

5 LEVELS OF EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT

By Randall Wilson

Employer engagement: working with employers in a variety of activities, over an extended period, in a manner that builds trust through participation in projects of mutual interests and leads to mutually successful outcomes.

Neither employers nor educators can achieve their goals in the labor market alone, so community colleges and workforce organizations must work with employers, and do so effectively. They can better engage employers by viewing the relationship as a continuum of activities and levels of engagement, with each step or level representing a higher degree of engagement and deeper integration of employers in a college's workforce and education activities. At higher levels, employer engagement becomes increasingly central to a college or workforce division's strategy. The figure illustrates this continuum and gives examples of activities associated with each level of employer engagement. It also shows how these activities change as an employer relationship deepens from a "new relationship" to a "working relationship" to a "strategic partnership."¹

Level 1: Advising. In basic advising, employers are consulted informally about hiring or training needs through interviews or surveys of businesses in a sector or region. More formally, employers are represented on advisory boards for a program of study, a grant, or a division. Where advisors are engaged more strategically, educators shift from seeking short-term "input" or job placements from employers to collaborating with them to understand workforce challenges and support the success of employers, students, and communities.

Level 2: Capacity-Building. Educators and employers respond to one another's needs: colleges provide customized training and skilled job candidates to individual firms; employers assist with equipment, space, loaned employees, and other supports to the college. Employers lecture or even teach an adjunct course at the college, while college instructors bring courses to the worksite.

Level 3: Co-Designing. The employer shifts from being an advisor to an active collaborator with the college on education and workforce initiatives, including design of new curricula and pathways.

Level 4: Convening. Educators work actively to recruit and convene businesses and their associations as substantive, ongoing participants in addressing workforce needs. At a more intensive level, colleges serve as hubs or brokers of workforce collaboration with employers and other education and training providers.

Level 5: Leading. At the most intensive level, employers, colleges, and other stakeholders build partnerships that transform local or regional workforce systems and enhance the growth of targeted industries or sectors. Some of the most effective and long-lasting regional partnerships are those that are led by industry representatives.

Ladder of Employer Engagement

	New Relationship		Working Relationship		Strategic Partnership	
	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	
Key employer role	Advising	Capacity-building	Co-designing	Convening	Leading	
Stage of relationship	Initial contact / new relationship	Establishing trust and credibility	Working relationship	Trusted provider and collaborator	Full strategic partner	
Activity examples	Discuss hiring needs, skills, competencies; advise on curricula; contract training; hire graduates	Job site tours; speakers; mock interviews; internships; needs assessment; loan/donate equipment; recruiting	Curriculum and pathway development; adjunct faculty and preceptors	College-employer sectoral partnerships	Multi-employer / multi-college partnerships	
Engagement examples by level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Western Technical College (Wisconsin Shifting Gears) > Monroe Community College 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Bristol Community College 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Owensboro Community and Technical College > Automotive Technical Education Collaborative (AMTEC) > Columbus State Community College (LogisticsART) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > NorTEC > Northern Virginia Community College (NoVAHealth FORCE) > Cabrillo College / Bay Area Community College Consortium 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Health Careers Collaborative of Greater Cincinnati / Cincinnati State Community and Technical College > Health Professions Pathway (H2P) 	

For more information, go to <http://www.jff.org/publications/resource-guide-engaging-employers>

¹ The continuum concept of "new," "working," and "strategic" relationships with business is adapted from Corporate Voices for Working Families, 2012, *Business and Community College Partnerships: A Blueprint*.