A Community College's Guide to Engaging Employers
For the Design + Delivery of Micro-pathways

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A note about the 2024 update

Much has transpired since the Lab published the original guidebook in May 2021. The inaugural Community College Growth Engine (CCGE, or "the Engine") cohort launched 32 micro-pathways spanning high-growth industries, including IT, advanced manufacturing, and healthcare, reaching over 3,000 learner-earners. A second cohort joined the Engine in January 2022 and designed over 20 micro-pathways. By the end of 2023, the Engine doubled in size, onboarding 30+ new colleges across the country, including the Montana state system, expanding to over 50 colleges and systems, which have co-designed more than 100 employer-validated micro-pathways. Much has been learned along the way.

This updated and revised guidebook offers practical ideas for bringing new employers to the table and deepening engagement with existing employers. It also showcases employer engagement tips from our Engine colleges based on their experiences.

There are a variety of high-quality resources, guides, and tools on employer engagement. This guidebook builds on the work of our colleagues at Harvard’s Project on Workforce, Jobs for the Future, the Council on Occupational Research & Development, and the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce, as well as our own expertise at the Lab, and applies them specifically to the context of micro-pathways and the Engine’s design criteria.

MICRO-PATHWAYS
Co-designed with learner-earners and employers, micro-pathways are defined as two or more stackable credentials, including a durable skill micro-credential, that are flexibly delivered to be achieved within less than a year and result in a job at or above the local median wage, and start learner-earners on the path to an associate degree.

DURABLE SKILLS
The Lab’s durable skills* were co-designed with 20 colleges and 60 employers and target the most in-demand universal (soft) skills in the emerging job market of the future. By unbundling each skill, the Lab has identified discrete skills that allow learner-earners to practice and demonstrate mastery on each skill with greater precision.

*Durable skills = 21st Century Skills
About this Guidebook

This is the second iteration of our employer engagement guidebook and is a reflection of our experiences, understanding, and growth through the Education Design Lab’s continued iteration process. The primary purpose of this guide is to support community colleges working with the Community College Growth Engine (CCGE, or the Engine). Launched in the fall of 2020, CCGE is a design accelerator working with community colleges and systems across the country to co-create a new type of credentials: micro-pathways. This guidebook is in service to the learner experience, as they are centered in the CCGE micro-pathway development process, and their experiences with institutions and employers.

ABOUT EDUCATION DESIGN LAB
The Lab is a national nonprofit that co-designs, tests, and builds new education-to-workforce models where skills matter. The Lab’s human-centered design process focuses on understanding learner-earner experiences, addressing equity gaps in higher education, and connecting new majority learner-earners to economic mobility.

ABOUT THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE GROWTH ENGINE
The Community College Growth Engine (CCGE), led by Dr. Lisa Larson, is a design accelerator set up just before the pandemic to help community colleges lean into a future role as regional talent agents in a skills-based economy. In June 2023, the Engine team released a thought paper: Transforming Community Colleges: 5 Design Questions to Shape the Future of Learning. Year 1 learnings are available in the first Design Insights Brief (January 2022). Watch our Jan. 19, 2022, National Convening on YouTube.
Building meaningful relationships with employers

To succeed, community colleges and employers must adapt and innovate. Community colleges stay ahead in workforce development by being adaptable and open to innovation. This helps them produce ideal candidates with the skills employers want as well as support industry growth.

Meaningful partnerships are symbiotic. Colleges train workers for employers, which invest back into the institution. Through this exchange of value, learner-earners access quality workforce opportunities. In successful partnerships, both employers and colleges have “skin in the game.” Investments from employers (e.g., financial, in-kind, time, expertise) match those made by colleges.

Colleges can generate value for employers by the following methods:

+ Designing programs to meet the skill gaps of employers.
+ Training workers throughout lifecycle (e.g., new hire training, re-skilling, upskilling).
+ Recruiting learner-earners who help diversify the workforce.

Employers can generate value for colleges by the following methods:

+ Making hiring commitments and communicating career advancement opportunities.
+ Sharing learner-earner outcome data to help colleges improve programs.
+ Understanding the technical and durable skills needed for high-demand roles and providing this analysis to education providers.
+ Providing work-based learning opportunities, participating in panels, mock interviews, etc.

A community college’s commitment to program or pathway iteration, based on the changing needs of employers and learner-earners, will ensure the institution encourages innovation in curriculum and workforce training. Intentional engagement and design sessions with employers provide the critical knowledge and feedback to ensure ongoing alignment of offerings to local workforce needs.
How might institutions engage employers in the design and delivery of high-quality micro-pathways?

Below are five phases of engagement that can be used as points of reference as you look to both broaden and deepen the array of relationships with regional employers who will work hand-in-hand on the design and delivery of micro-pathways for learner-earners. These phases are based on both the commonalities across the resources that informed this guidebook and input from the design teams who pioneered these best practices.

**The Phases of Engagement**

**Understanding the Landscape**
Get a clear snapshot of what is already working within your institution and assess the learner-earner experience through the eyes of various perspectives (students, faculty, staff, workforce partners, employers, community partners).

**Establishing Internal Commitments for a Sustainable Structure**
Drive internal alignment, develop coordinated involvement across all levels of your institution, and proactively explore your unique resources + expertise in order to create a plan of attack to serve local employer partners.

**Designing a Dynamic Talent Journey**
Leverage strong external partnerships and utilize employer-validated skills identification as the foundation to creating micro-pathways with learning experiences that ensure a seamless transition to employment and career advancement.

**Measuring Impact + Feedback Loops**
Proactively establish clear data practices with your ecosystem partners to continuously inform program design, attract sustainable funding through demonstrable + measured impact, and utilize joint storytelling to craft successful narratives.

**Developing a Holistic Ecosystem**
Focus on building sustainable pipelines for sectors, engage external relationships that align with your college’s objectives + provide them with out-of-the-box activities where they choose their desired level of engagement.
Understanding the Landscape

In the journey toward enhanced employer engagement and the creation of effective micro-pathways, it is essential to take time to reflect on what is.

Takeaways

1. Recognize strengths
2. Identify areas of potential
3. Evaluate Labor Market Information (LMI)
4. Understanding stakeholder perspectives
5. Tools + Techniques
6. Lab Innovation in Action: Alamo Colleges District
THE PHASES OF ENGAGEMENT: PHASE 1

Prior to taking action, it is essential to:

+ **Recognize strengths**: Every college has its unique strengths, be it in the form of specialized programs, dedicated faculty, or robust industry connections. Understanding these strengths and mapping existing relationships provides a foundation upon which to build.

+ **Identify areas of potential**: While it’s essential to celebrate successes, it’s equally important to recognize areas where there is potential for growth or enhancement. This isn’t about focusing on shortcomings but rather seeing opportunities for innovation and improvement.

+ **Evaluate Labor Market Information (LMI)**: Understanding local industry demands allows you as the institution to ensure micro-pathways provide workforce solutions in high-need sectors. Aligning micro-pathways with local needs creates opportunities to attract employer partners who are willing to engage, with the goal of developing a pipeline of talent. This approach allows you to narrow your scope and promises tangible benefits without overstretching your capacities.

+ **Understanding stakeholder perspectives**: Engaging with various stakeholders, including learner-earners, faculty, staff, employers, workforce partners, and community partners, can provide valuable insights into current opportunities. Their feedback can shed light on what’s working well and where there might be new opportunities. Our [Ecosystem Map](#) can be used to understand both internal and external stakeholders.

TOOLS + TECHNIQUES

+ **Surveys and feedback sessions**: Conducting surveys or organizing feedback sessions with both internal and external stakeholders can provide a wealth of information. These sessions can help gauge satisfaction levels, gather suggestions, understand expectations, and align skills. One such tool the Lab has developed is the [T-Profile](#), which allows dynamic and holistic skills identification.

+ **Data analysis**: Analyzing data, including enrollment numbers, graduation rates, employer engagement metrics, alumni engagement, and [Labor Market Data](#) can offer insights into best practices, trends, and patterns. This data-driven approach ensures decisions are informed and evidence-based.

+ **Collaborative workshops**: Organizing workshops where different departments come together to share their experiences and insights can be invaluable. These collaborative sessions can lead to a holistic understanding of the current ecosystem, fostering a sense of unity and shared purpose. This is achieved through the Engine’s [Design Team](#) process, bringing together internal stakeholders to develop unified action plans.
1.1 Lab Innovation in Action

The Alamo Colleges District is the largest provider of higher education in South Texas. It spans five campuses and serves close to 100,000 learner-earners. The district underwent its second “Summer Sprint” to develop micro-pathways in the summer of 2023 in partnership with CCGE.

**ACTION**

To prepare for this, the team used Lightcast reports to:

+ Understand high-growth IT careers in their local labor markets.
+ Review current job postings.
+ Identify the top technical skills and durable skills required for select occupations.

**RESULTS**

+ Generated pre-skills/curriculum mapping as a baseline for micro-pathway development.
+ Connected with local employers to co-design with and presented these findings during roundtable discussions.
Establishing Internal Commitments for Sustainable Structure

Takeaways

1. Establish a shared vision
2. Communicate and champion the vision across silos and levels
3. Coordinate an approach
4. Develop a value proposition
5. Innovation in Action: Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College
A transformative mindset shift is foundational to transition from a traditional academic-centric approach to a workforce-centric mindset. It’s not merely about implementing new programs or processes, but about cultivating a new way of thinking and operating. A workforce-centric mindset places employer engagement and workforce readiness at the heart of the college’s mission.

This college-employer partnership ensures curriculum design, micro-pathways, and student experiences are in sync with real-world demands, providing learner-earners with the skills and knowledge they need to achieve tangible career goals.

+ **Establish a shared vision:** A shared vision should encapsulate your college’s commitment to enhancing employer partnerships and its dedication to the success of micro-pathways. This vision not only sets the direction, but also serves as the foundation upon which all strategies and actions are built.

+ **Communicate and champion the vision across silos and levels:** For this mindset shift to be truly effective, it must permeate all levels of the college. From leadership and administration to faculty and support staff, everyone plays a role in fostering and championing a committed approach.

+ **Coordinate an approach:** A clear and coordinated approach to employer engagement ensures employers have a seamless experience, free from confusion or overlapping communications from multiple departments. A coordinated approach ensures all interactions with employers are streamlined, consistent, and aligned with your college’s overarching objectives. One way to do this is to collectively complete the **Design Activity: Internal Communications**.

+ **Develop a value proposition:** At the heart of clarity in engagement lies your college’s value proposition. It’s essential to articulate clearly what your college brings to the table. From talent pipelines and customized micro-pathways to curriculum collaboration and industry insights, your college’s offerings should be clearly communicated both internally and externally.

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**Lorain County Community College in Elyria, Ohio, works to make sure that every employee on campus can direct a student toward the workforce.**

The President’s thought process behind this mindset: "At some point, students will seek gainful employment whether they transfer or not."

Dr. Marcia Ballinger, LCCC President, quoted in *America’s Hidden Economic Engines: How Community Colleges Can Drive Shared Prosperity*
2.1 Innovation in Action

Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College (MGCCC) sought to center workforce access in their most recent strategic plan, *Excelerate 2030*. Implemented in 2021, the strategic plan redoubled the MGCCC commitment to workforce access in all aspects of the institution. Benchmarks within the strategic plan include student job placement rates, employer feedback on the quality of instruction, and success of partnerships with workforce leaders.

From *Harvard Project on Workforce: Friends in Both Places: An Investigation into Best Practices for Community College and Employer Partnerships (2023)*

**ACTION**

The college meaningfully engaged employers in every step of the program development process.

+ **Strategic planning**: Process was anchored in feedback from workforce partners rooted in active listing sessions. Listening over selling.

+ **Leadership**: The President’s office spearheaded these initiatives and set the tone.

+ **Early and ongoing**: Embedded workforce training in first-year seminar courses while also building new institutes like a Careers Readiness Center in collaboration with Goodwill Industries of South Mississippi to help learner-earners with durable skills.

**RESULTS**

+ 59 workforce partners joined MGCCC to provide workforce training as of FY 2022.

+ 100% job placement rate for practical nursing program graduates in 2022.
Developing a Holistic Ecosystem

Takeaways

1. Identify key players
2. Focus on systems rather than individual relationships
3. Introduce the Ladder of Engagement
4. Innovation in Action: City Colleges of Chicago
THE PHASES OF ENGAGEMENT: PHASE 3

As your college embarks on the journey of employer engagement, it’s essential to have a comprehensive understanding of the external ecosystem. This landscape comprises a diverse range of partners, each bringing unique value, expectations, and opportunities.

By mapping out this landscape in alignment with the Ladder of Engagement (explained on the next page), your institution can ensure a more strategic and effective approach to collaboration.

+ **Identify key players:** The external ecosystem is rich and varied, encompassing employers, workforce development boards, worker organizations, labor management organizations, labor unions, economic development associations, and chambers of commerce. By understanding each partner’s value proposition, your institution can align their objectives, strategies, and activities more effectively. This alignment ensures collaborations resonate with both the college’s goals and the activities offered within the Ladder of Engagement.

  + **Focus on systems rather than individual relationships:** You should focus on building pipelines for sectors (versus employers). Building partnerships with multiple employers across a sector reduces exposure to any one single employer and de-risks programs. You can focus on sectors by:

    + Serving regional industry needs instead of single employers.
    + Creating a single, coordinated, employer-facing unit to build and manage relationships.
    + Building centers of excellence in each college within a college system.
    + Including industry partners and policymakers to bolster relationships with employers, align with regional initiatives, and co-apply for funding to develop talent pipelines with:

        + **Local Workforce Development Boards (WDBs)**
        + **Economic Development Administrations (EDAs)**
        + **Chambers of Commerce**
        + **Labor unions**
        + Community-based organizations (Can be ascertained through your WDB)
        + Labor management organization (Can be ascertained through your WDB)
THE PHASES OF ENGAGEMENT: PHASE 3

+ **Introduce the Ladder of Engagement:** In the realm of employer engagement, a structured approach is paramount to ensuring clarity, consistency, and mutual benefit. This ladder not only provides a clear roadmap for your institution and your partners but also emphasizes the importance of progressive collaboration.

+ **Purpose and importance of the Ladder:** The Ladder of Engagement is more than just a list of activities; it’s a strategic framework that guides the depth and nature of collaborations. By detailing activities for employers at varying levels, it ensures that both your institution and your employers have clear expectations and understand their respective roles in the partnership.

**FIGURE 3.1 OVERVIEW OF THE LADDER OF ENGAGEMENT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advisor</th>
<th>Co-Designer</th>
<th>Partner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial interactions and feedback mechanisms:</td>
<td>Participates in advisor activities plus deeper involvement in program design and feedback:</td>
<td>Participates in co-designer activities plus sponsors holistic learner development resources:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Provide salary and wage data</td>
<td>+ Engage at multiple levels of your organization</td>
<td>+ Offer work-based learning opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Identify essential occupational skills</td>
<td>+ Conduct on-site tours</td>
<td>+ Organize job shadows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Assess program content</td>
<td>+ Provide continuous feedback on program design and candidate success</td>
<td>+ Provide holistic support to learner-earners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Participate in industry roundtables</td>
<td>+ Participate in grant funding applications</td>
<td>+ Formalize partnership through a MOU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Provide career insights to learners</td>
<td>+ Hire directly from the pool of program completers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Participate in recruitment events and guest lectures</td>
<td>+ Refer employees for upskilling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Interview program completers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Ladder of Engagement

As an Advisor, the employer participates in the following examples of interactions and feedback mechanisms:

+ **LMI Insights**: Reviews occupational labor market information and wage data provided by the institution and provides feedback based on the company’s projections. This includes projecting the number of hires a company will need on a yearly basis as well as information on entry-level and median salaries for positions within their organizations.

+ **Participate in a T-Profile session**: Provides one individual, usually an HR representative or manager, who participates in a T-Profile session. This session is the foundational compilation of the technical skills, durable skills, and credentials that need to be included within the curriculum in order to meet the demands of the position.

+ **Employer programming**: Engages in singular additions to the micro-pathway program schedule. This may include info sessions before graduation, career coaching/mock interviews sessions, insights from current employees, etc.

+ **Subject matter expertise**: Reviews and comments on micro-pathway core competencies, curriculum, and certifications throughout the development process and validates the final version prior to launch.

+ **Roundtable discussions**: Participates in industry roundtables to identify in-demand certifications and training needs across the industry. This provides an opportunity to identify new and emerging practices and technology to be considered.

+ **Engagement in events**: Attends job fairs, recruitment events, panels, and guest lectures. These interactions provide students with industry insights and potential employment opportunities. It also increases participating organization's visibility and notoriety.

+ **Agrees to interview graduates**: Interviews completers of the micro-pathway and provide them with an opportunity to secure a position at the organization.
The Ladder of Engagement

As a Co-Designer, the employer participates in the advisor activities plus deeper involvement in program design and feedback:

- **Holistic T-Profile sessions**: Provide multiple individuals from multiple levels of the organization to participate in a T-Profile session. Providing insights into positions within an organization from multiple points of view. These sessions delve deeper into hiring processes, technical skills, and durable skill priorities, ensuring programs are comprehensive and industry-aligned.

- **On-site engagements**: Invites cohorts to visit the job site to understand the working environment, workflow, as well as internal processes and protocols. Learners can experience what it would be like to work for an organization, increasing work readiness and decreasing potential initial turnover.

- **Continuous feedback loop**: Provides continuous feedback on the program design as well as the quality of the hires from the micro-pathway, including aggregate data on retention and advancement of completers.

- **Funding partner**: Advocates for and participates in grant applications to secure program funding for the micro-pathways and learner-earners. This may include providing letters of support, meeting with local and state officials, etc.

- **Create a talent pipeline for new hires**: Agrees to hire graduates who meet hiring requirements, creating a direct and transparent pipeline to fill positions that is visual to job seekers.

- **Retain and upskill**: Agrees to refer current employees who need remediation to be retained and/or need upskilling to be promoted to higher positions.
The Ladder of Engagement

As a Partner, the employer participates in co-designer activities plus sponsors holistic learner development resources:

+ **Work-based learning opportunities**: Provides work-based learning opportunities, including project-based collaborations, internships, apprenticeships, and/or co-op placement. These opportunities provide customizable training that prepares learners for specific positions within specific organizations.

+ **Job shadowing**: Organizes job shadowing opportunities, allowing students to observe professionals in their roles. These experiences provide insights into day-to-day operations, roles, and responsibilities, preparing students for employment.

+ **Holistic learner support**: Supports learner-earners beyond the classroom, such as tuition, transportation, and providing equipment for hands-on learning or mentorship.

+ **Formal MOU**: Enters into a formal agreement detailing the terms of the partnership (ex. MOU or contract).
3.1 Innovation in Action

**City Colleges of Chicago** (CCC) is a seven-campus community college system serving close to 61,000 learner-earners. Each college offered training in multiple industries, duplicating offerings across colleges which created three challenges:

1. Employers had to reach out to multiple colleges.
2. Qualified instructors and specialized equipment were spread thin.
3. Colleges struggled to develop deep sector expertise while managing multiple sectors.

From *Harvard Project on Workforce: Friends in Both Places: An Investigation into Best Practices for Community College and Employer Partnerships (2023)*

**ACTION**

In 2010, the newly appointed chancellor redesigned each campus as a Center of Excellence (CoE).

+ **Structure:**
  As a CoE, each college takes the lead on
  + Innovating and maintaining curricular excellence.
  + Developing relationships with employers.

+ **Capital-intensive programs:**
  Consolidated in one or two campuses
  + Knowledgeable faculty with industry experience.
  + Specialized equipment.
  + Recruitment activities.

+ **Other programs:** For programs that remain open at multiple or all campuses, one campus is designated as the CoE

**RESULTS**

+ **More responsive** to employers by focusing on a sector.
+ **Higher quality** program as a result of CoE.
+ **Longer commutes** for learner-earners as a result of CoE.
Designing a Dynamic Talent Journey

Takeaways

1. Leveraging employer engagement in program design
2. Building a dynamic learner-earner journey through the T-Profile
3. Facilitating a seamless transition
4. Beyond training for new hires
5. Lab Innovation in Action: Pima Community College
By developing strong external partnerships and employer-validated skills identification, your institution can design dynamic and impactful talent journeys that resonate with both learner-earners and employers.

“Skill gaps serve as an invisible drag on productivity, hampering both business economic competitiveness and workers' own economic mobility.”

National Skills Coalition Report

**Leveraging employer engagement in program design:**

Employer engagement in micro-pathways is not just about feedback on curriculum; it’s about weaving employer interactions directly into the program’s fabric. Examples include:

- Engage industry **professionals to serve as mentors** for learner-earners, providing guidance, support, and insights throughout their work-based learning journey.

- Incorporating **industry guest lectures and workshops** into the schedule, allowing learner-earners to gain insights directly from industry experts.

- Organizing **site visits**, enabling learner-earners to understand the working environment, workflows, and internal processes of potential employers.

- Drawing from the **Ladder of Engagement**, other impactful activities can include job shadowing, project-based collaborations, and even participation in industry roundtables.

Learn more + see examples from other employers: [Four Insights from Employers: How Learning Providers Can Design Industry-aligned Pathways](#)
**THE PHASES OF ENGAGEMENT: PHASE 4**

**Building a dynamic learner-earner journey through the T-Profile:**
The T-Profile serves as a foundational tool in this journey, facilitating employer-validated skills identification. To develop effective micro-pathway programs, your college must first understand the technical and durable skills that are required to achieve excellence in a given occupation.

Through the T-Profile:
+ You can engage employers in a structured dialogue, understanding the technical skills and durable competencies that are essential for specific roles.
+ You can foster collaborative sessions that allow for a deep dive into hiring and onboarding processes, ensuring the micro-pathway curriculum is aligned with employer expectations.

**Best use of the T-Profile:** Choosing either of the below avenues will ensure a holistic alignment and agreement for all those involved in what skills are most critical for the position. Not only does this support curriculum development, it also certifies that learner-earners will be prepared for what the region believes they should be skilled in — even serving the needs of employers who do not initially attend these T-Profile sessions:

**Good**
Three employers with the same industry/role within the region.

**Better**
One employer with participation from three or more perspectives: Employee in the role, supervisor/department lead, and HR representative.

**Best**
Multiple employers within the region with participation from three or more perspectives: Employee in the role, supervisor/department lead, and HR representative.

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**FIGURE 4.1** T-PROFILE

The Lab has developed the T-Profile tool to **identify and validate skills beyond job postings**. Instead of guessing what employers need, this method offers a systematic approach to ensure your programs align with real-world needs. It’s practical and reduces the risk of designing programs that don’t meet market demands.
Facilitating a seamless transition: The foundation for a successful transition begins well before graduation. By integrating employer engagement, work-based learning, and practical skills training throughout the micro-pathway, your college can ensure learner-earners are equipped with the skills and experiences they need to thrive in the workforce.

Career counseling and guidance: Offer dedicated career counseling sessions, helping learner-earners identify their strengths, refine their resumes, and prepare for interviews. Personalized guidance can make a significant difference in a learner-earner’s confidence and readiness.

Networking opportunities: Organize networking events, job fairs, and industry roundtables, allowing learner-earners to connect with potential employers, industry experts, and alumni. These interactions can open doors to job opportunities and provide invaluable insights.

Alumni engagement: Getting alumni involved is a good way to strengthen the connection between your college and employers. You can help learner-earners by connecting with alumni in relevant industries. Alumni can mentor learner-earners, helping them with school and career choices. Their industry knowledge helps learner-earners prepare for jobs. Including alumni as guest speakers in workshops, seminars, or career events helps learner-earners learn about real-world challenges and opportunities in their field. This inspires learner-earners and connects the college to the workforce.

Skill refinement workshops: Host workshops focused on refining both technical and soft skills, ensuring learner-earners are well-prepared for the demands of the modern workplace. This could include sessions on communication, teamwork, or specific industry tools.

Beyond training for new hires: By assisting employers in designing internal career ladders and recognizing how micro-pathways can stack into future educational attainment, colleges can move beyond pre-employment training resources. Your college can position itself to be a vital resource throughout learner-earner careers and at multiple levels of employment through:

- Stacking micro-pathways into certification and degree programs that mirror career advancement opportunities.
- Developing micro-pathways that match career growth opportunities that employers can directly refer incumbent workers to.
- Creating customized training programs to address employer needs such as learning new methods, techniques, or machinery.
Pima Community College is a two-year institution serving students and employers throughout Pima County in Arizona. It spans five campuses and serves close to 32,000 learner-earners.

Figure 4.2 is a T-Profile example from the Emergency Services micro-pathway at Pima Community College.

“As an employer, these types of tools help us articulate our needs to local training providers. [The T-Profile] is very easy to use...and then translating it to, hey, we need these things, can you help us train our future staff or upskill our current staff?”

CCGE employer partner
**THE PHASES OF ENGAGEMENT: PHASE 4**

**Education Design Lab | T-Profile**

**Occupation:** Emergency Medical Tech.

**Employer:** Pascua Pueblo Fire Department/Pascua Yaqui Tribe

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**ACTION**

+ Pascua Pueblo Fire Department / Pascua Yaqui Tribe indicated that learner-earners need to earn several technical certifications to be hired, as can be seen on the right-hand side on the bottom of the T.

+ The left side of the T provides a set of technical skills to also be addressed in the curriculum.

+ The employer selected their top three durable skills: Creative problem solving, collaboration, and intercultural fluency.

**RESULTS**

The college is using the Lab’s [vsbl online learning platform](#) and assessment rubrics to provide learner-earners the experience they need and the opportunity to earn an intercultural fluency micro-credential.

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**FIGURE 4.2 EMERGENCY SERVICES MICRO-PATHWAY**

With insights from the T-Profile, colleges can refine their micro-pathway curriculum, ensuring that it resonates with employer needs. This alignment is not a one-time process but requires continuous engagement and feedback. By regularly reviewing and updating the curriculum based on employer feedback, colleges can ensure that their programs remain relevant, dynamic, and impactful.
Measuring Impact + Feedback Loops

Takeaways

1. Benefits of instituting clear data practices
2. Implementing data strategies
3. Innovation in Action: Northern Virginia Community College
4. Lab Innovation in Action: Colorado Community College System
Establishing clear data practices with ecosystem partners is not just a supplementary effort, but a core component that drives the sustainability and effectiveness of the partnership.

The importance of data outcomes, joint storytelling, and feedback loop practices that ensure the continuous evolution and relevance of micro-pathways cannot be overstated.

1. **Benefits of instituting clear data practices**: Micro-pathways, by design, are dynamic and responsive to the ever-evolving needs of the industry. But how do we ascertain their effectiveness? How do we ensure they are fulfilling their intended purpose? The answer lies in data outcomes:

   + **Informed design**: Tracking learner-earners both in-program and post-program provides invaluable insights. It reveals what’s working, what’s not, and where refinements are needed.

   + **Ensured funding**: Demonstrable success, backed by data, attracts funding. Stakeholders are more inclined to invest in programs that have a proven track record, and data outcomes provide that evidence. These programs also drive enrollment of those previously not served, thereby further increasing funding streams.

   + **Sustained partnerships**: Clear data practices foster trust and transparency with ecosystem partners. When partners can see the tangible impact of their collaboration, they are more likely to continue and deepen their engagement. Understanding what works will yield important information for marketing campaigns to attract new types of learners.

   + **Strategic decision-making**: Data-driven insights empower your college to make strategic decisions, be it in terms of resource allocation, curriculum design, or partnership development.

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Pima Community College aligned their early work with CCGE to the Opportunity America Framework for measuring data around employer engagement and to structure its employer engagement practices. This includes a set of guiding principles including bringing in the “employer voice” at the beginning.
Implementing data strategies: Your institution is poised to become workforce data hubs, which in turn creates value, and more opportunities for funding and partnerships. Colleges can focus on data strategies by:

+ Developing a systematic approach to collect data.
+ Investing in a data infrastructure that can store, manage, and analyze large volumes of data.
+ Using tools and techniques to extract meaningful insights.
+ Fostering a culture of data-informed decision-making by involving stakeholders.
+ Monitoring key performance indicators aligned with goals to adjust strategies.
+ Providing opportunities for faculty and staff to enhance data literacy and analytical skills.
+ Sharing results with all stakeholders on a regular basis.
+ Following up with learner-earners through simple, easy SMS or email format to gather data.

One such example is our Data Collab. The Lab, along with partners Brighthive, National Student Clearinghouse, and Credential Engine, established a data infrastructure, as well as the technical, governance, and legal frameworks to support data collaboration across education institutions, government agencies, community-based organizations, and others. Colleges can focus on data strategies by:

+ Feedback loops, the heartbeat of continuous improvement:
  Emphasizing timely and diverse feedback opportunities to drive continuous cycles of iteration is critical to relationship longevity and program sustainability. Instead of waiting for end-of-year reviews or periodic assessments, the idea of continuously tweaking and improving programs based on real-time feedback is both practical and innovative. Engaging stakeholders in data practices ensures that data is relevant, useful, and actionable.

+ Joint storytelling to power success narratives: In the world of employer engagement and micro-pathways, numbers and data are vital. However, the power of a compelling narrative cannot be underestimated. Joint storytelling, a collaborative effort between your college and employers, brings to life the tangible impact of these pathways, resonating deeply with stakeholders and potential participants. These narratives:
  + Showcase the transformative power of micro-pathways
  + Highlight the journey of learner-earners, emphasizing their growth, the skills they acquired, and the opportunities they unlocked.
  + Showcase the benefits reaped by employers, be it in terms of skilled hires, increased productivity, or enhanced innovation.
  + Emphasize the collaborative nature of the success, underscoring the joint efforts of the college and the employer unlocking funding options for learners and program success.
Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) is a public community college composed of six campuses and four centers in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. NOVA’s success is due to large key investment in its internal capacity to analyze labor market data. Steve Partridge, Vice President for Strategy, Research and Workforce Innovation, created the Labor Market Intelligence (LMI) team.


**5.1 Innovation in Action**

**ACTION**

- **Strengthening capabilities**: The LMI team increased the capacity of the institution to collect, analyze, and publish data.

- **Sharing insights**: NOVA publishes quarterly reports that include real-time data on job postings, wages, and skill requirements by industry, and annual workforce briefs to take deep dives into high-growth industries.

- **Student resources**: The LMI website includes student-facing data on career ladders and pathways into specific industries and interactive dashboards with economic and demographic data.

- **Data partnerships**: NOVA worked with the Northern Virginia Chamber of Commerce (NVCC) to publish the Workforce Index, which highlights the state of remote work, hiring and education requirements, and on-the-job training for the region.

**RESULTS**

- **$45.1 million in federal and state government funding** to launch and expand three programs: data center operations, skilled trades, and healthcare.

- Amazon and Goodwill Living - **Created strong industry partnerships** with the IT/cybersecurity and healthcare sectors.
The Colorado Community College System (CCCS) is decentralized. In total, there are 38 colleges. Colorado community colleges have worked on the system and local level to address employer concerns. CCCS worked with the Lab’s Growth Engine to design five micro-pathways in behavioral health and three in renewable energy.

When a pain point is brought to the college, leadership seeks out a multitude of voices to find solutions.

### 5.2 Lab Innovation in Action

**ACTION**

- **Frequency:** Staff at Community College of Aurora connect with employers on a weekly basis leading to nonstop iteration.
- **Continuous quality improvement:** After getting feedback from learner-earners, staff began speaking directly with workers to ease pain points with both grassroots and high-level insights.
- **Partnerships:** In response to skill validation concerns, CCCS is working with state offices to create the nation’s first statewide digital badge accreditation process.

**RESULTS**

- **85 badges across state colleges,** eliminating employer concerns about credential credibility
- **Faster turnaround:** Weekly conversations between the college and key stakeholder groups create an infrastructure leading to more informed and intentional ecosystem integration and alignment.
Conclusion

As we conclude this guide, we acknowledge that the journey towards effective employer engagement and the creation of dynamic micro-pathways can feel more complex in practice than in theory. These collaborations are not a one-size-fits-all solution; they thrive on customization, adapting to specific local needs and conditions. This flexibility is key to developing structures that meet both your goals and the needs of employers.

This guide is meant to be a flexible toolkit, not a rigid set of instructions. Your journey in adapting and innovating these partnerships is unique, and small, deliberate steps can lead to significant impact. We challenge you to choose one or two strategies that resonate with your institution’s needs and start there.

The Lab has created this Community College’s Guide to Engaging Employers for use with colleges working with the Community College Growth Engine and as a guide for colleges in general. This guidebook is a compilation of experience and learnings through multiple projects and partnerships. This guide will grow and change, enriched by our collective experiences and insights. Your feedback and collaborative spirit are invaluable in this evolving process. We encourage you to continuously engage, learn, and adapt, crafting partnerships that not only support students but also strengthen the workforce in meaningful ways.

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