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.

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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.

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