

How to Form Partnerships Between Colleges and Community Partners

In the current economy, community partners need to work collaboratively to address local workforce demands. This need for collaboration is not new. However, the near zero unemployment in many communities is putting strains on the local workforce unlike anything seen in the past. Community colleges should be an intricate part of these conversations in all the communities they serve.

Four-year colleges also serve a community—both near and far, dependent on their mission and scope of academic programs. Colleges and universities also need to be at the table in these conversations to preserve their institutional identities while also shaping the future.

Many institutions are already dealing with enrollment challenges. Learner preferences have changed in the last decade to a desire for more flexible, more cost effective, and faster learning experiences. And, corporate partners are examining ways to bring in workers more quickly through things like competency-based education and shorter-term education programs.

The purpose of this guide is to describe methods to create sustainable, mutually beneficial partnerships between colleges and community partners, including education, workforce, and service organizations in the community. These partnerships can be viewed as a three-way Venn diagram between what each partner needs, what each partner has to offer, and what each partner hopes to gain.



When you find an alignment between these three pieces, an effective partnership can emerge.

What Is Our Current Partnership Capacity?

Partnerships are not new to colleges and universities. In fact, most college presidents and C-level executives can name 10 or more specific partnerships in which they and their teams are engaged. However, when pressed to identify all the partnerships they're engaged in, many colleges and universities will miss significant partnerships from their lists.

Being unaware of a partnership means that it isn't set up for sustainability—and more importantly—may not be aligned to the mission of the institution.

Colleges and universities should engage in a periodic survey of both the new partnerships that are emerging as well as the existing partnerships which may be ready for a transition in their institution. Types of transitions and how they could be handled are addressed later in this white paper.

A simple form or shared spreadsheet can be used to gather this information—and then serve as a reference for updating partnerships in the future. This documentation of partnerships can then serve a myriad of purposes, particularly if it is updated on an annual or semi-annual basis. Just a few of those purposes are:

- **A piece of evidence for accreditation purposes related to mission**
- **A piece of evidence for grant applications related to length and network of partnerships**
- **An assessment tool for readiness to engage the community in a new academic program or service offering**
- **An assessment tool for institutional capacity to engage in new partnerships**

All too often, partnerships are undertaken without ensuring that there's adequate capacity available within the institution to start and maintain the partnership in a healthy and effective manner. This tool allows institutional leadership to see who at the institution is working with external partners and to see who may have capacity for a leadership opportunity to begin or further develop a partnership.



Take Action: Part 1

Create a simple shareable spreadsheet (Google Sheets or Excel 365 work well for something like this) with column headers such as:

- **Community organization(s)**
- **Partnership start date**
- **Partnership objective(s)**
- **College team member(s) involved**
- **Rate partnership health (1 for unhealthy and 5 for healthy)**
- **Rate partnership alignment to mission (1 for not aligned and 5 for well aligned)**

Ask employees to complete the spreadsheet with partnerships they are engaged in across the organization's service area. Next, spend time as a leadership team talking about the data that is gathered. Are appropriate leadership team members aware of all partnerships? Does the leadership team agree with the assessment of mission alignment and health?

Where there's a lack of awareness, schedule a showcase session and ask that employee or employees to give an update to an appropriate leadership team on the partnership.

Where there's a gap between assessment of mission alignment and health in what the employee on the ground sees and what the leadership team sees, there's an opportunity for a conversation to create understanding and come closer to agreement.

Scenario 1

A college IT staff member was asked to serve on a community committee that was seeking grant money to put in network towers across the community to provide internet to low-income neighborhoods. The IT staff member completed the partnership form and ranked mission alignment as a 2. When they reviewed the submissions a few weeks later, the leadership team saw this as a serious gap. Lack of internet access to so many residents in the community was limiting the ability to offer online and hybrid courses to residents in these areas.

Once this gap was identified, the Chief Information Officer was able to have a conversation with the team member about this goal. The team member wasn't aware that residents from these neighborhoods signed up far less than the rest of the city. The team member had a renewed sense of purpose and, as such, redoubled their efforts in the partnership. After the grant was obtained, this team member spearheaded an effort to get computers donated from local businesses so that students in these impacted neighborhoods could check out a computer for a semester to use at home.

What Are Sustainable Partnerships?

The scenario just described highlights another concern with partnerships—particularly in small institutions. Too often, these partnerships are person specific and have not been designed with long-term sustainability in mind. If the person (bearing in mind that partnerships are typically focused on one person being involved) at the college changes roles or leaves the institution, or if the person at the partnering organization does either of those things, there's a strong chance that the partnership will stagnate, or worse, dissolve.

A sustainable partnership is one built around shared outcomes rather than individual members. A sustainable partnership has clear goals and deliverables. Until these goals and deliverables are

identified, you have an idea and not a partnership. A sustainable partnership also has more than one person from each organization involved dedicating time and effort to the partnership. The dedication of effort on the part of more than one person is particularly important. Partnerships with external organizations should begin by aligning internal resources to ensure that multiple people have responsibility for an initiative's success. Only then can sustainability be possible.

Finally, a sustainable partnership includes an awareness component that ensures that key members of all involved organizations can communicate knowledgeably about the partnership's benefits and activities.



Take Action: Part 2

Review the partnership document to assess these factors. For each partnership, determine if it's sustainable. Here's a checklist to review for each partnership:

- ☐ **Are there clear goals and deliverables?**
- ☐ **Are there multiple people involved from each partner organization from both a time and effort perspective?**
- ☐ **Are key members of all organizations aware and able to communicate about the partnership's benefits and activities?**
- ☐ **For those partnerships that are not sustainable, should they be continued?**
- ☐ **Are they clearly aligned with your mission and vision?**
- ☐ **Are they clearly aligned with one or more of your current strategic initiatives?**
- ☐ **Are you properly resourced in the area or areas tasked with this partnership to ask this of these individuals?**

Scenario 2

A statewide NGO in a midwestern US state was tasked with improving the number and quality of workers to fill manufacturing positions. The NGO worked with 10 colleges and universities – one four-year and nine community colleges over a two-year period to develop a high school-based dual credit curriculum that would transfer to all nine community colleges and then to the four-

year college for students interested in leadership positions within manufacturing companies. Eight major employers served as community partners lending expertise, work experiences, and financial and time support for the program.

From the outside, the partnership appeared to have all the hallmarks of success. From the inside, things were not nearly as healthy. Only three of the nine community colleges had more than one person attending any meeting and the individuals from the colleges varied from frontline faculty and lab technicians to an associate vice president for online learning. In the previous six months, the key point people from five of the 10 institutions had changed. The timeline to offer this program at five pilot high schools starting in the fall semester was in serious jeopardy.

In order to get the partnership on track, the CEO of the NGO approached the college presidents and asked them what could be done. Based on their feedback, it became clear to the CEO that the presidents were not aware of the project's timeline, with several citing concerns that their local high schools were not a part of the pilot or, particularly for the four-year institution where turnover had been significant, that there was a lack of alignment to current strategic initiatives.

As the CEO of the NGO reflected, she realized that she could have done a better job of keeping the presidents up to date on the project's progress rather than solely relying on institutional partners to update their executive leadership. She implemented a quarterly project update newsletter to all high school principals, manufacturing plant leads, and college presidents. While not a panacea, it certainly kept major failures and miscommunications at bay throughout the rest of the project.

What Are Mutually Beneficial Partnerships?

In addition to being sustainable, effective partnerships must have clear benefits to all participants. The benefit is subjective to each organization and benefits don't have to be equal. However, they must be identifiable and clear.

Many partnerships don't have a clear return on investment. However, every partner in a mutually beneficial partnership should assess, on a regular basis, whether a partnership is providing a beneficial return.

The assessment of return in community partnerships isn't always financial. Non-financial benefits are often relational or political in nature. Regardless of the type of benefit, there must be clear benefits that all members of a partnership can identify and articulate. They must also be able to assess these benefits in some way.

Consider the following examples. As you read each example, consider what the benefits might be for each member of the partnership. Would you call each partnership mutually beneficial?

Example 1

A local Chamber of Commerce has signed an agreement with the local community college that provides all Chamber members with 20% off tuition for up to three courses taken by their employees in one of 10 certificate programs. These programs were mutually chosen by the chamber and the college with input from the chamber's membership. The chamber pays nothing for this service but agrees to include this program on its website, in all of its recruitment and advertising efforts to new and existing businesses, and to provide radio advertising about the program for a period of one year.

Example 2

A local manufacturing plant is having difficulty hiring skilled labor for a particular job. While the community college nearest the plant has a certificate program that prepares workers for this job, classes don't run regularly due to lack of enrollment, which then means classes get cancelled. The college only has one adjunct faculty member teaching in the certificate program. The manufacturing plant works with the college to hire the adjunct faculty member, with the sole purpose of training new employees. The company also works with the college to get students who sign up for the certificate an interview with the company on the spot. If students are selected, they're immediately hired and the company pays their tuition as well as paying them a salary. Once the student completes the certificate—with all classes now offered at the plant—the student's salary doubles. Students who aren't selected for this program through the interview process can still complete classes at this plant and they're provided opportunities to interview with two other companies in the area who're interested in perhaps piloting this full program in the future.

Example 3

A large accounting firm is in the process of expanding its base of operations from the midwest to cover the entire country. To do so, the firm will need to hire more graduates. The firm identifies 25 schools across the country and works with the business schools to host on-site interviews.

Managing Partnership Transitions

Partnerships, while valuable, are not always forever. Some partnerships are created to solve a specific problem or address a specific challenge. Once that problem or challenge is moved to a new place, the partnership may be able to disband. Other times, partnerships must move to a governance or ongoing monitoring phase.

Transition times are especially important to the strengthening of the relationships that underlie a partnership. Ultimately, relationships are the most important outcome of nearly any partnership.

To ensure partnerships are handled well during transitions, all involved parties should come to agreement on what the goals are specific to the transition. If a partnership is transitioning to upkeep/maintenance, a memorandum of understanding or other formalized partnership agreement should be utilized. If a partnership has reached a formal end, some sort of celebration and/or recognition should be held for the work completed. Additionally, with both types of transition, lessons learned should be collected from all parties and shared appropriately.

Take Action: Part 3

Consider the following:

- ☐ **When a partnership is transitioning, identify whether it's an end to the partnership or a transition to an ongoing governance/maintenance relationship. In both cases, collect lessons learned from all participants and share accordingly.**
- ☐ **If the partnership is ended, plan a formal recognition and/or celebration.**
- ☐ **If the partnership is transitioning, agree to a new set of objectives and formalize these in some way, such as a memorandum of understanding.**



A Final Word

To maintain or grow enrollment, institutions must proactively identify and serve new cohorts of learners—but that's just the start. It's equally important to meet those learners' evolving expectations and equip those learners with the skills and supporting evidence to give them an advantage in the workforce.

How you meet these evolving requirements will depend on the unique mix of your institutional competencies, learner preferences, and industry hiring requirements.

We hope this guide has given you the ideas and tools you need to begin evaluating methods that will expand your reach via sustainable, mutually beneficial partnerships.



[Drop us a note](#) to learn more about how Open LMS or Monarch Strategies can support your efforts to implement new partnerships and programs.

This white paper was developed by [Open LMS](#) in partnership with [Monarch Strategies](#).

About Open LMS

Open LMS leverages open-source software to deliver an effective and engaging learning experience. As the largest commercial provider of hosting and support services for the open-source Moodle™ learning platform, we help organizations and institutions deliver great learning experiences without complexities. Previously a Blackboard product, Open LMS was acquired by Learning Technologies Group plc (LTG) in March 2020.

Learn more about Open LMS at www.openlms.net.