



ENGAGING EMPLOYERS IN A CROSS-SECTOR POSTSECONDARY ATTAINMENT AGENDA:

Lessons from Lumina Foundation's
Community Partnership for Attainment
Initiative

SEPTEMBER 2017

Acknowledgments

Equal Measure and DVP-PRAXIS thank the many organizations and individuals who contributed to the development of this Issue Brief. First, and foremost, we recognize Courtney Brown, Haley Glover, and their colleagues at Lumina Foundation for generously investing in efforts to improve postsecondary access and success, so that every student has a chance to succeed in college, and beyond. We must certainly acknowledge everyone in the Community Partnership for Attainment communities who dedicated time to sharing their thoughts and experiences with us as we wrote this Issue Brief. The individuals and organizations that forged partnerships in each of these communities are singularly committed to establishing a legacy of college access and success, and we celebrate them for those efforts. We are also grateful for their contributions as thought partners. Their insights helped Equal Measure and DVP-PRAXIS shape and refine what we learned over the course of the initiative.

About Lumina Foundation

Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation committed to increasing the proportion of Americans with degrees, certificates and other high-quality credentials to 60 percent by 2025. Lumina's outcomes-based approach focuses on helping to design and build an equitable, accessible, responsive, and accountable higher education system while fostering a national sense of urgency for action to achieve Goal 2025.

About Equal Measure

Headquartered in Philadelphia, PA, Equal Measure provides evaluation and philanthropic services to social sector organizations. Its areas of focus include aligning systems for stronger outcomes, increasing access and opportunity, building human and social capital, strengthening community capacity, and advancing equity in communities. For more than 30 years, Equal Measure's clients have been major private, corporate, and community foundations, government agencies, and national and regional nonprofits. Equal Measure has deep experience with network collaborative initiatives that improve educational outcomes, and build career pathways, for young adults to live better economic qualities of life.

About DVP-PRAXIS LTD

DVP-PRAXIS is an action-oriented consulting firm based in Indianapolis, IN, focused on higher education and the workforce. DVP-PRAXIS specializes in mixed-method formative and summative evaluation services to inform implementation and measure impact; provide strategic advising services for project development and implementation; and conduct research and policy analysis on critical issues facing higher education and the economy. Since 2004, DVP-PRAXIS has built a reputation for thoughtful listening to clients' needs, and for leveraging its experience and knowledge to support foundations, non-profit organizations, state agencies, and colleges and universities committed to improving postsecondary education and skills-development practices and public policies.

Introduction

Launched in 2013, Lumina Foundation’s Community Partnership for Attainment (CPA) initiative aimed to deepen the impact of cross-sector, place-based efforts to increase higher education attainment in communities and cities across the country. Lumina’s mission is to expand access and success in education beyond high school, particularly among adults, first-generation college students, low-income students, and students of color. This mission is directed toward achieving Goal 2025 – “to increase the proportion of Americans with high-quality postsecondary degrees and credentials to 60 percent by the year 2025.”

The goal of the 75-city CPA initiative was to strengthen place-based, cross-sector attainment efforts while better integrating the organizations working on them, and the knowledge gained from them. The investment combined grant support, technical assistance from a cadre of national experts experienced in community collaboration and postsecondary attainment strategies, a cohort model for grantee learning, and communications support to increase the visibility and impact of communities’ work.¹

The CPA investment prioritized three pillars:



Partnership Health

Community partners must collaborate to set and achieve common goals, use agreed-upon accountability tools and measures, and incorporate data when making decisions about program direction and design.



Equity

Communities need to identify and develop action plans to address chronic attainment gaps between populations, particularly between racial and ethnic groups.



Attainment

Communities must address both access and success for students, with the ultimate objective of increased postsecondary completion.

¹ <https://www.luminafoundation.org/files/resources/community-partnership-info.pdf>

Drawn from examples of Lumina Foundation grantee communities in the CPA initiative, *this Issue Brief focuses on how employers can help communities strengthen partnerships, address equity, and improve attainment of postsecondary degrees and credentials*. We collected data through interviews with representatives from all 75 communities shortly after receiving CPA funding, visits to 4 communities, and follow-up interviews focused on employer engagement with 10 communities.

In this Brief, *we describe why employers are important to community attainment initiatives, and explore considerations for communities who seek to authentically engage employers in these efforts*. Employers often play unique roles to support and pursue strategies for improving postsecondary attainment, along with community partners such as public education, higher education, government, and community based organizations. We discuss how to effectively and authentically engage employers in this work, the unique ways that employers contribute to postsecondary attainment initiatives, and how they fit with the collective efforts underway.

ABOUT THE CPA INVESTMENT

Here we highlight several key components of the CPA initiative:

- 1 Breadth:**
75 communities across the US, rolled out over three cohorts
- 2 Catalytic Investment:**
Approximately \$200,000 investments designed to help communities catalyze their work
- 3 Technical Support:**
Convenings, coaching, and peer-to-peer exchanges to help communities identify and implement best and promising practices
- 4 Learning Evaluation:**
Collaborating with an evaluation partner to understand and learn from what's working
- 5 Equity and Excellence:**
Elevating these concepts into the fabric of the initiative

SECTION 1

WHY DO CROSS-SECTOR PARTNERSHIPS ENGAGE EMPLOYERS IN IMPROVING POSTSECONDARY OUTCOMES IN THEIR COMMUNITIES?

Rapidly changing industries, technology, and workforce patterns highlight the need to keep education in sync with workforce demands.

Public education and higher education institutions are seeking to better align degree attainment, credentialing, and training programs with job and career opportunities to ensure workforce success. They are driven to develop the skills of students to match the needs of employers, and create sustainable, long-term employment pathways for those they educate and serve.

Employers are an essential player in postsecondary attainment efforts, bringing:

- Knowledge of industry trends and demands
- Proximity to the latest trends in industry and technology
- Data and projections of their current and future demand for workers
- An understanding of the skills necessary to enter and move in careers
- Existing networks and relationships within the private sector that bring more partners to the table who can further support and widen attainment efforts

Employers also have a vested interest in enhancing regional competitiveness and economies that keep their businesses strong, and ultimately benefit other postsecondary attainment partners in education and community organizations. They are motivated to grow and retain local talent, attract new businesses to the community, and build a strong local economy for their own business interests and their employee base. Partners in attainment need employers because they are on the frontlines of industry, technology, and workforce demand.

SECTION 2

HOW CAN CROSS-SECTOR PARTNERSHIPS ENGAGE EMPLOYERS TO IMPROVE POSTSECONDARY OUTCOMES IN THEIR COMMUNITIES?

Four lessons from the CPA communities emerged as critical for engaging employers in cross-sector partnerships. We discuss these lessons, and highlight how communities can incorporate each into their work.

- 1 Engage employers around “pain points”
- 2 Locate the right players from the business sector
- 3 Set up employers for success
- 4 Articulate roles that encourage employer commitment

ENGAGE EMPLOYERS AROUND “PAIN POINTS”

Communities around the country pointed to the value of working with employers around their “pain points” – pressures and stressors they face in meeting business needs. Addressing these pain points can increase the likelihood of successful employer engagement. Specifically, partnerships take the following approaches to engage employers:

Understand employer challenges

Understanding what “keeps employers up at night” can provide an entry point for helping employers see the benefit of participating in a cross-sector partnership. The most common pain points include:

- **An aging workforce.** Large numbers of employees with specialized skills and management experience are approaching retirement age.
- **Technical skills gap.** Those currently employed with many years left before retirement lack the requisite technical skills to remain or advance in the company.

- **Inadequate preparation.** The incoming workforce does not have the skills, education, or training for today’s jobs – particularly those in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) fields.
- **Lack of “soft” skills.** Workers have difficulty communicating with others, engaging in teamwork, or solving problems independently – interpersonal skills that matter in how employees perform their jobs with co-workers, their relationships with supervisors, and their readiness to advance to higher-level positions.
- **Recruiting challenges.** Local residents are not qualified for open positions, or it is challenging to attract talent from other areas because of concerns about the public education system, economic stagnation, crime, or an absence of postsecondary education institutions.

“We want to get regional employers to have a long-term dialogue about their needs.”

— Partnership Lead Agency

Understand what employers are doing to address their pain points

Employers may be working on their own to address training and employment gaps. Strategies for their incumbent workforce often include regular trainings and tuition reimbursements to create incentives for further education. To recruit new employees, businesses use a variety of local and national outreach tactics. To prepare new employees, they design orientation sessions and on-the-job-training for new hires.

Employers working on pain points in isolation may experience varying degrees of success with these strategies. They each require time and resources, and they do not address many of the underlying causes of employment and skill gaps. Postsecondary attainment partnerships offer an opportunity to develop strategies that are systemic in nature. They can build on employers' successes, while shifting the resolution of pain points from isolated employer efforts to industry-wide and community-wide solutions.

Illustrate how cross-sector partnerships address these challenges

Once pain points are understood – and named – partners communicate the resources they have and the role they play in helping employers' meet these needs. Employers can begin to see the value of joining with other businesses and cross-sector partners, and to answer the "What's in it for me" question. In Figure 1, we highlight the types of resources that partners offer employers to better understand and address their needs in systemic and strategic ways.

"[Our] initiative recognizes the struggles and what businesses are feeling: stopping the export, and wanting to keep students here. They want students to graduate and then stay local to improve the workforce."

—Partnership Lead Agency

Figure 1 WHAT CROSS-SECTOR PARTNERSHIPS CAN OFFER EMPLOYERS



DATA

Use **data** or research to illustrate the most common or pressing problems in the region



RELATIONSHIPS

Connect to others in the region with **resources and motivation** to address their talent and business needs



FUNDING

Lay out available services or **funding** that support these regional industry needs, and share how they can benefit the individual business



VISION

Describe how a broad strategy requiring industry and cross-sector partnerships may work, and invite the business to contribute their **vision** and expertise



VALUES

Tie postsecondary attainment to **parallel** issues that may already be of interest to the employer, such as economic development

Engaging Educators and Employers as Partners in Northwest Indiana

In Northwest Indiana, many businesses were hiring new employees whose skills did not properly align with their needs for open positions. Individually, the businesses were grappling with how to introduce their job opportunities to high school students, connect with educators to prepare the next generation for work, and recruit workers with the necessary skills. Past efforts between employers and higher education institutions had not produced the quantity of qualified applicants needed for expanding their businesses.

As the backbone agency for workforce development for the region, the Center for Workforce Innovations brought together educators and employers to talk about their common needs and experiences. Colleges and universities sought clarity about how to create relevant learning opportunities for students; and businesses wanted to know how to navigate Northwest Indiana’s educational systems to build a pipeline of ready employees. Both sides were interested in better integration of classroom training with work-based learning.

Partners learned that many young residents were entering the retail and hospitality industries. Retail had not been a primary focus in the past, but according to the lead agency, increasingly came to view retail jobs as “a gateway to the future” for multiple sectors and a training ground for customer service skills that are widely valued. The partners began to identify how prospective employees could use retail skills in other sectors. Through connection to the five-year-old READY NWI initiative, that was largely focused on college readiness and retention, employers found common ground to increase awareness of options for postsecondary credentials beyond traditional college and to extend the talent pipeline directly into businesses in the Northwest Indiana region. This expanded thinking made the goal of 60% of adults with post-high school credentials by 2025 much more attainable and much more valuable to the region’s employers.

LOCATE THE RIGHT PLAYERS FROM THE BUSINESS SECTOR

Cross-sector partners find that identifying partners and launching collaborations to address postsecondary attainment can be time consuming and intensive. One of the biggest challenges in these initiatives is to develop trust among partners. In some cases, members from business and the higher education systems have not worked together before, and do not have a shared language. Some new partnerships look to shift the nature of relationships among employers with a history of competition. To ease collaboration and relationship building with employers, many partnerships connect with existing efforts; this creates an opportunity to initiate relationships with employers, as many do not have time to join multiple partnerships and boards. Partners also look for the right players from local businesses, and big employers who share a vision and energy for increasing postsecondary attainment.

- Lead agencies **servicing a community’s educational, economic development, or regional planning efforts** provide a natural connection to employers already working to improve the quality of life and prosperity of their community. Partners make the case to employers that a well-prepared workforce and pipeline of new talent will keep local businesses in the region, and attract new ones considering a move or expansion, ultimately contributing to economic and regional competitiveness. Key places to look for well-aligned initiatives include:
 - » School districts and higher education systems
 - » Other postsecondary attainment initiatives or collaborations
 - » Economic development groups
 - » Workforce development boards
 - » Chambers of Commerce
 - » Regional or sector-led talent development efforts

- **Partnerships led by Chambers of Commerce, Workforce Development Boards, and Economic Development Agencies** benefit when businesses work together and with the community. These organizations can serve as backbone organizations, conveners, and hosts. They are particularly motivated to address economic development issues, and tend to be open to improving workforce development, career readiness, and education and training pipelines that necessitate cross-sector partnering.
- **Human Resource (HR) professionals and executives** are well suited as partners when the initiative is focused on recruiting, hiring, and advancing workers with postsecondary credentials, certificates, and degrees. HR partners address pipeline and hiring challenges by examining their internal policies and practices, learning about models from the field, and adopting new frameworks that better identify candidates for openings or advance existing employees through the organization.

“There was not much business involvement early on. Now, we hear from a lot of economic developers that they are working with businesses. Regional competitiveness gets people to walk in step.”

—Partnership Lead Agency

-
- **Champions from the business sector** are critically important when seeking employer partners. They believe in the role of employers in postsecondary success, are often already undertaking some of this work within their organizations, and may be engaged in other high profile community efforts. They provide credibility and play a pivotal role in increasing the partnership’s visibility with other businesses and employers. Champions help move the work along, entice others to join, write op-eds, sponsor events, and lead sub-committees.
 - **High-level executives with influence over policy and practice at their workplaces** have control over finances, time, and materials that can be steered toward postsecondary attainment efforts. Additionally, retired executives are apt to dedicate time and draw on their spheres of influence and past connections to bring new partners to the table.

LEVERAGING POLITICAL, REGIONAL, AND EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Partners can bring employers to the table by drawing on momentum created by existing policies, research, funding, and trends. These approaches include:

- » Tapping into collaboratives that are winding down, or short-term in duration, to identify and invite employers to attainment-focused partnerships.
- » Partnering with the lead agency of parallel efforts – where employers are already at the table – to carve out a role for postsecondary attainment as one of multiple strategies to reach broader regional goals. Attainment can be positioned as a driver that attracts new businesses to the region, readies the next generation workforce, decreases poverty, and provides a living wage to more residents.
- » Scaling up with employer partners, rather than launching new initiatives. A new partnership may not be necessary; instead, local programs and promising practices with existing employer partnerships can be scaled to affect a broader region and more residents. Employers often have stronger appetites for expanding current projects than for starting fresh.

Global Competitiveness as the Driver

*In Kansas City, the **Mid-America Regional Council** has framed its work to align with drivers of regional economic development. The Council embedded its postsecondary attainment efforts in KC Rising – an existing, business-led strategic plan to aggressively grow the regional economy. The shared motives of building and retaining local talent, along with attracting top-tier companies to the region, have helped reduce historical issues of territory and build a unified vision. In doing so, the partners created space where they set aside individual interests to tackle global competitiveness.*

One example is the partnership’s “Talent-to-Industry Exchanges,” – networks of industry, education, and GradForce KC/KC Rising stakeholders who create action plans to develop local talent pipelines into high-demand jobs. This led to joint endeavors between educators and those in the region’s high-demand industries to improve preparation for careers.

Another example is the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation’s KC Scholars program. KC Scholars builds on two of the Foundation’s prior scholarship programs – Project Choice and Kauffman Scholars – and reflects input from more than 60 community members. KC Scholars uses a three-tiered approach that provides traditional scholarships, college savings accounts for ninth graders, and scholarships for adult “comebackers.” These awards may be used at a network of 17 local higher education institutions – benefitting regional talent cultivation and retention efforts.

SET UP EMPLOYERS FOR SUCCESS

Bringing together partners from diverse sectors and backgrounds inevitably surfaces differences in language, priorities, and the pace of decision making. Cross-sector partners have observed that employers are often accustomed to real-time data, rapid processes, and hierarchical decision structures in their own work. Some join the collective to fulfill the social responsibility goals of their organization, and do not yet see how the process might affect their organization or the broader problems facing the community. In many partnerships, employers have less patience for the pace of the work of cross-sector collaboration; they are often unfamiliar with how organizations from outside the private sector operate, set outcomes, or progress toward goals.

In some cases, partners take time to orient employers to the norms and processes of attainment partnership work; in other circumstances, they decide to develop processes that closely mirror the norms and pace of employers. The following approaches are used to help employers work within postsecondary attainment partnerships:

- **Translate the purpose and aims of the partnership.** Language may differ, but cross-sector partners are expected to form a common vision for their community or region. A lead partner may play a central role in developing language that employers can embrace. Discussions about entry-level readiness, training pathways, and career ladders resonate with employers' daily concerns. Employers, as well as others in the partnership, are expected to explore barriers in their own institution's policies and practices that hinder postsecondary attainment – and look for ways that businesses can explore those barriers through existing human resources and budgetary priorities.

- **Plan for dialogue early on.** Orienting employers to the culture and pace of attainment work, as well as to members of the partnership, is a crucial element. It is important for partnerships to learn about how each member works, the challenges each member faces, and how organizational policy and program changes typically transpire at their home institutions. As well, partnerships should identify trust-building opportunities, activities, or forces that drive employers and other partners to collectively improve postsecondary attainment rates.
- **Leverage employer strengths.** Employers prefer to engage in visioning, strategy, and critical decision making. They enter partnerships with less focus on process. Checking in with employers about the roles they hope to play, as their commitment to the partnership grows, is important. They have preferences about the amount of information they receive, and where in the collective structure (steering committee, board level, or work group) they best fit.

“We want regional employers to have a long-term dialogue about what their needs are. Employers don’t speak the same language as educators. A lot of things get lost in translation.”

— Partnership Lead Agency

-
- **Facilitate collaboration among competitors from the same industry.** Employers who had previously competed for business, employees, and profits are not accustomed to partnering to address broad community issues. Setting collective goals, which emphasize collaboration and systems-level change, can facilitate these new relationships. Employers from different industries may each require common skills in their entry-level workforce, offering the potential for employers to work collaboratively to articulate a set of competencies for higher education and training entities to adopt.
 - **Bank on trust and standing partnerships - no matter how small - to ease the process.** Partners use existing relationships to launch or sustain attainment efforts. They seek opportunities where relationships among or with employers may already be built and tested, such as a local Chamber of Commerce or industry association. Employers trust colleagues from other businesses who demonstrate their commitment to community and regional efforts, and are more likely to participate when they see others benefit from postsecondary efforts.

THE ROLE OF DATA IN EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Data play a critical role in employers' day-to-day operations, and can be important in a community's employer engagement strategies in the following ways:

- » **Regional research**
Builds a picture of the broad workforce needs to address
- » **Comparison research**
Shows the competitive edge of a region in recruiting, hiring, and retaining its workforce
- » **Industry standards**
Defines the skills required to fill current and future open positions
- » **Statistics on entrepreneurship**
Portrays potential new workforce needs in new or growing industries
- » **Higher education records**
Determines where and how the region's workforce is educated

Pairing Up Across Sectors

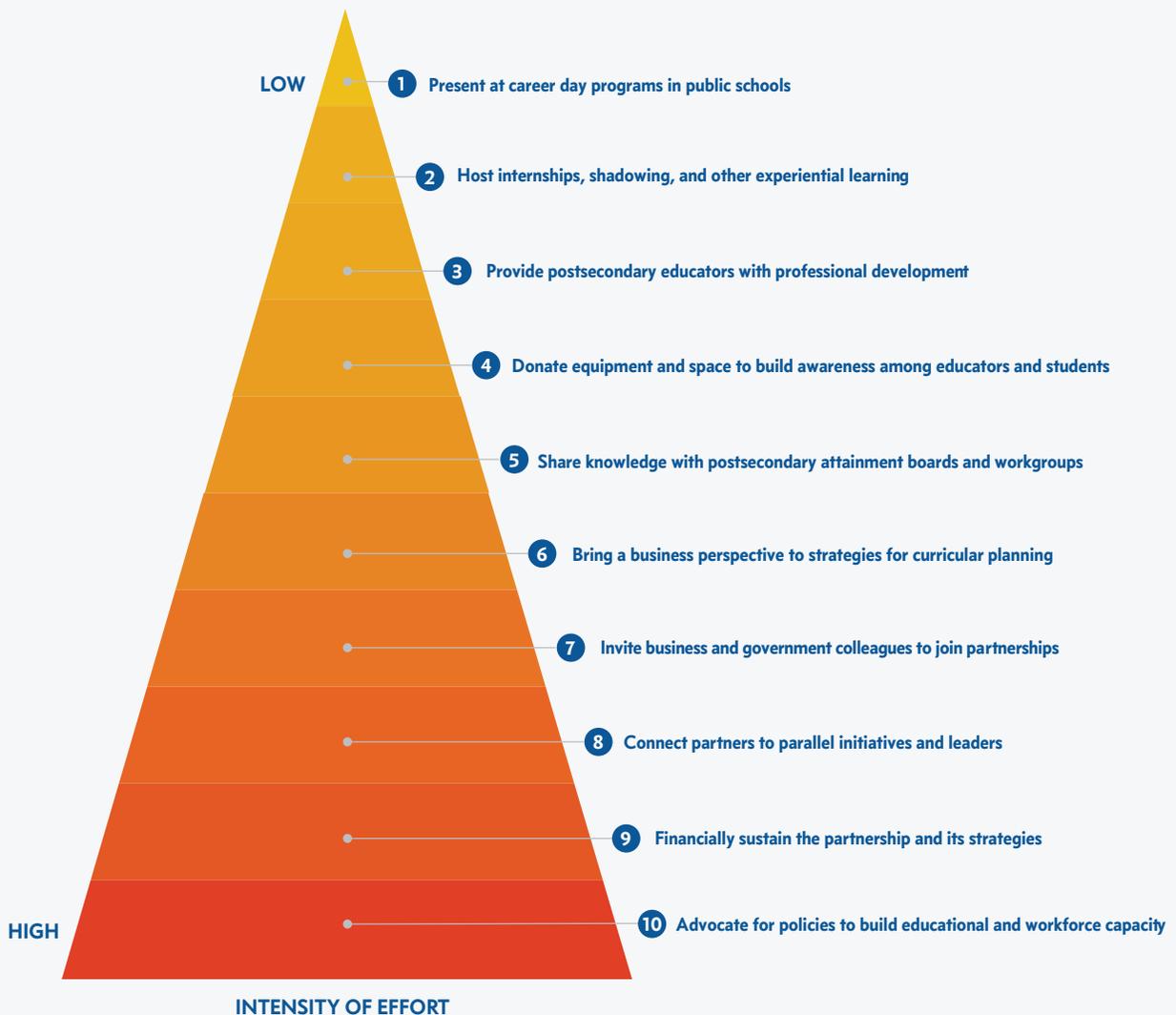
Mission: Graduate's project-centered partner engagement strategy in Albuquerque, NM, has led to commitment, buy-in, and immediate recognition of the partnership's value among employers. *Mission: Graduate asked educational and community partners to develop practice-changing projects within their own institutions that would also contribute to Mission: Graduate's goals. Partners volunteer or are assigned to specific initiatives based on expertise or level of enthusiasm for the project. For instance, a public school district and local employers hosted a three-day summer academy as an opportunity for faculty to learn how to incorporate technologies into their curriculum, develop lesson plans with other faculty, and apply mathematical concepts in their work. Considering high turnout and sustained demand, the district plans to expand the academy to more teachers in the region. This approach has led to early energy around Mission: Graduate's work, systemic thinking and approaches from individual partners, and collaborations with organizations and businesses.*

ARTICULATE ROLES THAT ENCOURAGE EMPLOYER COMMITMENT

In communities with postsecondary attainment efforts, employers become engaged in partnerships when they experience the mutual benefit partners bring one another. Where employers fit within postsecondary attainment efforts depends on many factors – including the initiative’s target population, the initiative’s maturity, the type of organization leading the partnership, and size of the business partner.

The depth of employer involvement ranges from tactical (e.g., one-time volunteering) to deep commitments (e.g., public advocacy) that require sustained amounts of time, resources, and financial contributions.

Figure 2 DEPTH OF EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT IN POSTSECONDARY ATTAINMENT EFFORTS



From Needs to Action

The Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce oversees a multi-pronged workforce and postsecondary success strategy that has framed these issues as important for regional growth. In 2013, business leaders, plant managers, senior level human resources managers, and higher education representatives from advanced manufacturing, healthcare, and information technology discussed skills gaps and mapped career pathways in their sectors. Employers wanted to develop consistency across schools around job candidates' competencies and knowledge, and equip graduates with highly valued technical skills, such as mobile app development.

*These groups formed "Skills Panels," and **established the first collaboration between workforce development boards, the business community, and higher education – creating alignment between program or degree curricula and the skills employers need from potential workers.** The panels identified goals to address the workforce development needs in the region, and moved quickly into implementation. This collaboration created an opportunity for business leaders to discuss their workforce needs and challenges, and for higher education institutions to learn how to adapt programs to better prepare their students for careers.*

Partnerships carve out roles and responsibilities for employers by examining the local populations that the initiative is targeting. Engagement looks different for programs targeting adults with some or no college credit than for those targeting traditional-aged students.

When initiatives are focused on **adults with some or no college credit or credential**, employers play distinct roles:



Employers in the Partnership:

- Share credentials for various job categories
- Invite higher education institutions to advise and recruit employees at their work sites
- Demonstrate that degree and credential attainment will lead to promotions
- Negotiate group discounts with higher education institutions for college courses and training
- Guide educators in the necessary professional and interpersonal skills for students to advance in their careers



Employers In the Workplace:

- Develop tools and policies that show clear pathways to promotion and wage increases for employees
- Offer benefit packages that offer tuition remission and flex hours to employees
- Host on-site trainings and courses for employees
- Recognize competency and past experiences in determining wages and positions
- Develop initiatives that support hiring and retention of local employees



Employers in the Region:

- Provide a direct line for higher education to recruit and support large numbers of the region's working population
- Ensure that higher education and credentialing programs are relevant and essential to current industry needs
- Devise industry policies and practices that promote attainment through hiring and promotion region-wide
- Ensure that training for current and future needs is accessible
- Encourage targeted short-term credentialing and certificate programs to fast-track postsecondary attainment rates

When efforts are focused on **traditional-aged students (16-24 years old)**, employers encourage training and educational curricula that will lead to employment, informing educators about the actual and projected needs of their industries.



Employers in the Partnership:

- Share with partners the region's industrial picture and hiring projections
- Donate updated hardware, tools, or machinery for educational settings
- Shape curricula for high school, college, and credentialing programs



Employers In the Workplace:

- Volunteer for career day visits with students
- Provide tours of business or plant for students and educators
- Host internships, summer jobs, and experiential learning opportunities
- Develop and improve orientation sessions for new and junior employees



Employers In the Region:

- Communicate the types of high-wage, in-demand jobs available to traditional-age students
- Provide training and simulation facilities to educators and students
- Support new and emerging industries in the region through coordinated policies and practices across employers
- Ensure a pipeline of local employees are prepared for entry level positions and advancement in the business

A Note about Equity and Inclusion

In our examination of employer engagement, communities varied in how they address career pathways for the most vulnerable, struggling populations.

Many of these communities have employers in the information technology, biological sciences, and advanced manufacturing sectors. While these sectors are profitable for the region, and allow for higher earnings among many employees, their existing workforce tends to be rather homogenous in ethnicity, gender, and background – with less representation of women, people of color, non-native English speakers, and LGBTQ individuals. Although strides have been made, inequities remain in many industries. Occupations that have traditionally hired and advanced significant numbers of women and people of color are not often partnership members, in part because the level of wages or financial benefit to the region resulting from these jobs are undervalued or negligible from an economic development standpoint.

Employers can help ensure equitable access and pathways to careers. In communities with postsecondary attainment initiatives, employers and partners can set a vision, agenda, and strategies for equity and inclusion, such as:

- Becoming more inclusive when selecting employers and industries for the partnership
- Tailoring postsecondary and career pathways for underrepresented groups
- Reflecting critically on how new policies and practices will affect different populations, and working toward equitable solutions for postsecondary attainment rates and career ladders
- Documenting and improving employers' hiring and promotion practices, accounting for the roles that culture and history play in some industries

To learn more about how Lumina Foundation infused an equity frame into the Community Partnership for Attainment investment, please read [*Incorporating Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in a Cross-Sector Postsecondary Attainment Agenda*](#).

SECTION 3

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MOVING FORWARD

Employers are crucial partners in postsecondary attainment efforts. They offer knowledge of the trends and demands of industry, and can work with postsecondary institutions and partners to contribute to an attainment agenda. The commitment and contributions of employers have the potential to improve educational outcomes, create viable career pathways, and establish an economically vibrant region.

We offer recommendations for funders and community stakeholders to consider when implementing cross-sector, place-based change strategies:

1 **Make space at the table**

Given their knowledge and perspectives about regional labor market needs, employers have much to offer postsecondary attainment initiatives. That is why it is important to acknowledge the value of employers in attainment-related discussions, and to include them in postsecondary partnerships. Cross-sector partners should create a welcome space for employers, and consider new processes, motivations, and incentives that draw employers in and allow them to contribute meaningfully to the initiative.

2 **Begin with the end in mind**

Employers are situated at the end of the education-to-career continuum. They are intimately familiar with the skills of recent graduates and incoming employees, and their businesses manage performance and talent of the local workforce. The challenges they share with postsecondary attainment partners can provide valuable insights into how to equip students for the workforce. By elevating these challenges, employers can help partners craft solutions that address higher education curricula, financial aid, college and career readiness, and public education reform.

3 **Focus on and leverage early wins**

Postsecondary attainment partnerships may initially engage with a single employer or sector, but should look to scale over time. As new sectors and employers join the partnership, early stage relationships with employers will play a critical role in the perception about the partnership's value for employers. Early successes – and failures – are likely to influence future attempts to attract employers. Demonstration of concrete “wins” for employers, the partnership, and the region can facilitate future employer relationships, leading to greater impact at scale.