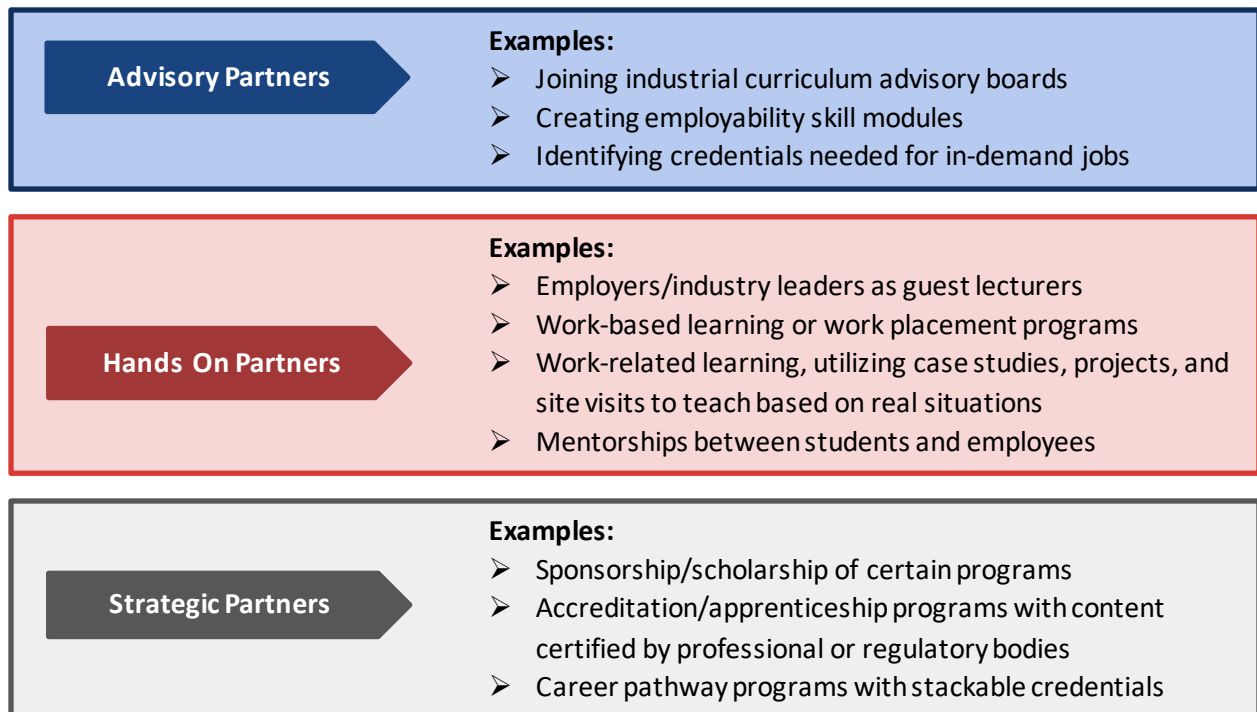


Engaging with Postsecondary Education on Workforce Development

A trained workforce is critical for the success of every business and colleges and universities can offer a pipeline of skilled workers. This brief is designed to introduce ways in which companies and postsecondary educational institutions can engage on workforce development to create a pipeline of potential employees, especially for foreign-owned companies looking to establish business operations in the United States. The brief will highlight some practical key information and best practices for companies seeking to engage with community colleges and universities on workforce based on SelectUSA's interviews with representatives from the American Association of Community Colleges and several community colleges and universities.

While company and postsecondary institutions workforce engagement can assume many forms, there are some predominant approaches that broadly fit into three levels of partnership:



Engaging with Community Colleges

According to the American Association of Community Colleges, there are 1,043 community colleges in the United States as of 2021. Community colleges offer a variety of degrees and certificates in both traditional academic disciplines as well as more practical, technical fields. These schools often serve as an initial entry point into postsecondary education for many students. The findings below highlight how business investors can work with community colleges to further establish a trained workforce and contribute the local communities' capacity and resiliency.

Key Findings

- **The initial entry point to discuss company engagement varies across states and college structures.**
 - Company engagement protocols often depend on the level of sophistication of the education institution.
 - Community colleges are publicly governed by lay trustees, either elected or appointed, at the state, district, or local level. The role of these boards is to ensure community and workforce responsiveness, making the sector adaptable and flexible in addressing emerging workforce needs and skills-needs of employers.
 - In some cases, it may be appropriate for companies interested in engagement to approach the president or chancellor of a college, whereas in other cases, it may be permissible to directly engage the department or professor of interest or the person overseeing contract training.

Best Practice: Simply reaching out to community colleges via email or phone call is often an effective way of initiating engagement.

- **Community colleges will often be flexible in order to work with companies.**
 - The American Association of Community Colleges notes that community colleges are eager to engage with companies and will utilize all available resources to ensure a successful collaboration. –
 - These engagement opportunities may not be readily apparent on most academic institutions' websites, as their promotional materials typically focus on degrees and traditional educational programs for students. However, community colleges often do have the resources (such as workspace, faculty, and industry contacts) to assist companies.
- **In general, community colleges do not require companies to meet any performance metrics or spend money in order to set up a partnership or program.**
 - However, a college's willingness to take on a program can depend on the cost, availability of qualified teaching staff, required resources, and feasibility of a proposed program. Certain programs and types of engagement may be overly burdensome for an institution to implement.
 - Capital-intensive engagements, such as those requiring laboratory space or equipment, are far more expensive and difficult to initiate than collaborations that require only a classroom or curriculum development.
 - **Companies may consider a few options to facilitate capital-intensive engagement.**
 - ✓ Donate equipment to the college.
 - ✓ Donate money through the college or its foundation, which administrators have control over and can use to fund the purchase of equipment.
 - ✓ Utilize online learning options and virtual reality platforms in order to hybridize capital-intensive programs, thereby reducing some expenses.

➤ **Community colleges often prefer working with companies interested in long-term engagements.**

- According to Jake Fay of Centralia Community College in Centralia, Washington, it takes around 18 months to launch a new course at a community college. This investment of time and resources is more worthwhile to community colleges if the partnership lasts several years.
- For companies interested in short-term arrangements, such as training incoming or existing employees, many community colleges offer contract training. With contract training, the community college can rent the company's space to provide equipment demonstrations or deliver custom workshops. Contract training can often begin within a few days, though it is important to note that participating students would not receive college credit.

Best Practice: Companies looking to hire full-time employees should also keep in mind that job offers should be competitive and that signing bonuses are now a standard practice.

➤ **One best practice is for companies to provide internships, apprenticeships, and full-time job offers in conjunction with their program.**

- While most colleges would not require this, it serves as a tangible sign of success of the program to both the company, college, and student constituencies.

➤ **The COVID-19 pandemic has indirectly led to increased opportunities for companies to connect with colleges more easily in a virtual environment.**

- On the informal end of opportunities for engagement with community colleges, the rapid increase in virtual job fairs has allowed companies to advertise job opportunities and find their workforce without a physical presence.

Best Practice: Companies will be most successful with community college boards if they can present on how their program will help meet projected job growth trends.

➤ **Companies hoping to create a new program with community colleges should consider the following:**

- **A program should be designed to meet a demonstrable employment need in the local community.** In order for a community college to offer a program, many states require there to be local job opportunities for program graduates. Administrators need to ensure they are developing programs and curriculum that will serve local business and industry needs. Occasionally, community college administrators, working in tandem with economic developers and local government officials, will create a program before job opportunities exist in the hopes of attracting industry to their location.
- **Community colleges need to ensure that the new program or degree is not already being offered by a university in the state or a neighboring community technical college.** Companies will be most successful if they can convey the unique nature of their program relative to other schools in the area.

- New technical or specialized education courses often are vetted by a college advisory board comprised of industry members, rather than set by state standards.

Best Practice: *Companies seeking to provide input on curriculum for courses and degree programs should strive to engage with or serve on advisory boards set up by the community college.*

Engaging with Universities

As opposed to community colleges, which often offer technical trainings, universities largely collaborate with companies on topics in which they already have expertise and degree programs. Many universities, particularly those specializing in certain fields, may have proprietary training materials, research, or equipment. Where community college programs generally would be designed around practical skills and immediate employment opportunities, university programs often offer opportunities for fitting real-world examples into existing curriculum and research projects. The findings below illustrate how business investors can collaborate with universities to further develop a trained workforce in specialized fields.

Key Findings

- **The initial entry point to discuss company engagement will vary from university to university and may also depend on the type of engagement a company is seeking.**
 - Many universities have commercialization offices dedicated to research and technology transfer collaboration with companies. However, to engage with a university on curriculum development, it may be more appropriate for companies to approach the department or professor of interest.
- **As with community colleges, universities are willing to engage with companies of varying sizes.**
 - For most universities, factors such as alignment with their existing programs and project scope are most important.

Best Practice: *Companies should ensure that an engagement is substantial enough to be worthwhile for the university. As a general guideline, longer-term engagements that span at least a year or two are preferable to shorter programs.*

- It is also important to understand the university's academic calendar (which could be based around semesters or quarters) and be prepared to work within that time construct.
- **Companies seeking to create a customized curriculum or training program should be prepared to cover some of the financial costs.**
 - Academic institutions often cannot financially support industry-directed trainings on a project-to-project basis. As short-term trainings that require new curriculum development are cost-prohibitive for universities, trainings are often subsidized by federal funding. Many universities offer fee-for-service arrangements for short term engagements, such as contract training for a company's existing workforce.

- **Foreign-owned companies that are planning to invest in the United States may have opportunities for engagement as well.**
 - Many universities are willing to work with foreign companies before the company has physically invested or located in the United States.
- **Some common avenues for companies to collaborate with university departments on curriculum include:**
 - Companies may be able to create a training program that the university can promote on its website or disseminate to students via the university portal.
 - Companies may contribute to the development of specific curriculum pertaining to their industry. This process is often negotiated on a case-by-case basis. For example, a company that wants engineering students to be trained in a particular skill or methodology not currently included in the program may be able to collaborate with the university to adopt the new material into the course curriculum. Some universities may structure these as exclusive partnerships or reciprocal partnerships (often where the company provides industry insights, data, or other resources in exchange for the opportunity).

Conclusion

There is a clear mutual desire for postsecondary and companies to collaborate on developing a trained workforce that enhances regional innovation, resilience, and capacity. Universities and community colleges alike expressed their willingness to be flexible in order to partner with companies. While each school is unique, this brief has outlined some overarching guidelines and best practices for companies to bear in mind when approaching community colleges and universities.

ABOUT SELECTUSA

SelectUSA is a U.S. government-wide program housed in the International Trade Administration at the United States Department of Commerce. Our mission is to facilitate job-creating business investment into the United States and raise awareness of the critical role that economic development plays in the U.S. economy. This brief was prepared under contract on behalf of SelectUSA by Ascendant Program Services, LLC, with Senior Economic Research Analyst Samantha Luban as the lead author.

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