



Industry Partnerships that Last

A Playbook for Higher Education

MAY 2026

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Letters of Introduction	1
Business-Higher Education Forum	1
Texas Business Leadership Council	1
About	2
Introduction	3
The Partnership Mismatch	3
The Community College Advantage	3
Laying the Groundwork for Partnerships that Last	4
Become a Partner of Choice	5
Overcome Barriers to Collaboration	9
Where Collaboration Creates Value	14
Tools, Templates, and Resources	16
Market Yourself as a Partnership Ready Institution	18
Templates and Meeting Resources	21
Appendix	28
Common Ways to Engage	28
References	32
Acknowledgements	32

Letters of Introduction

BUSINESS-HIGHER EDUCATION FORUM

Business and higher education share a common goal: preparing people for good jobs while ensuring employers have the talent they need to compete. Yet, too often, partnership efforts fall short—not for lack of interest, but because the systems, timelines, and incentives don't align.

At the Business-Higher Education Forum (BHEF), we work closely with business leaders and higher education institutions across the country to move beyond good intentions and toward partnerships that deliver real outcomes. We are grateful to the partners who have shaped this work and generously shared their time, insights, and lessons learned.

This playbook brings together lessons learned, tested strategies, and concrete tools to help higher education institutions strengthen their engagement with business. It draws on examples from Texas' community colleges, but the strategies and tools are designed to be applicable across higher education. There is no one-size-fits-all approach—the goal is not to replicate a model, but to adapt what works to your context, capacity, and regional priorities.

We hope this resource supports your efforts to build partnerships that expand opportunity for learners, strengthen relationships with employers, and contribute to more resilient regional economies.

Jennifer Thornton

*Senior Vice President & Chief Program Officer
Business-Higher Education Forum*



About the Business-Higher Education Forum

The Business-Higher Education Forum (BHEF) is a national network connecting pioneering corporate and higher education leaders to identify emerging skills and co-develop inclusive pathways that address talent needs. BHEF empowers and catalyzes collaborations that deliver accelerated, inclusive, and effective solutions across education and work to meet the changing talent needs of learners, workers, and businesses. For more information about BHEF, visit bhef.com.

TEXAS BUSINESS LEADERSHIP COUNCIL

As the president of Texas Business Leadership Council (TBLC), a network of CEOs and business executives focused on promoting public policies for a more globally competitive Texas, I've witnessed how partnerships between business and higher education are the cornerstone of a successful workforce development system. To that end, the TBLC is proud to team up with Business Roundtable, the Business-Higher Education Forum, and the Texas Success Center on the Workforce Partnership Initiative (WPI) in Texas. WPI is redefining how business and higher education come together to meet regional workforce needs and empowering employers to take the lead in shaping talent pipelines by collaborating with local higher education institutions.

To best ensure learners are equipped for workplace success, postsecondary systems must work alongside industry leaders and employers to deliver a high-quality education that meets market needs. Based on WPI learnings, this playbook is designed to foster greater mutual understanding and provide practical tools and templates to empower institutions to initiate, sustain, and strengthen their partnership efforts with employers. In today's fast-moving economy, these partnerships are even more critical to ensure the workforce of tomorrow is prepared for the high-growth roles vital to driving economic momentum and innovation in Texas and across the country.

Justin Yancy

*President & CEO
Texas Business Leadership Council*



About the Texas Business Leadership Council

The Texas Business Leadership Council (TBLC) is a network of Texas based CEOs and senior business executives focused on advancing a long-term vision of a prosperous Texas in a globally competitive business environment. For more information about TBLC, visit tblc.org.

About

This resource provides practical guidance to help higher education institutions build, structure, and develop effective, sustainable, and mutually beneficial partnerships with business that drive talent solutions for American people, businesses, and regional economies.

It is organized into two sections: strategies for institutions to build and strengthen partnership with business followed by a set of user-friendly tools, templates, and resources—including guidance on positioning your institution as a partner of choice. A variety of departments and roles across all higher education institutions, often depending on size of the institution, can use this publication to identify best practices for partnering with business and as a resource for customizing materials for partnership engagement.

This resource was developed by the Business-Higher Education Forum and the Texas Business Leadership Council through the Workforce Partnership Initiative Texas (WPI Texas). WPI Texas supports community colleges, private sector leaders, and key intermediaries throughout Texas to align credentials of value with industry needs, expand quality work-integrated learning opportunities, strengthen high-impact partnerships, and increase employers' access to ready-to-work learners with in-demand skills. Best practices and lessons learned from the participating WPI Texas community colleges, Connecticut Tech Talent Accelerator participating colleges and universities, and Hudson County Community College are embedded throughout the playbook.

Refer to your role icon to quickly navigate to the most relevant sections of the toolkit.



PRESIDENTS, CHANCELLORS, PROVOSTS

Institutional leaders can use this resource to set a clear vision and strategy for partnership, remove structural barriers, and empower staff and faculty with the time, autonomy, and resources to build and expand partnerships.



STRATEGIC LEADERS (e.g., vice presidents/deans/department chairs in advancement, workforce, corporate engagement, and continuing ed/lifelong learning): These leaders can use this playbook to design and coordinate institution-wide partnership strategy, align outreach and relationship management across departments, and establish consistent messaging and value propositions. This resource also supports leaders in identifying discipline-specific partnership opportunities, aligning programs with employer needs, and bridging institutional strategy and on-the-ground implementation.



FACULTY & EXTERNALLY FACING STAFF

Faculty and staff can use this playbook as a practical guide and leverage templates, meeting resources, and partnership activity examples to initiate conversations with business, co-design curriculum, and embed work-integrated learning into programs.



87%

of **higher education leaders** agree that partnerships with business are a priority



89%

of **business leaders** agree that partnerships with higher education are a priority



22%

of **higher education leaders** say they are fully executing a partnership strategy

The Partnership Mismatch

Business and higher education leaders alike agree that partnership is essential, yet fewer than one in five higher education leaders report fully executing on a partnership strategy.¹ While both business and higher education recognize the value of partnership, their priorities often differ—and these differences vary across industries and regions. This mismatch underscores the importance of tailoring partnerships to a company's specific goals.

The historic, siloed model, where institutions prepare learners at the start of their careers and employers provide jobs, no longer meets the demands of today's dynamic workforce. With rapid technological change and shifting industry needs, work and learning need to align more closely—learners benefit from practical experience and workers must be lifelong learners.

Bridging the gap between the ambitious goals of partnership initiatives and their current level of implementation requires addressing the existing barriers that both business and higher education experience. Partnerships must be designed to address clear goals and with an approach of shared responsibility in talent development.

Many higher education institutions have built strong and innovative partnerships, yet there are opportunities to deepen and expand this work. Business leaders are often eager and well-intentioned partners but sustaining collaborations can be challenging given the demands on their time and resources. Likewise, higher education institutions may face capacity constraints or may not have full visibility into the day-to-day operations of business. At times, these differences can make it seem as though the two sides are speaking different languages. This playbook is intended to bridge those gaps by fostering greater mutual understanding, aligning goals, and offering practical tools and templates that make partnership efforts easier to initiate, sustain, and grow.

The Community College Advantage

Community colleges play a vital role in delivering accessible, career-aligned education that meets the needs of local industries and helps learners access in-demand jobs in their communities. They enroll 40% of all higher education students, serving a diverse population that includes adult learners, dual enrollment students, and individuals across a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds.² Community colleges serve a high share of adult learners: 31% of community college students are age 25 or older, compared to 19% at four-year colleges.³ At the same time, dual enrollment now accounts for 21% of total community college enrollment,⁴ demonstrating their expanding reach to younger learners. Community colleges are especially positioned to offer short-term, skills-based credentials that today's learners increasingly seek. While they may face resource constraints, these institutions are often nimbler and designed to be more responsive than their four-year counterparts when it comes to building strong, workforce-aligned pathways.

For business, community colleges offer a powerful solution: access to hyper-local talent trained in alignment with evolving business needs. In fact, on average, about half of community college graduates work in the same metro area as their college and two-thirds work in the same state.⁵ With the right institutional readiness and tools, community colleges can become even stronger partners in building the workforce for today and the future in their communities.



Laying the Groundwork for Partnerships that Last

In the context of this report, a business-higher education partnership is a formal agreement to contribute resources or services including staff, funding, facilities, work-integrated learning, labor market insights, or advocacy to enhance educational training and opportunities that are linked tightly to workforce development and building talent pipelines. Partners share ownership, responsibility, and accountability for the success of learners and for meeting regional workforce development needs. Every higher education institution is structured differently, with different resource allocations, faculty needs, institutional priorities, and structural constraints.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to partnership. The best practices shared here are intended to serve as examples and inspiration, not prescriptive models. Successful partnerships should be designed creatively and strategically to align with your institution's specific goals, capacity, and community needs.

Become a Partner of Choice

ASSESS THE NOW

FOR PRESIDENTS / STRATEGIC LEADERS



Use an assessment, whether administered through a third party or internally, to examine the state of your institution's culture, resources, structure, and processes to establish and sustain meaningful partnerships with business. Map current partnership practices and identify opportunities for deeper collaboration. Understand your institution's capacity, where practices and policies are strong, and where additional support may be needed.

Recommendation: Partnership activities often exist across multiple departments and stakeholders at an institution, and sometimes without clear communication across departments. Encourage the assessment to be completed by institutional leadership (e.g., presidents, provosts), faculty, career services, deans and department chairs, continuing education or professional education, workforce, and business partnership coordinators. Create a community of trust among staff to gain honest feedback across departments.

Resources: See the Tools, Templates, and Resources section for additional resources including BHEF's Industry Partnership Assessment for Higher Education Institutions.

EMPOWER STAFF THROUGH LEADERSHIP

FOR PRESIDENTS / STRATEGIC LEADERS



Leadership prioritization and resourcing is crucial to fostering a culture of industry partnership. When leaders champion business engagement, they create the conditions for staff to approach partnerships with creativity and confidence. Faculty and staff need both autonomy and institutional support to navigate conversations with business, propose innovative ideas, and adapt offerings to meet workforce needs. With strong leadership backing and executive-level business engagement, teams are better equipped to build meaningful, responsive relationships with business partners.

Recommendation: Ensure that partnerships with industry are a publicly stated priority from the strategic plan to organizational and individual goals. Create the incentives and structures that empower and celebrate partnership momentum across your organization, as success breeds success.

Recommendation: Faculty can engage deans, department chairs, and program directors early to gain buy-in, serve as a bridge between institutional strategy and implementation, and create swift change. Leadership does not need to stay at the table but engaging them periodically or in an on-call capacity can ensure that partnership is a priority and staff time and resources are dedicated to the partnership.

IDENTIFY A CLEAR POINT OF CONTACT

FOR STRATEGIC LEADERS / FACULTY & EXTERNALLY FACING STAFF



Businesses may struggle to navigate the structure of higher education institutions. When possible, identify points of contact at the institution—either institution wide or by sector/discipline—who has the primary responsibility of developing, managing, and tracking partnerships. Given variations in institutional structure and capacity, the office or title serving as the point of contact will vary by institution. While partnerships should engage leadership, deans, faculty, and staff, designated points of contact help coordinate communication and ensure continuity. If a dedicated POC is not possible, leverage the connections from institutional leaders to initiate introductions and ensure a smooth handoff to the appropriate staff member.

Recommendation: As an institution, define roles and responsibilities for each staff role or department, and overall goals for business engagement.

Recommendation: If a business were to go to your institution's website, would they know who to reach out to for collaboration? Ensure a POC applicable to them is visible on websites, outreach materials, and even email signatures.

Recommendation: Anticipate turnover at both the business and the institution. Build relationships that transcend beyond one point of contact and use customer relationship management tools and systems that support relationship longevity.

DEVELOP A SOLUTIONS ORIENTED, "YES-AND" MINDSET

FOR ALL ROLES



Encourage staff to engage with business from a place of flexibility, openness, and problem solving. Businesses have shared that working with higher education can feel challenging when their ideas are met with barriers rather than possibilities.

Instead of leading with limitations, be transparent about what your institution can offer and what support, buy-in, or resources would be needed from the business to make it work. Train staff and faculty where to direct a business or how to facilitate a warm handoff if they are not the right contact for a request. Constraints around time, staffing, and funding are real, but they don't have to be a conversation ender. Engage with institutional leadership on creative solutions or change. When the business request isn't feasible, reframe the conversation to an alternative and ask if they would be open to co-investing.

Business may not always understand institutional processes or constraints, so clear, honest communication is important. Approaching each partnership as a shared challenge to solve together builds trust and allows for more effective collaboration.

Recommendation: When speaking with a business, reframe limitations into opportunities by focusing on the benefits to them. For example, if a business partner is seeking to revise a pathway to focus on skills not yet required in the current program, and the current required coursework provides skills that are essential to different partners, you might respond by embedding the new skillsets while highlighting the advantages of those existing skills: the existing skills allow the business partner to access well-rounded talent.

Resources: See the Tools, Templates, and Resources section for additional resources including How to Partner with Us One-Pager

MEET BUSINESS WHERE THEY ARE

FOR ALL ROLES



Business and education often operate with different communication styles and priorities. To build stronger partnerships, education should engage business in a language that resonates—one that emphasizes outcomes, return on investment, and impact. Rather than focusing solely on academic structures or internal processes, highlight how your institution can help solve real workforce challenges.

Recommendation: Communicating with business is a skill that varies in strength from department to department. Leverage these differences by encouraging internal peer-to-peer learning and sharing strategies on how best to frame partnership activities in ways that build trust and demonstrate value.

SAN JACINTO COLLEGE LYONDELLBASELL CENTER FOR PETROCHEMICAL, ENERGY, & TECHNOLOGY

San Jacinto College's LyondellBasell Center for Petrochemical, Energy, & Technology was "designed by industry, for industry." San Jacinto College set out to strengthen the petrochemical talent pipeline in Pasadena, Texas, one of the region's fastest growing industries, by expanding hands-on training for the next generation of workers.⁶ As plans for the new facility began to take shape, Chancellor Brenda Hellyer invited business leaders to weigh-in on early design concepts. The message was clear: think bigger. To meet the need for more equipment and space, San Jacinto College invested further and repurposed campus land, sunsetting a golf course to make room for expanded training capacity. Spanning more than 151,000 square feet, the facility now features a glass pilot lab, a glycol distillation unit, 35 training labs, and dedicated meeting

spaces. Local employers not only sponsored and helped design the center, but continue to shape curriculum, collaborate on customized training programs, and actively recruit talent directly from campus.

This solutions-oriented mindset and close collaboration with employers became the foundation of the center's success. By eliminating the need for companies to dedicate their own facilities to training, San Jacinto College positioned the center as the region's hub for talent development. In return, business partners continue to invest time, resources, and funding and continue to hire learners directly from the program. The center stands as a model for how higher education can meet industry where it is, while fueling long-term economic growth.



LEVERAGE REGIONAL NETWORKS & THIRD-PARTY ASSISTANCE

FOR STRATEGIC LEADERS / FACULTY & EXTERNALLY FACING STAFF



Tap into existing networks like chambers of commerce, workforce boards, sector partnerships, economic development organizations, and alumni networks to get warm introductions to local business. These organizations offer resources, added capacity, and can amplify reach and impact. Collaborate with other colleges and universities to share best practices, troubleshoot common challenges, and explore opportunities for joint employer engagement.

Recommendation: If resources are available, partner with technology platforms (e.g., student data systems, mentorship matching, or work-integrated learning project tools) to streamline engagement.

EY-ALAMO COLLEGES DISTRICT HIRING PILOT: EXPANDING CAREER OPPORTUNITY VIA ASSOCIATE DEGREES

In 2019, EY faced a significant talent challenge in San Antonio: it could not find enough bachelor's degree holders in accounting or other fields to staff its third internal service delivery center.⁷ For the first time in its history, EY expanded its talent pipeline and turned to a community college partnership. EY turned to local and national intermediary partners that brought in expertise in education to employment pathways, capacity and credibility with businesses, and resources, through the Business Roundtable's Workforce Partnership Initiative. Together, they helped target a community college in the region to work with and provided technical assistance and added capacity, and they also helped to construct and navigate the partnership.

Together, the partners invested time in planning and relationship-building. Alamo helped EY recruiters

understand the community college ecosystem, while EY introduced its brand to students through a marketing campaign, campus visits, and faculty engagement, ensuring educators could serve as champions for their learners. The result was the EY-Alamo Colleges District Hiring Pilot, which led to the successful hiring of 91 Alamo graduates. This program provided motivated community college students with access to a global employer, elevated the value of the associate degree in the region, and demonstrated how inclusive hiring strategies can meet business needs while expanding economic mobility. The pilot also encouraged Texas community colleges to place greater emphasis on post-degree employment outcomes. Although this type of partnership was new for EY, the support of intermediaries and the Alamo Colleges District helped streamline the process and establish a model for future engagement.

MARKET YOURSELF

FOR STRATEGIC LEADERS / FACULTY & EXTERNALLY FACING STAFF



Lead with a clear statement of partnership opportunities and activities. Develop marketing materials to clearly demonstrate offerings including the resources or engagement needed from each partner, timeline, and the POC. If you are already doing great work with industry at your institution, showcase that impact and outcomes through marketing collateral.

Recommendation: To get a foot in the door of business, start with engagement opportunities that are a low lift for the business, such as a classroom visit to talk to learners about their industry, or hosting a job-shadowing opportunity.

Resources: See the Tools, Templates, and Resources section for additional resources including How to Partner with Us Pitch Deck Checklist, How to Partner with Us One-Pager, and Program Marketing Checklist

Overcome Barriers to Collaboration

FOR STRATEGIC LEADERS / FACULTY & EXTERNALLY FACING STAFF



Successful partnerships demand time and investment from both sides, though they are rarely the full-time focus of those managing them. Both business and higher education face challenges in starting and sustaining partnerships due to capacity constraints, shifting priorities, and internal limitations. By understanding the perspective of business and their common barriers, higher education can position itself as a stronger partner.

Difficulty Identifying Business Partners

It may be difficult to find or engage businesses in your region, especially if they are experiencing initiative fatigue.

MITIGATION TACTICS

Use labor market data to guide outreach: Identify high-demand industries and occupations in your region and prioritize outreach to businesses aligned with those sectors as well as your institution's priority sectors.

Activate internal networks: Leverage alumni, faculty, and advisory board connections to make warm introductions to potential partners.

Collaborate: Work with other higher education institutions in your region to approach a business together, adding capacity and de-duplicating efforts.

Limited Internal Capacity and Resources

Higher education often has small teams or limited internal capacity for engaging with business. Faculty, in particular, may not be encouraged to, or have the resources to make partnership a priority in their role. Limitations may exist in terms of equipment or space.

MITIGATION TACTICS

Ensure leadership, incentives and resources align: Higher education leadership must support the importance of partnership, creating space and autonomy for staff to optimize partnership activities.

Seek additional resources: Identify alternate funding sources like grant funding, philanthropy, or public-private partnerships to supplement institutional resources. These funds can support program development or equipment purchases, or bring in consultant expertise to accelerate implementation.

Ask the business to lean in: Be transparent with business about institutional capacity. If limitations like insufficient equipment, faculty time, or facilities exist, communicate that an investment of the business' resources can enable the program's creation. Frame the partnership activity as a shared investment, which also builds mutual ownership.

RECOMMENDATION: If a lack of equipment or specialized equipment is a barrier, ask the business if they would consider allowing the institution to utilize their facilities or production floor during non-peak times for education and training.

Strategically select partners: Align partnership to student and institution priorities and assess partners based on size, hiring needs, and level of investment.

Connecticut's Tech Talent Accelerator (TTA), an initiative developed by the New England Board of Higher Education and the Business-Higher Education Forum, is closing the tech skills gap by supplying state-funded micro-grants to faculty to rapidly form business-higher education partnerships.⁸ These partnerships are co-designed training pathways in high-demand fields such as cybersecurity, mobile application development, game design, cloud computing, and biostatistics. Over two years, the initiative has developed or updated 15 business-validated pathways with 26 Connecticut employers, enrolled more than 700 learners, and secured over 100 internships and job placements.

Key design features include embedding industry-recognized credentials into curricula, leveraging competency maps based on workforce data, maintaining continuous employer input, providing financial support for learners, and building transferable

credit and noncredit pathways. The TTA model demonstrates how purposeful alignment across business, education, and government can yield scalable, equitable tech workforce outcomes in a relatively short time.

Through TTA, Charter Oak State College developed the Cyber Ready Program with business partner Travelers. These partners recognized that not every learner had the resources to take courses or sit for exams like the CompTIA Security+ credential that the program prepared learners for. Thus, it combined TTA funding with financial support from the state's Good Jobs Challenge and its own institutionally related foundation to provide wraparound support to learners. Charter Oak's three-pronged approach has allowed it to use the TTA grant to design the course, the Good Jobs Challenge grant to pay for 25 students' class costs, and its own foundation's grant to offset the cost for students of sitting for the exams.

Difficulty Engaging Small and Medium Business

Small and medium businesses anchor local economies in certain regions, especially rural regions. Constrained staff capacity, limited hiring needs, and cross-functional talent demand can make it difficult for them to partner with higher education.

MITIGATION TACTICS

Pool resources via size and sector-based collaboration:

Encourage groups of small businesses within the same sector to jointly support learners through shared or rotational work-integrated learning experiences. For example, rather than hosting a single intern all summer, multiple small businesses could share a cohort of interns who rotate across organizations. This model gives learners diverse, practical experience and helps businesses build connections to future talent. Similarly, higher education institutions can co-develop upskilling or reskilling programs for clusters of small businesses with shared needs, which spreads the workload of curriculum design and increases program participation.

Package programs around "utility" skills: Small businesses often seek employees who can contribute across multiple roles (e.g., a customer service employee who can also assist with operations or sales). Higher education institutions can tailor or bundle existing courses into applied, cross-occupational credentials that combine durable and technical skills to develop well-rounded, cross-functional workers who meet small business needs and make it easier for small businesses to benefit.

Inflexible Program Structures

Rigid curriculum requirements, lengthy accreditation processes, or scheduling can make it difficult for colleges to adapt quickly to business needs for timing, delivery format, or skill requirements. This rigidity can cause missed opportunities with evolving skills needs.

MITIGATION TACTICS

Build modular or stackable program designs: Develop shorter, microcredentials or certificates that can stack into degree programs and allow for faster curriculum updates.

Leverage noncredit pathways: Use noncredit offerings as a rapid response tool to pilot new content and test curriculum and modality, as well as build pathways to for-credit options.

Lack of Follow-Through from Business Partners

Business partners may not complete agreed upon follow-through due to bandwidth constraints, shifting priorities, or impatience around seeing a return on investment.

MITIGATION TACTICS

Set expectations early: Before agreeing to a partnership activity, ensure both partners are clear on their roles, responsibilities, timeline, and expectations. Although it is important to be adaptable as priorities and goals may shift throughout the partnership, hold the business accountable through a short partnership agreement.

RECOMMENDATION: Often, businesses seek short-term solutions to their talent needs, which is not always possible. Find ways to create short term wins for the business that build trust, which could include starting with a noncredit pathway, developing the pathway while learners are entering it, and marketing intended outcomes of the partnership.

Start with a shared and clear goal: Successful partnerships are built on a mutually beneficial goal with realistic strategies to achieve it.

Ensure the business has a stake in the game: If the business has invested resources, time, or talent, they are more likely to be responsive and continue follow-through.

Unclear Value Proposition for the Business

Businesses may be unsure how partnering with an institution will benefit their organization, or the business needs a clear indication of the return on investment.

MITIGATION TACTICS

Create pitch materials: Develop a pitch deck and other marketing materials to clearly outline partnership activities and anticipated outcomes.

RESOURCES: See the Tools and Templates section for additional resources including How to Partner with Us Pitch Deck Checklist, and the How to Partner with Us One-Pager

Share peer success stories to establish trust: Identify and showcase testimonials or case studies from work with other businesses who have benefited from similar partnerships.

Hudson County Community College (HCCC) and Eastern Millwork, Inc. recognized a growing need for skilled workers in advanced manufacturing and sought a new model to rapidly build a sustainable talent pipeline while creating affordable career pathways for students.⁹

In just seven months, Hudson County Community College partnered with Eastern Millwork, Inc. to launch the Eastern Millwork-Holz Technik Academy, a five-year registered apprenticeship that blends paid, tuition-free college with hands-on training. Apprentices earn an associate degree at HCCC and a bachelor's at Thomas Edison State University while working at Eastern Millwork, graduating debt-free with guaranteed jobs paying \$70,000 plus benefits.

To accelerate the program's launch, HCCC took an innovative approach: developing and delivering the first course while continuing to build out the remaining curriculum and pathway in parallel. The college also served as an apprenticeship intermediary, helping to manage administrative requirements so the employer could focus on mentoring and on-the-job training. By aligning curriculum directly with employer needs and removing financial barriers for learners, the program has already produced graduates prepared for high-skill careers while providing the company with a steady stream of talent. The model highlights how rapid, cross-sector collaboration can create scalable pathways that meet workforce demands and provide students with clear, life-changing outcomes.

Limited Business Bandwidth

For businesses, partnerships with higher education are likely not their primary focus, and some may not view partnership with higher education as a first solution to talent challenges or upskilling needs. Time constraints, shifting priorities, external pressures and policy changes, and limited internal capacity can make sustained engagement difficult. This challenge may look like inconsistent or dropped communication from the business, delayed responses or unresponsiveness after initial interest, and difficulty maintaining momentum over time.

MITIGATION TACTICS

Conduct internal partnership check-ins: Schedule periodic conversations to revisit goals, identify pain points, and explore new areas of collaboration. These check-ins can reaffirm shared priorities.

Communicate as partners: Partnerships should include an agreed upon cadence of communications or meeting structure. Send regular updates, such as program outcomes, student success stories, event invitations, and industry-relevant news. Be strategic about the timing and amount of information in communications as to not overwhelm the partner.

RECOMMENDATION: Consider a newsletter that highlights institutional updates, recent wins, new offerings, or labor market shifts.

Deliver timeliness and follow through: Build trust by ensuring responsiveness, meeting deadlines, and following up.

RECOMMENDATION: It may take five or six touchpoints to capture the attention of a business partner, even when a partnership already exists. Don't be discouraged if you feel like you are following up often; communication from external contacts can easily get lost in a crowded inbox. Consistent, respectful persistence is key.

Showcase the wins: Recognize and celebrate business partner contributions by publicly thanking partners through social media, events, and press releases, building goodwill and visibility.

Shifting Business Priorities

Business may change their minds or pivot direction due to internal shifts, leadership changes, external market pressures, or economic uncertainty. In these cases, what may look like excitement and initial interest can be followed by sudden delayed responses or repeatedly canceled meetings.

MITIGATION TACTICS

Be strategic and protective of institutional resources: While flexibility is important, be careful not to invest disproportionate time and energy into a partnership that is not reciprocated. It is okay to walk away or pause a partnership when the level of engagement is unsustainable.

Diversify partnerships: Avoid putting all your eggs in one basket. Maintain a portfolio of business relationships to balance risk.

Vet partnerships: Ensure the business's needs and engagement capacity align with your institution's mission and strategic priorities. Ask questions around longevity of demand, for example: how might technological change, automation, or market shifts affect demand for this skillset or role?

Establish multiple points of contact: Engage individuals across the company, including HR, subject-matter experts, and leadership to ensure continuity and buy-in even when turnover occurs.

Unclear Signaling into Talent Needs

Business partners often recognize they are facing talent challenges but may struggle to clearly define the specific skills, credentials, and workforce needs. This challenge is especially true for emerging technologies and tools, e.g., integrating AI into business practices. Business may also experience unclear signaling on education and experience requirements or preferences for a given role, including miscommunication or differing priorities between HR and the subject-matter expert hiring for the role.

MITIGATION TACTICS

Lean into higher education's strengths: Identifying skills gaps and mapping them to curricula is a core strength of higher education. Rather than asking employers to list skills for a specific job, share an existing program's summary of its knowledge, skills, and abilities and ask them to react: Which skills should remain? Which are outdated? What tools or technologies have replaced them? What is missing?

Clarify education and experience preferences in practice: Business often describe hiring as "skills-based," prioritizing demonstrated competencies over traditional indicators like degrees. In practice, this may include candidates with certifications, bootcamps, military experience, or on-the-job training. However, some businesses who advertise a skills-based approach may still prefer candidates with certain degrees or levels of experience. Others may list high educational requirements but demonstrate flexibility during hiring. Engage business partners to clarify preferences, what qualifications they value, and what a "strong candidate" looks like in practice. These conversations can not only improve alignment but may also prompt partners to refine their internal signaling or hiring practices.

Where Collaboration Creates Value

FOR ALL ROLES



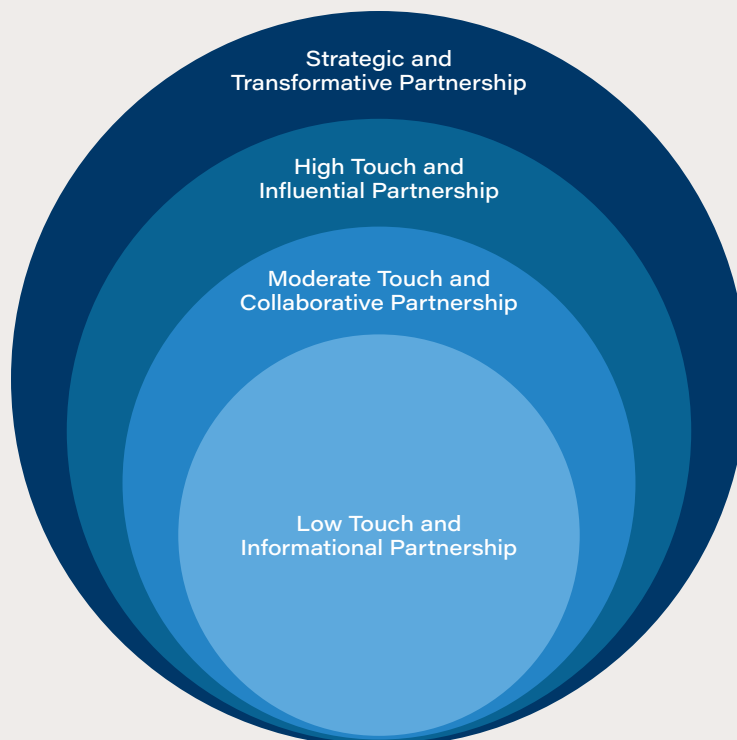
There is no one-size-fits-all approach to partnerships, and they should vary based on mutual needs and ability to provide time and resources, as well as intended outcome.

Some businesses may be time-constrained and seek a low-touch or one-time engagement that is primarily informational, such as visiting campus to talk to learners or sharing opportunities on a job board. These kinds of partnerships are valuable starting points, especially for new partnerships, because they build trust, spark relationships, and can have a meaningful impact on learners. Other businesses may aspire to become strategic or transformative partners, taking a more active role in shaping local and regional workforce strategies through thought leadership, advocacy, and long-term collaboration. Partnerships evolve: a business may engage at different levels over time, but not every partner needs to move outward on the partnership spectrum. Each level of engagement holds value for both the business and the institution: the key is identifying the right fit for each partner.

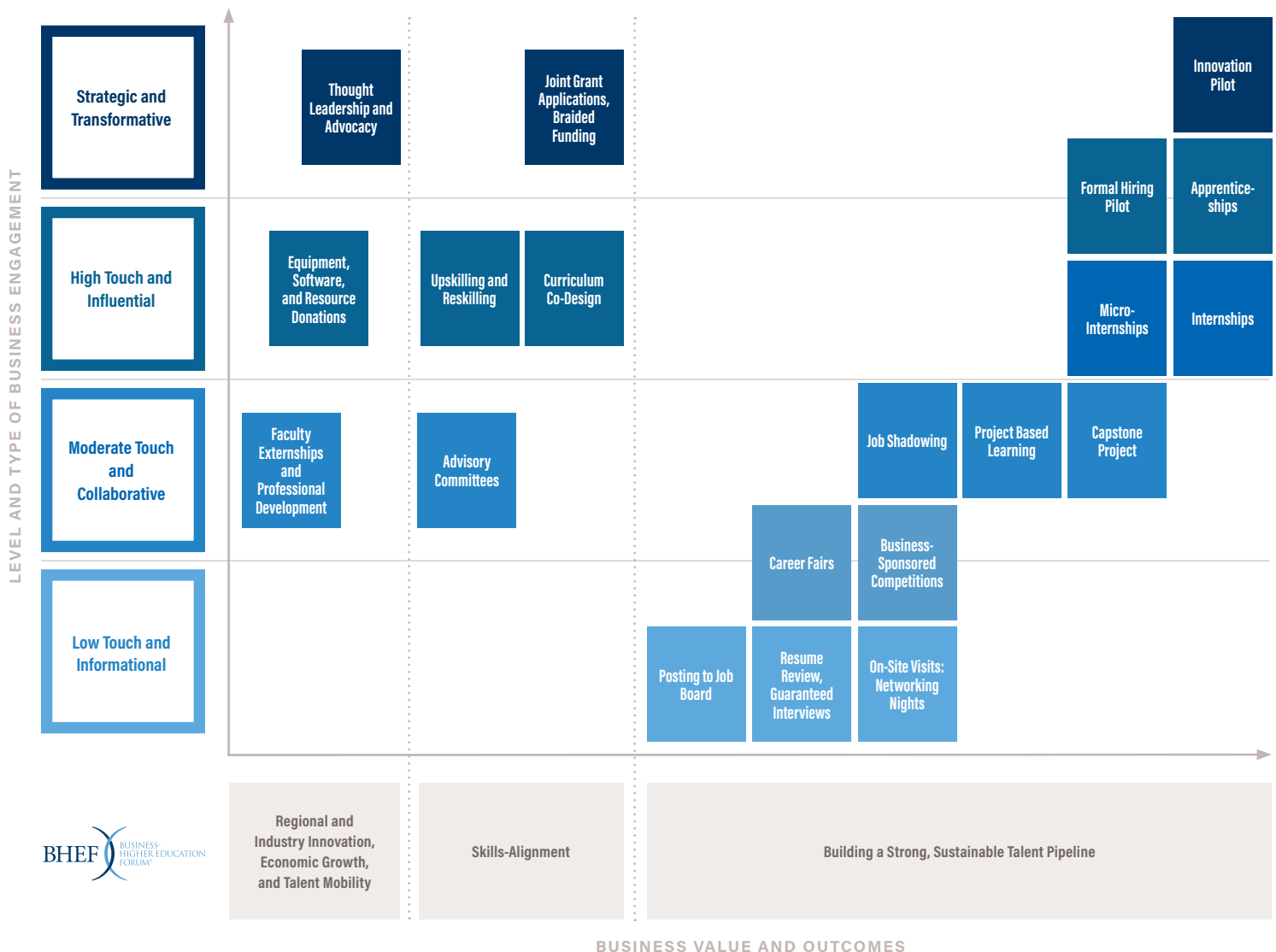
The Strategic Business-Higher Education Partnership Activities graphic illustrates the value of partnerships from a business perspective and highlights the range of opportunities for engagement. It is intended to help higher education institutions frame discussions with business partners and identify activities that align with the partner's available resources, time commitment, and desired outcomes or return on investment. This tool is best used by the institution's partnership manager as a working document to guide partnership strategy. By listening to a business partner's needs and capacity, the partnership manager can use the graphic to pinpoint activities that represent the best fit.

**Refer to pg. 28 for definitions of common ways to engage.*

THE PARTNERSHIP SPECTRUM: BUSINESS-HIGHER EDUCATION COLLABORATION



STRATEGIC BUSINESS-HIGHER EDUCATION PARTNERSHIP ACTIVITIES



DRIVE REGIONAL GROWTH AND ADVANCE SHARED GOALS THROUGH WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING

FOR STRATEGIC LEADERS / FACULTY & EXTERNALLY FACING STAFF



Work-integrated learning (WIL) is a vital steppingstone for learners transitioning from education to the workplace. WIL gives learners an opportunity to apply academic learning to the workplace and develop professional skills through opportunities like internships, project-based learning, and job shadowing. As entry-level opportunities are reshaped and employers report that graduates often lack critical workplace skills, WIL is increasingly important. They are important for businesses to develop ready talent, for learners to have the skills to thrive and grow in the workplace, and for education to keep up with a fast-moving labor market where curriculum updates alone cannot keep pace. These experiences not only equip learners with quality, hands-on training but also help employers reduce onboarding time and strengthen their early talent

pipelines. WIL is critical for learners to translate the knowledge they acquired in an academic setting into a workplace context. Together, business and education can co-create WIL opportunities that serve a single student or scale to reach many. These partnerships can be short-term or evolve into multi-year engagements, depending on mutual goals and capacity. Many definitions of quality WIL exist, including fair compensation to ensure broadened access and allow businesses to reach the entire talent pool, mentorship, and formal onboarding. If a business is unable to provide compensation, institutions should explore offering academic credit to the learner. Funding may be available to offset the cost of paid experiences, and local workforce intermediaries can be valuable partners in identifying and accessing these resources.

Tools, Templates, and Resources

FOR STRATEGIC LEADERS / FACULTY & EXTERNALLY FACING STAFF



TOOL OR TEMPLATE NAME	TYPE OF RESOURCE	DESCRIPTION AND HOW TO USE	PAGE #
Business Partnership Readiness Resources			
BHEF Assessment	Resource	BHEF has created tools for assessment and planning to help higher education systems, public and private colleges and universities, and community and technical colleges strengthen their approaches to industry partnership. Focused on various partnership modalities, from upskilling and customized training, work-integrated learning, and credential development, this resource helps leadership teams build the foundational culture, resources, structure, and processes to establish and sustain meaningful employer partnerships. To learn more about accessing and using the Industry Partnership Assessment, contact our team at info@bhef.com	
Marketing Yourself as a Partnership Ready Institution			
How to Partner with Us Pitch Deck Checklist	Resource	Engage new or prospective business partners Key Components: - Information to include in a pitch deck - Tips to ensure the message is clear and compelling When and How to Use It: - Use the checklist to build/refine a partnership pitch deck - Support introductory meetings - Share as a follow-up to reinforce conversations and maintain momentum with partners	18
How to Partner with Us One-Pager	Template	Introduce partnership opportunities to new, prospective, or existing business partners Key Components: - Customizable template to provide a concise overview of partnership activities, expected levels of business partner commitment, and intended outcomes When and How to Use It: - Tailor the template with branding, examples of partnership opportunities, and details such as potential timeline to startup - Share with business partners to help them indicate which activities they may be interested in learning more about - Intended to be an interest or intake form—not a formal commitment—to gauge a partner’s capacity and priorities	20

TOOL OR TEMPLATE NAME	TYPE OF RESOURCE	DESCRIPTION AND HOW TO USE	PAGE #
Templates and Meeting Resources			
Business Partner Conversation and Follow-up Guide	Resource and Template	Conduct productive 1:1 or small group meetings with business partners Key Components: • Practical tips for leading listening-focused conversations, assessing workforce needs and partnership capacity, and identifying meaningful opportunities for collaboration • Guidance for thoughtful follow-up When and How to Use It: • Use during introductory or early scoping conversations with potential partners. • Use in ongoing partnership meetings to discuss what is working and where collaboration could expand	21
Advisory Committee Invitation Email Template	Template	Invite new partners to join an advisory committee Key Components: Sample invitation language When and How to Use It: Customize with branding, details, goals, and commitment requirements	23
Business Cold-Call Email Template	Template	Invite prospective business partners to engage in one or more partnership activities Key Components: Sample cold call email template When and How to Use It: • Include a point of contact • Add short summaries or examples of successful existing partnerships to encourage co-opetition • Attach the "How to Partner with Us One-Pager" to serve as an intake form to gain contacts and gauge interest from the prospective partner	24
Industry Roundtable Agenda Template	Template	Engage business leaders from a particular sector for a roundtable discussion Key Components: Industry Roundtable Agenda Template When and How to Use It: • Create a space for leaders from a particular sector to speak candidly about their current/expected talent needs as well as share examples of how they are currently working with higher education partners • Use this template to set a compelling external agenda for a business-led roundtable	25
Industry Roundtable Invitation and Follow-up Email Template	Template	Invite business leaders from a particular sector for a roundtable discussion Key Components: Industry Roundtable invite and follow-up template When and How to Use It: Tailor these communications with sector-specific details, as well as goals and priorities for convening local business leaders	26

How to Partner with Us Pitch Deck Checklist

This checklist helps institutions engage new or prospective business partners by outlining key information to include and tips for delivering a clear, compelling message. A pitch deck can support introductory meetings or serve as a follow-up resource to reinforce discussions. Institutions can use this checklist to create their own pitch deck or evaluate an existing one. This is a guide for the information to have prepared for conversations with business partners, not something to use in full during a meeting. Avoid overwhelming the business with too much information. Use it to shape your verbal pitch and pull relevant elements to share as needed. See the Business Partner Conversation and Follow-up Guide for tips on leading employer listening sessions.

CATEGORY	BEST PRACTICE
Institutional Overview (1-2 Slides)	Provide a brief overview of the institution. Who you are, who you serve, what you do best, and why it matters to business. This can include: • Mission • Location and reach • Learners enrolled and growth • Key programs or focus areas aligned to high-demand regional industries • Forecasting or key priorities ahead (e.g., goal for every IT and computer science program completer to have a work-based learning experience upon completion) Keep this concise and provide a high-level overview of what is important to the institution.
Why Partnership Matters (1 Slide)	Explain the shared challenge with general statistics and labor market data for your shared region. This may include: • Changing skill needs (example: 63% of employers report skill gaps as a major barrier to business transformation over the 2025-2030 period, World Economic Forum Future of Jobs Report 2025) • Demographic shifts for higher education • Incoming AI disruption (example: AI skills carry a real wage premium, 28% premium in median advertised salary in job postings with at least one AI skill compared to similar roles without AI, Lightcast Beyond the Buzz) Position partnership as a solution to business' most pressing talent needs and future talent needs.
History of Impact (1-3 Slides)	Insert case studies (one slide per case study) with examples of previous or current partnerships with business to serve as proof points. Be sure to include the following: • Problem you solved together • One sentence describing the solution you created together • A few sentences about the approach or partnership activity that enabled the solution to be built: What were the roles and responsibilities of each partner? What was the timing like? • Outcomes or student success stories • If available, include a quote from the business partner
ROI for Business Partners (1 Slide)	Brief overview of partnership opportunities framed with the business outcome in mind. <u>Example content:</u> • Talent Development and Curriculum Alignment: Streamline talent development by influencing curriculum and credential design to ensure graduates and current employees are trained with the skills, tools, and technology relevant to your workforce • Recruitment and Pipeline Building: Gain access to job-ready graduates, develop efficient recruitment pathways that reduce time and costs of onboarding, get engagement early with regional talent to increase brand visibility • Enhance Regional Innovation and Institutional Capacity: Increase brand visibility and goodwill, enhance long-term innovation and growth in the region, develop better prepared graduates trained by faculty who understand current industry needs and on tools, systems, and technologies used in the workplace Customize with additional proven outcomes from partnerships based on your institution's strengths.

How to Partner with Us Pitch Deck Checklist

PAGE 2 OF 2

CATEGORY	BEST PRACTICE
Partnership Activities (1-3 Slides)	Brief overview of partnership activities for each business outcome. Do not include every single activity, but a general list is good to have on hand in case a business partner asks about potential activities. <u>Example content:</u> Talent Development and Curriculum Alignment: - Upskilling and Reskilling: Support current employees by providing short courses or credentials to build new competencies aligned to your needs. Intensity: Low – High - Curriculum Co-design: Co-develop new programs, update existing curriculum, or modularize existing content to align with emerging needs. Intensity: Low - High - Advisory Committees: Engage in formal advisory boards to inform program design, curriculum updates, equipment purchases, and skill prioritization. Intensity: Low - Joint Grant Applications, Braided Funding, and Innovation Pilots: Pursue funding together to pilot new models, tech adoption, or other workforce solutions. Intensity: High
Partnership Stakeholder Roles (1 Slide)	Identify the roles and responsibilities for each stakeholder, including institutional roles and responsibilities. <u>Example content:</u> Business Partner: - Designate a staff lead or subject matter expert point of contact for partnership - Advise on trends - Commit to one or more partnership activities - Share data on outcomes - Engage in marketing programs and outcomes Business Champion: - Dedicated business partner with proof points - Designate senior executive, staff lead and subject matter expert - Endorse regional industry-driven action plan with targets - Committed to advancing mission of institution - Chair meetings as “face” of industry roundtables - Recruit new business partners [Insert Institution]: - Designate staff point of contact to facilitate partnership activities, set expectations, and project manager - Design and deliver programs - Integrate business feedback - Recruit and support learners - Lead in marketing programs and outcomes Community Partners, Intermediaries: - Staff champions for meetings/convenings - Provide capacity building, consulting, expertise, and facilitation of partnerships - Oversee state or regional priorities
Next Steps (1 Slide)	Include any next steps and the contact information for the institution's partnership point of contact. Content may include: Next Steps: - Review partnership activity opportunities - Select activity and designate point of contact at your company - Partnerships point of contact information to begin conversations

Recommendation: Keep information quick and concise. Use checklists or short, clear descriptions instead of long paragraphs. Whenever possible, add visuals, especially in the history of impact section.

How to Partner with Us One Pager

[INSERT LOGO]

[Partnership Point of Contact name]
[email]
[phone]

[Higher Education Institution Name]

How to Partner with Us

Company Name:

Primary Point of Contact Information:

Secondary Point of Contact Information:

Partnership Activity Opportunities:

ACTIVITY	PROPOSED OUTCOME	BUSINESS PARTNER COMMITMENT	INTENSITY
Skills Alignment			
Upskilling and Reskilling	Support current employees by providing short courses or credentials to build new competencies aligned to your needs.	Time, financial investment, or facilities	Low-High
Curriculum Co-Design	Co-develop new programs, update existing curriculum, or modularize existing content to align with emerging needs.	Time, expertise, possible funding	Low-High
Advisory Committees	Inform program design, curriculum updates, equipment purchases, and skill prioritization.	Time	Low
Joint Grants, Braided Funding, or Pilots	Pursue funding together to pilot new models, tech adoption, or new solution.	Time, financial investment	High
Recruitment and Pipeline Building			
Job Board	Post jobs on Handshake for free.	Minimal time	Low
On-Site Visits	Increase industry visibility on campus through networking nights, guest speaker series, Q&A sessions, and classroom visits.	Time	Low
Formal Hiring Pilots	Structure a pilot program offering guaranteed interviews or streamlined hiring processes for qualified graduates.	Time, hiring commitment	Medium
Resume Reviews or Guaranteed Interviews	Provide resume reviews or guarantee learners an interview for a particular role or work-integrated learning experience. This does not require a commitment to hire the learner.	Time	Low
Career Fairs	Engage in organized career fairs to network with students on campus.	Time, booth/sponsorship	Low
Work-Integrated Learning (WIL)	Co-create WIL opportunities that serve a single student or scale to reach many. These partnerships can be short-term or evolve into multi-year engagements. Ex: Internship, micro-internship, project-based learning (provide data sets or real-world problems), capstone project, job shadowing, mentoring	Time, supervision, potential pay	Medium-High
Industry Challenges and Competitions	Engage students in hackathons, case comps, innovation challenges.	Time, project design	Medium-High
Apprenticeships	Earn-and-learn model leading to long-term hires.	Paid roles, supervision, instruction	High
Enhance Regional Innovation & Capacity			
Equipment/Software Donations	Contribute tools, software, training equipment, or funding/scholarships to increase hands-on learning and ensure alignment with workplace technology.	Equipment, funding, scholarships	Medium
Faculty Externships	Offer faculty opportunities to spend time in industry settings to remain current on skills and technologies. Employers may also lead workshops or provide training for faculty.	Time, facilities, training	High
Thought Leadership	Collaborate on research, blogs, and case studies or joint speaking engagements to shape regional and national workforce policy and share success stories.	Time, expertise	Medium

What questions, comments, or concerns do you have?

What additional information would be helpful in moving forward?

Business Partner Conversation and Follow-up Guide

In 1:1 or small group conversations with business partners, you do not need to have all the answers, nor be an expert in their industry. Approach the discussion with curiosity and a willingness to learn. Focus on understanding their talent challenges, structural barriers, and both current and future workforce needs. Use thoughtful questions to help you explore where collaboration could meaningfully address challenges. You do not need to develop solutions in the moment. Effective partnership is iterative and co-designed.

AGENDA TEMPLATE

AGENDA ITEM	INTERNAL CONVERSATION GUIDE
Introductions	- Facilitate introductions - Share a brief overview of the purpose of the conversation. Frame the discussion around a shared goal—strengthening alignment between your programs and their talent needs. - Include any relevant information about your institution: who you serve, what you do best, and any strategic priorities relevant to the business partner's industry.
Listening Session	Example Discussion Questions: - What trends or economic shifts are having the biggest impact on your organization right now? - Where are you facing the greatest barriers when it comes to talent: attracting applicants, finding candidates with the right skills, retention, upskilling, or something else? - Are there particular roles or skill areas where you consistently see gaps? - When you bring in early career hires, where do they typically need the most development? - How are you approaching training or upskilling for your current workforce? - If you've partnered with higher education before, what worked well—and what could have been stronger?
Engagement Opportunities	- Briefly reflect back what you heard during the listening session to confirm your understanding of their priorities and challenges. - Avoid overwhelming the partner with multiple asks or overly prescriptive suggestions. Example Discussion Questions: - What questions, comments, or concerns do you have? - What additional information would be helpful from us for moving forward? - What level of engagement feels realistic for your organization right now? If the business partner expresses interest in collaborating and time allows, begin discussing potential next steps. - Briefly share one or two examples of successful partnerships, highlighting the challenge addressed, the co-created solution, and the outcomes to demonstrate the value of partnering with your institution. - At a high level, reference a range of partnership opportunities based on themes from the discussion. - Avoid proposing a specific solution; instead, illustrate the spectrum of engagement options, from low touch to more involved
Next Steps	- Let the partner know you will follow up with a small number of tailored partnership ideas based on what you heard during the discussion. - Provide the appropriate point of contact

Business Partner Conversation and Follow-up Guide

PAGE 2 OF 2

After the conversation, reflect on what you heard and consider potential collaboration opportunities based on:

- Talent needs: industry sector, roles/occupations, priority skills/tools, and career level
- Business capacity to engage: time, resources, and decision-making authority
- Institutional resources, program capacity, and strengths

In your follow-up, share a few ideas that respond directly to their priorities and invite their input. From there, schedule a follow-up conversation to refine the approach together and identify practical next steps.

FOLLOW-UP TEMPLATE

Subject: Follow-Up: Partnership Opportunities with [Insert Institution Name]

Dear [Name],

Thank you again for taking the time to meet with us. We appreciated the opportunity to learn more about your current priorities and talent challenges.

As a brief recap, we heard that [insert concise summary: e.g., you are working to upskill current production workers and face challenges finding time to take employees off the floor for retraining]. Based on our conversation, we see a few potential starting points:

1. [Example: Hosting a targeted career fair with manufacturing students in dual enrollment programs]
2. [Example: Joining our program advisory committee to provide input on curriculum and emerging skill needs]
3. [Example: Exploring a pilot upskilling workshop or customized training module]

These ideas are just a starting point. We are eager to collaborate on identifying an opportunity that feels manageable for your team while meaningfully addressing your priorities. If you are interested in seeing additional partnership activity examples, I've attached our "How to Partner with Us" one-pager with options that we can tailor to your needs.

Let's reconnect in the coming weeks to explore potential next steps. Feel free to reach out to me if you have any questions in the meantime.

Best,
[Name]
[Title]

Advisory Committee Email Invitation Template

Subject: Shape the Future Workforce in [Your Region]: Join the [Insert Discipline and College] Advisory Committee

Dear [Prospective Member Name],

I am pleased to invite you to become a member of the [Insert Institution Name and Discipline] Advisory Committee for [time period].

In today's rapidly changing economy, [College Name] is committed to staying closely aligned with local industry needs. Our goal is to remain at the forefront of emerging technologies and equipment while preparing learners with the skills your company requires. To achieve this, we depend on candid feedback and strong partnerships with leaders like you.

As a member of the Advisory Committee, you will have the opportunity to:

1. Access a pipeline of hyper-local talent equipped with industry-relevant skills.
2. Impact education and strengthen your local economy.
3. Enhance your professional profile by serving on an advisory board.
4. Expand your peer network and connect with other local businesses on shared challenges and opportunities.
5. Advise [College Name] on aligning programs with current and future workforce needs.

Details: Meetings will be held [insert cadence, timeframe, and approximate duration of each meeting].

Thank you for considering this invitation to join the [insert discipline] Advisory Committee. **Please let me know your ability to participate by [insert date].** [Insert partnership point of contact], cc'd, will serve as your primary point of contact for employer partnerships at [College Name] and can answer any questions you may have.

Best,

[President of the Institution Name]

Recommendations:

Send invitations from your institution's president. This can increase visibility, demonstrate institutional commitment, and increase likelihood of employers to engage. Put the advisory committee email on college letterhead to signal officiality.

Add a line to email signatures at the college: Interested in exploring a partnership with [College Name]? Connect with our partnership point of contact: [Name, Title, Email, Phone]

Business Cold-Call Email Template

Subject: President [Insert President's Name] Invites You to Explore Partnership Opportunities with [Insert Institution's Name]

Dear [Employer Contact],

At [college name], we are committed to preparing students for the workforce of tomorrow while helping employers like you address pressing talent challenges. [President of the institution] would like to **invite you to explore partnership opportunities with us**. We would love to schedule a brief call with our [partnership point of contact] to learn more about your workforce needs and discuss ways we can collaborate. Attached you will find our "How to Partner with Us" one-pager which outlines a menu of opportunities ranging from guest speaking or a site visit to deeper collaborations like curriculum co-design or customized training programs.

[Partnership point of contact] (cc'd) will serve as your primary point of contact for industry partnerships at [college name] and would be happy to connect directly to discuss opportunities.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Best,
[Name]
[Title]

Recommendations:

Send a cold-call invitation on behalf of your institution's president. Doing so can increase visibility, demonstrate institutional commitment, and increase likelihood of businesses to engage.

The partnership point of contact should follow-up directly to this email with an introduction and proposed meeting dates/times about two weeks out.

Add a line to email signatures at the college: Interested in exploring a partnership with [college name]? Connect with our partnership point of contact: [Name, Title, Email, Phone]

Industry Roundtable Agenda Template

[Insert Institution Logo] [Insert Industry Champion Logo] [Insert Community Partner Logo]

[Insert Industry] Industry Roundtable Agenda

[Insert Date and Time] (90 to 120 minutes)

[Insert Venue and Address]

[Insert Company and Community Partner Names] and [Insert Institution] [Insert Industry] Industry Roundtable

Together, we are strengthening [insert region]'s workforce by bringing together regional higher education institutions, local businesses, and intermediaries to explore opportunities, challenges, and strategies to strengthen our region's [insert industry] talent pipeline.

This roundtable discussion will focus on [insert 2–3 focus areas, e.g., partnership opportunities, validate in-demand skills and occupations, identifying talent challenges in the region].

AGENDA

[Insert time, 30 minutes]	Networking
[Insert time, 15 minutes]	Welcome, Overview, and Introductions [Name Title Organization] [Name Title Organization] [Name Title Organization] [Name Title Organization]
[Insert time, 15 minutes]	Regional Labor Market and Economic Update [Name Title Organization]
[Insert time, 50 minutes]	Business Roundtable Discussion: [Insert Industry] Labor Market Needs and Opportunities [Name Title Organization]
[Insert time, 5 minutes]	Closing, Commitments, and Next Steps [Name Title Organization] [Name Title Organization]

Recommendations:

Begin the roundtable with short introductions from each co-host, highlighting who they are and why their organization is engaged in this important work. Start with the representative from the company champion. Whenever possible, have the welcome and introductions delivered by senior leaders, such as a college president, the CEO of a regional company, or a C-suite/HR executive from a larger employer. This order sets the tone, underscores the importance of the partnership, and signals strong commitment from both education and industry.

Next, share a 10–15 minute snapshot of regional industry demand and talent supply to set the stage and spark discussion. This overview can be shared by a community partner or someone from the college.

Next, engage business representatives in a roundtable discussion. Use live polling tools to capture insights on top occupations, in-demand skills, desired experience levels, and hiring projections. After each polling question, have a facilitator guide conversation among the businesses. For better collaboration, arrange seating in an arch or U-shape to encourage open dialogue.

Wrap up the meeting by securing commitments to partners and outlining tangible next steps. For example, let participants know you will follow up to explore partnership opportunities. You can also provide a form for participants to share additional insights and contact information they may not have offered during the discussion.

Industry Roundtable Email Invitation and Follow-Up Template

INVITATION TEMPLATE

Subject: [Insert Company, Community Partner, or Your Institution's Name] Invites You to Join [Insert Industry] Industry Roundtable on [Insert Date and Location].

[Insert Your Institution's Name]: [Insert Industry] Industry Roundtable on [Insert Date and Location]

We are excited to invite you to participate in an upcoming [insert industry] Roundtable hosted by [insert college name and partners] on [insert date and location]. This conversation will bring together business leaders, educators, and community partners to explore opportunities, challenges, and strategies to strengthen our region's [insert industry] talent pipeline. This roundtable discussion will focus on [insert 2–3 focus areas, e.g., partnership opportunities, validate in-demand skills and occupations, identifying talent challenges in the region].

By participating in this roundtable, you will have the opportunity to share insights on current and future workforce needs, connect with other businesses on shared concerns and opportunities, and inform higher education institutions' successful alignment with workforce needs in the region.

We hope that your company will join as we convene to advance this important work.

Please RSVP [Insert RSVP Form] by [Insert Date].

Thank you for your consideration and leadership on workforce issues. We look forward to seeing you on [insert date].

Sincerely,

[Insert Name of Executive at Company, Community Partner, or Your Institution]

Recommendations:

If you have an industry partner who is a champion of the work, ask them to co-invite participants or even send the invitation themselves. An email that reads "X Company Invites You" can go a long way in getting industry buy-in through brand recognition and healthy competition among companies.

If you are partnering with a community organization such as a workforce board or chamber of commerce, you can co-brand or co-send the invitation to broaden reach.

Example:

This discussion will focus on how the state's new funding formula for community colleges established by House Bill 8 (HB8) impacts businesses, colleges, individuals and the broader community. The legislation offers a new funding model for the state's community colleges that is based on awarding degrees, certificates, and credentials of value that are aligned with the changing needs of employers and workers. The discussion will inform the community college approach to developing new industry-aligned manufacturing credentialing, hiring, and the creation of partnerships to strengthen the workforce. By participating in this roundtable, you will have the opportunity to share insights on current and future workforce needs, connect with other businesses on shared concerns and opportunities, and inform your community colleges' successful implementation of the legislation and alignment with manufacturing workforce needs in the region.

Industry Roundtable Email Invitation and Follow-Up Template

PAGE 2 OF 2

FOLLOW-UP TEMPLATE

Subject: [Follow-Up: [Insert Industry] Industry Roundtable with [Insert Institution Name]]

Dear [Contact Name],

I hope this message finds you well. Thank you for your participation in our [insert industry] Industry Roundtable discussion on [insert date]. It was incredible to hear from you and other local business and industry leaders about your hiring and skills needs.

We are excited to build on the energy in the room. Attached is our **"How to Partner with Us" one-pager** which outlines partnership activities that range from low-touch opportunities, such as guest speaking or hosting a site visit, to high-engagement collaborations like co-designing curriculum or developing customized training.

To continue the conversation, we'd love to schedule a meeting with you to discuss the following:

- 1. Reactions and key takeaways:** What insights stood out to you from the other employers in the room? Were there any specific potential demand or emerging occupations, career pathways, or partnerships that piqued your interest?
- 2. How we can support:** What talent challenges does your organization face today and what talent challenges do you anticipate in the next five years? Are there partnership activities that you would be interested in collaborating on?

I will serve as your primary point of contact for employer partnerships at [insert college name]. Please let me know your availability for the following dates and times over the next few weeks:

[Insert meeting time/date options]

Best,
[Name]
[Title]

Recommendations: Send follow-up from partnership point of contact. If capacity is available, send individual follow-up to each company who attended the roundtable discussion.

Add a line to email signatures at the college: Interested in exploring a partnership with [College Name]? Connect with our partnership point of contact: [Name, Title, Email, Phone]

Common Ways to Engage and Related Terms

FOR STRATEGIC LEADERS / FACULTY & EXTERNALLY FACING STAFF



Talent Development: Use this common business term to describe activities like curriculum alignment or co-designing programs.

RECOMMENDATION: Utilize language that resonates with business, one that focuses on the outcome and impact of the proposed activity or engagement.

SKILLS ALIGNMENT

Upskilling and Reskilling: Support incumbent workers by providing short courses or credentials to build new competencies aligned with business needs.

RECOMMENDATION: Design coursework that is accessible to adult learners by offering flexible formats (asynchronous and hybrid) and multilingual options. Where possible, integrate stackable and industry-recognized credentials aligned with in-demand skills.

Curriculum Co-Design: Co-develop new programs, update existing curriculum, or modularize existing content to align with emerging business needs.

RECOMMENDATION: Balance the specific talent needs of your business partner(s) with the broader demands of the regional industry.

Advisory Committees: Engage business leaders in formal advisory boards to inform program design, curriculum updates, equipment purchases, and skill prioritization.

RECOMMENDATION: Leverage advisory-board relationships to deepen business engagement.

Joint Grant Applications, Braided Funding: Pursue funding together to pilot new models, tech adoption, or other workforce solutions.

RECOMMENDATION: Use funding strategically to offset costs that may create barriers to business participation (equipment, wages, or training expenses) and to address institutional capacity constraints.

Innovation Pilots: Innovate custom training program that includes skills alignment and development as well as hiring.

RECOMMENDATION: Focus an innovation pilot to engage a specific learner population that is underserved.

Common Ways to Engage and Related Terms

REGIONAL AND INDUSTRY INNOVATION, ECONOMIC GROWTH, AND TALENT MOBILITY

Equipment, Software, and Resource Donations: Invite businesses to contribute tools, software, training equipment, or funding to increase hands-on learning and ensure alignment with workplace technology.

Faculty Externships and Professional Development: Offer faculty opportunities to spend time in industry settings to remain current on skills and technologies. Businesses may also lead workshops or provide training for faculty.

Thought Leadership and Advocacy: Collaborate on research, blogs and case studies, or joint speaking engagements to shape regional and national workforce policy and share success stories.

RECOMMENDATION: Highlight partnership success stories to elevate business brand visibility, build goodwill, and encourage healthy competition among businesses.

BUILDING A STRONG, SUSTAINABLE TALENT PIPELINE

Job Board: Utilize online platforms and job matching boards for business partners to post their jobs to for free.

RECOMMENDATION: Encourage learners to search for jobs through the database.

On-Site Visits: Increase industry visibility on campus through networking nights, guest speaker series, Q&A sessions, and classroom visits.

RECOMMENDATION: Activate alumni as champions to encourage business engagement. This entry point is accessible for businesses that may not be ready to commit to formal hiring targets or structured partnerships.

Formal Hiring Pilots: Offer a structured pilot program that offers resume reviews, guarantees interviews, or streamlines hiring processes for qualified graduates.

RECOMMENDATION: Prioritize engagement with businesses planning to hire at scale, such as those expanding facilities or opening new locations.

Career Fairs: Organize industry-wide career fairs for learners and business to network on, or off, campus.

RECOMMENDATION: If a business is unable to make a formal hiring commitment, encourage participation through lower-lift engagement opportunities like this.

Job Shadowing: Collaborate on a short-term experience in which learners observe professionals in the workplace to gain insights into daily tasks, industry expectations, and career pathways. Job shadowing is often used as an introductory experience for learners exploring career options.

Common Ways to Engage and Related Terms

BUILDING A STRONG, SUSTAINABLE TALENT PIPELINE

Internship: Ask business to offer a structured, intermediate-term (2-4 months) work experience that complements academic learnings and provides learners with hands-on exposure to a profession or industry. Internships offer learners the opportunity to develop industry-specific skills, build professional networks, and gain real-world experience. For internship experiences, projects and tasks are primarily decided, developed, and run by the business and opportunities often exist siloed, though complementary to academic learning.

RECOMMENDATION: To ensure a high-quality learning experience and to alleviate potential barrier of entry strains, internships are often paid.

Micro-Internship: Ask business to host a short-term, project-based experience where learners complete real-world assignments for business over a few days or weeks. Micro-internships offer flexibility, allowing learners to engage in meaningful work without the full commitment of a traditional internship. These internships are particularly beneficial for learners who might not be ready for a full internship experience to get workplace exposure. They also serve as a lower lift for businesses as they do not have to commit as much time or resources to training and mentoring the intern.

RECOMMENDATION: To ensure a high-quality learning experience, micro-internships are often paid.

Project-Based Learning (PBL): Offer an experiential learning model where learners collaborate on real-world projects, in partnership with a business. These projects can be embedded within a credit-bearing course, capstone experience, or extracurricular program. PBL allows learners who may not have time for an internship to apply classroom knowledge to solve real-world business challenges. In exchange, businesses receive varied approaches to problem-solving as well as an additional touchpoint to learners and faculty.

RECOMMENDATION: Close the feedback loop with business partners by sharing key learnings and hosting structured pitch sessions that allow learners to showcase their solutions.

Capstone project: Offer a credit-bearing, culminating experience, typically offered in a student's final year of college, to develop a project that integrates and applies what they have learned, or a real-world problem.

RECOMMENDATION: Business partners can serve as co-supervisors or mentors on capstone projects.

Common Ways to Engage and Related Terms

BUILDING A STRONG, SUSTAINABLE TALENT PIPELINE

Business-Sponsored Challenges and Competitions: Create events where learners participate in business sponsored case competitions, hackathons, or innovation challenges that simulate real-world business problems. These experiences allow learners to develop problem-solving skills, network with professionals, and showcase their talents to potential businesses.

Apprenticeship: Develop an earn-and-learn model that is business driven and combines paid, on-the-job training with related training and instruction. It can be registered or not registered and usually leads to a placement opportunity.

RECOMMENDATION: Utilize state and federal funding to offset costs.

Co-ops: Build formal programs that integrate alternating or parallel periods of academic study and paid, full-time work experience with an employer, which can be multi-term and progressive.



REFERENCES

- 1 Blochinger, S., Williams, C., Myers, M., Crowley, S., & Fox, K. (2024). *Forging partnerships to align education and industry for the workforce of Tomorrow*. BHEF. <https://www.bhef.com/publications/forging-partnerships-to-align-education-and-industry-for-the-workforce-of-tomorrow>
- 2 Community College Faqs. Community College Research Center. (n.d.). <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/community-college-faqs.html>
- 3 *Community College Month: April 2024*. United States Census Bureau. (2024, April 16). <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/stories/community-college-month.html>
- 4 Fink, J. (2024, November 17). *How many students are taking dual enrollment courses in high school? New National, state, and college-level data*. Community College Research Center. <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/easyblog/how-many-students-are-taking-dual-enrollment-courses-in-high-school-new-national-state-and-college-level-data.html>
- 5 Conzelmann, Johnathan G., Steven W. Hemelt, Brad Hershbein, Shawn Martin, Andrew Simon, and Kevin M. Stange. 2023. "New Data Show How Far Graduates Move from Their College, and Why It Matters." Policy and Research Brief. Kalamazoo, MI: W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research. <https://doi.org/10.17848/pb2023-64>
- 6 San Jacinto College. (n.d.). Center for Petrochemical Energy and Technology. <https://www.sanjac.edu/information-for/business-partners/cpet/>
- 7 *Texas Workforce Partnership initiative: The EY-Alamo Colleges District Hiring Pilot*. Business Roundtable. (n.d.). <https://www.businessroundtable.org/texas-workforce-partnership-initiative-the-ey-alamo-colleges-district-hiring-pilot>
- 8 *Connecticut Tech Talent Accelerator: Partnerships Closing the Tech Skills Gap*. Business-Higher Education Forum. (2024). <https://www.bhef.com/techtalentaccelerator>
- 9 *Hudson County Community College and Eastern Millwork create a transformative apprenticeship program*. Business-Higher Education Forum. (n.d.). <https://www.bhef.com/case-study/hudson-county-community-college-eastern-millwork>

AUTHORS

Madison Myers, Manager of Workforce Partnerships, Business-Higher Education Forum

Kelle Kieschnick, Vice President of Policy, Texas Business Leadership Council

Jennifer Thornton, SVP and Chief Program Officer, Business-Higher Education Forum

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This playbook and its collection of best practices were made possible by the Trellis Foundation and the JPMorgan Chase Foundation for its support of the Workforce Partnership Initiative Texas.

We also thank the Workforce Partnership Initiative Texas partners for their leadership and for providing detailed information and insights, including Business Roundtable, Texas Business Leadership Council, and Texas Association of Community Colleges through the Texas Success Center. The findings and conclusions contained within this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of our partners.

We are also appreciative of the following individuals who participated in the review process, provided critical insights, and produced fruitful partnerships through their everyday work, including:

- **Lori Margolin**, Vice President of Strategic Initiatives, Continuing Education, and Workforce Development, Hudson County Community College
- **Kaleb Warnock**, CEO & Founder, FloWar Business Management
- **Brenda S. Kays**, Ed.D., President Emeritus Kilgore College/Senior Advisor Texas Success Center
- **Supriyo Ray**, Associate Professor, Department of Natural Science, Bowie State University



One Dupont Circle, Suite 360, Washington, DC 20036

☎ 202.367.1189 | ✉ info@bhef.com | 🌐 www.bhef.com



816 Congress Ave., Suite 990, Austin, TX 78701

☎ 512.481.0525 | ✉ kkieschnick@txblc.org | 🌐 txblc.org