

ENGAGING EMPLOYERS to Support Adult Career Pathways Programs



Issue Brief

Introduction

Employer engagement in Adult Career Pathways (ACP) programs can strengthen the efforts of adult educators to help learners attain secondary credentials, transition to postsecondary programs, achieve industry credentials, and secure family-sustaining employment. Whether employer contributions result in the development of workplace relevant curriculum, career awareness activities, work-based learning opportunities, or in-kind support for equipment and other resources, employer engagement is essential for ACP programs. Employers can help ensure programs are responsive to the needs of local industry, while providing adult learners the relevant workplace context and foundational skills they must master to succeed along a career pathway. Interfacing with adult learners in the classroom on a daily basis, teachers are well positioned to work with employers toward the goal of translating workplace skills into learning objectives that can be taught within a career pathways context. This brief offers practical strategies on engaging employers and building business-education partnerships to support ACP programs, and highlights promising examples from adult education providers in three states.

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Benefits of Partnering

Engaging employers to support ACP programs can benefit all stakeholders involved – employers, educators, and learners. This section outlines employer roles in the business-education partnership and a list of benefits that employers can contribute to ACP programs.

Engaged employers can:

- **Participate in needs assessments** – Collecting local labor market information and identifying broad industry needs are the first steps for educators when considering which employers to engage in a partnership. Engage employers in a preliminary discussion on the following:
 - What industries in the community need more skilled workers?
 - What are the hiring needs of the employers in those industries?
 - What skills are lacking among adults in the available local workforce?
- **Set standards and assist with the design of programs of study** – Employers can share specific information about new hire expectations to inform the modification or creation of curricula to address employer needs.
- **Provide worksite and other work-based learning experiences** – Employers can provide an environment for learning outside of the classroom. Hands-on learning experiences that connect workplace applications to course content are important for learners and teachers.
- **Provide and/or support certifications** – Employers and/or their industry associations may be able to certify that an individual has the knowledge and skills needed for employment. Earning an industry or employer-recognized credential is an important step learners can build upon as they advance in their career pathway.
- **Leverage connections to suppliers and other businesses** – Most employers have strong connections to other businesses that can extend the partnership network, benefitting learners, educators, and employers.

Although employers may have altruistic or philanthropic motivations, their primary goal for establishing business-education partnerships is to close the gap between the number of individuals they currently employ and the number they would employ if skilled workers were available. For employers, time is of the essence to find a qualified workforce, access education and training programs that support their needs, and lower their costs for recruitment and training. In discussions with employers, adult educators should point out how a new partnership can effectively address these concerns, ultimately achieving the win-win situation both parties desire. Consequently, educators should not hesitate to take the first step in engaging employers. Many employers in the community may never have been asked to become involved in a business-education partnership for adult learners, and others may have had an interest in partnering but are unaware of which institution or organization to contact to get started. In the next section, the brief takes a look at examples from communities in Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Illinois, whose business-education partnership experiences show promise and are yielding tangible benefits for ACP program stakeholders.

Promising Practices

Pennsylvania's Statewide Approach to Adult Career Pathways

Pennsylvania's state plan for ACP is the culmination of several state agencies working together to help "equip Pennsylvanians with the core skills that will enable them to succeed as workers, citizens, and family members."¹ A team of leaders from the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) Bureau of Postsecondary and Adult Education and partnering agencies selected 22 adult education providers in eight Workforce Investment Areas to pilot a new initiative for career pathways implementation. The PDE and Penn State University joined forces with the state's Department of Labor and Industry, Department of Community and Economic Development, and local adult education coalitions to support a statewide vision for career pathways.

According to KayLynn Hamilton, Workforce Development Liaison at the Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy at Penn State University, "What stands out most—probably more so than the number—is the variety of types of employers involved and their unique contributions to the providers. Contributions range from curriculum development support, book donations, and job shadowing opportunities to sharing meeting space, authentic materials, and detailed skill requirements for specific jobs. Provider agencies recognize and truly value the participation of employers. Employer engagement is greatly expanding the types of supports students can access."

Rather than starting partnerships from scratch, program managers are reaching out to employers already engaged with their local Workforce Investment Boards and One-Stops, working through established workforce relationships to save both time and resources. This also helps them "dive right in" to conversations with employers that can impact curriculum decisions, career awareness activities, and career pathways selection for learners.

In the southwestern part of the state, Three Rivers Workforce Investment Area and Goodwill have partnered to offer a six-week program on medical career pathways focused on topics and skill-building activities that will enhance adult learners' opportunities to pursue careers in healthcare. The curriculum integrates academic and workforce

Promising practices in Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Illinois are highlighted here. How is your state engaging employer support for Career Pathways programs?

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— KayLynn Hamilton
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¹ Pennsylvania Department of Education – Postsecondary and Adult Education, Division of Adult Education. (2011). *Pennsylvania career pathways planning guide: Steps toward the vision*. Retrieved from: <http://www.workforce-ks.com/Modules/ShowDocument.aspx?documentid=868>

competencies that local healthcare employers have identified as important for entry-level employee success. When students successfully meet the competencies deemed necessary for employment, Allegheny General Hospital offers job shadowing in several departments. Upon successful program completion, students can transition to the medical certification programs at a partner community college or apply for an entry-level position at one of the employer partners' facilities.

In Lehigh Valley's Career Pathways for Adults initiative, teachers are encouraged to:

- Demonstrate how skills taught in the classroom align with the skill requirements of local jobs;
- Invite employers to participate in a career fair or guest speakers' panel;
- Use career pathways maps as a tool for incorporating career awareness and development in the classroom to build reading comprehension, vocabulary development, and math skills;
- Engage students in research on local labor market trends; and
- Take an incremental approach when creating lesson plans. First, ensure students have the basic foundational competencies required for the workplace; then, focus on sector-specific topics. With an understanding of the workplace and the targeted industry sector, instruction can then move into occupation-specific topics. This approach will increase awareness of the workplace in general, and then expand awareness to targeted industries and the occupations in-demand within an industry.

Across the state, Pennsylvania's career pathways plan encourages adult educators engaged in ACP to work with employers to contextualize curriculum to meet workforce needs and anticipated industry and occupational trends. Steps in this process can include:

- Correlating job skills to basic academic skills;
- Concentrating instruction on correlated skills;
- Using industry sectors and specific occupations as the context for reading, writing, and math instruction;
- Reviewing curriculum with employers on a consistent basis to ensure authenticity; and
- Making use of workplace materials, problems, and scenarios to provide a motivating context for career pathways instruction.

“PluggedIn VA is a ‘win-win-win.’ It is a ‘win’ for all of the organizations and agencies involved...for employers... and most importantly, for students.”

— Darrell Blankenship
Executive Director
Southwest Virginia
Workforce Investment
Board

“This experience plays a major role in students’ decision-making as they set their goals for further education and careers.”

— Elizabeth McNulty
Instructor
Elgin Community College
Health Care Bridge
program

Southwest Virginia Regional Adult Education

PluggedIn VA is a six-month intensive career pathways program serving lower-skilled adults of all ages who lack a high school credential. Southwest Regional Adult Education and Sykes Enterprises, Inc., a global business process outsourcing company, have formed a partnership which provides organized services for adult learning in three areas: academic preparation, counseling, and mentoring. Program manager Linda Allen says teachers in the program enjoy a high level of employer engagement from the Sykes management team, whose involvement includes hosting planning meetings, serving as curriculum advisors, conducting tours and classes at the company facility, offering mock interviews and part-time on-the-job training during the program's second semester, and offering a guaranteed job interview for those completing the program. Instructor Rebecca Elswick points out the impact of the partnership on students: "I was impressed with how Sykes Enterprises treated the students with respect and encouraged open communication. I believe they are committed to establishing a mutually beneficial relationship by developing a partnership based on trust and a shared interest." Darrell Blankenship, Executive Director, Southwest Virginia Workforce Investment Board, says of the program, "*PluggedIn VA* is a 'win-win-win.' It is a 'win' for all of the organizations and agencies involved because outcomes are perfectly matched to required performance measures. It is a 'win' for employers because the graduates have entry-level or above skills. Finally, and most importantly, it is a 'win' for the students. Where else can someone enter a program and six months later have the opportunity to have achieved a GED®, earned industry recognized credentials – including the nationally recognized Career Readiness Certificate – and up to 29 college credits?"



Illinois' Elgin Community College Health Care Bridge Program

Elgin Community College's Health Care Bridge program was one of 15 sites in Illinois funded by the *Shifting Gears Illinois* initiative. The college's Dean of Adult Education, Peggy Heinrich, shares how the partnership with two hospitals and a nursing home began: "No hard sell was needed to convince the employers to participate. Employer representatives were invited to a kick-off luncheon where they heard about the purpose of the bridge program, participated in brainstorming about the skills needed to enter the health care profession, and identified primary contacts who would work with the college. After the initial meeting, both employer and teacher roles were spelled out in partnership letters to formalize the agreements."



Program instructor Elizabeth McNulty shares that, "The tour of Provena St. Joseph Hospital is always a highlight of our *Introduction to Health Care Professions* class. Students have the opportunity to see the behind-the-scenes workings of a hospital and to speak with different health care professionals about their jobs. This experience plays a major role in students' decision-making as they set their goals for further education and careers. In addition, learning about the hospital's mission and philosophy, and about available job opportunities, allows the students to see St. Joseph as a future employer." According to Dean Heinrich, the participating employers have found the program to be beneficial and rewarding, and the partnership has become the model for all other bridge programs at the college.

Challenges to Creating Effective Partnerships

With clear reasons to partner, it is imperative that more adult education programs which are aimed at improving foundational or basic employment skills engage employers. Out of 500 bridge programs in one survey, only about one-third of the programs had implementation partners from industry or labor organizations, and less than one-fifth received funding from those sources.² More often than not, educators will need to make the first move toward building employer partnerships. When approaching employers about partnering to create career pathway programs for adults, educators need to be prepared for the challenges of bringing together two cultures — business and education — to achieve common goals. Support from program administrators, as well as other partner agencies who have built successful employer relationships, will be important in identifying companies best suited for partnering in the local area and the types of expectations the companies are likely to have. Among the documented challenges for business-education partnerships, ACP programs are most likely to experience the following:

- Garnering a critical mass of support from employers to move from the discussion phase to partnership commitments;
- Finding the right people in partnering companies who have the passion to make things happen and the authority to commit company resources for partnership activities;
- Having both employers and educators articulate their expectations and how they will measure success;
- Finding common ground and developing mutual respect;
- Understanding each other’s needs and “decoding” terminology unfamiliar to the other partner;
- Engaging the right combination of employees who can articulate the skills and workplace competencies needed by entry-level employees; and
- Keeping all partners at the table to maintain momentum.

Numerous sources suggest ways in which adult educators can engage employers in supporting the career pathways pipeline. The final section of the brief provides a checklist of strategies and tips to consider when working with employers to plan, develop, and implement ACP programs.



² These programs provide low-skilled adults with basic skills required to succeed in a postsecondary credentialing or degree program (Alssidt, Goldberg and Klerk, 2010).

Strategies and Tips for Employer Engagement in Adult Career Pathways Programs

Learn the language of business and their needs.

- Research the needs of local employers with respect to hiring needs and skills gaps.
- Identify potential partners based on industry needs and standing employer relationships through existing programs, local workforce investment boards, or other partner agencies.
- Gauge the willingness of employers who need to address skill deficiencies to enter partnerships with adult education programs.

Reach out to CEO or senior-level executives in companies where there is potential for partnering.

- Engage individuals passionate about education with the corporate authority to commit company resources to the partnership.
- Build on existing relationships and establish parameters for the partnership that will enable the group to accomplish mutual goals.
- Schedule an initial meeting of employers interested in pursuing a partnership. Bring preliminary research data or industry analyses to the meeting to demonstrate your understanding of and commitment to addressing the hiring needs of your potential new business partner(s).

Engage employers in program design, curriculum development, and work-based learning.

- Select a career pathway for program development based on market demands.
- Ask employers to identify basic skill requirements, technical/occupational skill requirements, and soft skill/employability competencies of entry-level and incumbent workers in the chosen pathway(s).
- Work alongside employers to review and align existing or develop new curriculum that meets national/state standards to support local job market needs.
- Request authentic workplace materials, scenarios, and examples from employers to assist in contextualizing the instruction.
- Ask employers to identify the credentials they value for occupations in the chosen pathway(s).
- Ask employers to provide work-based learning experiences for adult learners (e.g., job shadowing, internships).

Invite feedback and other support as the program develops.

- Enlist employer partners to participate in the job placement process (e.g., conducting mock and actual interviews, hiring graduates, assisting with job placement at other businesses).
- Ask employers to provide feedback about the success of program participants once they are hired.
- Establish a program revision/evaluation schedule to ensure program content continues to be responsive to changes in the industry.
- Approach employers about providing funding, equipment, or other resources to help reduce barriers to student persistence and completion.

Maintain regular communications.

- Keep employer partners informed about the development of new curricula and program design.
- Promptly respond to correspondences from employer partners and follow through on action items agreed upon by the partnership.
- Recognize employers for their input, support, and guidance as the program matures.
- Collect data to ensure all parties' needs are being met.

Employer engagement facilitated by adult educators can strengthen and expand ACP programs that will enable adult learners, local companies and, ultimately, communities, to prosper.

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