, institution-wide practice.
- Understanding which required courses most often delay a working learner's progress, and why.
- Ensuring program outcomes are described in language that is meaningful to employer partners and to the people who will use those credentials.

What does "ready" look like in my function?

Academic leaders who are positioned to lead in this area can:

- Describe, specifically, how the institution currently recognizes learning gained through work, and identify where that practice is inconsistent across departments.
- Speak to at least one structural change that has been made, or is actively being pursued, to reduce unnecessary delay in a working learner's path to completion.
- Point to a recent or upcoming conversation with employer partners about what program learning outcomes mean in workplace terms.

What do I do first?

- Ask for a brief inventory of how credit for work-based learning is currently handled across your largest workforce-aligned programs, and where the practice varies.
- Identify a committee or faculty senate process where a conversation about standardizing that practice could begin.
- Choose one program with strong employer partnership and ask whether stated learning outcomes for this program are meaningful for that employer.

For the full picture of what this looks like in practice, see [Working Learner-Centered Academic Practices](#), particularly [Credit for Competencies and Skills](#) and [Competency Transparency and Skills Alignment](#).

Fiscal and Financial Leaders

Employers experience financial and billing decisions before they experience almost anything else about the institution. A confusing invoice, an unexpected hold on an employee's enrollment, or a billing cycle that doesn't align with how the employer processes payments can damage a partnership before it has a chance to develop. The goal is financial infrastructure that is as reliable and friction-free for employer partners as any other vendor relationship an employer manages.

What is my primary accountability in this work?

Your accountability is to ensure that the financial experience of employer-sponsored enrollment is predictable, consistent, and friction-free. That means:

- Knowing whether employer-sponsored learners can be enrolled without being placed on financial hold while employer payment is pending, or whether your current billing policies treat these students the same as a student whose payment hasn't yet been received.
- Understanding whether invoices sent to employers contain the information an employer's own finance team needs (employee identifiers, program, term, itemized costs).
- Ensuring that billing cycles align well enough with how employers process payments, and that invoices don't create unnecessary delays or exceptions on the employer's side.

What does "ready" look like in my function?

Fiscal and financial leaders who are positioned to lead in this area can:

- Describe how employer-supported learners are flagged in student information systems and confirm that a pending employer payment does not trigger an enrollment hold.
- Point to a consistent invoice format used for all employer partners and confirm that format was designed with an employer finance team in mind.
- Speak to how your billing calendar aligns with the fiscal cycles and invoice payment terms of your employer partners and identify any structural mismatches that cause delays.

What do I do first?

- Request a recent invoice sent to an employer partner and assess whether it contains what an employer finance team would need.
- Walk through what currently happens when an employer payment is delayed: does the employee's enrollment get held, and if so, what is the process for resolving the problem? Confirm whether the process is documented and consistently applied.
- Identify whether employer receivables are currently tracked separately from student accounts, and if not, make that structural fix.

For the full picture of what this looks like in practice, see [Responsive Business and Financial Practices](#), particularly [Invoice Structure and Timing](#) and [Employer Direct-Pay Processing](#).

Workforce and Continuing Education Leaders

In most institutions, this function is often the person who initiates partnerships, manages day-to-day relationships, and coordinates across functions on an employer's behalf. That breadth of responsibility is exactly what makes this role so consequential. Building documented, coordinated systems makes the partnerships this office manages more durable and easier to grow. This role is well-positioned to build the systems and infrastructure to support that work.

What is my primary accountability in this work?

Your accountability is to ensure that employer partnerships are documented, strategically coordinated, and managed to clear, mutual standards. That means:

- Knowing whether your institution has a complete, shared picture of all employer relationships across departments and functions, or whether engagement is happening in silos you can't see.
- Understanding whether each active employer partnership has a documented point of contact, a shared record of key terms and history, and a mutual definition of success.
- Ensuring that coordination required to serve employers across billing, advising, academics, and registration, happens through defined systems and processes rather than through informal relationships.

What does "ready" look like in my function?

A leader who is positioned to succeed in this role can:

- Describe the full scope of employer engagement across the institution, including partnerships managed by the office, advisory board relationships, faculty connections, advancement relationships, and non-credit or customized training engagements.
- Point to a shared system where employer partnership information is documented and accessible to all relevant staff.
- Confirm that each significant partnership has a shared, written agreement of what the partnership is working toward, revisited on a regular cycle.
- Speak to a specific instance when the institution used its employer relationship data strategically to identify an opportunity, coordinate a response across departments, or deepen an engagement.

What do I do first?

- Prioritize the creation of a shared system for mapping and tracking employer relationships across the institution. Identify who needs to be involved and what it would take to get a shared system in place.
- Identify several employers who appear in more than one place across the institution. Assess how those employers are experiencing the institution to understand the highest priority areas to focus attention.
- Choose one active partnership that does not have a shared definition of success and hold a strategic conversation with that employer to try this approach.

For the full picture of what this looks like in practice, see [Foundational Actions and Mindsets](#), particularly [Consistent Points of Contact and Internal Coordination](#), [Asset and Relationship Mapping](#), and [Shared Definitions of Success and Mutual Accountability](#).

Enrollment Management Leaders

Enrollment management leaders who understand employer-sponsored enrollment as a growth strategy, not just a workforce development initiative, are positioned to translate that opportunity into outcomes that matter. That approach has practical consequences: intake processes designed for working adults, systems that handle employer sponsorship well, and a first contact experience that sets learners up to enroll, persist and complete.

What is my primary accountability in this work?

Your accountability is to ensure that employer-supported learners are treated as a strategically important population, with recruitment and retention approaches that reflect their actual situations. That means:

- Incorporating employer-sponsored learners into enrollment forecasting and goal-setting.
- Ensuring that recruitment strategies reach employer partners and their employees with messaging that speaks to their specific questions about cost, scheduling, and credential value.
- Designing intake processes including advising, financial aid, and enrollment workflows that account for how employer sponsorship works, so students are set up to register and to persist.
- Using retention data disaggregated by employer cohort to identify where employer-sponsored learners are leaving and why.
- Ensuring that your CRM and student information systems flag employer-sponsored students in ways that carry through to billing, advising, and academic records.

What does "ready" look like in my function?

A leader who is positioned to succeed in this role can:

- Describe how employer-sponsored learners appear in enrollment forecasts and strategic plans as a prioritized population with specific goals attached. Use retention data by employer cohort as a standing input for enrollment planning.
- Confirm that employer-sponsored learners move through a documented and consistently applied intake process that includes advising on pacing, program terms, and pathways.
- Coordinate with the bursar, financial aid, and workforce development when an employer-sponsored student's account requires attention and where coordination may break down.

What do I do first?

- Review your current enrollment goals for whether employer-sponsored learners appear as a focus population.
- Walk through the current enrollment experience from the perspective of a working adult whose employer is paying tuition directly. At which steps does the process assume a traditional student? Where does employer sponsorship create a point of friction?
- Pull retention data for employer-sponsored learners specifically. If you don't currently have it disaggregated that way, requesting it from Institutional Research is the first step.

For the full picture of what this looks like in practice, see [Integrated Student Support](#), particularly [Pre-Enrollment Planning and Readiness](#), and [Responsive Business Practices](#), particularly [Employer Direct-Pay Processing](#).

Institutional Research and Data Leaders

Employers need data that is consistent, predictable, and delivered at the right time. Much of what currently frustrates employer partners in this area is reporting is built around academic calendars rather than around what an employer actually needs to know and when they need to know it. The work of this role is to close that gap by making good reporting the automatic default rather than a special request.

What is my primary accountability in this work?

Your accountability is making learner progress data usable and predictable for employer partners, without requiring manual effort each time it's needed. That means:

- Knowing whether your institution reports on employer-sponsored learners using a consistent template and consistent definitions, or whether it varies by who is asked.
- Understanding how much of current employer reporting is automated versus manually assembled under time pressure.
- Ensuring early warning signals, missed coursework, non-registration, are something your systems proactively surface systematically, not only through individual advisor awareness.

What does "ready" look like in my function?

A leader who is positioned to lead in this area can:

- Describe the institution's current process for generating an employer progress report, end to end, and identify where it still depends on manual work.
- Point to a shared set of definitions for key data fields or a report template currently in use across employer partnerships or identify that this is something still to be built.
- Speak to how quickly current systems would surface a learner at risk of withdrawing.

What do I do first?

- Walk through what it currently takes to produce a progress report for one of your largest employer partners, end to end.
- Convene a conversation with the Registrar and Workforce leadership to define shared definitions before discussing automation.
- Identify whether student success warning signs are currently configured to generate any kind of system-level signal, or whether they depend entirely on individual advisor attention.

For the full picture of what this looks like in practice, see [Actionable and Predictable Data](#), particularly [Standardized Progress Reporting](#) and [Timeliness and Responsiveness of Data](#).

Academic Advisor / Employer Liaison

You are very often the individual contact who represents the institution for an employer-sponsored learner, and frequently the person an employer trusts most directly. Much of what makes a partnership work day-to-day happens in your conversations: whether a learner is prepared before they start, and whether someone notices and responds when things start to go wrong. Your judgment and attentiveness is key to a learner's positive experience, as well as their employer sponsor.

What is my primary accountability in this domain?

Your accountability is the lived, day-to-day experience of the working learners you support. That means:

- Knowing whether employer-sponsored learners you are responsible for receive an intake experience that aligns with their employers' program parameters, or the same generic process as every other student.
- Understanding which early warning signs you're expected to watch for, and what you're expected to do when you see one.
- Ensuring the messages a learner hears from you about workload and expectations are consistent with what their employer is telling them.

What does "ready" look like in my function?

An advisor or liaison who is well-positioned in this role can:

- Describe what a first advising conversation with an employer-sponsored learner actually covers, beyond standard intake.
- Identify the specific signals that would prompt proactive outreach to a learner, before they ask for help.
- Understand what can be shared with the employer and what must only be shared with the working learner.

What do I do first?

- Review your current caseload and identify which employer-sponsored learners have not yet had an initial advising session tailored to their situation.
- Confirm what early warning signals are currently visible to you and what you're expected to do when one appears.

For the full picture of what this looks like in practice, see [Integrated Student Support](#), particularly [Pre-Enrollment Planning and Readiness](#) and [Ongoing Advising and Risk Intervention](#).

Practice Guide

Drawing on practitioner insights from [Employer-Friendly Practices: Bridging Higher-Ed Practices and Employer Realities](#) and research in the field, this guide focuses on changes in higher education practice and operations that will make a difference for employer partners. Our model for advancing these changes in higher education's operational infrastructure consists of five domains.

- [Foundational Actions and Mindsets](#)
 - Connecting to Business Imperatives
 - Leadership, Urgency, and Institutional Commitment
 - Asset and Relationship Mapping
 - Consistent Points of Contact and Internal Coordination
 - Shared Definitions of Success and Mutual Accountability
- [Responsive Business and Financial Practices](#)
 - Pricing and Financial Transparency
 - Invoice Structure and Timing
 - Employer Direct-Pay Processing
- [Working Learner-Centered Academic Practices](#)
 - Course Availability and Sequencing
 - Credit for Competencies and Skills
 - Competency Transparency and Skills Alignment
- [Actionable and Predictable Data](#)
 - Standardized Progress Reporting
 - Timeliness and Responsiveness of Data
- [Integrated Student Supports](#)
 - Pre-Enrollment Academic Planning and Readiness
 - Ongoing Advising and Risk Intervention

The following segments include deep dives on each of the domains, including insights into what employers experience and where disconnects happen, along with guiding questions and short- and longer-term activities that can support improvements.

Domain 1: Foundational Actions and Mindsets

This section addresses the foundational conditions that shape every domain that follows. Unlike the operational domains, the actions here are less about systems redesign and more about leadership, culture, and shared accountability and are preconditions for everything else.

Connecting to Business Imperatives

Primary Responsible Role: President / Chancellor

Key Collaborators: Provost, Vice President for Workforce/Continuing Education, Director of Employer Partnerships

What Employers Experience. Employers frequently describe early conversations with institutional partners as broad and aspirational but shallow. Institutions may express enthusiasm for partnership without asking what the employer is trying to accomplish, whether reducing turnover in a specific role, building a pipeline for high-need positions through apprenticeship and structured work-based learning models alongside training for current employees, advancing equity goals within their workforce, or strengthening a reputation as an employer of choice.

Absent that understanding, program design and operational decisions can default to institutional convenience rather than employer need. Employers can begin to feel that the institution views them primarily as an enrollment source rather than a strategic partner. Over time, that perception can erode investment and engagement.

"Each employer has a different reason for why they're offering education programming to employees. You have to get there."

Why This Happens. Higher education institutions are accustomed to defining educational value on their own terms: credit accumulation, retention, and time-to-degree. Employers care deeply about credential completion, often more than anything else as an accountability metric. An institution that tracks completion without understanding why a specific employer needs it (to fill a talent pipeline, to meet a credential requirement tied to a wage increase, to reduce turnover in a hard to fill role, to prepare a workforce for automation or AI implementation, etc.) is measuring the right outcome without understanding what that outcome is for. Without deliberate effort to understand employer objectives at the outset, institutions default to their own frameworks and miss the opportunity to demonstrate relevance.

A forthcoming UpSkill America study, sharing findings from a national survey of employers, indicates that more than 70% of employers will moderately or significantly increase training investments as a result of AI adoption.

Staff who work directly with employers may not have much influence over the academic and financial decisions that shape those partnerships. When business intelligence about

employer needs doesn't reach the people who design programs or set policies, alignment is challenging.

Discussion Questions

- Do we know why each of our employer partners is investing in employee education?
- Is that knowledge documented and shared across the relevant offices?
- Does it inform how we design programs or configure our services?
- Do we have protocols or policies for institutional communication and accountability for employer partnerships?
- When did we last ask our employer partners whether their goals had changed?
- What do we know about the industry associations and other sources of training and development our employer partners most value? What can we learn from them?

Actions

Immediate next steps and quick wins:

Audit what you currently know about each active employer partner's business objectives.

- Review existing partnership records and identify where employer goals are documented..
- Identify which active partners do not have a recorded understanding of their workforce priorities and use gaps as the starting point for near-term outreach.

Draft a structured employer discovery protocol for new partnerships.

- Develop a standard set of questions to surface employer objectives at the start of each new relationship (retention, advancement, pipeline, equity, brand).
 - **Resource:** [Shared Definitions of Success Template](#)
 - **Resource:** [Understanding Your Employer Partner - Intake Form](#)
 - **Field Example:** [Ivy Tech Community College Needs Analysis](#)
- Document completed records in a shared system accessible to relevant academic, advising, and finance staff.

Medium-term activities:

Train employer-facing staff to conduct and translate business needs assessments.

- Develop training that builds familiarity with common employer workforce strategies and HR priorities.
 - **Resource:** [Understanding Employer Language](#)
- Include practice in translating business language into institutional terms and vice versa.
- Incorporate business needs assessment into onboarding for all staff in employer-facing roles.

Establish a regular cadence for revisiting employer goals with active partners.

- Schedule structured check-ins with each employer partner at least annually.
- Use a consistent set of questions to surface whether business priorities have shifted.
- Update documentation and share changes with relevant institutional staff.

Longer-term transformations:

Integrate employer objectives into program design and operational planning.

- Require documentation of employer business goals in any new employer partnership proposal.
- Reference employer objectives explicitly in program review and in reporting to institutional leadership.
- Use employer goals as criteria when evaluating institutional flexibility on scheduling, credit recognition, and delivery format.
- Require faculty and staff goals to reflect employer priorities and satisfaction.

Create structured opportunities for senior leaders to hear directly from employer partners.

- Convene annual or semi-annual employer advisory conversations at the cabinet level, and include workforce staff in those conversations to build shared organizational understanding.
- Use findings to inform institutional planning and strategic priorities.
- Seek employer feedback on satisfaction with processes and interactions with the institution.
 - **Resource:** [Employer Partnership Survey](#)

A Note on Workforce Pell

Beginning July 2026, federal Pell Grant eligibility extended to short-term credentials, with implementation led by states. Employer education support programs frequently operate independently of other forms of financial aid. Some employers use "last dollar" models that support students after other aid is applied, and others use "first dollar" approaches. Either way, employers may support learners to earn credentials regardless of whether the credential or the learner qualify for federal financial aid. The policy and employer activity intersect at the point of access. Pell eligibility may expand access for eligible employees who are not fully covered by employer support. Institutions should help employers understand how Workforce Pell operates, along with other forms of financial aid, and where it can support their working learners.

Leadership, Urgency, and Institutional Commitment

Primary Responsible Role: President / Chancellor

Key Collaborators: Cabinet, Vice President for Workforce / Continuing Education, Director of Employer Partnerships

What Employers Experience. Speed matters as a signal of serious intent and as a practical prerequisite for partnership. Employers describe a pattern: initial conversations with senior leaders are energetic, but momentum slows when the work moves to operational staff. Decisions that require coordination across departments stall. Employers are told that a new program or policy accommodation will take longer than they anticipated. Staff members who are committed individually lack the authority to move quickly. The result is that employers begin to question whether the institution is committed.

Why This Happens. In some institutions, employer engagement sits within a specific division, often continuing education or workforce development, that does not have formal authority or influence over the academic, financial, or student service systems that shape the employer experience. Other institutions seed employer engagement responsibilities across multiple departments, each with a different process. When leadership has not explicitly elevated employer partnership as an institutional priority, cross-functional coordination depends on informal relationships and individual goodwill rather than clear governance and shared accountability.

"There are inconsistencies in leadership, especially the willingness and open-mindedness of college leaders. We have some who aren't as open-minded, and it limits their opportunities with us."

Organizational cultures in higher education often prioritize deliberation and shared governance over speed. Those values serve important purposes, but without deliberate effort to build faster response pathways for employer engagement, institutions may inadvertently signal that employer partners are not a priority.

Discussion Questions

- Is employer partnership named in our strategic plan with measurable goals?
- What is our current average response time to new employer inquiries?
- Can employer-facing staff resolve common issues without escalation?
- Are we adequately staffed and resourced to sustain our current partnerships?
- Does our institution have any exemplar partnerships in our portfolio that we can use to build from strength?

Actions

Immediate next steps and quick wins:

Formally designate an executive accountable for employer partnerships.

- Issue written designation from the cabinet or president defining the scope of authority and parameters of the role, including contract negotiation, pricing exceptions, and

operational escalation, as well as reporting line(s), level of authority, and department assignment that makes the most sense for the institution.

- Support the executive internally and externally as the institutional face of employer partnerships.

Define and publicize clear response time standards for employer inquiries.

- Set an institutional standard for initial response (for example, two business days) and train all employer-facing staff on the standard.
 - Assign accountability for monitoring compliance.
 - Include response time metrics in employer partnership performance reviews.
-

Medium-term activities:

Model leadership engagement visibly.

- Ensure president and senior leaders participate directly in key employer conversations, not only at launch, but on an ongoing basis.
- Feature employer partnerships in public-facing communications and narratives.
- Recognize staff contributions to employer engagement in institutional forums.

Build expedited pathways for employer-driven program or policy decisions.

- Identify the categories of decisions most frequently requested by employers (scheduling accommodations, pricing exceptions, contract terms).
- Establish limits within which employer-facing staff can act without additional approval.
- Create a defined fast-track review process for requests outside those parameters.
- Create workflow directions and processes for all parties so likely bottlenecks and problems can be mitigated easily.
- Communicate decision timelines to employer partners in advance.

Align staff capacity with employer engagement commitments.

- Audit staffing in employer-facing roles against partnership volume and complexity.
 - Identify resourcing gaps, including CRM systems, dedicated account management, and cross-functional coordination support.
 - Develop a staffing and investment plan aligned with strategic growth goals.
-

Longer-term transformations:

Establish employer partnership as a named priority in institutional strategic planning.

- Include explicit employer engagement goals in the strategic plan.
- Assign measurable targets and report progress at cabinet level.
- Communicate strategic commitment publicly and internally.

Write employer partnership responsibilities into formal institutional policy.

- Integrate executive accountability into governance documents.
- Define what gets escalated, to whom, and what approval is needed at each level.
- Establish annual governance review of employer partnerships at cabinet level.

Asset and Relationship Mapping

Primary Responsible Role: Vice President for Workforce / Continuing Education

Key Collaborators: President / Chancellor, Provost, Academic Deans, Director of Institutional Research, Director of Advancement, Faculty Senate Leadership, Director of Employer Partnerships

What Employers Experience. Employers working with a college often discover, sometimes years into a relationship, that the institution has other significant connections to their organization that no one coordinated. A faculty member has been placing interns with the company for a decade; several of their employees are enrolled in a non-credit program; a senior leader holds an advisory board seat but doesn't know the institution also has a tuition assistance agreement with their HR department. From the employer's perspective, this fragmentation can be puzzling and occasionally frustrating. It can feel like the institution doesn't know its own business.

The inverse happens too. Employers may not realize the full range of ways they could engage with an institution, because no one at the institution has ever put that picture together and shared it with them. In both cases, the root problem is that the institution has relationships it cannot fully see and therefore cannot fully use.

Why This Happens. Most colleges did not build employer engagement as a designed, institution-wide function. It grew organically: workforce development offices building tuition assistance partnerships, academic departments cultivating advisory board relationships, career services placing students, advancement officers nurturing donors, and faculty developing individual professional connections with industry contacts. Each of those relationships has real value. Without a shared view of who the institution knows and how, those relationships stay siloed, difficult to coordinate, impossible to scale, and dependent on individual staff members who carry the relationship in their own heads rather than in a shared record.

The consequences of that invisibility grow over time. An institution cannot strategically grow what it cannot see. Opportunities to deepen an existing relationship go unrecognized because no one assembled the full picture. Significant employers who touch the institution in three different places never get a coordinated experience, because no single person at the institution knows all three touchpoints exist.

This is a different problem from how individual employer partners are managed. Asset mapping is not about who answers the phone when an employer calls, or how smoothly a relationship survives a staff change. It is about whether the institution has ever looked across all of its departments and functions to understand the full scope of who it knows, what those relationships involve, and where the strategic opportunities lie. Many institutions have not but getting that picture can be the prerequisite for doing anything coherent with it.

Discussion Questions

- If you asked five different people in your institution today to name your top employer partners, would they give the same answer?
- Do you know how many companies serve on advisory boards across your departments, and whether any of those same companies appear in multiple places across the institution?
- Is there anyone in your institution whose job it is to have a complete picture of employer engagement across all departments and functions?
- Do your employer partners know the full range of ways they could engage with you?
- When did your institution last look across all departments to identify where employer relationships exist?

Actions

Immediate next steps and quick wins:

Conduct a rapid relationship inventory across all departments.

- Identify who in your institution currently has active employer relationships, across workforce development, career services, academic departments, advancement, student services, and faculty.
 - **Field Example:** [Dismantling the Silos with KCTCS](#)
- Focus first on identifying the relationships themselves: who the employer is, who the institutional contact is, what the nature of the engagement is (advisory board, tuition assistance, internship placement, sponsored research, giving, etc.), and how long it has been active. Use a simple, shared format, even a spreadsheet, to capture initial findings. Don't let perfect infrastructure be an obstacle to getting a first picture quickly.
- Look for patterns in what you find. Identify the employers who appear in more than one place across the institution.

Medium-term activities:

Build a systematic, institution-wide asset map.

- Move from the initial rapid inventory to a more complete picture, including faculty-level connections, advisory board memberships across all departments, non-credit and customized training relationships, and giving or advancement relationships.
- Agree on a common set of categories for relationship types.
 - Strada Education Foundation offers a [helpful framework](#) for common partnership structures and activities within college/employer partnerships that can support this activity or provide a jumping-off place for adaptation.
- Record the asset map in a shared system that all relevant staff can access and update, not in individual inboxes or department-level spreadsheets.

Establish cross-functional employer engagement teams or regular convenings.

- Create a standing mechanism, whether a formal team or a regular cross-departmental meeting, for staff across workforce development, academics, career services, advancement, and faculty leadership to share what they know about employer relationships. The goal is not to manage individual relationships, but to maintain shared visibility about which employers the institution is working with, in what ways, and where are the gaps and opportunities.
 - Include faculty in this conversation, since some of the most durable and strategically valuable employer relationships in an institution sit with individual faculty members who have never been asked to share or document them.

Begin using the asset map to inform outreach and partnership development.

- Identify employers already engaged with the institution in multiple ways who may not know the full picture of that engagement.
- Use the map to identify significant employers in your region or sector with whom the institution has no current relationship and prioritize outreach accordingly.
- Share the map with employer partners themselves where appropriate, so they can see the full scope of the relationship and identify where they want to go deeper.

Longer-term transformations:

Integrate relationship mapping into institutional planning and reporting.

- Build employer relationship data into strategic planning processes, board-level reporting, and annual program review cycles so the picture stays current and leadership has visibility into both the breadth and the depth of the institution's employer engagement.
- Report on the asset map at cabinet-level meetings with enough regularity that employer relationship health is treated as an institutional performance indicator, not an occasional topic.

Build scalable, sustainable infrastructure for ongoing mapping.

- Invest in a shared CRM or partnership management system capable of holding the full picture of employer engagement across all departments, not just workforce development's relationships.
- Configure that system for regular, lightweight updates so the asset map stays current without requiring time-intensive re-inventory.
- Develop protocols for capturing new relationships as they form and retiring or updating records when relationships change, so the map reflects current reality rather than growing stale.

Develop an employer-facing summary of the institution's partnership offerings.

- Translate the internal asset map into an external-facing picture: what does the institution offer to employer partners across all the ways an employer might engage, from workforce training and tuition assistance to advisory roles, experiential learning, sponsored research, and community investment?
- Use this as a tool both for deepening existing relationships and for orienting new employer partners to the full range of what's possible.

Consistent Points of Contact and Internal Coordination

Primary Responsible Role: Vice President for Workforce/Continuing Education, Enrollment Management, Community Relations

Key Collaborators: Human Resources, Academic Deans, Registrar, Finance

What Employers Experience. Once an employer has established a relationship with an institution, they expect to be able to reach someone who knows them and their programs. That expectation is frequently not met. When a knowledgeable contact leaves, the institutional knowledge they carried often leaves with them. Employers find themselves re-explaining the history of the partnership, reintroducing their program structure, and waiting for a new contact to build sufficient familiarity to be effective.

Even when staff remain in place, employers describe difficulty reaching someone who can speak to the full scope of the relationship. No one person seems to have the full picture, and navigating to the right answer requires more effort from the employer than it should.

"Points of contact have to be able to connect a whole lot of dots and typically, they're not resourced, nor do they have the bandwidth to do so."

Why This Happens. This section addresses a different problem than asset mapping, focused on whether the institution has built the operational infrastructure to manage a relationship reliably over time, rather than visibility into the nature and breadth of the employer relationship. Employer partnerships cut across organizational boundaries that were often not designed with external partners in mind. Each department manages its own responsibilities, and coordination between them often depends on relationships rather than shared systems and defined protocols. When those relationships break, coordination breaks with them.

Staff in employer-facing roles often carry significant institutional knowledge in informal ways rather than in shared, documented systems. When they leave, that knowledge is not transferred. Without deliberate effort on documentation, knowledge management, and cross-functional coordination, employer partnerships are perpetually at risk of starting over, not because the relationship is over, but because the person who knew how to service it left.

Discussion Questions

- Is partnership documentation stored in a shared system accessible to relevant staff, and is partnership documentation treated as a performance expectation?
- Does each employer partner have a named relationship manager?
- What happens to a partnership when its primary contact leaves?
- Can our employer-facing staff answer basic questions about billing, advising, and academic policy, or must employers navigate multiple offices independently?
- Do employer-facing staff know who (exactly) to call for questions across departments?
- Are staff in each department prepared to answer questions relevant to employer partnerships?

Actions

Immediate next steps and quick wins:

Assign a named relationship manager to each employer partner.

- For employer partners who come to the college through an executive, determine a structured hand-off between the executive and a staff member who will manage the relationship, and determine when and how frequently the executive will check-in on the partnership.
- Define the staff relationship manager role clearly, including scope of authority and coordination responsibilities. Establish a defined backup contact.
- Communicate the assignment formally to employer partners.

Begin building a shared employer partnership record.

- Identify or select a shared system accessible to all relevant staff.
 - Document contract terms, pricing agreements, key contacts, and program parameters for each active partner.
 - Define mandatory fields and require completion within a defined timeframe after key interactions and provide upfront and ongoing staff training.
 - Identify and engage champions in campus departments to support the effort.
-

Medium-term activities:

Develop a structured transition protocol for staff changes/turnover.

- Require outgoing staff to ensure documentation is up to date before departure.
- Schedule a formal transition meeting with employer partners when contacts change, and assign interim coverage immediately upon departure notification.
- Communicate transitions to employer partners proactively and with advance notice.

Invest in cross-functional coordination capacity.

- Establish regular touchpoints between employer-facing staff and counterparts in billing, advising, registrar, and academic affairs.
 - Create shared issue logs accessible across relevant departments.
 - Develop cross-training so employer-facing staff can answer questions across functional areas and route complex issues efficiently.
 - Develop data and tracking capacity, enabling identification of gaps and opportunities, and bright spots for celebration.
-

Longer-term transformations:

Formalize documentation as an institutional performance standard.

- Conduct quarterly audits to ensure partnership records are current and complete.
 - Treat documentation as an explicit performance expectation for all employer-facing staff.
 - Integrate record completeness into supervision and review processes.
-

Shared Definitions of Success and Mutual Accountability

Primary Responsible Role: Vice President for Workforce / Continuing Education

Key Collaborators: Provost, Institutional Research, Director of Employer Partnerships

What Employers Experience. Employers describe a frequent disconnect when they ask institutions how their program is performing. Retention or completion rates that an institution might view as acceptable or even strong may fall well below what an employer needs to justify continued investment.

Employers also note that their own definitions of success are not fixed. Goals shift with business conditions, leadership changes, and workforce strategy. An institution that aligned its program to one set of objectives and never revisited that alignment may find itself delivering outcomes that no longer serve the partnership's current purpose without either party having noticed the drift.

"Colleges say, '55% retention rate is really good'. Employers want 70% minimum. There are translation problems."

Why This Happens. Colleges and universities have well-developed internal frameworks for measuring program quality and student success, as well as state and federal standards to which they must adhere. Those frameworks were designed for compliance, accreditation, and internal improvement, generally not for external performance agreements with employer partners. Adapting them for use in employer relationships requires intentional effort that is rarely built into standard partnership workflows.

Discussion Questions

- Do our employer partnerships include documented, mutually agreed definitions of success?
- Are our completion and retention benchmarks understood and accepted by employer partners?
- When did we last conduct a structured performance review with each employer partner?
- Do we have a defined process for renegotiating program parameters when an employer needs change?

Actions

Immediate next steps and quick wins:

Review current partnerships for documented success metrics.

- Identify which active partnerships have mutually agreed, written definitions of success, and which do not.
- For those that do not, schedule a structured conversation with the employer partner to establish shared metrics.

- Document agreed measures, including minimum acceptable thresholds alongside aspirational targets, in the partnership record or MOU.

Train employer-facing staff in facilitated goal-setting and performance conversation.

- Develop capacity to lead structured conversations about workforce goals and success definitions.
- Build fluency in translating between institutional metrics and employer-facing language.
- Incorporate performance conversation skills into ongoing staff development.

Medium-term activities:

Establish a formal joint performance review process.

- Schedule annual structured reviews with each employer partner.
- Present institutional data alongside employer-reported outcomes.
- Document agreed adjustments and assign accountability for follow-through.
- Treat the review as a mutual accountability process, not an institutional report-out.

Negotiate shared success metrics at the start of each new partnership.

- Surface employer goals and translate them into measurable partnership indicators.
- Agree on minimum acceptable thresholds alongside aspirational targets.
- Document agreed metrics in the partnership agreement or MOU before programming begins.
- Revisit metrics annually or when employer priorities shift.
 - **Resource:** [Shared Definitions of Success Worksheet](#)

Longer-term transformations:

Build institutional flexibility into partnership agreements.

- Looking across partnerships, determine standardized metrics that can be available for all employer partnerships, easing requirements for Institutional Research.
- Define in advance what modifications are permissible if performance falls short (scheduling, format, advising intensity, pricing).
- Establish a clear process for requesting and approving adjustments.
- Create documented precedents for accommodations that have worked well, so future requests can move faster.

Domain 2: Responsive Business and Financial Practices

This section examines the most common business and financial issues employers encounter, and how institutions can begin addressing them.

Pricing and Financial Transparency

Primary Responsible Role: Chief Financial Officer

Key Collaborators: Enrollment Management, Workforce Leadership, Academic Deans

What Employers Experience. Employers report difficulty calculating the total cost of enrollment. Tuition is presented per credit, while fees are disclosed separately. Certain fees appear after enrollment. Materials costs are unclear. Human resources departments struggle to align institutional pricing with annual tuition assistance caps, particularly common thresholds such as \$5,250. When employers are funding a training contract, cohort agreement, or apprenticeship related instruction rather than individual tuition, that cap does not apply, but employers still need predictable, all-in pricing to budget against.

Why This Happens. Institutional pricing is often structured around per-credit tuition, differentiated rates by part-time or full-time status, and distributed fees across departments. While internally logical, these structures do not align with employer budgeting models, which prioritize predictable annual costs.

"We run into challenges with how institutions define fees and how we set up our policy... Do we cover the graduation fee? Prior learning assessment? It's a very technical conversation. And with 300 different ways to define a technology fee, it's almost impossible to be that specific."

Employers are often not fully informed about the restrictions colleges and universities operate under, especially public institutions that often do not set their own tuition rates. For an employer who works primarily with private or for-profit institutions, the more rigid environment for public institutions may be confusing and can come across as unresponsiveness rather than a structural constraint. Employers may also not be aware of the availability of other student financial assistance, including federal and state aid, Promise scholarships, and other opportunities.

Discussion Questions

- How many separate fees apply to learners enrolled with employer support?
- Who has authority to adjust pricing?
- How does our pricing align with employer support models, including tuition assistance caps and apprenticeship or contracted training arrangements?
- Are we transparent about tuition rates and typical fees, as well as about what can and cannot be waived or changed?
- Can people who are charged with employer partnerships describe, simply, how colleges and universities make budget and financial decisions?

Actions

Immediate next steps and quick wins:

Conduct a comprehensive fee audit for employer-sponsored learners.

- Inventory all fees applied to employer-sponsored students.
- Eliminate non-essential or duplicative fees where possible.
- Bundle unavoidable fees into transparent total-cost presentations.
- Clarify which fees are set by state or system leadership and cannot be changed locally.

Produce standardized employer-facing total cost sheets.

- Calculate tuition, mandatory fees, and estimated materials costs for complete pathways, including required tools, uniforms, technology, safety equipment, etc.
 - Present total program cost, not just per-credit rate.
 - Include payment timing and term breakdown.
 - Ensure communication clearly explains pricing constraints for public institutions, which employers may not be aware of.
-

Medium-term activities:

Map program costs against common employer support thresholds.

- Model pacing scenarios that align with annual tuition assistance caps, including the current Section 127 cap of \$5,250 (the federal tax exemption cap for employer-supported tuition assistance).
 - **Resource:** [Unlocking Opportunity: How Tax Policies Like Section 127 Can Drive Employer Partnerships](#)
 - Ensure staff are prepared to share information about other forms of financial aid with employers that can influence employer investments and policies, including federal and state financial programs for eligible employees.
 - For cohort, contract, or apprenticeship-based arrangements, model costs against the relevant negotiated rate or program budget.
 - Provide scenario-based cost projections for part-time and accelerated options.
-

Longer-term Transformations:

Redesign workforce program pricing architecture.

- Evaluate alternative pricing models (modular, subscription, bundled) in the context of institutional constraints.
- Conduct financial modeling analysis.
- Align any pricing reforms with institutional strategy and phase implementation to minimize disruption.

Invoice Structure and Timing

Primary Responsible Role: Controller / Director of Student Accounts

Key Collaborators: Chief Financial Officer, Chief Information Officer, Workforce Partnerships

What Employers Experience. Employers frequently report that invoices lack essential information, such as employee identifiers, program names, or clear billing periods. Invoices may arrive weeks after census dates, making it difficult to align payment processing with internal approval cycles. In some cases, multiple invoices are issued for individual employees rather than consolidated under a single employer account.

Employer finance teams must manually match institutional invoices against their own HR, payroll, or training budget records. Corrections require multiple exchanges with institutional staff. These processes consume time and reduce the perceived reliability of the partnership.

Why This Happens. Student account systems were originally designed to manage individual student liability, not third-party billing, and privacy rules constrain what can be communicated about individual students. Academic calendars drive billing cycles, and invoice templates reflect internal accounting needs rather than employer usability. Without intentional redesign, billing practices remain misaligned with employer operational expectations.

"We were hearing from students that they couldn't enroll in their next course because they had an overdue bill, but we hadn't received the bill yet. Or we had 30 days to pay it and hadn't yet. So now, as soon as that invoice comes in, we have to pay it. And accounts payable tells us, cross your fingers."

Many institutions route new employer agreements through the same enterprise resource planning system used for vendor procurement. An employer partnership is structurally different, in that it is an ongoing relationship involving tuition sponsorship for multiple unique individuals over time. Forcing that relationship through a procurement-oriented approval process often means significant delays and a contract structure that doesn't reflect how the partnership will actually operate.

Discussion Questions

- What is our average time from enrollment confirmation to invoice issuance?
- How frequently do employer invoices require correction, and is invoice performance tracked as a partnership metric?
- Do we offer consolidated billing options?
- What constraints do we face resulting from state or federal controls?
- How are finance charges with employers negotiated, billed, or cancelled?

Actions

Immediate next steps and quick wins:

Standardize employer invoice templates.

- Include employee name and identifier, program name, term, billing period, and itemized cost breakdown.
- Remove internal terminology unfamiliar to external finance teams.
- Pilot the revised template with employer partners and revise based on feedback.

Align billing cadence with employer fiscal cycles.

- Consult with employer finance teams to understand their fiscal calendars and payment approval windows.
 - Establish a predictable invoice issuance timeline following census or enrollment confirmation.
 - Communicate the billing calendar to employer partners in advance each term.
-

Medium-term activities:

Offer consolidated invoicing for employer cohorts.

- Group multiple employees under a single employer account.
- Provide both summary-level and itemized breakdown.
- Assign employer account number for streamlined tracking.

Automate employer invoice generation.

- Integrate billing triggers into student information system workflows.
 - Reduce manual spreadsheet manipulation.
 - Validate automated outputs prior to release.
-

Longer-term transformations:

Redesign billing infrastructure to support employer partnerships.

- Develop employer-specific billing modules within financial systems.
- Establish employer account management protocols.
- Embed invoice performance metrics into finance office review processes.

Employer Direct-Pay Processing

Primary Responsible Role: Bursar

Key Collaborators: Chief Information Officer, Controller/Director of Student Accounts, Workforce Partnerships

What Employers Experience. Employers frequently report that employees are blocked from registering because payment has not yet been posted, even when employer direct payment agreements are in place. In some cases, employees are instructed to advance tuition and seek reimbursement later. Sponsorship verification may require manual intervention by multiple offices.

From the employer's perspective, these experiences can signal a failure to put the partnership into practice. Employees perceive institutional disorganization. HR teams must intervene repeatedly to resolve preventable issues.

Why This Happens. Student information systems are typically configured to trigger administrative holds automatically when balances remain unpaid past defined deadlines. Employer sponsorship arrangements often operate outside those default configurations. Without system-level differentiation, sponsored learners are treated identically to self-paying students.

Some of this misalignment can be addressed through third-party billing and sponsorship platforms designed specifically for this problem. These platforms integrate with common student information systems and give employer partners a dedicated portal to view, dispute, and pay invoices for their sponsored employees.

"There is already skepticism among our employees... We have to tell employees, we will really pay for it! Oh, I can't tell you how often we had a canned response: 'Please ignore this. We promise, we've got you.' It's so frustrating."

Discussion Questions

- How many working students experienced administrative holds last term?
- Are employees ever required to advance tuition despite sponsorship agreements? If so, what can be done to correct this?
- Is employer sponsorship tracked automatically or manually?
- Who is responsible for resolving sponsorship-related enrollment blocks?

Actions

Immediate next steps and quick wins:

Establish written pre-authorization agreements with employer partners.

- Define payment timing expectations.
- Clarify responsibility in the event of delayed payment.
- Document escalation pathway for billing disputes.

Create a formal employer-sponsored designation within the student information system.

- Flag students upon confirmation of employer sponsorship.
- Ensure designation flows across billing and registration systems.
- Train staff about correct use of sponsorship designation.

Medium-term activities:**Disable automated holds for flagged employer-sponsored learners.**

- Ensure that an employer's unpaid balance doesn't result in a financial or transcript hold on the employee's enrollment. The two accounts should operate independently.
 - **Resource:** [Balancing Access and Accountability](#)
- Establish internal guidelines for manual review if payment delays occur.
- Monitor hold incidents quarterly.

Create separate employer receivable accounts.

- Distinguish employer balances from individual student accounts.
- Assign a dedicated account manager for large employer partners.
- Align reconciliation procedures with consolidated billing.

Longer-term transformation:**Fully integrate employer sponsorship into institutional payment workflows.**

- Redesign processes so sponsorship verification, billing, and enrollment confirmation occur seamlessly.
- Embed employer payment tracking into finance dashboards.
- Conduct annual workflow audits to identify friction points.

Evaluate third-party sponsored billing platforms.

- Research third-party invoicing and sponsorship billing platforms.
- Weigh the cost of licensing such a platform against current staff time spent on manual reconciliation and collections for employer-sponsored accounts.
- If a platform is adopted, ensure integration with existing financial aid and registration workflows so sponsored learners are not double tracked across systems.
 - **Field Example:** [5 Benefits of Automating the Sponsored-Billing Process in Higher Education](#)

Domain 3: Working Learner-Centered Academic Practices

Getting academic practices right is where the partnership either delivers on its promise or can fall apart. Academic design determines whether employer partnerships deliver meaningful workforce outcomes. Employers do not seek to compromise academic rigor. They seek predictability, efficiency, and visible skill development aligned with workplace realities.

Course Availability and Sequencing

Primary Responsible Role: Provost, VPI, VPAA

Key Collaborators: Academic Deans, Registrar, Institutional Research, Enrollment Management, Advising, Workforce/Employer Partnerships

What Employers Experience. Employers often begin partnerships with shared expectations about completion timelines. As employees progress, however, they encounter structural barriers. Required courses may be offered only once per academic year and are not aligned to working hours. Sections may be canceled due to low enrollment. Prerequisite courses may extend across multiple terms without alternative sequencing options.

Employers cannot reliably predict when employees will complete credentials. Workforce planning tied to credential milestones becomes unstable. Budgets are unpredictable.

Why This Happens. Course scheduling is typically decentralized across departments. Enrollment minimums and faculty load models may inadvertently deprioritize smaller employer cohorts. Institutions rarely conduct systematic bottleneck analysis specific to adult or workforce learners. As a result, delays become normalized.

"They don't offer classes that work for our employees. Classes are during the day, no night or weekend classes. Even when we bring them enough students to support a faculty member, they say they can't do it."

Discussion Questions

- Which courses most frequently delay working learners?
- How often are required courses canceled?
- Can learners predict graduation timelines at enrollment?
- Is time-to-degree variability tracked by employer cohort?

Actions

Immediate next steps and quick wins:

Conduct a formal annual bottleneck analysis focused on employer-sponsored learners.

- Identify courses that most frequently delay progression.
 - **Resource:** [Scheduling for Success: New Report Shows How Smarter Academic Scheduling Can Boost College Completion](#)

- Calculate average wait times for required courses.
 - Review cancellation frequency.
 - Present findings annually to deans and provost.
-

Medium-term activities:

Establish a minimum offering guarantee for required workforce courses.

- Create policy preventing cancellation without alternative offering.
- Align enrollment thresholds with strategic workforce priorities.

Create dedicated employer cohort sections when enrollment justifies it.

- Determine feasibility of reserving seats or establishing dedicated sections.
 - Align pacing with employer payment cycles.
 - Assign faculty experienced in adult learning.
-

Longer-term transformation:

Redesign academic calendar structures for workforce-intensive programs.

- Evaluate modular formats and rolling starts.
- Model impact on faculty workload and accreditation.
- Secure faculty governance approval.
- Implement phased calendar reform.

Develop a multi-year course rotation schedule for workforce-aligned programs.

- Provide at least two years of forward visibility.
- Clearly identify required courses and sequencing.
- Share schedules with employer partners.

Credit for Competencies and Skills

Primary Responsible Role: Provost, Chief Instructional Officer

Key Collaborators: Registrar, Faculty Senate, Academic Affairs, Workforce Partnerships

What Employers Experience. Employers often observe employees enrolling in introductory or foundational courses that replicate competencies already demonstrated in the workplace. Certifications that are widely recognized in one program may not be recognized in another. Portfolio review processes may extend across multiple months without clear communication about status or outcome.

From the employer's perspective, this redundancy increases the financial cost of participation and lengthens time to completion without adding meaningful value. It also signals that the institution does not fully acknowledge or respect applied workplace expertise. When employees must repeat learning unnecessarily, employers question the efficiency and strategic value of the partnership.

Why This Happens. In many institutions, policies governing Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) and Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) evolved organically within departments rather than through centralized academic strategy. Faculty authority over curriculum and credit determination is appropriately protected; however, without institution-wide standards and clear equivalencies, variability becomes structural. Because that authority typically sits with department or program-level faculty committees, standardizing CLP practices is a curriculum governance change and needs to move through the same approval pathways as other changes to academic standards.

"Our employees would love for their work to count... so they could get into the meat of things that will truly get them the degree quicker. We're not looking to dilute anything—we want it to be connected."

CPL is often treated as an exception process, rather than as an integrated component of workforce-oriented program design. Without service-level timelines and transparent criteria, delays and inconsistency are inevitable, and students ultimately suffer, especially working learners from under-resourced backgrounds.

Finally, employers think and plan and train in competencies (knowledge, skills, and abilities in context), not courses. Until institutions define learning in terms of what learners can do and create legitimate pathways for working learners to demonstrate the competencies they already possess, employers will continue to pay for learning their employees already have.

There are clear benefits to institutions that provide credit for prior learning. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning's [long-term research](#) indicates that CPL significantly lowers costs for adult learners, shortens time to completion, and increases completion rates, outcomes that both employers and institutions care about.

Discussion Questions

- Do we have a consistent, institution-wide policy for recognizing learning gained through work, or does it vary by department and individual faculty?
- Has our curriculum governance body (faculty senate, curriculum committee, etc.) formally engaged in the institution's CPL approach?
- Is our process for recognizing work-based learning accessible and understandable to working learners and their employers?
- Are we asking what learners already know and can do, or focusing only on course equivalencies?
- Can working learners get a clear picture of how their professional experience counts before they enroll?
- Do our employer partners understand how their employees' workplace learning is recognized in our programs?
- Do we have a sense of how our employer partners' skills and competencies are changing because of AI adoption and automation?
- Do we have a sense of the financial impact of increasing recognition of prior learning (enrollment revenue lost, tuition revenue lost, etc.)?

Actions

Immediate next steps and quick wins:

Inventory current CPL/PLA policies and practices across programs.

- Identify which programs offer credit for work-based learning and on what basis.
 - **Resource:** [Enhancing Accessibility and Inclusion: The 2024 Landscape of Credit for Prior Learning in U.S. and Canadian Higher Education](#)
- Document the review process, decision timelines, and responsible parties for each.
- Note where practices vary significantly across departments.
- Use findings to identify gaps in consistency, accessibility, and transparency.

Medium-term activities:

Establish clear, consistent institutional standards for CPL review.

- Define eligibility criteria, acceptable forms of evidence, and review timelines that apply institution wide.
- Ensure these standards are channeled through academic governance processes, and that there are faculty champions involved in the proposed changes.
- Assign clear responsibility for administering the process.
- Set a defined service-level standard for review and decision (for example, 30 calendar days from submission).
- Make the process and its criteria publicly accessible to learners and employer partners.

Work with employer partners to identify where workplace learning aligns with program competencies.

- Engage employer partners in reviewing which skills and knowledge their employees typically develop on the job relative to program requirements.
- Use those conversations to inform how work-based experience is assessed and recognized, focusing on what learners know and can do, not only on which courses they might waive.
- Revisit alignment with employer partners on a defined cycle as workforce practices and program requirements evolve.

Ensure working learners can assess their options before enrolling.

- Train advisors to ask about professional experience and workplace skills as a standard part of intake for employer-sponsored learners.
 - Equip advisors to explain available CPL pathways, what documentation is needed, and what the likely timeline is.
 - Provide written guidance on how work-based learning may count toward program requirements before learners commit to a course of study.
 - Document CPL-related advising conversations in the student record.
-

Longer-term transformation:**Develop structured pathways for competency demonstration where programs allow.**

- For workforce-aligned programs with well-defined learning outcomes, work with faculty to identify where demonstrated workplace competency can serve as a recognized pathway toward program completion.
- Begin with programs and employer partnerships where the conditions are most favorable, document outcomes, and expand from there.
- Ensure any competency demonstration pathways are formally approved, consistently administered, and communicated clearly to learners and employers.
- Confirm that new demonstration pathways are reviewed and approved through standing academic governance processes and have faculty buy-in.
- Develop ways to communicate and market credit for prior learning practices and examples within current employer partnerships, and for future partners.
- Engage state and system level partners to create comprehensive reforms and leverage other efforts in this area.

Track and report CPL and competency recognition as part of workforce partnership metrics.

- Monitor the number of working learners who pursue and receive credit through work-based learning recognition, including participants in internships, apprenticeships, externships, and other formats alongside those with full-time roles.
- Track time-to-decision and consistency of outcomes across departments.
- Include CPL utilization data in workforce partnership reporting to institutional leadership and employer partners.

Competency Transparency and Skills Alignment

Primary Responsible Role: Provost

Key Collaborators: Curriculum Committees, Academic Deans, Institutional Research, Workforce Partnerships

What Employers Experience. Employers reviewing program materials may find detailed course descriptions but limited clarity regarding applied competencies. It may be difficult to determine how skills accumulate across a pathway or how specific learning outcomes map to job requirements.

This lack of transparency makes it harder for employers to justify investment internally. HR and business leaders may struggle to articulate how a credential advances organizational capability.

Why This Happens. Academic outcomes are often written for accreditation and internal quality assurance rather than for external workforce audiences. Curriculum review processes prioritize disciplinary rigor but may not require systematic alignment with industry frameworks. Transcript formats typically record credit hours and grades without referencing competencies.

"Every syllabus says the learning objectives, but now that you've completed the course, what are the skills you should speak to in an interview, on your resume?"

Discussion Questions

- Are learning outcomes understandable to non-academic audiences?
- Are students emerging from programs with a clear understanding of what they know and can do?
- Can we demonstrate skill progression clearly across a pathway?
- Do transcripts reflect competencies beyond credit accumulation?
- Is employer feedback incorporated into curriculum review?
- Are industry experts regularly brought in as instructors or guest lecturers?

Actions

Immediate next steps and quick wins:

Publish accessible program-level learning outcomes.

- Translate outcomes into plain language, aligned to employer demand.
- Avoid discipline-specific jargon.
- Make outcomes visible on program websites.

Develop employer-facing competency briefs.

- Summarize skills gained at key milestones within a program.
- Provide a brief narrative explaining applied relevance.

- Share briefs with employer partners.
-

Medium-term activities:

Map outcomes to recognized industry frameworks.

- Identify relevant industry skill frameworks, complemented by any required national standards.
- Conduct structured crosswalk analysis.
- Document alignment clearly.

Embed employer input into curriculum review cycles.

- Establish advisory panels with industry representation or go beyond advisory panels by giving employers a more active role in curriculum development.
 - Integrate workforce alignment criteria into program review.
 - Document changes resulting from employer feedback.
 - **Field Example:** [How Miami Dade College Built Its AI Programs by Letting Industry Talk First](#)
-

Longer-term transformations:

Integrate competency indicators into transcripts or digital credentials.

- Explore digital badging and incremental credentialing models aligned with program milestones.
- Ensure consistency across programs.
- Participate in emerging state-led talent marketplace efforts designed to register and provide comprehensive competency data across credentials.

Domain 4: Actionable and Predictable Data

Employers often need and want more than compliance-level data reporting. Data must be operational, predictable, and aligned to business decision cycles.

Standardized Progress Reporting

Primary Responsible Role: Director of Institutional Research

Key Collaborators: Registrar, Chief Information Officer, Workforce Partnerships, Provost

What Employers Experience. Employers frequently request learner progress data and receive spreadsheets assembled manually, often weeks or months later. Report formats vary from term to term. Projected completion dates may be absent or calculated inconsistently. Aggregate completion rates require additional follow-up.

Human resources and talent development teams must then manually reconcile institutional data with internal employee records. This process introduces delay and error. From the employer's perspective, the absence of standardized reporting suggests that the institution does not fully understand their need for consistent, business-ready information.

Even when learners are performing well, inconsistent reporting weakens confidence in the partnership.

Why This Happens. Most institutional reporting systems are designed for accreditation, federal compliance, and internal academic review. Data structures align to census dates, grade submission timelines, and regulatory definitions. Employer reporting requirements do not map cleanly onto those systems. Employers often work on different timelines and request data in slightly different formats and metrics using slightly different definitions.

"The key metric is how far away is this person from graduation. The problem is that they can't predict. This was mind-blowing, that they couldn't at the start of a semester predict who was going to earn a credential at the end of that term."

As a result, employer data is often extracted manually from multiple systems, reformatted, and delivered without standardized definitions. Without automation and governance, variability becomes structural.

Discussion Questions

- What data elements do our employer partners request most frequently?
- How long does it currently take to produce a standard progress report?
- Are projected completion dates calculated consistently?
- Is employer reporting automated or manually assembled?
- What information does the institution need back from the employer to gauge effectiveness of instruction, working learner satisfaction, and workplace outcomes?

Actions

Immediate next steps and quick wins:

Define a standardized employer data dictionary.

- Convene Institutional Research, Registrar, and Workforce leadership to identify required recurring data elements (enrollment status, credits earned toward credential, cumulative GPA where appropriate, projected completion date, withdrawal indicators).
- Document clear definitions for each field to ensure consistency across terms.
- Review definitions with employer partners for clarity.

Develop a standardized employer progress report template.

- Design consistent report layout with defined fields and explanatory notes.
 - Remove academic jargon or clarify terminology.
 - Pilot internally and revise based on feedback.
-

Medium-term activities:

Establish a predictable reporting cadence aligned to employer needs.

- Meet with employer partners to understand fiscal and workforce planning cycles.
- Set a recurring reporting schedule (for example, quarterly).
- Communicate reporting calendar in advance.
- Assign responsibility for report delivery.

Ensure data collection enables early-warning alerts for employer-supported students.

- Adopt software platform that enables early-warning alerts.
 - Integrate alert system with employer reporting protocols.
-

Longer-term transformations:

Automate recurring data pulls through system integration.

- Work with IT to build standardized queries in the student information system.
- Reduce manual spreadsheet manipulation.
- Validate automated outputs against prior manual reports.
- Monitor data accuracy quarterly.

Develop secure employer dashboards where appropriate.

- Implement role-based access controls.
 - Ensure FERPA-compliant consent processes are embedded (FERPA governs the data and information institutions can share about students without students' written consent).
 - **Resource:** [Employer-Developed FERPA Agreement Template](#)
 - Provide aggregated metrics and downloadable reports.
 - Establish dashboard usage analytics to monitor effectiveness.
-

Timeliness and Responsiveness of Data

Primary Responsible Role: Director of Institutional Research

Key Collaborators: Chief Information Officer, Provost, Workforce Partnerships

What Employers Experience. Employers may learn about course withdrawals or non-enrollment only after tuition deadlines have passed. Projected completion dates may not reflect updated enrollment patterns. Early signs of academic struggle are not communicated in time for intervention.

Workforce planning becomes reactive rather than proactive. Employers must adjust promotion timelines and succession plans without reliable advance notice.

Why This Happens. Institutional reporting often centers on end-of-term milestones. Risk indicators such as missed assignments or non-registration are captured within systems but are often not shifted into structured outreach or reporting workflows. Without defined service standards, responsiveness depends on individual initiative.

"Their reporting timeline is super, super late. You'd think at the end of a semester they'd clearly be able to report... or even just after the add/drop window."

Discussion Questions

- What is our average turnaround time for employer data requests?
- Do we proactively notify employers of risk events?
- Are workforce metrics visible at executive leadership level?
- Is there a defined escalation pathway for urgent data needs?

Actions

Immediate next steps and quick wins:

Establish response time standards for employer reporting.

- Define standard turnaround time for requested reports.
- Clarify escalation pathway for urgent requests.
- Communicate standards internally and externally.
- Monitor compliance quarterly.

Align reporting calendar with employer fiscal and workforce planning cycles.

- Conduct structured consultation with employer partners.
- Adjust reporting schedule accordingly.
- Document reporting alignment commitments.
 - **Resource:** [Employer-Developed FERPA Agreement Template](#)

Medium-term activities:**Implement automated early risk alerts.**

- Identify specific triggers (e.g., non-registration for next term, GPA decline below threshold, withdrawal events).
- Configure alerts within LMS and SIS.
- Assign responsibility for outreach upon trigger activation.

Develop formal data escalation protocols.

- Define approval chain for non-standard data requests.
 - Establish prioritization guidelines.
 - Document timeline expectations for urgent workforce-related requests.
-

Longer-term transformations:**Integrate workforce partnership metrics into executive dashboards.**

- Include retention rates by employer cohort.
- Track time-to-completion variance.
- Present workforce data in cabinet-level reviews.
- Incorporate workforce metrics into annual strategic planning.

Domain 5: Integrated Student Support

When student support is reactive, inconsistent, or invisible to employer partners, students who leave (permanently or temporarily) can reflect on the institution, not just on individual circumstances. Closing that gap requires institutions to be intentional, proactive, and transparent about how they support the students employers are sending them.

Pre-Enrollment Academic Planning and Readiness

Primary Responsible Role: Vice President for Enrollment Management

Key Collaborators: Workforce Advising, Financial Aid, Registrar, Academic Departments

What Employers Experience. Employers frequently report that employees withdraw during the first term due to unexpected workload demands, misalignment between program content and career goals, or a poor understanding of the financial and scheduling commitments involved. Tuition assistance funds are used inefficiently because learners do not fully understand pacing options, program constraints, or the sequencing of their chosen program.

HR leaders are often surprised to learn that employees select programs without reviewing cost implications, employer policy constraints, or realistic time-to-completion estimates. From the employer's perspective, these breakdowns can signal that the institution did not adequately prepare learners before they enrolled.

Why This Happens. Traditional enrollment pipelines are often optimized for full-time, residential students. Advising resources are often stretched, and working learners are typically processed through standard intake workflows. Readiness conversations can happen informally rather than systematically. Without structured advising checkpoints and documented degree pathway planning, enrollment becomes transactional rather than strategic and attrition can become normalized.

"We are big advocates for upfront counseling required before enrollment. We built a coaching program as a response to schools not doing it."

Discussion Questions

- Do employer-sponsored learners receive any differentiated advising prior to enrollment that ensures they are compliant with their employers' policies?
- Is workload reviewed explicitly and documented before registration?
- Can learners see a written degree pathway with multiple pacing options before they commit?
- Is financial impact, including withdrawal consequences, modeled in every intake advising session?
- Do we track first-term attrition for employer-sponsored learners, and do we use it to improve our intake process?

Actions

Immediate next steps and quick wins:

Standardize employer-specific intake advising.

- Require a mandatory advising appointment prior to course registration for all employer-sponsored learners, focused on academic and financial planning and time commitments required.
 - **Resource:** [Supporting Adult Learners in Postsecondary Education](#)
 - Confirm learner understanding of employer tuition policy, reimbursement timing, and eligibility requirements, and document advising conversation in the student record.
-

Medium-term activities:

Align institutional and employer messaging on expectations.

- Coordinate with employer contacts to ensure that what learners hear from the institution about workload and commitment is consistent with what they hear from their employer.
- Develop shared communication templates that both parties can use during the enrollment period.
- Clarify policies on workplace scheduling flexibility in writing before enrollment begins.

Develop workforce-specific orientation modules.

- Address academic expectations, technology requirements, available support services, and realistic workload examples.
 - Include employer messaging about workplace scheduling flexibility and performance standards where applicable.
 - Require completion before the first term begins.
 - Track completion rates across employer cohorts.
-

Longer-term transformation:

Provide written degree pathway maps with pacing options.

- Outline course sequence across terms for the learner's chosen program, identifying any course substitutions and waiver options.
 - Present multiple pacing scenarios, including part-time and accelerated options, with estimated completion timelines for each.
 - Include projected cost under each scenario, mapped against common employer reimbursement caps.
 - Share the pathway document with the learner and, where appropriate, with the employer liaison.
 - **Resource:** [The Costs of Today's College Credit Transfer System for Learners and the Mindsets and Practices That Reduce Them \(CHEPP\)](#)
-

Integrate financial impact modeling into advising sessions.

- Review annual tuition assistance caps, contracted training arrangements, or other applicable employer support terms and reimbursement timing with each learner.
- Model cost implications of different credit load scenarios.
- Explain financial consequences of course withdrawal, including impact on employer reimbursement eligibility.

Embed readiness review formally into the enrollment workflow.

- Require documented advisor sign-off before registration is confirmed.
- Track completion of readiness review across employer cohorts.
- Audit compliance with intake advising standards annually.
- Use attrition data from first-term withdrawals to identify gaps in pre-enrollment preparation and adjust advising protocols accordingly.

Ongoing Advising and Risk Intervention

Primary Responsible Role: Director of Advising, Counseling Services

Key Collaborators: Workforce Partnerships, Institutional Research, Registrar

What Employers Experience. Employers assume institutions are monitoring learner progress and intervening early when challenges arise. However, they often discover withdrawals only after deadlines have passed. Risk signals such as missed assignments or declining grades are not communicated in time to allow meaningful intervention. This delay can erode employer confidence and increase perceived financial risk.

Why This Happens. Advising caseloads are broad, and proactive outreach may not be prioritized. Early alert systems exist within learning platforms but are not always linked to structured outreach workflows.

Advisors may not be trained in employer tuition policies or in coordinating with employer partners.

"There is an assumption that the university is catching people who are falling behind. The university is responsible, and the employer believes the university is responsible, but I don't know that there is a good mechanism to communicate. That's the gap, or opportunity, there."

Discussion Questions

- How are at-risk working learners currently identified?
- What is the time interval between early alert and outreach?
- Are advisors trained in employer tuition policies?
- Is retention data broken out by employer groups and reviewed by leadership?

Actions

Immediate next steps and quick wins:

Assign dedicated advisors to employer cohorts.

- Ensure advisors understand the specific terms of each employer's support, whether tuition assistance, a training contract, or an apprenticeship agreement, and the parameters governing it.
- Provide advisors with opportunities, as appropriate, to meet employer leads, tour facilities, and understand students' work.
- Define advisor caseload size appropriate for proactive outreach.

Establish structured early alert triggers.

- Define specific risk indicators (missed assignments, GPA decline, non-registration).
- Configure automated alerts within LMS and SIS.
- Require documented advisor outreach following trigger activation.

Medium-term activities:**Develop employer communication protocol (with learner consent).**

- Define which risk events warrant employer notification.
- Establish a timeline for notification.
- Document FERPA-compliant consent procedures.
 - **Resource:** [Employer-Developed FERPA Agreement Template](#)

Track advising engagement metrics and intervention outcomes.

- Measure time from alert to outreach.
- Track retention rates by employer cohort.
- Review intervention effectiveness quarterly.

Longer-term transformation:**Integrate retention analytics into workforce strategy review.**

- Present employer-specific retention trends to cabinet.
 - Identify recurring risk factors.
 - Adjust staffing and support models based on data.
-

Institutional Self-Assessment

This resource is designed to help institutional leadership teams assess their current readiness across the five domains of employer-friendly practice. We provide an overview of the domain, followed by a self-assessment tool. Additional information and resources are linked, for those who want to go deeper.

The self-assessment process is most useful when completed collaboratively by a cross-functional group that includes senior academic, financial, enrollment, and workforce leaders rather than by a single individual. When different team members assign different scores to the same item, it reveals operational and accountability gaps, areas where institutional processes depend on individual effort rather than shared design.

For each item, assign a traffic light rating:

- **Green** - This is consistently in place, well-understood across relevant offices, and functioning as intended.
- **Yellow** - This is partially in place, inconsistently applied, or dependent on individual effort rather than institutional systems.
- **Red** - This is not in place, or significantly below the standard needed to support effective employer partnerships.

At the end of each domain, tally your ratings to produce a domain readiness level. Overall institutional readiness is a composite of all five domains.

Foundational Actions and Mindsets

Across our interviews, the institutions that employers described as their best partners shared something that had little to do with program design or resources. They had leaders with the agency to create change in their organizations and who took employer engagement seriously as a strategic priority, staff who understood what employers were trying to accomplish, and a shared sense of what success looked like for both sides. Everything else: the billing workflows, the advising systems, and the data practices, worked better because that foundation was in place.

In our research, employers consistently described the difference between institutions that treated employer engagement as a strategic priority and those that treated it as optional. Employers rarely struggled with program quality, but they were concerned about whether institutional leaders understood why employers were investing in education, whether

Did You Know?

Employers invest in education for [many reasons](#), and they're not thinking only about skill development. Employers are looking to improve talent retention and create advancement pathways, as well as strengthening their employer value proposition, brand, and employee experience. Nearly [60%](#) of employers support education programs because their own employees demand it!

institutional leaders moved with urgency, whether there was alignment between leadership and staff, and whether their college partners were willing to define success in terms employers could recognize. Under all these concerns was a constant: employers treated credential completion as an important accountability signal.

#	Assessment Items - Foundational Actions and Mindsets	Green (2)	Yellow (1)	Red (0)
Connecting to Business Imperatives				
F1	Senior leaders have an active understanding of the employer's goals driving each partnership, and that information is documented and accessible to relevant staff.	☐	☐	☐
F2	Staff who work with employers are trained to understand common employer needs and priorities in the region.	☐	☐	☐
F3	A clear process exists for capturing employer goals at the start of each new partnership and keeping that information current as the relationship evolves.	☐	☐	☐
Leadership, Urgency, and Institutional Commitment				
F4	Employer partnership is named as an institutional priority in strategic planning documents and internal communications.	☐	☐	☐
F5	The institution has set clear response time standards for employer inquiries and tracks whether those standards are being met.	☐	☐	☐
F6	A senior leader is formally responsible for employer partnership outcomes, with the authority to act on contracts, pricing, and operational issues without unnecessary delay.	☐	☐	☐
Asset and Relationship Mapping				
F7	The institution has conducted a recent inventory of employer relationships across all functions, including workforce development, academic departments, career services, advancement, and faculty.	☐	☐	☐
F8	Employer relationship information is recorded in a shared system accessible to all relevant staff, not in individual inboxes or department-level files.	☐	☐	☐
Consistent Points of Contact and Internal Coordination				

#	Assessment Items - Foundational Actions and Mindsets	Green (2)	Yellow (1)	Red (0)
F9	Each active employer partner has a named relationship manager and a designated backup contact, and employer partners know who to reach.	☐	☐	☐
F10	Key information for each employer partner, including relationship manager, contract terms, pricing, contacts, and communication history, is recorded in a shared system that all relevant staff can access.	☐	☐	☐
F11	When a relationship manager leaves, there is a clear plan for transferring employer relationships so that continuity and trust are maintained.	☐	☐	☐
Shared Definitions of Success and Mutual Accountability				
F12	Each partnership includes a written, mutually agreed definition of what success looks like, including minimum acceptable outcomes.	☐	☐	☐
Total		☐	☐	☐

18-24: Strong foundation. Focus on maintaining consistency and institutionalizing what is working.

12-17: Partial foundation. Identify which gaps are most consequential and prioritize those first.

0-11: Significant foundational gaps. Operational improvements in other domains are unlikely to hold without addressing these conditions first.

Responsive Business and Financial Practices

When we asked employers what most quickly undermined their confidence in an institutional partner, operational and financial friction emerged as a recurring theme. Some examples: receiving an invoice six months late with no itemization; watching an employee get placed on a financial hold despite a signed employer agreement; fielding questions from students who were misdirected by college staff.

These small problems can accumulate quickly and create big issues, stopping a working learner from registering for their next course or getting in the way

Did You Know?

About 42% of employers support direct pay to institutions on behalf of working learners, while 58% offer reimbursement. Yet, offering direct payment has an impact on program success: organizations that provide direct payment are [more than four times as likely](#) to report their program is successful!

of an employer trying to justify the program to a skeptical financial leader. Among many of the employers we interviewed, these experiences defined the partnership as much as anything that happened in the classroom.

For many employer partnerships, business and financial practices (engaging under contract or agreement, exchanging money for tuition) are a real test of institutional readiness. Employers may be aligned on mission and enthusiastic about program design, but their experience and confidence can deteriorate once contracts are signed and money is exchanged and the real work of enrolling, learning, and progressing begins.

Friction around business practices is one of the fastest ways to undermine trust. Employers are accustomed to predictable vendor relationships. When colleges and universities cannot meet business expectations, and when institutional structures are poorly fit for working learners, employers question whether the partnership can scale or sustain.

Did You Know?

The [IRS tax code](#) allows for working learners to receive up to \$5,250 in employer support for tuition as non-taxable income. For the first time in decades, that amount will increase based on the cost of living each year. When an employer caps their education benefit at \$5,250, this is why.

#	Responsible Business and Financial Practices	Green (2)	Yellow (1)	Red (0)
Pricing Transparency				
1.1	The institution can produce a complete proposal for any program, including tuition, fees, and materials, within 1-2 business days.	☐	☐	☐
1.2	Program costs have been modeled against common employer support thresholds, including the federal tax-exempt cap of \$5,250 for tuition assistance, and pacing options are available to help employees stay within those limits.	☐	☐	☐
1.3	Pricing information is presented in a format that works for employer budget planning, not just in per-credit or per-term academic terms and reflects if prices vary based on delivery and location of courses delivered.	☐	☐	☐
1.4	Staff who interact with employers can explain, in plain language, how the institution sets prices and makes financial decisions.	☐	☐	☐
Invoice Structure and Timing				

#	Responsible Business and Financial Practices	Green (2)	Yellow (1)	Red (0)
1.5	Employer invoice templates include the employee name, program, term, billing period, and an itemized cost breakdown in language that employer finance teams can follow.	☐	☐	☐
1.6	Invoices are sent on a predictable schedule that aligns with how employers manage payments, not just with the academic calendar.	☐	☐	☐
1.7	Employers with multiple sponsored learners can receive a single consolidated invoice with a summary total and itemized detail.	☐	☐	☐
Employer Direct-Pay Processing				
1.8	Written agreements with employer partners spell out when payment is due, who is responsible if payment is late, and how disputes are handled.	☐	☐	☐
1.9	Employer-sponsored learners are flagged in the student information system so that financial holds are not applied while employer payment is pending.	☐	☐	☐
1.10	Balances owed by employers are tracked separately from individual student accounts, with a designated contact for employers sponsoring multiple learners.	☐	☐	☐
Total		☐	☐	☐

15-20: Strong financial infrastructure. Monitor for consistency across partners and over time.

10-14: Operational gaps present. Prioritize items most directly affecting learner enrollment and employer payment cycles.

0-9: Significant financial friction likely. Employer trust is at risk. Immediate review of billing and payment systems is warranted.

Working Learner-Centered Academic Practices

The employers we spoke with were not asking institutions to lower academic standards or design programs around employer convenience. What they told us they wanted (and frequently did not find) was evidence that institutions had thought deeply about what it means to be a working adult trying to earn a credential while holding down a job and managing a family. Rigid schedules, requirements that are hard to understand and plan around, and programs that bear little visible connection to workplace skills, look like indifference and bureaucratic thinking to employers, even if they were borne out of tradition for institutions.

Did You Know?

Employer spending on training is significant and growing. In 2025, employers reported [\\$102.8 billion](#) in training expenses, averaging over \$800 per employee and representing an increase of almost 5% from the previous year.

Ensuring that curricula are responsive to employer needs is where the partnership either delivers on its promise or quietly falls apart. Academic design determines whether employer partnerships deliver meaningful workforce outcomes. Employers want predictability, efficiency, and visible skill development aligned with workplace realities, without sacrifices in academic quality and learning outcomes.

#	Working Learner-Centered Academic Practices	Green (2)	Yellow (1)	Red (0)
Course Availability and Sequencing				
2.1	Programs that serve working learners offer evening, weekend, or online options and academic and support services that accommodate employees across common work schedules, including shift workers.	☐	☐	☐
2.2	A multi-year course schedule for workforce-aligned programs is published and shared with employer partners, and required courses are not cancelled without an alternative option in place. Outdated program and course information are scrubbed from websites and company catalogs.	☐	☐	☐
2.3	The institution reviews annually which courses are most frequently causing delays in learner progression and reports findings to academic leadership.	☐	☐	☐
Credit for Competencies and Skills				
2.4	Working learners can get clear, written information on how their professional experience (past and current) may count toward program requirements, including estimated timelines and costs, before they commit to a course of study.	☐	☐	☐

#	Working Learner-Centered Academic Practices	Green (2)	Yellow (1)	Red (0)
2.5	Policies for recognizing learning from work experience are consistent across departments, with clear criteria and a defined process that learners and employers can understand before enrollment.	☐	☐	☐
2.6	Timelines for processing credit for prior learning requests are clearly defined, and outcomes are tracked to ensure consistency across departments.	☐	☐	☐
2.7	Employer partners are engaged regularly to identify where workplace learning and experiences align with program requirements, and that input shapes how work-based learning is recognized.	☐	☐	☐
Competency Transparency and Skills Alignment				
2.8	Program-level learning outcomes are written in plain language and published where employers and prospective working learners can find them.	☐	☐	☐
2.9	Learning outcomes for workforce-aligned programs are connected to recognized industry skill frameworks and/or certifications.	☐	☐	☐
2.10	At least some workforce-aligned programs offer a formal, consistently administered pathway for learners to demonstrate competency and connect that learning into a credential, and is clearly communicated to learners and employer partners.	☐	☐	☐
Total		☐	☐	☐

15-20: Academic practices are well-aligned with working learner needs. Focus on maintaining employer input and expanding competency recognition pathways.

11-14: Meaningful gaps present. Identify which are most visible to employers and most consequential for learner progression.

0-9: Academic systems present significant barriers for employer-sponsored and working learners. Sustained engagement with employers is unlikely without structural reform.

Actionable and Predictable Data

One of the things that surprised us in our research was how modest employers' data requests were. They were not asking for real-time dashboards or detailed academic records. They wanted to know, at reasonable intervals, whether their employees were progressing and when they were likely to finish. They wanted to be told, and not to discover after the fact, when someone was falling behind and they wanted that information consistently, in a format they could use.

What they described receiving instead was manual spreadsheets assembled on request, inconsistent formatting from term to term, and often flat-out refusal to provide completion projections. For employers who are trying to make workforce planning decisions and defend continued investment to their own leadership, that gap is not a minor inconvenience.

Did You Know?

Companies that invest in employee education often experience significant returns, saving money through increased retention, improved talent attraction, and internal mobility. Check out cases from [Chipotle](#), [Starbucks](#), [McDonald's](#), and [Medtronic](#).

Data practices determine whether employer partnerships are sustainable. Employers invest in education programs because they expect measurable impact: improved retention, increased promotion readiness, strengthened internal pipelines. Without timely, consistent, and usable data, employers cannot evaluate that impact or defend continued investment.

While some institutional leaders might push back on data sharing as a responsibility for the employer and employee, employers are simply not set up to collect this data from students in an accurate and timely way. Instead, employers want colleges and universities to work in partnership, focused on the success of their working learners.

#	Actionable and Predictable Data	Green (2)	Yellow (1)	Red (0)
Standardized Progress Reporting				
3.1	Students receiving employer sponsorship have given written consent for the institution to share relevant information with their employer, and that consent is collected as part of enrollment.	☐	☐	☐
3.2	A standard progress report template is in use, with consistent fields and formatting across all employer partners and terms, including projected completion dates.	☐	☐	☐
3.3	Key terms used in employer reports, such as enrollment status, credits completed, and projected completion date, are defined consistently and applied the same way across all partners.	☐	☐	☐

#	Actionable and Predictable Data	Green (2)	Yellow (1)	Red (0)
3.4	Progress reports are delivered on a predictable schedule that aligns with how employer partners plan and make decisions.	☐	☐	☐
3.5	Recurring employer data reports are generated automatically from institutional systems rather than assembled manually each term.	☐	☐	☐
Timeliness and Responsiveness				
3.6	There are defined turnaround standards for responding to employer data requests, and compliance with those standards is monitored.	☐	☐	☐
3.7	Employers are notified promptly when a sponsored learner withdraws or does not register for the following term.	☐	☐	☐
3.8	Student data systems flag warning signs, like missed assignments, persistent absence, or falling grades.	☐	☐	☐
3.9	Employer partners receive a summary each term of how their sponsored learners performed, including completion rates and any agreed success metrics.	☐	☐	☐
3.10	Retention and completion rates for employer-sponsored learners are tracked for each employer and reviewed by senior leadership on a regular basis.	☐	☐	☐
Total		☐	☐	☐

15-20: Strong data infrastructure. Focus on automation, consistency, and integrating workforce metrics into strategic planning.

10-14: Partial data capability. Prioritize standardization and timeliness. Inconsistency can be as damaging as absence.

0-9: Data practices are a significant vulnerability. Employers cannot evaluate their investment, and trust is at risk.

Integrated Student Support

Even when the financial systems are working well, the academic model is well-designed, and the data is flowing, partnerships can still fail if working learners don't get the right support at the right time. Working learners navigate two performance systems simultaneously: their workplace and the institution. Support models designed for traditional, full-time students do not automatically translate to working adults balancing employment, family, and education. While many colleges, especially community colleges and regional comprehensives, serve and prioritize students with competing priorities, they don't necessarily account for the employers' role.

Employers generally assume their institutional partners are monitoring learner progress and intervening before problems become withdrawals. In our research, that assumption was rarely warranted at the scale employers needed. "There is an assumption that the university is catching people who are falling behind," one employer told us. "But I don't know that there is a good mechanism to communicate. That's the gap."

Did You Know?

About [30%](#) of employers provide coaching and advisory services to learners participating in education programs. Programs that employers view as successful are nearly twice as likely to include advising services as unsuccessful programs, creating clear value for employers.

#	Integrated Student Support	Green (2)	Yellow (1)	Red (0)
Pre-Enrollment Planning and Readiness				
4.1	Employer-sponsored learners receive an advising appointment before registering for courses, separate from the standard intake process.	☐	☐	☐
4.2	Every employer-sponsored learner receives a written degree plan with multiple pacing options and estimated completion timelines before they enroll.	☐	☐	☐
4.3	Incoming students receive a transfer credit/degree audit to determine their fastest and most cost-efficient path to a credential.	☐	☐	☐
4.4	Employer-sponsored learners receive a financial planning session that accounts for all forms of support (employer, federal, state, veteran's, etc.) and covers assistance caps and the cost impact of dropping a course.	☐	☐	☐

#	Integrated Student Support	Green (2)	Yellow (1)	Red (0)
4.5	Working learners and their employers receive clear information about any factors that could affect cost or time to completion, such as prerequisite requirements or the need for additional academic preparation, before enrollment begins. Any required placement testing occurs early in this process.	☐	☐	☐
4.6	The institution and employer partners communicate consistent messages to learners about workload expectations and scheduling flexibility before enrollment begins.	☐	☐	☐
Ongoing Advising and Risk Intervention				
4.7	Dedicated advisors are assigned to employer cohorts, with manageable caseloads that allow for proactive outreach rather than only responding to problems.	☐	☐	☐
4.8	Early warning triggers are active for employer-sponsored learners, and advisors are required to follow up when a trigger is activated.	☐	☐	☐
4.9	A written protocol defines which learner events are shared with employers, on what timeline, and with appropriate consent in place.	☐	☐	☐
4.10	First-term withdrawal data for employer-sponsored learners is analyzed regularly and used to improve how the institution prepares and supports learners before they start.	☐	☐	☐
Total		☐	☐	☐

15-20: Strong support infrastructure for working learners. Verify that systems are functioning consistently across all employer cohorts, not just flagship partnerships.

10-14: Support gaps present. Early alert and pre-enrollment advising are typically the highest-leverage starting points.

0-9: Support systems are not adequately adapted for employer-sponsored learners. Attrition is likely higher than it needs to be.

Overall Institutional Readiness

Domain	Maximum Score	Your Score
Foundational Actions and Mindsets	24	
Responsive Business and Financial Practices	20	
Working Learner-Centered Academic Practices	20	
Actionable and Predictable Data	20	
Integrated Student Support	20	

Calculating Your Overall Score

80-104: Strong Readiness. Your institution has built substantial infrastructure for employer partnership. Focus on identifying remaining inconsistencies, sustaining what is working, and continuing to deepen employer relationships. Share your practices! Other institutions can learn from you.

55-79: Developing Readiness. Meaningful capacity exists but gaps are present across multiple domains. Use domain-level scores to prioritize where to focus first. Look for high-Red domains as the most urgent starting points, and for quick wins within Yellow items that can build momentum.

0-54: Early-Stage Readiness. Significant gaps exist that are likely to affect employer relationships and working learner outcomes, even if those effects are not yet fully visible. Begin with the Foundational domain and treat operational improvements in other domains as a medium-term agenda. Leadership commitment and resource investment are prerequisites for progress.

Interpreting Your Results

Start with disagreement. If members of your team scored the same item differently, that is information. Discuss it before averaging. The disagreement often points to inconsistent practice: something that works in one department or for one employer partner, but not systematically and consistently across the institution. It can also indicate a difference in perception across levels and roles in the institution.

Prioritize Red items in the Foundational domain first. Operational improvements in the other domains are less likely to stick if the foundational conditions are not in place. A change in billing process that works for one partner but not others, or a data improvement that stalls because no one has authority to make it permanent, often reflects a foundational gap rather than a technical one.

Treat Yellow as the action zone. While Red items may surface the biggest issues for longer-term attention, Yellow items are often where the most immediate progress is possible: policies that can be strengthened, informal practices that can be formalized, and individual efforts that can be institutionalized.

Use the detailed practice guide. This guide includes detailed activities that can support improvements in each domain, as well as case studies, templates, and other resources to help along the journey.

Revisit annually. This assessment is most useful as a repeated measure. Completing it once identifies priorities. Completing it each year tracks whether institutional practice is actually improving and keeps employer partnership on the leadership agenda.

A Process for Implementation

From Assessment to Action

Once you've completed the initial conversations with your institutional team, identifying the places that deserve deeper attention, it's time to focus on implementing the specific changes that employer partners are seeking. This process is designed to help institutions move through that work deliberately over the course of a semester, rather than letting momentum from the initial assessment session dissipate before action begins.

This is a suggested structure. Some institutions will move faster. Others will need to adapt the cadence to accommodate leadership availability, board calendars, and academic calendars. What matters most is that the work has a beginning, a structure to follow, and a defined point of return to back the full group, so that efforts between sessions have somewhere to land.

Who Should Lead This

There is no single right answer to who convenes this process. What matters is that the convener has both the *authority* to bring people to the table and a *stake* in the outcome. At different institutions, this might be the President or Chancellor, the Vice President for Workforce or Continuing Education, or the Provost. Whoever convenes the group should also be prepared to keep the process moving between sessions, since semester-long initiatives are vulnerable to losing momentum without a clear owner.

A Proposed Structure: One Semester, Four Sessions

The process below assumes four full-group sessions across a typical semester (16 weeks), with small-group work happening between the sessions. Each corresponds to a stage of work, and the small-group assignments between sessions are designed to align with the three tiers of action used throughout this guide: Immediate next steps and quick wins, Medium-term activities, and Longer-term transformations.

Session 1: Assess and Organize (Month 1)

In the full-group session: Convene a cross-functional group that includes people working across the roles identified in this guide, complete the self-assessment together, and discuss any disagreement in scoring before finalizing domain scores. Identify which domains and sub-sections are most urgent, using the interpretation guidance above.

Form small groups. The most natural division is one small group per domain (Foundational, Business and Financial Practices, Academic Practices, Data, and Student Support), but some institutions may prefer to organize by department or role instead, especially if a single department touches multiple domains. Either approach works, as long as Red and high-priority Yellow items have an assigned owner by the end of this session.

Assign the between-session work. Each small group's first assignment is to review the "immediate next steps and quick wins" actions in their assigned sub-sections and identify which ones could realistically begin within the next four to six weeks.

Between Sessions 1 and 2: Quick Wins (Weeks 2-6)

Small groups work independently to begin implementing quick win actions, using the detailed practice guide content for their assigned sub-sections, including the employer experience framing and discussion questions, to ground their work. Groups should document what they start, what they complete, and what they discover along the way, including any quick wins that turn out to be harder than expected.

Session 2: Report Back and Plan Medium-Term Work (Month 2)

In the full-group session: Each small group reports back: what was attempted, what worked, what didn't, and what they learned about the underlying causes of the gap. This is also the moment to surface cross-domain dependencies. For example, a Credit for Competencies and Skills group may discover that progress depends on data infrastructure owned by the Data domain group.

Assign the next round of work. Small groups continue to work on quick wins, or shift focus to the "Medium-term activities" in their sub-sections.

Between Sessions 2 and 3: Medium-Term Build (Weeks 8-16)

Small groups work on medium-term activities, which often require coordination with other departments or offices not represented in their group. Groups should identify early whether a medium-term action depends on a decision or resource outside their authority, and flag that for the convener rather than letting it stall quietly.

Session 3: Surface Structural Issues and Set Direction (Month 4)

In the full-group session: Review medium-term progress. This is the session where structural and policy-level issues are most likely to surface. Use this session to decide which longer-term transformations are worth pursuing this year versus tabling for a future cycle, since not every institution will be ready to act on every longer-term recommendation in a single year.

Assign final work. Groups working on viable longer-term transformations begin scoping what that work would require: governance approval, budget, staffing, or system changes, recognizing that most longer-term transformations will extend well beyond a single semester.

Session 4: Consolidate and Plan Forward (End of Semester)

In the full-group session: Review the semester's progress across all domains. Re-score any items where meaningful change occurred, and document what is still in progress for continued ownership into the next term. Decide on next steps for any longer-term transformations identified in Session 3, including who will own them going forward. Set the date for the next full self-assessment, per the "Revisit annually" guidance, recognizing that institutions further along in this work may benefit from revisiting sooner.

What Makes This Work

Someone has to own the gaps between sessions. Small-group work tends to stall without a check-in point on the calendar. The convener's job between full-group sessions is less about

doing the work and more about making sure each group knows their next deadline and has what they need to meet it.

Not every domain needs equal attention. An institution that scored well in Business and Financial Practices but poorly in Academic Practices should weigh its small-group time accordingly.

Cross-domain dependencies are common and should be expected, not treated as failures. Several of the actions in this guide depend on work in more than one domain. Surfacing those dependencies in Session 2 or 3, rather than discovering them in isolation, is part of what makes this a coordinated process rather than five separate projects.

This process produces real artifacts. By the end of a semester, an institution following this structure should have completed several quick wins, made visible progress on medium-term activities, and have a defined, scoped plan for at least one longer-term transformation. That is meaningful progress, even if it does not fully close every gap identified in the initial assessment.

Engage and Stay Connected

Billing workflows, advising systems, and data practices do not often appear in strategic plans, but they are the practices through which institutions can demonstrate, one interaction at a time, whether their commitment to working learners and the employers who support them is real. They are the small processes and details that can lead to large returns or cause real damage. They are often where trust is built or lost.

For many institutions, especially community colleges and regional comprehensives working with limited resources and high community need, doing this well is already the aspiration. This guide is meant to help close the distance between that aspiration and day-to-day practice.

Where to Begin

Not every institution will be starting from the same place. Some will have strong employer relationship infrastructure but limited academic flexibility. Others will have invested deeply in working learner support but never examined the operational side of their billing or data practices. The self-assessment tool is designed to help leadership teams identify where friction is highest and where early action is most likely to build momentum. The assessment is backed up by detailed insights across each domain and focus area.

We recommend beginning with the Foundational domain regardless of where operational gaps are concentrated. These conditions: clarity of purpose, leadership commitment, shared definitions of success, are what make operational progress in every other domain possible.

An Invitation

This guide is accompanied by an array of resources and tools that can help colleges and universities take action, including deeper dives into specific practice areas, and tools and templates that translate recommendations into immediate institutional actions.

We are also actively seeking higher education leaders who want to engage with this work directly to test these frameworks in their own institutions, share what they are learning, and help us understand where the guidance needs to be sharper, more nuanced, or more honest about the barriers involved. If that describes you, we invite you to share and connect with us through our [Employer-Friendly Practices survey](#).

The employers who participated in this research did so because they want these partnerships to work. So do we. And so, we believe, do the leaders and practitioners who will read this guide. We look forward to working with you.

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About

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