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 million[1] 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.
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> "We are moving at the pace of industry rather than the historic pace of higher education."
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> "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."
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> "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

[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.

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Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) estimated that approximately 1.5 million undergraduates and 500,000 graduate students received financial supported by their employers, generating an estimated $28 billion in tuition revenue for colleges and universities.

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.

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