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: determining which contracts can be reviewed without weeks of internal routing, removing scheduling barriers, and empowering staff to make decisions without unnecessary escalation. That kind of authority typically needs to come from the executive's office. 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, that it is understood, and that it's 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 what this looks like 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 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 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.