# Improving Workforce Outcomes for Rural Community College Students

A how-to guide for rural community college workforce partnerships

**SOCIAL FINANCE**

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## ABOUT SOCIAL FINANCE

Social Finance is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to mobilizing capital to drive social progress. We believe that everyone should have the opportunity to thrive and that we can catalyze those opportunities through a set of innovative financing strategies called Pay for Success. To date, Social Finance has mobilized nearly $150 million of capital to address a wide range of social issues in areas such as education, workforce development, health, and criminal justice.

# Introduction

## A crucible moment for rural community college leaders

### CONTEXT

**Community college workforce programs are in the spotlight.** Even before COVID-19, the combination of rising income inequality, decades of wage stagnation, disinvestment in public workforce funding, and a rapidly changing economy had placed pressure on U.S. community colleges to become engines of local workforce development. Employers, workforce boards, and policymakers were increasingly turning to community colleges to provide vocational training, close critical skills gaps, and create pathways to economic mobility for the more than 8 million students who enroll at these institutions each year.[1] Community colleges had become especially vital for students of color, first-generation students, low-income students, and adult students, all of whom enroll in these institutions at disproportionately higher rates relative to other undergraduate institutions.[2]

**Today, community colleges face a perfect storm of new shocks:** a global pandemic, a shuttered U.S. economy, uncertain enrollment, and a national movement for racial justice. These shocks exacerbate an already fragile workforce system and bring renewed attention to the racial disparities that have long pervaded our nation's postsecondary system. It is a crucible moment for community colleges. The choices community college leaders make in the months ahead are critical: without an effective workforce program strategy, they may inadvertently perpetuate skills gaps and income inequality. But community colleges also have enormous potential to yield innovative workforce programs that equip students for gainful career pathways and accelerate the equitable economic recovery our nation needs.

**Partnerships are essential to the success of community college workforce efforts.** By collaborating with local stakeholders—including employers, workforce boards, foundations, nonprofit service providers, and K-12 school districts—community colleges can foster systemic change. Partnerships can help bolster colleges' limited staff, tailor programs to local labor markets, expand student access to on-the-job experience and wraparound supports, increase enrollment, diversify revenue sources, and improve student outcomes.

**But forging effective community college workforce partnerships is challenging.** Partnerships require trust, financial resources, and coordination among multiple stakeholders who often have different goals, motivations, timelines, and business models. Results from recent federal grants to community college workforce programs illustrate the difficulty of building workforce partnerships that measurably improve student outcomes and endure over time. Health Profession Opportunity Grants—which provided $125

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[1] Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System
[2] College Board

million to 64 community colleges to train low-income individuals for in-demand healthcare jobs—showed mixed results across employment and earnings gains among participants.[3] Early results from the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant—which provides $2 billion in federal funding to 256 community college workforce programs—reveal that grantees are serving disproportionately fewer women and students of color, less than half of students are completing these workforce programs, and only half of those who start programs without a job are obtaining employment upon completion.[4] Moreover, many community colleges have struggled to sustain these partnerships beyond the federal grant period. These examples highlight how even large investments in workforce partnerships do not necessarily correlate with success.

**Rural community colleges face unique circumstances in developing workforce partnerships.** On the one hand, rurality brings many advantages. The strong sense of place that often exists in rural communities is an asset that can help unite potential partners. Rural areas are also often characterized by close local relationships, giving community college leaders a strong pulse on the community's needs and a foundation of trust on which to build partnerships. In addition, community colleges in rural areas often serve as the primary meeting space for local organizations, conferring a convening power that can help attract workforce stakeholders to the table. In towns where community colleges are the primary—if not the only—postsecondary institution, they tend to be closely connected with the local K-12 school system, helping give high school students a bridge into the workforce. Rural community college workforce partnerships may also be able to access funds set aside specifically for rural geographies.

**On the other hand, rural community colleges face a unique set of challenges.** Local population emigration, talent shortages, a declining tax base, and limited employer partners are a few of the many unique headwinds that can stymie rural community college workforce partnerships. For students, lack of broadband internet access, limited transportation, inadequate supportive services, and fewer available jobs can pose significant barriers to successful workforce outcomes. As a result, disparities persist between rural and urban community college students across the education continuum, such as disparities between attainment and earnings.[5] On top of these pre-existing inequities, rural community colleges now face the added challenge of a pandemic that is likely to hit many rural communities especially hard due to limited healthcare system capacity.[6]

**Despite volumes written on community college workforce partnerships, few resources focus on the rural context.** Finding guidance that is immediately actionable and tailored to the unique assets and constraints of rural communities can be daunting. This report aims to help fill that void.

## REPORT OVERVIEW

**This report was written both by and for rural community college leaders.** Within its pages are dozens of best practices and case studies that have been sourced from rural postsecondary education experts and practitioners around the country. This information has been curated for individuals in a variety of roles including rural community college presidents, program directors, faculty, and institutional research

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[3] Abt Associates
[4] Urban Institute
[5] United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service
[6] New York Times

teams. The purpose of these findings is to catalyze important conversations, spark informed action, and improve partnership outcomes.

**Readers may use this report in multiple ways.** For rural community college leaders starting to think about a new or existing partnership, reading the Executive Summary can provide a high-level overview of the key steps and considerations to keep in mind. Individuals involved in day-to-day implementation, management, or adaptation of a partnership may wish to use the guide more comprehensively and refer to the detailed action steps as a workplan. For individuals seeking guidance on a specific step in the partnership journey, the report is structured to facilitate easy navigation to the most relevant section.

**The relevance of this report spans far beyond the halls of a rural community college.** For students, improving the effectiveness—and local relevance—of workforce programs at community colleges can enhance employment and life outcomes in a time of incredible need. For rural employers, effective community college workforce partnerships will create reliable talent pipelines, enhance the skills of existing employees, and build goodwill among local patrons and policymakers. For rural communities, strong workforce partnerships help build and adapt local labor markets, which will become increasingly important for post-pandemic economic recovery. Additionally, highlighting best practices specific to rural communities will bring attention, ideas, and more nuanced policymaking to this unique segment. For philanthropy, highlighting examples of rural community college workforce partnerships that have used innovative financing models can prompt new ways of deploying resources that shift risk and align incentives. And for government, improving the outcomes and sustainability of workforce partnerships will stretch public grant dollars further at a time when continued public workforce investment remains tenuous.

## METHODOLOGY

**The findings in this report are based on six months of rigorous primary and secondary research.** Social Finance's research spanned two phases, including an initial landscape scan of community college workforce partnership examples and best practices, and a more detailed review of selected partnerships through the development of case studies.

**Phase 1: Landscape Scan.** Social Finance reviewed dozens of in-depth research reports to identify trends, best practices, and examples of rural community college workforce partnerships around the country. Our team researched specific rural community college workforce partnerships, ultimately cataloging a database of over 30 partnerships. We also interviewed 39 rural community college experts and practitioners, including approximately 25% from community colleges, 20% from employers, and 55% from other community partners. Through these expert interviews, Social Finance explored questions such as the following:

- How did your partnership **originate**, and what was the **partnership development process**?
- What are the **key design elements** of your partnership (e.g. target population, partners, goals, programs, funding sources, staffing structure)?
- What **assets and challenges** have arisen from operating in a **rural setting**? How has your partnership leveraged these assets and mitigated the challenges?
- What are **key success factors** in developing a rural community college workforce partnership?
- How has your partnership **evolved and sustained itself** over time?

**Phase 2: Case Studies.** Through the landscape scan, Social Finance identified a diverse set of rural community college workforce partnership examples, which we then prioritized for in-depth case studies based on several criteria, including:

- **Quality.** Priority was given to high-quality partnerships as evidenced by factors such as strong student outcomes, alignment with best practices identified in Phase 1, strong reputation among multiple experts, and lengthy program history.
- **Additionality.** We gave preference to partnerships that were less prominent in the available literature and thus could provide novel insights and perspectives on the topic of rural community college workforce partnerships.
- **Diversity.** To ensure our final set of case studies was representative and relevant to a broad audience of rural community colleges, we selected partnerships that were diverse along several dimensions including geography, program offerings, and partnership models.

**What do we mean by rural?** There are many ways to define rurality, including definitions based on population size, population density, and proximity to an urban center. Throughout our research, Social Finance used the definition provided by the U.S. Census Bureau and adopted by the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. By this definition, rural includes any population, housing, or territory not in an urban area (which is characterized by a population of 50,000 or more). Thus, our research focused on communities with fewer than 50,000 people. In cases where a community college had multiple campuses, we included these institutions in our scope if any of their campuses were in areas considered rural according to the above definition.

**What do we mean by community college?** For the purposes of our research, we considered both two-year and less than two-year postsecondary institutions with occupational and/or academic offerings including certificates and associate degrees. This included both publicly and privately controlled institutions, both for-profit and nonprofit institutions, as well as Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Tribal Colleges and Universities. Combining these definitions with the rural classification above yields approximately 350 rural community colleges across the country collectively serving nearly 1 million students.[7]

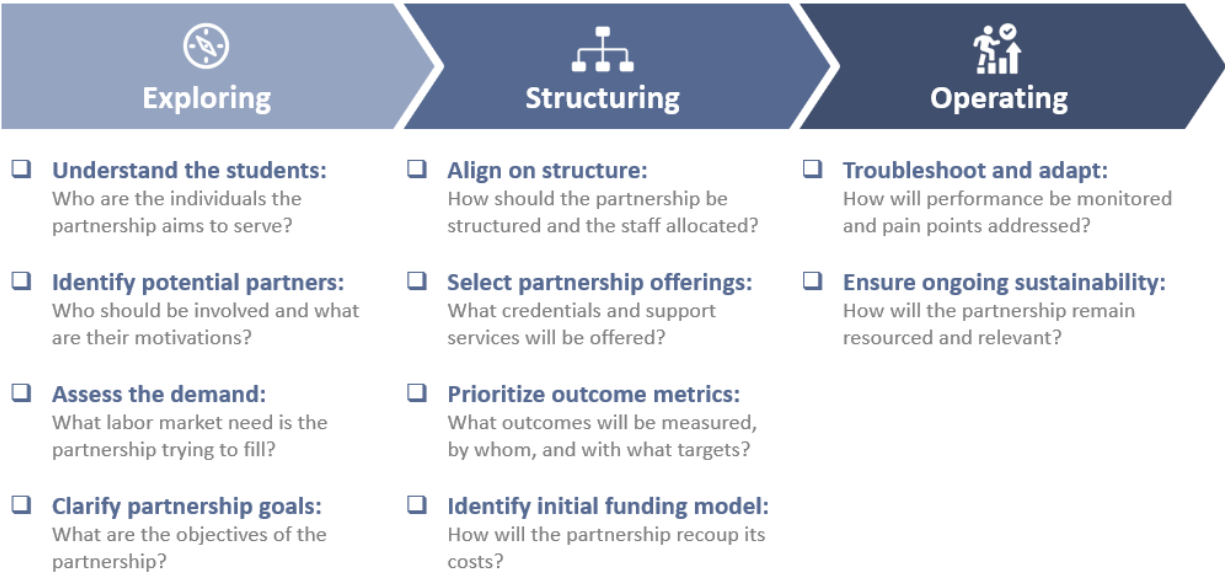---

[7] Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System

# Executive Summary
## An actionable framework for rural workforce partnerships

**No two rural community college are exactly alike.** The shared "rural" classification masks wide variations that exist among institutions in all dimensions: student demographics, staffing capacity, course offerings, fiscal strength, workforce development strategies, and culture. Vast differences also exist among rural community colleges' surrounding labor markets, partnership ecosystems, and funding sources.

**Despite this variation, our research surfaced ten common steps that can guide rural community college leaders in their workforce partnership journeys.** These steps are illustrated in Figure 1 and summarized below. We break the steps into three stages. Within a given stage, the collection of steps is often accomplished iteratively rather than sequentially. Each step includes best practices, rural considerations, and case studies of exemplar institutions. Through this framework, our aim is to meet community college leaders where they are—whether they are starting, stuck, or in steady-state—and help them take their workforce partnerships to the next level.

**Figure 1. Rural Community College Workforce Partnership Journey**



| Exploring | Structuring | Operating |
|---|---|---|
| ❑ **Understand the students:** Who are the individuals the partnership aims to serve? | ❑ **Align on structure:** How should the partnership be structured and the staff allocated? | ❑ **Troubleshoot and adapt:** How will performance be monitored and pain points addressed? |
| ❑ **Identify potential partners:** Who should be involved and what are their motivations? | ❑ **Select partnership offerings:** What credentials and support services will be offered? | ❑ **Ensure ongoing sustainability:** How will the partnership remain resourced and relevant? |
| ❑ **Assess the demand:** What labor market need is the partnership trying to fill? | ❑ **Prioritize outcome metrics:** What outcomes will be measured, by whom, and with what targets? | |
| ❑ **Clarify partnership goals:** What are the objectives of the partnership? | ❑ **Identify initial funding model:** How will the partnership recoup its costs? | |

Whether exploring a new partnership because the college was approached by a potential partner or because workforce programming has become an internal priority, the following steps and associated case studies can help rural community college leaders start their partnership on the right footing:

| **Understand the students** | Start by talking to students. Attend student-centered events, administer student surveys, and review historical student outcomes data. Identify which students the partnership will serve and deeply understand their needs. By understanding the challenges facing rural students—such as limited broadband access, lower awareness of program offerings, and pressure to migrate toward jobs outside the community—college leaders can mitigate these challenges, for example, by setting up broadband hotspots, tailoring student outreach, and designing programs around students' career perceptions. They can also celebrate the unique attributes of their student population and ensure the students themselves are viewed as a core asset to the partnership. | Skyline COLLEGE<br><br>*San Bruno, CA*<br><br>**Addressing students' food insecurity through community partnerships** |
|---|---|---|
| **Identify potential partners** | Understand the landscape of potential partners for the program. Then, meaningfully engage them by being active in the local community, customizing outreach, and finding a champion for the program outside the college. While rural communities may have unique challenges—including fewer available partners to work with—their strong sense of place, close relationships, and often acute talent shortages can be advantages to rural community college leaders in exploring a workforce partnership. | LAKE AREA TECHNICAL COLLEGE<br><br>*Watertown, SD*<br><br>**Building a robust employer network through persistent, tailored outreach** |
| **Assess the demand** | Identify acute workforce shortages as well as long-term macroeconomic needs and engage community stakeholders in the process. Start by reviewing publicly available labor market data and internal program data, and by convening local employers. To address inaccuracies in labor market data and lower numbers of employers that can exist in rural areas, college leaders can have staff triangulate data trends from multiple sources and meet with regional employers outside their immediate catchment area. | DABNEY S. LANCASTER COMMUNITY COLLEGE<br><br>*Clifton Forge, VA*<br><br>**Combining public labor market data with innovative market research** |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Clarify partnership goals** | Recognizing that each organization in the partnership brings its own unique goals and motivations, work together to collectively define the objectives of the overall partnership. Clearly defined objectives—such as developing a skilled talent pipeline or contributing to local economic development—directly inform the partnership's mission and design. Connecting the partnership's mission to the goals of multiple employers and industries across the region can mitigate the challenge of having limited employers in the community. Rural college leaders can also leverage their convening power and the strong sense of place in their communities to unite partners around a shared vision. | **NORTHEAST STATE** *Blountville, TN*<br><br>**Building an employer talent pipeline to renew manufacturing in the community** |



**Structuring**

In the structuring stage, successful rural community college leaders collaborate with potential partners to refine the details of their partnership, including governance, staff allocations, program offerings, outcomes measurement, and funding. Four steps and case studies can help guide this process:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Align on optimal structure** | Set up an external governance structure, distributing functions across different committees including executive, management, and operations committees. Determine how to allocate internal staff to run the program, including the college's President, the workforce program director, institutional researchers, and instructors. To help fill governance roles or find new staff, community college leaders can lean on close relationships in their community and consider sharing staff with partners. | **MGCCC** Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College<br>*Perkinston, MS*<br><br>**Formalizing structure through an MOU and empowering staff to share governance**<br><br>**NORTHEAST STATE** *Blountville, TN*<br><br>**Sharing staff with local employers** |
| **Select partnership offerings** | Identify potential program offerings and prioritize them based on criteria such as student needs, labor market demand, and the track record of those offerings at other comparable institutions. Identify wraparound features that could support students at important points in their journey, such as gas cards, commuter passes, broadband hotspots, meals, flexible schedules, and online course offerings. | **DABNEY S. LANCASTER COMMUNITY COLLEGE** *Clifton Forge, VA*<br><br>**Creating onramps to apprenticeships through non-credit certificates** |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Prioritize outcome metrics** | Start by developing a list of potential metrics, such as those that align with funding opportunities, signal partnership financial viability, and indicate broader community prosperity. Prioritize the list of metrics based on agreed upon criteria, such as whether the metrics reflect meaningful impact on students and align with funder and policymaker priorities. While rural community colleges may have limited institutional research capacity to spearhead these tasks, college leaders might mitigate this challenge by hiring new temporary staff or reorganizing existing staff. Investing in data warehouses and knowledge management systems can also improve staff productivity. | **WEST HILLS COLLEGE**<br>*Coalinga, CA*<br><br>**Aligning outcomes with employer and K-12 partner priorities** |
| **Identify initial funding model** | Develop partnership financial projections. Then, identify financial resources available at the college to support the partnership, explore external funding sources, and pursue innovative financing mechanisms where needed. While rural communities face unique headwinds—including minimum enrollment requirements for public grants, declining local tax bases, and a limited philanthropic sector—rural college leaders can lean on close local relationships and braid together multiple funding sources as much as possible. | **NORTHEAST STATE**<br>*Blountville, TN*<br><br>**Braiding together state grants and employer funding** |

## Operating

For rural community college leaders actively operating a workforce partnership, we recommend continuously refining the partnership's design to maximize student success. Two steps and case studies can guide this process:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Troubleshoot and adapt** | Develop a data-driven evaluation and monitoring process, with the goal of anticipating challenges in advance. Our research surfaced common issues that arise in rural settings—including student attrition, resource constraints, communication challenges, and limited institutional research capacity—but also revealed several ways that innovative leaders can troubleshoot. | **MGCCC**<br>Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College<br>*Perkinston, MS*<br><br>**Harnessing data and advisor input to refine the program** |

**Ensure ongoing sustainability**

Proactively plan how the workforce partnership will achieve long-lasting impact and relevance. Start by reassessing the partnership's financial model and looking for additional funding sources (including from employers) on a regular basis. Among rural community college workforce partnerships, funding streams tend to become less diversified as earned revenue and internal allocations increase. Meanwhile, continue to involve key staff at the college in operating the partnership to maintain their buy-in, and align the partnership's goals with student, college, and industry needs to ensure it remains relevant.

**MGCCC**
Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College

*Perkinston, MS*

**Integrating the partnership into the community college's strategic plan**

# Partnership Models
## Exemplar community college workforce partnerships

In our research, we examined more than 30 community college workforce partnerships. There were seven that stood out as exemplars based on a few criteria: strong student outcomes, alignment with best practices, lengthy program history, and mentions from multiple experts. These partnerships are profiled below:



**LAKE AREA TECHNICAL COLLEGE**
Watertown, SD | Exemplar in Identify Potential Partners

**DABNEY S. LANCASTER COMMUNITY COLLEGE**
Clifton Forge, VA | Exemplar in Assess Demand, Select Partnership Offerings

**Skyline COLLEGE**
San Bruno, CA | Exemplar in Understand the Students

**WEST HILLS COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT**
Coalinga, CA | Exemplar in Prioritize Outcome Metrics

**SAN JUAN COLLEGE**
Farmington, NM | Exemplar in Select Partnership Offerings

**NORTHEAST STATE**
We're here to get you there
Blountville, TN | Exemplar in Clarify Goals, Align on Structure, Identify Initial Funding Model

**MGCCC**
Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College
Perkinston, MS | Exemplar in Align on Structure, Troubleshoot and Adapt, Ensure Sustainability

### Expanding Apprenticeships
*Clifton Forge, VA*

Partnership between **Dabney S. Lancaster Community College, WestRock**, a packaging company with a nearby paper mill, and **other employers**.

Since then, Dabney Lancaster has become a **certified training site** for the National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER). This credential **provides an easier on-ramp** for students interested in becoming apprentices in craft trades at local companies.

### Instrumentation and Controls Academy
*Perkinston, MS*

Partnership between **Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College** and **utilities and oil / gas companies**, such as Mississippi Power Company and Chevron.

The goal is to produce qualified graduates to **replace retiring workers and fill currently vacant instrumentation and controls positions**. The program has demonstrated strong outcomes with **job placement rates around 95%**.

### Nursing Program (IHS Partnership)
*Farmington, NM*

Partnership between **San Juan College** and **Indian Health Service (IHS)** to increase the number of Native American nurses at IHS facilities.

A federal grant funded the training for Native American nursing students at San Juan. Upon graduation, these **students had jobs waiting for them at an IHS facility**.

### Regional Center for Advanced Manufacturing
*Blountville, TN*

Partnership between **Northeast State Community College, local manufacturing leaders** (such as Eastman Chemical Company and Domtar Paper), and **local and state governments**.

The goal is to produce qualified graduates to **replace the retiring manufacturing workers in the area**. The program has demonstrated strong outcomes to date with **job placement rates around 98%**.

### Shipbuilding Apprenticeships
*Perkinston, MS*

Partnership between **Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College** and **Ingalls**, a major employer in the shipbuilding industry.

The goal is to produce qualified graduates to **help Ingalls meet its increased production demands**. The apprenticeship program was started between the two organizations in 1959.

### SparkPoint (Center for Working Families)
*San Bruno, CA*

Partnership between **Skyline College** and **United Way of the Bay Area**, modeled on the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Center for Working Families.

The goal is to help more students **achieve financial self-sufficiency**. SparkPoint offers **bundled services for students**, including financial education, assistance with public benefits, and a food pantry.

### Stretch the Million (Build Dakota Scholarships)
*Watertown, SD*

Partnership between **Lake Area Technical College, the Build Dakota Scholarship Fund**, and **more than 140 employers**.

Employers in high-need industries (such as agriculture and welding) **sponsor scholarships** for students. In return, the student agrees to **work at the company for three years** after graduation.

### Wonderful Agriculture Career Prep
*Coalinga, CA*

Partnership between **West Hills College, The Wonderful Company,** and **local K-12 schools** to build and run a dual enrollment program.

Participating students can **graduate from high school with an associate degree** and attend a four-year institution with Junior standing or **find a role with the Wonderful Company**.

# Understand the Students
## Who are the individuals the partnership aims to serve?

### OVERVIEW

When exploring a rural community college workforce partnership, an important step is to identify which students the partnership will serve. The target population for a program has direct implications for partnership structure, partner selection, and program design. Experts highlighted four common student archetypes among rural community colleges, with different implications for each group:

**Figure 2. Student Archetypes and Potential Partnership Implications**

| ARCHETYPE | POTENTIAL PARTNERSHIP IMPLICATIONS |
|---|---|
| **Traditional Students** (e.g. recent high school grads) | Incorporate non-academic skills training (e.g. soft skills) needed to succeed in the workforce |
| **Non-Traditional Students** (e.g. parents; students older than 25) | Account for potential knowledge gaps since students have not been in school for a while; consider providing childcare services |
| **Current Workers** (e.g. individuals working to pay for program; local employees) | Structure class schedules and student support services to balance work and academic schedules |
| **Underrepresented Groups** (e.g. women, people of color, first generation students) | Use inclusive language in marketing the program; speak directly to students to understand their needs and potential challenges |

Once the target student population has been identified, the next step is to understand their needs, goals, and potential barriers to successful outcomes. This will help ensure the partnership is structured to mitigate student attrition points from the start. Our research highlighted common barriers that students face, outlined in Figure 3.

**Figure 3. Common Student Attrition Points**
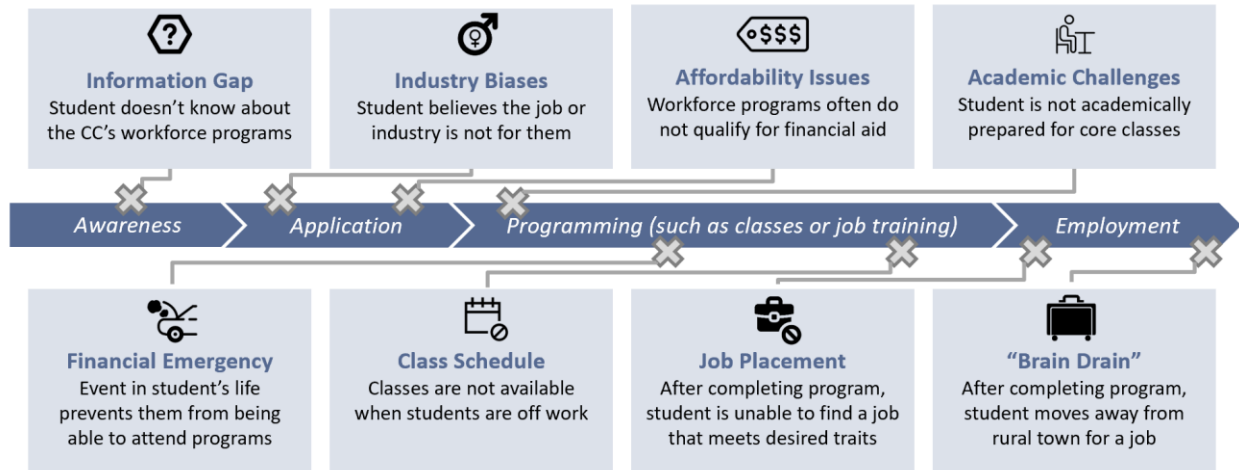


Though the students' needs, goals, and potential barriers will vary across and within community colleges, taking the time to understand them can lead to better outcomes for the partnership.

## GETTING STARTED

Experts identified steps that rural community colleges can take to understand their students' needs:

| Workstream | Potential Action Steps |
|---|---|
| **Identify the partnership's target student population** | ❑ **Connect with students** and review **internal student demographic data** to understand who the institution is currently serving<br>❑ Review **external student demographic data** (e.g. from other local workforce or education institutions) to understand who the institution is not currently serving<br>❑ Examine internal and external student outcomes to understand how different student populations may interact with the partnership<br>❑ Determine if there are **disparities in outcomes** at the institution (e.g. by race, gender, income) that this program should address |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Understand students' needs** | Ask questions about programmatic needs and **listen to the students**:<br>❑ Send out a student survey by working with established survey providers (e.g. Community College Survey of Student Engagement) or by building one internally<br>❑ Incorporate questions about students' goals and needs **into scheduled student check-ins**, such as intake or advising meetings<br>❑ Host large student forums to receive feedback (e.g. on available or potential student support services)<br><br>Examine internal student-level data:<br>❑ Review the institution's **student-level data** (e.g. federal financial aid data to understand the percentage of students who have children or the percentage who are working)<br><br>Examine external demographic data and trends:<br>❑ Review data from other workforce institutions and/or the local region (e.g. "Asset-Limited, Income-Constrained, Employed" work from the United Way to understand the demographics of the broader local student population) |

## RURAL CONSIDERATIONS

| | Key Considerations | Potential Action Steps |
|---|---|---|
| **Assets** | **Diversity in student demographics and needs across rural locations.** While rural communities can share similar characteristics, they are not a monolith. As such, student populations vary across rural community colleges. Leaders at these institutions can feel freedom to explore and test new approaches, given that replicating an approach from a different community with different students may not generate the same outcomes. | ❑ While this also holds true for urban and suburban communities, it reinforces the need for rural community college leaders to **develop a deep understanding of their student population and the unique characteristics of their communities.** This can create a solid foundation to build partnerships that empower students and generate successful outcomes. |
| **Challenges** | **Lack of or limited access to technological infrastructure (e.g. broadband internet, laptops).** Some rural communities lack access to the technological infrastructure that students need to succeed. Access limitations can pose challenges at multiple stages of a student's journey through the program. | ❑ Work to **understand the challenges** that technological infrastructure limitations poses to students<br>❑ Implement **tailored support services**, such as broadband hotspots in parking lots or loaner laptops and tablets |
| | **Brain drain.** Many rural communities struggle with population migration, as they may not offer the same economic opportunities as more urban areas. Students in these rural | ❑ Understand the **students' career objectives** and their **perception of the local opportunities** (e.g. through student surveys, discussion forums) |

| communities may feel as though they need to move to access the right job for them. | ❑ Build on this understanding when **selecting partners** to ensure that the right people are at the table to help connect students to local opportunities |
|---|---|
| **Limited awareness of community college offerings.** At the national level, rural high school graduation rates are higher than their urban and suburban counterparts, but their college enrollment rates are lower. One of the potential reasons is limited awareness of local community colleges' offerings. This can lead rural students to bypass postsecondary institutions and move directly from high school into the workforce. | ❑ Increase **outreach efforts** to the traditional student population (e.g. current high school students or recent high school graduates) <br> ❑ **Adjust outreach language** to use terminology that resonates with students. For example, avoiding "higher education jargon," which can often be inaccessible and challenging to understand |

## EXEMPLAR IN PRACTICE:  SparkPoint

*Overview:* SparkPoint is a partnership between the United Way of the Bay Area and Skyline College, located in San Bruno, CA.[8] It is a one-stop shop on the community college campus designed to help students and families achieve financial self-sufficiency. From the onset of the partnership, SparkPoint has diligently worked to understand the needs of its student population and used those insights to inform partnership offerings.

*Journey to date.* To understand student needs, SparkPoint frequently turns to the students themselves. They rely on several communication channels to capture these primary voices, including direct student-faculty conversations and student-centered events (e.g. panel discussions).



Direct Student-Faculty Conversations: The need for the SparkPoint Food Pantry, which was originally operated by Skyline and served as the catalyst for the SparkPoint partnership, was identified through direct conversations between Skyline faculty and students. Faculty members noticed that some students were struggling in the classroom – some were having trouble focusing and others were falling asleep during class. Faculty members privately connected with students about these issues and discovered that many were struggling

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[8] While San Bruno is not often considered to be rural due to its proximity to San Francisco, its population size of ~43K classifies it as rural based on the U.S. Census definition.

with food insecurity. Recognizing the barrier that this challenge posed to student success, they brought the need for student food assistance to one of the Deans. There, the idea for a partnership food pantry was born.

Student-Centered Events (Panel Discussion): SparkPoint frequently hosts student-centered events and leverages them as opportunities to hear about student needs and/or challenges directly from the students themselves. For example, a few years ago, the SparkPoint partnership hosted a speaker on the Skyline campus for a discussion focused on workforce outcomes for male students of color. The speaker facilitated a discussion between Skyline faculty, staff, and students around how the college can further support this student population. The students in attendance flagged that throughout the day they would benefit from access to sustenance to keep their energy levels up as they were often spending 10 to 14-hour days away from home. Shortly thereafter, the partnership launched "SparkPoint Snacks" to provide snacks (e.g. granola bars, peanuts) in baskets around campus without any barriers to uptake (e.g. no eligibility criteria, no name required).

By understanding the needs of their student population—through use of various student-centered communication channels—the SparkPoint partnership has designed program offerings that help students overcome challenges they may be facing and achieve financial self-sufficiency. According to Chad Thompson, Director of SparkPoint:

**"It is easier to work with programs or partners who understand their students. You can learn from them. You can talk to staff and talk to students about what they need, what we are providing, and what we are missing."**
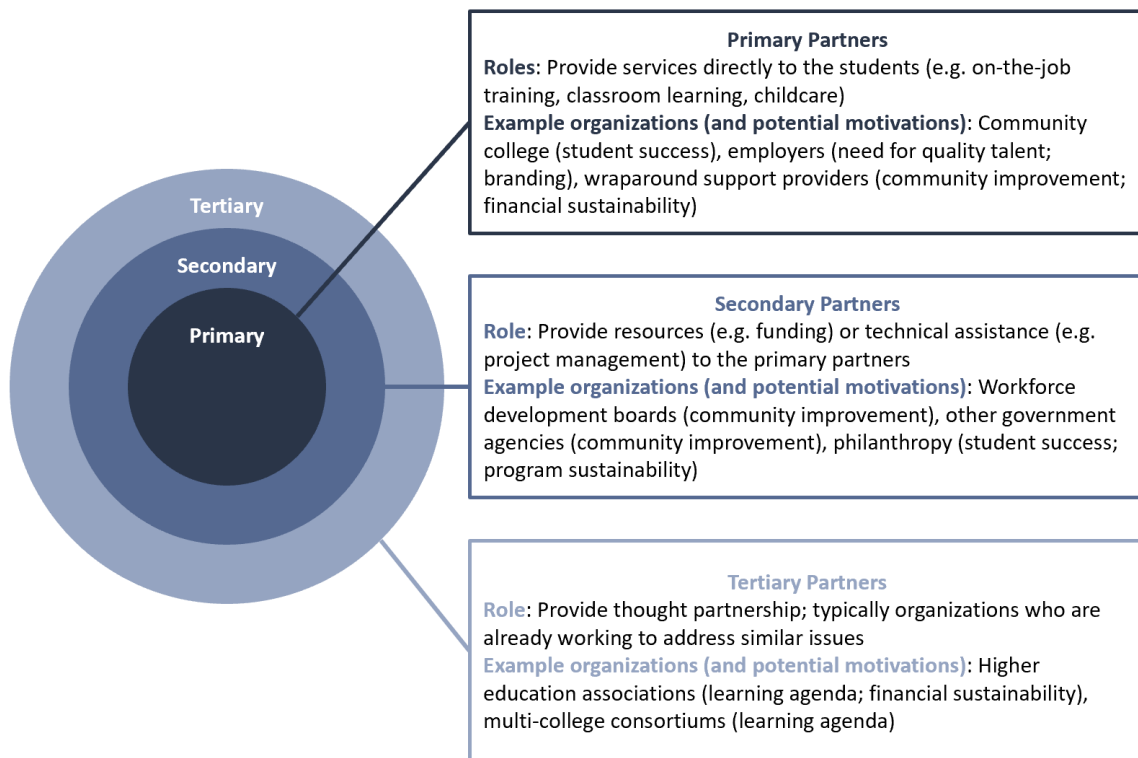
# Identify Potential Partners
## Who should be involved, and what are their motivations?

### OVERVIEW

Finding the right partner organizations can set up a rural workforce partnership for success. The first step is identifying the different types of organizations within the community and surrounding region that could serve as potential partners. Our research suggests that community college leaders can think about these potential partners in three categories: primary, secondary, and tertiary partners. As depicted in Figure 4, the specific organizations, prospective roles, and motivations vary across each category.

**Figure 4. Types of Potential Partners**

Tertiary

Secondary

Primary

**Primary Partners**
**Roles**: Provide services directly to the students (e.g. on-the-job training, classroom learning, childcare)
**Example organizations (and potential motivations)**: Community college (student success), employers (need for quality talent; branding), wraparound support providers (community improvement; financial sustainability)

**Secondary Partners**
**Role**: Provide resources (e.g. funding) or technical assistance (e.g. project management) to the primary partners
**Example organizations (and potential motivations)**: Workforce development boards (community improvement), other government agencies (community improvement), philanthropy (student success; program sustainability)

**Tertiary Partners**
**Role**: Provide thought partnership; typically organizations who are already working to address similar issues
**Example organizations (and potential motivations)**: Higher education associations (learning agenda; financial sustainability), multi-college consortiums (learning agenda)

While the taxonomy above can help group organizations together by their roles in the partnership, it is important to note that it is not always necessary to bring together all three types of organizations for a

successful workforce partnership. Additionally, an organization can play multiple roles in a partnership. The important step is putting together a list of potential roles and respective partners that could be involved in the program.

Once potential roles and partners have been identified, community college leaders should develop a plan to reach out and meaningfully engage relevant individuals at these organizations.

## GETTING STARTED

Experts identified steps that rural community colleges can take to identify potential partners:

| Workstream | Potential Action Steps |
|---|---|
| **Understand the landscape of potential partners** | **Identify the roles** needed for the workforce program to be successful, such as the ability to provide:<br>❑ Direct-to-student support (i.e. primary partners)<br>❑ Financial resources (i.e. secondary partners)<br>❑ Technical assistance (i.e. secondary partners)<br>❑ Thought partnership or guidance (i.e. tertiary partners)<br><br>**Build a list** of potential partners:<br>❑ Ask others at the community college to suggest organizations that could fit required roles<br>❑ Take note of organizations with which the community college already has close relationships<br>❑ Observe which organizations are already actively engaging on local workforce development issues |
| **Meaningfully engage potential partners** | Compose **talking points** for each potential partner:<br>❑ Reflect on what each organization's motivations could be<br>❑ Based on those motivations, think through the potential messaging<br><br>If possible, set up a **face-to-face meeting**:<br>❑ Leverage existing relationships to set up conversations<br>❑ Decide whether a senior leader at the community college should join the meeting<br><br>Plan for the **long term**:<br>❑ Be active in the community to develop strong relationships over time that are built on trust<br>❑ Even if the organization is not interested in this partnership, stay in touch, and build the relationship for future opportunities<br>❑ Find an industry champion who can advocate for the program in the employer community<br>❑ If the resources exist, consider dedicating staff to partner outreach and relationship management |

## RURAL CONSIDERATIONS

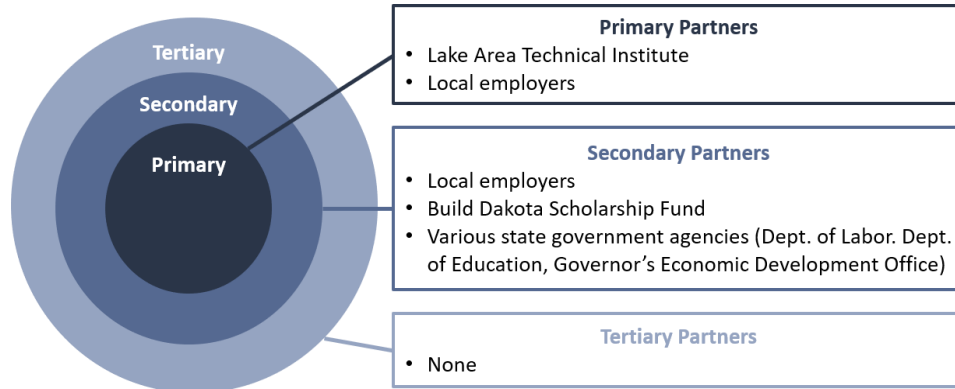| Key Considerations | Potential Action Steps |
|---|---|
| **Assets** | |
| **Employers' willingness to partner**. For businesses in high-demand industries—whether advanced manufacturing, nursing, utilities, or other industries—it can be challenging to find and attract talent to their rural locations. This can make a partnership with a relevant and strong community college program appealing, since it creates a direct, local talent pipeline. | ❑ **Target employer outreach** toward the businesses in high-demand industries<br>❑ **Consider the needs of the students**. It can be tempting to quickly build a non-credit program to meet the needs of the employer more quickly; however, these programs may not provide paths into good jobs with living wages. |
| **Best option for workforce training.** In many rural communities, the community college is the best—and sometimes only—option for workforce-related education and training. | ❑ Lean on the college's reputation to **become a prominent voice** on workforce issues (e.g. by serving on local workforce boards) and to cultivate others' interest in collaborating |
| **Power of local relationships**. By virtue of their smaller populations, leaders in rural communities tend to be more connected through their professional or personal lives (e.g. Rotary Club, board memberships). This can make it easier for leaders at community colleges to turn existing acquaintances into organizational partnerships. | ❑ Leverage existing relationships with local employers and leaders to **set up conversations** about partnering together<br>❑ Lean on knowledge of potential partners and their leaders to develop talking points that **appeal to their motivations** |
| **Challenges** | |
| **Limited landscape of potential partners.** Rural areas may have fewer available partners compared to their urban or suburban counterparts. This applies to all types of partners but may disproportionately impact the availability of organizations that provide wraparound supports. | ❑ **Develop a plan** for the community college to provide the necessary wraparound support services if finding the right partner proves difficult<br>❑ **Identify sources of funding** to hire personnel and find the necessary resources (e.g. building for food pantry) |

**EXEMPLAR IN PRACTICE:** Lake Area Technical College's (LATC) "Stretch the Million" (STM)

***Overview.*** The STM program is part of Build Dakota Scholarships, a $50 million fund dedicated to providing scholarships to students in high-need industries and keeping them employed in the state after graduation. STM brings three main partners to the table: LATC, local employers, and Build Dakota Scholarships. LATC serves as a primary partner, providing in-class education and support services to the students. The local employers act as both primary and secondary partners, providing

on-the-job training and partial funding for scholarships. Build Dakota serves as a secondary partner by contributing financially to the program through scholarships and by setting the overall direction of the program.

Additionally, Build Dakota Scholarships engages a number of different organizations across the state to identify high-need industries (Department of Labor), provide connections in local communities to spread the word about the program (Governor's Economic Development Office), and build relationships at high schools to increase program demand (Department of Education).



**Primary Partners**
- Lake Area Technical Institute
- Local employers

**Secondary Partners**
- Local employers
- Build Dakota Scholarship Fund
- Various state government agencies (Dept. of Labor. Dept. of Education, Governor's Economic Development Office)

**Tertiary Partners**
- None

*Journey to date.* It took time to build up the program to what it is now. For example, in the first year, LATC had to find the first cohort of employer partners in a span of four months. Without a full plan in hand, they reached out to companies where they had relationships, knowing that the community college's positive reputation would improve their chances of finding partners.

Julie Stevenson, Business Partner Specialist at LATC, recalled the first year, saying, "The [companies] did it just out of the goodness of their hearts…. They knew that we had the reputation but nothing else to bank on."

To expand the program, LATC went out into the community to spread the word about STM directly to local employers. When they had these conversations, LATC centered the discussions on the benefits for the employers, such as how the program could help businesses build their talent pipeline in the midst of an acute workforce shortage in their specific industries and geographies.

Additionally, LATC made sure that early participation in the program provided value for the employers. They highlighted the companies when marketing the program more broadly, providing exposure for the companies to current and future students, alumni, and community members.

Six years ago, the first cohort of STM had five employer partners. Since then, because of LATC's efforts, 140+ companies have sponsored 380+ LATC students, committing over $3 million in scholarships. Reflecting on these efforts, Stevenson says:

**"When the program started … I [didn't] think anyone would have anticipated that the employers would have contributed [this much]!"**

# Assess the Demand
## What labor market need is the partnership trying to fill?

### OVERVIEW

By assessing local labor market needs, a rural community college can identify industries to prioritize for partnerships and better understand the needs of employers. To evaluate this need, community colleges should review labor market data from sources such as Burning Glass, Emsi, Glassdoor, Indeed, or Google Jobs. This can help community colleges identify current and potential workforce shortages in local industries and expected wages for different jobs.

However, these sources do not tell the full story of labor demand. Rural community colleges should also talk to industry leaders and workforce experts (e.g. county economic development agencies) to contextualize the needs of local employers. Their qualitative perspectives can complement the quantitative data from the labor market reports and help the community college leaders deeply understand the important dynamics and needs within local industries.

### GETTING STARTED

Experts identified steps that rural community colleges can take to assess the local demand for jobs:

| Workstream | Potential Action Steps |
|---|---|
| **Identify current and near-term workforce shortages** | Review **external labor market data** (from sources such as labor market information databases, technical assistance providers, Burning Glass, Emsi, Glassdoor, Indeed, and Google Jobs) to identify:<br>❑ Current demand for different types of occupations<br>❑ Projected future demand for different types of occupations<br>❑ Expected wages for different types of occupations<br><br>Review **internal data** on former students to identify:<br>❑ Job placement rates<br>❑ Job retention rates<br>❑ Average earnings |
| **Identify long-term macro-economic needs** | Review publicly available **state and local data** related to trends for:<br>❑ Population demographics (e.g. Census)<br>❑ Economic development (e.g. workforce development boards)<br>❑ K-12 performance (e.g. Department of Education, local education agencies) |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Engage community stakeholders** | ❑ Convene **local employers and workforce organizations** to discuss their hiring needs; engage a **third-party intermediary** for facilitation and assistance if needed<br>❑ Have **one-on-one conversations** with **HR administrators** from major local employers (e.g. VP of HR) to learn about their needs<br>❑ Have **one-on-one conversations** with **front line employees** from local employers (e.g. site managers who oversee daily activities) to better understand detailed information on employers' needs and job benefits for students | |

## RURAL CONSIDERATIONS

| | Key Considerations | Potential Action Steps |
|---|---|---|
| **Assets** | **Power of local relationships**. As discussed in the "Identify Potential Partners" section, leaders in rural communities tend to be more connected through their professional or personal lives (e.g. Rotary Club; board membership) and often have a stronger pulse on the local community. | ❑ Leverage existing relationships with local employers and workforce experts to **set up conversations** on labor needs<br>❑ **Gather letters from employers** affirming talent shortages to support the business case for a program |
| **Assets** | **Community college as the convener**. In many rural communities, the campus serves as the primary meeting space for local organizations and events. As a result, the community college can play the convener role to bring others together. | ❑ Utilize the community college campus to **host employers and workforce organizations for convenings** on local labor demand |
| **Challenges** | **Limited applicability and accuracy of labor market reports.** Labor market reports often provide data at the state or county level, which makes it challenging to apply to a specific rural area. Additionally, these reports do not account for demand from small businesses that recruit through offline methods (e.g. word of mouth). | ❑ Connect with **employers and workforce experts** to understand their needs, either one-on-one or at a convening<br>❑ **Analyze complementary data** as a proxy for labor demand. For example, Dabney S. Lancaster Community College used statistics on truck crashes to estimate the demand for a Commercial Driver's License program |
| **Challenges** | **Limited number of employers.** As mentioned in the "Identify Potential Partners" section, in some rural communities, there may only be one or two major employers. However, if a community college workforce partnership relies entirely on one employer, there is a significant downside for the students if the employer moves out of the community. | ❑ To mitigate this risk, examine the labor market demand at the **regional level in addition to local level**<br>❑ As the program grows, **pull in other employers**, even if they are further away<br>❑ **Incorporate transferrable skills** into the program to help students adapt to the needs of multiple employers |

**EXEMPLAR IN PRACTICE:** Dabney S. Lancaster Community College (DSLCC)

*Overview.* In 2019, DSLCC received a grant from the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) to expand the institution's apprenticeships. Their process for identifying industries—currently focused on construction, manufacturing, plumbing, welding, and carpentry—exemplifies how a rural community college can effectively assess local labor market demands.

David Shofstahl, Apprenticeship Coordinator at DSLCC, shared that the rurality of the region makes demand assessment difficult, but that challenges can be mitigated with a data-driven approach and strong local relationships.

*Journey to date.* DSLCC's program directors review labor reports from the state and demand aggregation organizations, as both provide valuable information but have limitations.



State reports, such as the quarterly reports from the Virginia Employment Commission, provide insights on workforce shortages across the state and help the program directors identify key industries to focus on. However, the data in these reports are generally at the county level, which might overstate the relevant demand for DSLCC's service region, since it encompasses the entirety of Alleghany, Bath, and Rockbridge Counties, but only the northern portion of Botetourt County, where population density is much higher outside of the college boundary.

Labor demand aggregation organizations, such as Glassdoor, Indeed, and Google Jobs, provide helpful reports (including information on salaries) based on online job listings across various websites. However, these organizations do not account for job openings that recruit through offline methods (e.g. word of mouth, flyers). For example, DSLCC discovered discrepancies between the demand in these reports and their understanding of the local construction and manufacturing labor markets. Where online sources reported no demand for labor in a variety of trades, such as masons, plumbers, and machinists, college staff knew of several local employers who were actively hiring.

Given the limitations of external labor market data, DSLCC program directors supplement this information by conducting their own market research with boots-on-the-ground data collection and deeper analysis of related and complementary data. For example, DSLCC employees wanted to gather demand data to develop a Class B commercial driver's license (CDL) certification course. Unfortunately, sources did not provide insight on demand for CDL Class B endorsements, aggregating all CDL occupations under one classification. To gain a realistic sense of local need for Class B drivers, DSLCC reviewed regional and state-level crash statistics from the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA). By comparing gross vehicle weight ratings (GVWR) of trucks involved in accidents, they identified a ratio of Class B to Class A vehicles, which was applied to the overall demand for CDL occupations in the region. This allowed them to extrapolate a general understanding of local demand and develop a strong case to develop a course.

DCLCC also leverages existing relationships with local employers to meet with them and discuss their employment needs. This can manifest in many ways: informal one-on-one meetings, qualitative surveys, or hosting community-wide events on DSLCC's campus.

After assessing the demand for apprenticeship programs through both external reports and conversations with local leaders and experts, DSLCC staff gather letters of need from employers. This can help make the business case for the program internally at the college or support additional grant submissions.

David Shofstahl summarizes this process by saying that community colleges should understand the local labor demand to play an important and, often, missing role in the community:

**"We want employers to turn to us for any staffing or performance need. I see the community college as the human resource development function for small businesses that cannot afford it on their own."**

# Exploring

Students    Partners    Demand    **Goals**

# Clarify Partnership Goals
## What are the objectives of the partnership?

### OVERVIEW

While each organization will have its own motivations, it is important to define overarching goals for the partnership. This builds common ground between the organizations and gives direction to each organization's respective activities. Then, the community college should build on these objectives and help draft the partnership mission statement. A clear and agreed upon mission statement can serve to unite the different partners throughout the lifecycle of the program.

In our research, we came across many different partnership goals; however, they often had at least one of the three objectives below:

**Figure 5. Types of Common Partnership Objectives**

| Common Objectives | Example Partnership |
|---|---|
| **Employer Talent Pipeline** Develop skilled candidates to help satisfy employer labor needs | One of the **Regional Center for Advanced Manufacturing's** strategic objectives is meeting the industrial training and education needs of the regional manufacturing industry |
| **Student Success** Support students throughout all phases of their education and workforce journey | **SparkPoint's** primary objective is to help students and other members of the community achieve financial self-sufficiency |
| **Community Prosperity** Contribute to local economic development initiatives or goals | **Wonderful Agriculture and Career Prep** works to align regional high schools, colleges, and industry to prepare students for high-tech jobs |

## GETTING STARTED

Experts identified steps that rural community colleges can take to clarify partnership goals:

| Workstream | Potential Action Steps |
|---|---|
| **Define the motivations and goals of the community college** | ❑ Define what **partnership success** means for the community college (e.g. relationships with new partners, target completion or job placement rate)<br>❑ Understand the **partnership's potential student population** and consider the potential role the partnership may play in needing their needs (see "Understand the Students" section)<br>❑ Identify how the partnership may fit within the **community college's strategic plan** |
| **Define the objectives of the partnership** | ❑ Identify the motivations and goals of **each stakeholder**<br>❑ Identify how partnership may fit within **local or regional policy landscape**<br>❑ Prioritize objectives by mapping each of the above **to common partnership objectives** |
| **Draft the partnership mission statement** | The process will likely vary depending on which objectives resonate with potential partners:<br>❑ **Employer talent pipeline**: The mission could connect to stated goals of the employer(s) or broader workforce system<br>❑ **Student success**: The mission could connect to the education and/or career aspirations of the primary program beneficiaries (i.e. the students)<br>❑ **Community prosperity**: The partnership's mission could emphasize how the success of the community college, its students, the local workforce, and the surrounding region are deeply interconnected |

## RURAL CONSIDERATIONS

| | Key Considerations | Potential Action Steps |
|---|---|---|
| **Assets** | **Strong sense of place.** Individuals living in rural areas often feel a strong sense of place and pride for their community. Factors such as social relationships, the natural environment, and politics are often cited as common, important factors contributing to an individual's sense of place. These feelings can often motivate stakeholders to work hard on behalf of community initiatives. | ❑ Include **community prosperity** as one of the partnership's objectives to tap into the power of individuals' feelings of place and pride |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | **Community college as the convener**. As mentioned in the "Assess the Demand" section, rural community colleges can often play the convening role in partnerships, bringing other organizations together and facilitating meetings. | ❑ Use the campus to **host conversations** to clarify partnership goals<br>❑ Use this convening power to **serve as the "broker"** and unite individual stakeholders who may come to the table with different motivations |
| **Challenges** | **Limited number of employers.** As mentioned in the "Identify Potential Partners" and "Assess the Demand" sections, there may only be one or two major employers in rural communities. | ❑ Connect the partnership mission to the **goals of multiple employers or industries**<br>❑ Include **employer talent pipeline *and* student success** as objectives to ensure the partnership is dedicated to employer talent needs *and* helping students adapt to the needs of local employers |

**NORTHEAST** STATE
*We're here to get you there*

**EXEMPLAR IN PRACTICE:** Regional Center for Advanced Manufacturing (RCAM)

*Overview.* In 2008, RCAM was launched by Northeast State Community College in partnership with northeast Tennessee manufacturing leaders and local and state government agencies to provide industrial training and education to the local workforce. Since its founding, RCAM has built on the strengths of its key partners by defining its primary objective as meeting local employers' skilled labor needs and supporting regional economic development efforts.

*Journey to date.* Eastman Chemical Company, a local manufacturing leader, was one of the initiators of the partnership when the company identified an acute need for a more robust pipeline of qualified, skilled workers in Kingsport, TN. Eastman worked with Northeast State to identify the specific skills that the Eastman workforce needed, and then began to outline how they could work together to provide customized and specialty training in these areas (e.g. general technology, welding/metal fabrication, chemical process operations). In doing so, they solidified one of the objectives of the partnership as building an employer talent pipeline.

Throughout this process, Eastman and Northeast State recognized that a handful of local and state government agencies (City of Kingsport, Kingsport Chamber of Commerce, and the Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development) were working to catalyze the industrial manufacturing industry across the region. Eastman and Northeast State joined forces with these agencies and broadened the objectives of the RCAM partnership to also include community prosperity – to be achieved through the promotion of advanced manufacturing careers in the local area and support of regional economic development efforts.

By clearly defining their objectives—employer talent pipeline and community prosperity—the RCAM partners unified their individual efforts and have built strong career pathways between higher education and local advanced manufacturing careers. According to RCAM Director Heath McMillan:

**"For a long time, manufacturing and higher education [were] on paths that didn't cross, but we have been intentional to make sure that they do cross—and that the community college encourages pathways and training for our local industry."**

# Align on Structure

How should the partnership be structured and staff be allocated?

## OVERVIEW

Once a community college has partnered with other organizations, the next step is to set up the external and internal structures. Externally, the community college should collaborate with partners to identify roles and responsibilities. While some of the assignments are clear based on the strengths of each organization, others will require some more discussion (e.g. who is responsible for student outreach).

Once the roles and responsibilities have been decided between partners, it can be helpful to have a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in place. This formalizes the partnership and provides greater accountability for each partner to deliver on their responsibilities.

Additionally, experts we interviewed identified committees as a helpful form of program governance—ensuring that key personnel across the organizations are communicating on a regular basis. An example committee structure could look like the following:

**Figure 6. Potential Committee Structure for a Community College Workforce Partnership**

| COMMITTEE | CADENCE | PURPOSE |
|---|---|---|
| Executive Committee | Semi-Annually (Every 6 months) | • Provides strategic direction, vision and goals for partnership<br>• Members likely consist of the senior leadership at each organization (e.g. CC president, employer president or SVP) |
| Management Committee | Monthly | • Make decisions to execute on the direction, vision, and goals set by the Executive Committee<br>• Members likely consist of leadership closer to the operations of the program (e.g. CC VP of Workforce Development, employer VP of HR) |
| Operations Committee | Bi-Weekly | • Forum for on-the-ground discussions, such as real-time troubleshooting, among representatives from partners<br>• Members likely consist of managers involved in the day-to-day operations of the program (e.g. CC Dean of Workforce Development, employer business operations manager) |

In addition to setting up the external structure, community colleges need to determine their internal structure. Employees at the college often play important and complementary roles in running a workforce program. Experts highlighted four roles as being critical:

**Figure 7. Important Partnership Roles within the Community College**

| | Role | Responsibilities |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | **President** | • Set the vision for the workforce programs at the institution<br>• Signal the importance of the program both internally and externally |
| 2 | **Program Director** | • Responsible for the day-to-day administration of the program<br>• Communicate with internal and external stakeholders (includes conveying value proposition) |
| 3 | **Institutional Researcher** | • Collect and track relevant outcomes for the program<br>• Analyze and present data to guide design and implementation changes |
| 4 | **Instructors** | • Includes teachers in the classroom and on the job<br>• Often responsible for additional student supports, such as advising and mentoring |

# GETTING STARTED

Experts identified steps that rural community colleges can take to align on the structure:

| Workstream | Potential Action Steps |
|---|---|
| **Identify roles and responsibilities for each organization** | **Build a list of the roles** that are needed to start and sustain the program. Examples include providing:<br>❑ "In the classroom" education<br>❑ On-the-job training<br>❑ Student supports (see "Select Partnership Offerings" section)<br>❑ Start-up funding (see "Identify Initial Funding Model" section)<br>❑ Outreach to identify and recruit students<br><br>Map the **list of roles to the strengths** of each partner:<br>❑ Identify the strengths of each partnering organization<br>❑ Determine which roles are best suited for each organization<br><br>**Align** on roles and responsibilities:<br>❑ Discuss the proposed roles and responsibilities with partners<br>❑ Agree on an initial assignment of roles and responsibilities |
| **Formalize the structure through a MOU** | ❑ Work with the community college's legal team to draft a MOU<br>❑ Discuss the proposed MOU with partners<br>❑ Agree on the MOU and have all parties sign |
| **Create a governance structure through committees** | Identify **required** committees:<br>❑ Based on the number of partners and complexity of the program, determine which committees are needed<br><br>**Staff** the committees:<br>❑ Find leaders within community college to serve on committees<br>❑ Identify a committee chair<br>❑ Ensure that there are regular meetings scheduled |
| **Identify and staff the required positions within the community college** | **Identify** the required positions for the program, such as:<br>❑ President<br>❑ Program Director<br>❑ Institutional Researcher<br>❑ Instructors<br><br>**Staff** the required positions:<br>❑ Look within the community college to see if there is existing expertise and bandwidth to fill each of the roles<br>❑ If there are still gaps afterwards, then reach out to the partners to see if they are willing to assign any of their employees<br>❑ If there are still gaps afterwards, then post a job description |

## RURAL CONSIDERATIONS

| | Key Considerations | Potential Action Steps |
|---|---|---|
| **Assets** | **Community college as the convener**. As mentioned in the "Assess the Demand" and "Clarify Partnership Goals" sections, rural community colleges can often have convening power in their communities. | ❑ Utilize the campus to **host partners for committee meetings** |
| | **Power of local relationships**. As mentioned in the "Identify Potential Partners" and "Assess the Demand" sections, leaders in rural communities tend to be more connected through their professional or personal lives (e.g. Rotary Club; board membership). | ❑ **Lean on their existing relationships** when making requests for staffing support (e.g. having a partner's employee to serve as an instructor) |
| **Challenges** | **Heavy competition from local employers for talent.** In many rural communities, the demand for certain skillsets (such as IT or data analysis) is far greater than the supply of qualified individuals. As a result, colleges looking to hire externally for a position will face stiff competition from local industry, which can often offer a higher salary.<br><br>For example, Dr. Mary Graham, the President of Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College (MGCCC), believes the demand for data analysts and research teams will continue to grow, so colleges need to be proactive in attracting and keeping talented researchers. Dr. Graham shared that "at Gulf Coast, we understand the value of making data-driven decisions, so we work hard to promote the many benefits of working in a college environment—benefits above and beyond salary." | ❑ Whether recruiting or retaining talent, **find opportunities to improve aspects of the job outside of the salary**. For example, opportunities to work from home or being on a team with a strong culture of professional development were cited as draws to MGCCC's data team. |
| | **Challenge in finding needed expertise locally.** Finding experts to teach the relevant courses in a workforce program can be challenging for a couple of reasons: 1) smaller population sizes in rural communities and 2) | ❑ **Second staff** from an employer partner to fill the need. The community college will need to make the business case to the employer—namely, that without experts to educate and train the students, the graduates of the program |

limited desire of prospective employees to move or commute to a rural area.

- will not be equipped to handle the requirements of the job
- ❑ **Hire retired workers** from the employer partner as instructors. They have the content expertise and competition for their services will be more limited.
- ❑ For a longer-term solution, **build a program at the community college** that will train the needed talent
- ❑ For a longer-term solution, **work with a nearby four-year institution** to train the needed talent. For example, MGCCC works with the University of Southern Mississippi to ensure that the graduates of their PhD program in higher education research have the relevant skills to join MGCCC's IR team.

**EXEMPLAR IN PRACTICE:** Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College's (MGCCC) Shipbuilding Apprenticeship



*Overview.* The partnership between MGCCC and Ingalls Shipbuilding, the largest manufacturing employer in the state, stretches back to the 1950's when apprenticeship programs began. Today, the two organizations partner to provide career pathways in a variety of manufacturing fields (such as welding, electrical maintenance, and shipfitting) for MGCCC students and a steady supply of well-trained graduates for Ingalls.

*Journey to date.* Of the governance structures involved in the MGCCC–Ingalls partnership, the most formal is their memorandum of understanding (MOU). The agreement between these two parties details what needs to be accomplished, who is responsible for each task, and how the program will be funded. For example, it clearly assigns the classroom instruction component to MGCCC and the on-the-job training and coordination with the Department of Labor (to maintain apprenticeship status) to Ingalls. Within the MOU, there is an "Other" section at the end that allows the two parties to adapt for unplanned events, such as when Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005.

Additionally, employees from MGCCC and Ingalls communicate regularly through a variety of different channels. For the employees who are closest to the day-to-day operations of the program, there is a standing meeting that brings together employees from both organizations every two weeks. Additionally, employees from Ingalls are members of MGCCC's industry advisory committees—ensuring that the employer can contribute the strategic direction of the program at

MGCCC—and vice versa. Finally, there is a formal structure at the senior leadership level, with an Ingalls executive sitting on MGCCC's board of trustees.

Dr. Jonathan Woodward, Executive Vice President of Teaching and Learning at MGCCC, summarizes the nature of the deep partnership between his institution and Ingalls by saying:

**"The question is, 'Where does Ingalls end and MGCCC begin?'"**



**EXEMPLAR IN PRACTICE:** Regional Center for Advanced Manufacturing (RCAM)

*Overview.* In 2008, RCAM was launched by Northeast State Community College, in partnership with northeast Tennessee manufacturing leaders and local and state government to provide industrial training and education to the local workforce.

*Journey to date.* Throughout the history of the partnership, Northeast State has tapped into employees of Eastman Chemical Company to train the students and run the program.



Northeast State has found instructors for RCAM-related courses by hiring retired Eastman employees. These part-time faculty have brought experience and knowledge that was directly applicable to the courses and, further down the line, a potential job at Eastman. To fill any remaining instructor gaps, Eastman provides current employees who are subject matter experts. This acts as a win-win for the community college and the employer: Northeast State finds someone to teach some of their more technically-advanced courses and Eastman trains prospective employees on exactly what they need to know to be successful at their company.

Until 2019, the RCAM Director was an employee of Eastman assigned to work at Northeast State, reporting to the community college's leadership. According to Jeff Frazier, a former RCAM Director:

**"We (Eastman employees) brought the context of the manufacturing need to the college and immersed it there. It was critical to our success."**

Structure  **Offerings**  Outcomes  Funding
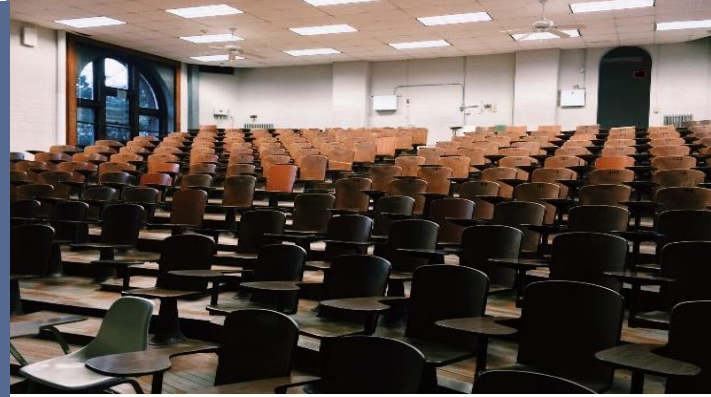
# Select Partnership Offerings

## What credentials and support services will be offered?

### OVERVIEW

At this stage of partnership development, the parameters of the workforce partnership should be set (or at least, in development): the student population, the partners, the goals, and the labor market demand. It is now time to translate these elements into credential offerings for the students. In addition to these, experts suggest that CC leaders can look at three factors—length to completion, completion rates, and wage gains—to determine the right program offerings for partnership.

The relationships between these factors are important. Evidence suggests that there is 1) a positive correlation between time to completion and wage gains and 2) a negative correlation between time to completion and completion rates. The table below provides an overview of this information:

**Figure 8. Credential Offerings by Length, Completion Rates, and Wage Gains**

| Credential Offerings[9] | | Length | Completion Rates[10] | Wage Gains[11] |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Dual Enrollment | High school students take courses and receive training that count for CC credit | Significant Variation | Limited Research | Limited Research |
| Certificate Program (non-credit) | Program does not count toward a degree; faster to create since it does not need external approval | <1 Year | ~80% for programs shorter than a year[12] | On average, modest, positive impacts; but returns may be temporary[13,14] |
| Certificate Program (credit) | Program also accumulates credit toward a degree | <1 Year | | |
| Apprenticeship | Applicants are paid while trained on the job by experienced workers[15] | 1-2 Years | ~45%[16] | Avg. earnings per year are ~$6.5K higher than similar nonparticipants[17] |

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[9] These credential offerings are neither mutually exclusive nor collectively exhaustive
[10] American Enterprise Institute
[11] Ibid.
[12] Figures from the first round of TAACCCT were used, since the data was collected in 2015
[13] Brookings Institute
[14] Community College Research Center
[15] American Enterprise Institute
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Associate Degree | Requires completion of an organized program of study of at least two years of full-time academic study[18] | 2+ Years | ~25%[19] | Avg. earnings per year are $5-7K higher than college noncompleters[20] |
| Transfer to Four-Year Institution | Clear transfer pathways are established from the CC to a four-year institution | 4+ Years | Limited Research | Students who transfer to 4Y but do not complete earn more than their counterparts who do not transfer[21] |

Given the needs of students (e.g. short-term upskilling) and the partners (e.g. significant portion of employers' workforce retiring each year) and partnership goals (e.g. providing a direct path for students into stable, well-paying jobs), community college leaders can use the information in the table to select the right set of credential offerings (e.g. for-credit certificates that build into associate degrees).

Programmatic offerings should also include wraparound support sevices. As discussed in "Understand the Students," students face barriers to successful outcomes. Support services can help minimize student attrition. While support services vary across programs and colleges, our research indicates that an integrated suite of multiple services based on student needs will likely be the most effective.

Experts recommended the following support services most frequently. The table below organizes these supports based on number of mentions (in decreasing order) and the challenges they can help address:

**Figure 9. Student Support Services Mapped to Common Causes of Student Attrition**

| POTENTIAL SUPPORT OFFERINGS | Information gap | Industry biases | Affordability issues | Academic challenges | Financial emergency | Class schedule | Job placement | "Brain drain" |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Transportation | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Dependent care | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Mentoring / Coaching | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Financial health | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| Mental health | | | | ✓ | | | ✓ | |
| Food | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| Soft skills training | | | | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ |

Legend: ✓ Direct Impact ✓ Indirect Impact

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[18] Department of Education
[19] Figures from the first round of TAACCCT were used, since the data was collected in 2015
[20] Community College Research Center
[21] Ibid

## GETTING STARTED

Experts identified steps that rural community colleges can take to select their programmatic offerings:

| Workstream | Potential Action Steps |
|---|---|
| **Select credential offerings** | ❑ Identify the **full set of potential credential offerings** for students in this program (including existing community college offerings and new ones)<br>❑ **Map** potential credential offerings to:<br>   o **Student** needs (refer to "Understand the Students" section)<br>   o **Partner** needs (refer to the "Identify Potential Partners" and "Assess the Demand" sections)<br>   o Partnership **goals** (refer to the "Clarify Partnership Goals" section)<br>❑ **Select** the credential offerings that best fit the needs and goals<br>❑ Begin the process of **approval and accreditation** (unless the offering is a non-credit certificate) |
| **Select support services** | ❑ Understand student **needs, goals, and potential roadblocks** (refer to the "Understand the Students" section)<br>❑ Identify **support services** that could address these needs and roadblocks (e.g. on-campus day care, food pantry)<br>❑ **Prioritize and select** most relevant support services for the partnership<br>❑ Determine whether those support services should be **provided by the community college or a partner**<br>❑ If the services should be provided by a partner, then **determine which organization** to partner with |

## RURAL CONSIDERATIONS

| | Key Considerations | Potential Action Steps |
|---|---|---|
| **Assets** | **Ability to offer a wide variety of different programmatic offerings at the same time.** While this consideration also holds true for urban and suburban community colleges, rural community colleges have long been known for their ability to cater to a wide variety of student career objectives by offering a breadth of different programmatic offerings. For example, some rural community colleges (e.g. West Hills) offer dual enrollment programs, while simultaneously offering traditional associate degrees pathways and transfer pathways. | If other workforce offerings already exist at the community college:<br>❑ Build upon **previously existing programmatic offering infrastructure** when selecting the offerings for a new partnership<br>❑ Consider ways in which new offerings (academic or wraparound services) might make the partnership more **student-friendly** or adapt it to evolving **employer needs** |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Challenges** | **Community colleges serve large geographic areas.** While many rural colleges are located in small towns, they often have catchment areas that span large geographies. Students in these areas may have long commutes to take advantage of the community college's offerings. It is no coincidence that when we spoke to rural experts about common the importance of support services, transportation was mentioned most often. | ❑ Ask students if **transportation access** is a barrier for them<br><br>If transportation is a barrier, then consider:<br>❑ Providing funding for students who already have cars, such as **gas cards** or **access to emergency aid for repairs**<br>❑ Adapting class schedules for students who live further away by making it easier to **stay on campus for longer blocks of time**<br>❑ Working with partners, such as economic development agencies, to **improve public transit** (e.g. Clark College in WA) |
| | **Lack of or limited access to technological infrastructure (e.g. broadband internet, laptops, etc.).** As mentioned in the "Understand the Students" section, some rural communities lack access to the technological infrastructure that students need to succeed. | ❑ Work to **understand the challenges** that technological infrastructure limitations poses to students<br>❑ Implement **tailored support services**, such as broadband hotspots in parking lots or loaner laptops and tablets |
| | **Shortage of potential partners.** As mentioned in the "Identify Potential Partners," "Assess the Demand," and "Clarify Partnership Goals" sections, rural areas can have more limited availability of partners compared to urban or suburban counterparts. This applies to all types of partners but may disproportionately impact the availability of organizations that provide wraparound supports. | ❑ **Develop a plan** for the community college to provide the necessary wraparound support services<br>❑ **Identify sources of funding** to hire personnel and find the necessary resources (e.g. building for food pantry) |

**DABNEY S. LANCASTER COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

## EXEMPLAR IN PRACTICE:  Dabney S. Lancaster Community College's (DSLCC) Apprenticeship Programs

*Overview.* Over the course of the last 20-30 years, DSLCC has supported apprenticeships at WestRock's paper mill (in nearby Covington, VA), in the areas of millwright, pipefitter, and welding crafts. Today, these programs include a broad range of offerings, centered around industry credentials that can lead directly into an apprenticeship to or an associate degree. In 2019, DSLCC received a grant from the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) to expand their apprenticeships into new trade areas.

*Journey to date.* The partnership between DSLCC and WestRock began in the 1990s, with the community college agreeing to provide the classroom-based education components of various apprenticeships. The success of this partnership, as evidenced by its longevity, prompted the community college to think about providing similar services for other local employers.

National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER) Certification: This changed around 2012, when DSLCC became certified by NCCER, a nonprofit organization dedicated to setting standards for craftsmen. The NCCER four-level craft credential is generally recognized by the Virginia Department of Labor and Industry as satisfying the required instruction component of apprenticeships.

By offering these industry-recognized credentials, DSLCC built an easy on-ramp into potential apprenticeships for their students. The college offered these programs as non-credit certificates since they were quicker to set up, easier to modify, and a good fit for some of their students, who stated a preference for non-credit courses, noting that for-credit programs could be intimidating.



Pathways to degrees: Not long after DSLCC began offering NCCER certifications, they heard from students who wanted to build on their NCCER program toward a longer-term certificate or an associate degree. As a result, the college has been working to make sure students can convert their NCCER credential into course credits. For example, if a student completes all four levels of the NCCER Electrical program, up to six course credits may be awarded toward the Electrical and Instrumentation certificate or associate program. To date, DSLCC has implemented this in a handful of non-credit credential programs and is in the process of expanding the crosswalks.

David Shofstahl, Apprenticeship Coordinator at DSLCC, describes this process by saying:

**"We are trying to find ways to crosswalk non-credit to credit … We don't want students spinning their wheels on wasted endeavors. We want them to be able to credit their prior learning, even if they earned it non-credit."**

## EXEMPLAR IN PRACTICE:  San Juan College's Support Services

**Overview.** Over the past few years, San Juan has been one of the top community colleges in granting short-term certificates and associate degrees to Native American students. The leadership attributes much of this success to the support services built into the ongoing Guided Pathways work.

*Journey to date.*



Native American Center: The leaders and staff at San Juan are focused on understanding the student experience and the unique needs of their population. The Native American Center provides numerous wraparound support services, ranging from academic to financial, to meet students' needs. For example, they heard from some of their students that the scholarship program run by the Navajo Nation's regional chapter houses was challenging to navigate. As a result, there is now dedicated staff to help San Juan students access these scholarships.

Additionally, the center creates a sense of belonging on campus for Native American students. They organize culturally relevant events, such as bringing in Native guest lecturers and organizing trips for students to learn more about their identities and histories.[22]

Guided Pathways: In 2016, San Juan received a $1.7 million grant from the Department of Education to support Native American students in graduating from the community college.[23] This funding supported the hiring of a program director and two coaches for a Pathways Coaching program, who help Native American students navigate the institution and find resources.

Additionally, this grant was used to fund technology and textbooks for students, offsetting an important cost that could have otherwise been a barrier to success.

Additionally, as part of their Guided Pathways work with AACC, San Juan has been disaggregating academic outcomes data by race and gender. As part of an initial effort, they identified classes with high drop, fail, or withdrawal rates and outcome disparities, then implemented the interventions with promising early results.

Dr. Adrienne Forgette, San Juan's VP of Learning, summarizes the student-centric support services available for Native American students by saying:

**"It is all about being there for them to solve whatever needs they have. It is about developing trust and making sure that they can count on you for whatever they need."**

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[22] San Juan College Website
[23] Farmington Daily Times

# Prioritize Outcome Metrics

What outcomes will be measured, by whom, and with what targets?

## OVERVIEW

Defining clear outcome metrics can help focus attention, signal progress, attract new funding, and flag areas for improvement. The program leadership team can start by building a comprehensive list of potential metrics based on multiple sources, including the partnership's goals. This can lead to a long list of potential outcomes to measure. Experts mentioned their partnerships tracking the following:

**Figure 10. Example Outcomes Measured by Community College Workforce Partnerships**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Program outputs** | • Number of students enrolled (including number of new students)<br>• Number of career fairs held<br>• Number of job applications supported |
| **Business metrics** | • Program revenue (tuition and external)<br>• Program expenses<br>• Program margin |
| **Student success (within program)** | • Program retention rates<br>• Program completion rates<br>• Degree / credential attainment rates |
| **Student success (after program)** | • Job placement rates<br>• Salary increase from pre- to post-program<br>• Growth in wages over time<br>• Job retention rates |
| **Community-building** | • Job placement rates in local community<br>• Percentage of local employees trained at community college<br>• Impact on college's relevance and standing in local community<br>• New employers locating in community |

It is important to note, however, that the list of potential outcomes may vary by workforce program due to differences in the internal context (e.g. current data systems) and external contexts (e.g. state funding priorities, goals of employer partners).

After developing a comprehensive list, assessing the metrics against a set of criteria can help identify the metrics to track and present to partners. Example criteria include:

- **Evidence-based**: Backed by relevant research and/or programmatic data, as possible
- **Measurable**: Can be regularly assessed based on reliable and accessible data sources
- **Observable**: Can be observed and measured within the project timeframe
- **Beneficiary alignment**: Indicates meaningful improvement in the lives of students served
- **Program alignment**: Aligns with the program and/or community college's theory of change
- **Value-creating**: Generates social and/or financial benefits to community
- **Policy alignment**: Aligns with the state's policy priorities or funding metrics (where applicable)

In summary, the outcome selection process could look like the following: building a comprehensive list of potential metrics, then using criteria to narrow down to a group of final outcomes.

**Figure 11. Outcome Selection Framework**
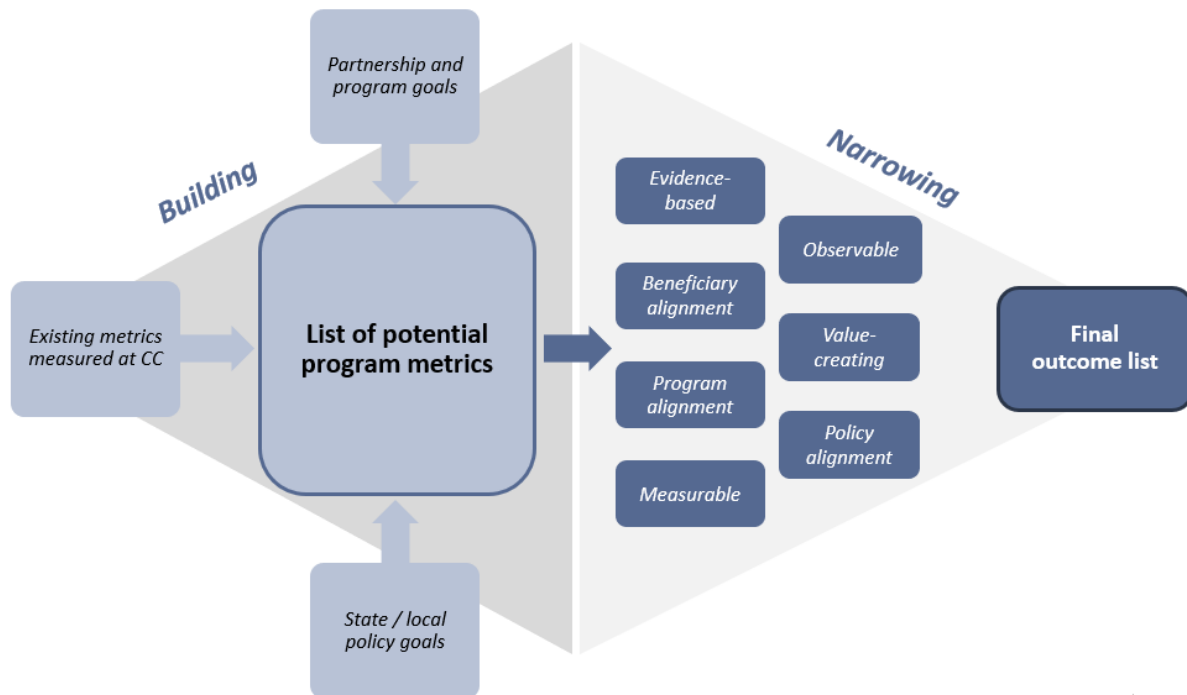
## GETTING STARTED

Experts identified steps that rural community colleges can take to select their outcome metrics:

| Workstream | Potential Action Steps |
|---|---|
| **Identify a comprehensive list of program metrics** | **Review sources** to build a list of potential outcomes, such as:<br>❑ Partnership's goals (see the "Clarify Partnership Goals" section)<br>❑ Metrics currently measured at the community college<br>❑ Local (state or county) policy priorities<br>❑ Funding requirements |
| **Assess potential metrics against a set of criteria to select outcomes** | ❑ Develop a list of **selection criteria** (see the "Overview" section above)<br>❑ Assess **potential outcomes** against these criteria with partners<br>❑ **Discuss areas** where assessments diverge and converge to **determine final set** of outcomes to be measured<br>❑ Decide the **frequency** that each outcome will be measured at and reported, and the **reporting organization** |

## RURAL CONSIDERATIONS:

| | Key Considerations | Potential Action Steps |
|---|---|---|
| **Assets** | **Close relationship with K-12 can improve chances of student success.** Community colleges are key institutions within rural communities, which allows for more opportunities to collaborate with local K-12 schools. This leads to a better understanding of student needs, which helps identify metrics that affect performance. | ❑ Collaborate with the K-12 systems **early in the development of the partnership** to gain buy-in and build trust<br>❑ Work with middle and high schools to **raise awareness** about community college offerings with students and parents |
| **Challenges** | **Limited capacity of institutional research (IR) departments.** Many rural community colleges do not have robust IR departments:<br><br>1. IR departments are often understaffed, and employees wear many hats—on average, a public, rural, two-year institution has less than 2.5 FTEs working on institutional research. [24] | ❑ **Adding IR capacity through temporary staffing:** Beaver County Community College, which initially had one IR FTE, improved the college's data scorecard by hiring two graduate student interns. [26]<br>❑ **Advancing IR capacity beyond compliance:** Tallahassee Community College invested in a data warehouse and knowledge management system to |

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[24] The National Survey of IR Offices from the American Institute of Research found that public, two-years with less than 5,000 students have 2.33 FTE working on IR on average; average of three-year average enrollment at rural, public, two-year institutions is ~4,400.

[26] Achieving the Dream

| | |
|---|---|
| 2. IR departments primarily focus on mandatory data reporting (e.g. state requests for data) and not programmatic analysis. [25] | reduce the amount of time staff spent on producing reports. [27] |
| | ❑ **Expand IR capacity through reorganization:** Durham Technical Community College centralized all research and planning functions into one office, leading to increased staff productivity levels. [28] |

**EXEMPLAR IN PRACTICE:** West Hills College—Coalinga's (WHCC) Partnership with The Wonderful Company

*Overview.* The partnership between WHCC, The Wonderful Company, and the local K-12 system provides dual enrollment opportunities for local middle and high school students. Students can major in Plant Science or Agriculture Science Technology, with the goal of graduating from high school with an associate degree.

*Journey to date.* The partnership is rooted in the need to increase educational attainment in the Central Valley, especially for the agriculture industry. WHCC and The Wonderful Company conducted a skills mapping exercise to develop an effective program and determine high-level goals, which was a foundational component of building this collaborative, industry-informed pathway program. They identified the skills missing from job applicants but found in successful employees to build skills maps, which led to the creation of rubrics to evaluate student mastery. WHCC employees then developed performance tasks to provide students with opportunities to explicitly practice identified skills. This development of the skills maps and rubrics provided a way to assess student growth and a common language for students, instructors, and the industry.

Building the list of metrics: After determining overall project outcomes, West Hills developed a more detailed list of outcome metrics by aggregating metrics from multiple parties involved in the partnership. Examples include:
- 80% retention rate per cohort: required by The Wonderful Company
- 80% course pass rate: an overall goal for all West Hills College courses
- Enrollment trends, time to completion, completion type (degree, certification, transfer), average course load, average GPA, participation in work-based learning: Student data from feeder high schools
- Course success rate, course units completed, persistence rate, job placement rate, completion of transfer level math/English, demographic data, completion type (degree,

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[25] Association for Institutional Research: The fields are "Data reporting—mandatory: federal requests for data"; "Data reporting—guide books / rankings / surveys; IPEDS data reporting"; "Factbook development or equivalent"; "Data reporting—mandatory: state / district requests for data"

[27] Achieving the Dream

[28] Ibid

certification, transfer), transfer rate: required by the California's Community College Chancellor's Office

Many of these reporting requirements are built into the funding model for the program, but West Hills identified additional student success indicators. They analyzed what additional variables, such as a student's grades and course selection, may affect the program's ability to accomplish the goals.

Tracking outcomes: After building this list, the WHCC IR team played a critical role in developing customized reports and dashboards reflecting standard college reporting metrics disaggregated by dual enrollment status.  These data tools enable West Hills employees to access this data on a regular basis to improve the program and ensure that students are on track for success. For example, West Hills regularly reviews transcripts of high school students (via Tableau reports) at the end of each semester to ensure each student is on track to complete the required coursework. If a student is struggling, West Hills employees can guide the student toward a credit recovery plan to help them get back on track to complete the program on time.

Prioritizing outcome metrics: To adapt to the different needs of each partner, West Hills prioritizes specific outcomes depending on the partner with whom they are communicating. For example, West Hills presents course retention rate, pass rate, and placement rates to The Wonderful Company. This provides the company leaders with context needed to make decisions on program improvement.

Additionally, West Hills holds data summits twice a year with their K-12 education partners to discuss dual enrollment challenges, success, and needs. During these sessions, West Hills shares enrollment trends, time to completion, and individual course grade trends. This allows for the K-12 partners to track student outcomes in the aggregate by college and by individual high school campus.  West Hills also provides weekly grade checks to the leadership at each partner high school as part of a comprehensive student support program, which includes early alert notifications, counseling, and supplemental instruction.

A comprehensive method of identifying, measuring, and analyzing outcome metrics has helped West Hills and its K-12 partners build a strong system of data-driven programmatic improvement with a focus on student success. They have been able to identify and scale promising practices, secure additional grant funding to replicate this model, and advocate for dual enrollment to be granted formal program status within the college. Their success can be seen through more than 100 students graduating from the program, completing four years of work-based learning with The Wonderful Company and earning an associate degree from WHCC by the summer following high school graduation.

# Identify Initial Funding Model
## How will the partnership recoup its costs?

### OVERVIEW

As the structure of a partnership is being established, the college and its partners should identify funding sources to start the program. While a community college workforce partnership may start as a "side-of-the-desk" project, a successful one requires dedicated time from staff members—prompting a need for early funding.

Though the partnerships profiled in this report took different paths to fund initial expenses, experts highlighted a few best practices:

**Figure 12. Best Practices for Funding the Initial Years of a Workforce Partnership**

| | |
|---|---|
| Utilize a braided funding scheme | Drawing from multiple sources decreases reliance on a single funding stream; employers and other partners may feel more invested in a partnership after making a financial contribution |
| Use external funding to cover (most of) the start-up costs | External funds can act as a catalyst for the program by quickly infusing capital for initial costs (such as equipment and facilities) |
| When communicating with funders, highlight the college's financial contributions | Multiple funders stated a preference for colleges having financial "skin in the game;" as such, colleges should highlight their investments when reaching out to potential funders |
| Build out financial projections | Estimate the program's start-up and operating costs and revenue streams (such as tuition or employer contributions) |

If the community college is looking for external funding, the following organizations could serve as funders. Our partnership research found that two sources were used more frequently than others: employers and state grants. To focus initial efforts, they may serve as a logical place to start.

**Figure 13. Potential Sources of External Funding**

| | |
|---|---|
| Employers | Monetary or in-kind contributions from employers that benefit from programs |
| State Government | Includes flow through federal dollars; tends to come with many requirements |

| | |
|---|---|
| Local Government | Includes flow through federal / state dollars; tends to come with fewer requirements |
| Federal Government | Grant initiatives, such as Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT); tends to come with many requirements |
| Philanthropy | Includes foundations, corporate, and individual giving; competitive to receive |

However, if traditional funding sources are not available or sufficient, innovative financing models, such as the ones below, may be helpful.

**Figure 14. Examples of Innovative Funding Models from Community College Workforce Partnerships**

| | Pay to Stay | Employer Tuition Coverage | Earn and Learn |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Example:** |  MCC Monroe Community College STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK |  LAKE AREA TECHNICAL COLLEGE |  LAKE MICHIGAN COLLEGE |
| **How it works:** | **Students:** get placed into jobs at local manufacturing companies<br><br>**Employers and students:** each get $1,500 bonus if the employee is retained for 1 year after hire date<br><br>**County:** makes bonus payments | **Endowment:** funded by local philanthropist to support Build Dakota Scholarships<br><br>**Students:** receive full-ride if they stay in local job for 3 years<br><br>**Employers:** can sponsor students and cover part of scholarship (Build Dakota Scholarships covers the rest) | **Students:** paid up to $12/hr to get hands-on training at local employer<br><br>**Employers:** cover upfront wage costs<br><br>**Endowment:** with funding from local foundation, repays 70% of costs based on student wages and persistence |
| **What it means:** | **Community college and students bear financial risk** if student doesn't graduate or get placed in job<br><br>**Government pays** for retention **outcomes** | **Community college and students bear financial risk** if student doesn't graduate or stay in job<br><br>**Endowment and employer pay** for retention **outcomes** | **Employer bears financial risk** if student does not finish training<br><br>**Endowment pays** for completion and earnings **outcomes** |

Lastly, experts emphasized that funding sources often change throughout the duration of a workforce program. Typically, the programs are more reliant on external sources during the pre-launch and first few years. Afterwards, the programs should look to cover their costs through generated revenue, such as additional tuition. This process is further explained in the "Ensure Ongoing Sustainability" section.

## GETTING STARTED

Experts identified steps that rural community colleges can take to identify an initial funding model:

| Workstream | Potential Action Steps |
|---|---|
| **Build financial projections** | Estimate the **program's revenues and costs**:<br>❑ Estimate the revenues that will come into the community college because of this program<br>❑ Put together a budget based on the program structure (though general operating budget assumptions could also be used)<br>❑ Consider both the short-term (1-2 years) and medium-term (3-5 years) when planning financials<br><br>Work with the **finance department**:<br>❑ Establish a financial goal for the program (e.g. breakeven)<br>❑ Identify how much funding the college can and is willing to provide |
| **Explore external funding sources** | Have conversations with **program partners:**<br>❑ Come prepared with a specific ask for each partner<br>❑ Highlight why this is beneficial for each partner<br><br>Research **potential workforce grant opportunities** provided by:<br>❑ State agencies and entities (e.g. Department of Labor, Department of Workforce Development)<br>❑ Federal agencies (e.g. Department of Labor, Department of Education Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education)<br>❑ Local agencies and entities (e.g. county or town workforce development boards)<br>❑ Philanthropy (e.g. community foundations, national foundations) |
| **Explore innovative funding models (if needed)** | Replicate innovative funding models from **other colleges**, such as:<br>❑ Monroe Manufactures Jobs at Monroe County Community College<br>❑ Earn and Learn at Lake Michigan College<br>❑ Build Dakota Scholarships at South Dakota Technical Institutes |

## RURAL CONSIDERATIONS

| | Key Considerations | Potential Action Steps |
|---|---|---|
| **Assets** | **Power of local relationships**. As mentioned in the "Identify Potential Partners," "Assess the Demand," and "Align on Structure" sections, leaders in rural communities tend to be more connected through their professional or personal lives (e.g. Rotary Club, board membership). | ❑ Community college leaders can **lean on their existing relationships** when making funding requests to local organizations (such as employers and town or county government agencies) |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Challenges** | **Funding requirements.** Some funding opportunities—often state and federal grants—come with minimum program enrollment requirements. This can be especially challenging for rural institutions, where fewer students are available to sign up for classes. | ❑ Community colleges can work with **local economic development agencies and job centers** to proactively recruit potential students into the program<br>❑ In the grant application, community colleges can reach out to the government agency and **request an exemption** from the minimum enrollment requirement |
| | **Declines in local tax bases.** Due to migration out of rural areas and economies that never fully recovered after the Great Recession, rural community colleges have seen a decrease in funding. As a result, they may have more limited budgets to allocate. | ❑ Community college leaders could look for **creative ideas** to bring in more and earlier funding. For example, if they have an equipped training facility, they can rent it out to employers who need to train their staff<br>❑ Solicit **in-kind donations**, especially when they can offset cash expenses (e.g. equipment, food, utilities)<br>❑ Once the program is up-and-running, the community college could **offer technical assistance** to other colleges looking to start similar programs |

**NORTHEAST** STATE
*We're here to get you there*

**EXEMPLAR IN PRACTICE:** Regional Center for Advanced Manufacturing (RCAM)

*Overview.* In 2008, RCAM was launched by Northeast State Community College, in partnership with northeast Tennessee manufacturing leaders and local and state government, to provide industrial training and education to the local workforce.

*Journey to date.* Early in the partnership, Northeast State relied heavily on braided funding and resources from local employers and the state to cover the start-up and early operational expenses.

Facilities: Two external funding streams were instrumental in building out the training facility. First, Domtar, a paper mill, donated an old plant to be repurposed as the training ground for RCAM. Then, Northeast State applied for and received a $10 million grant from the state's Department of Economic and Community Development to build out the space and procure the needed equipment.

Personnel: Eastman Chemical Company, a major local manufacturer and key partner, wanted to

make sure that the programs at RCAM were well aligned with the skills that they needed. To do this, they lent employees to serve as instructors when Northeast State needed subject matter experts. Additionally, Eastman seconded an employee to work closely with the community college's leadership as the RCAM Director. This ensured that the community college's programs accounted for the industries' needs. This process is also described in the "Align on Structure" section.

Scholarships: Northeast State realized that tuition presented barriers to entry and completion for students, prompting Eastman to endow a workforce development scholarship program that provides financial support for students.

However, the program did not entirely rely on external funding in the early years. Northeast State contributed to the financial picture of the program by hiring new staff (such as retired Eastman employees to serve as adjunct faculty) and allocating time from existing staff.

This initial braided funding model catalyzed a program that is now in its eleventh year of operation. While the funding sources have shifted over time—with more of the responsibility falling to Northeast State as the program became a major revenue generator—the commitment to high-quality education and training remain the same.

# Troubleshoot and Adapt

## How will performance be monitored and pain points addressed?

### OVERVIEW

A data-driven approach to continuous improvement supports the long-term success of a community college workforce partnership by allowing leaders to regularly assess how a program is performing against key performance indicators and use that information to improve operations. Figure 15 illustrates the common steps in a data-driven cycle of improvement. These steps entail continuously collecting and sharing data, analyzing it for insights, identifying and prioritizing solutions, and implementing course corrections.

**Figure 15. Cycle of Programmatic Improvement**
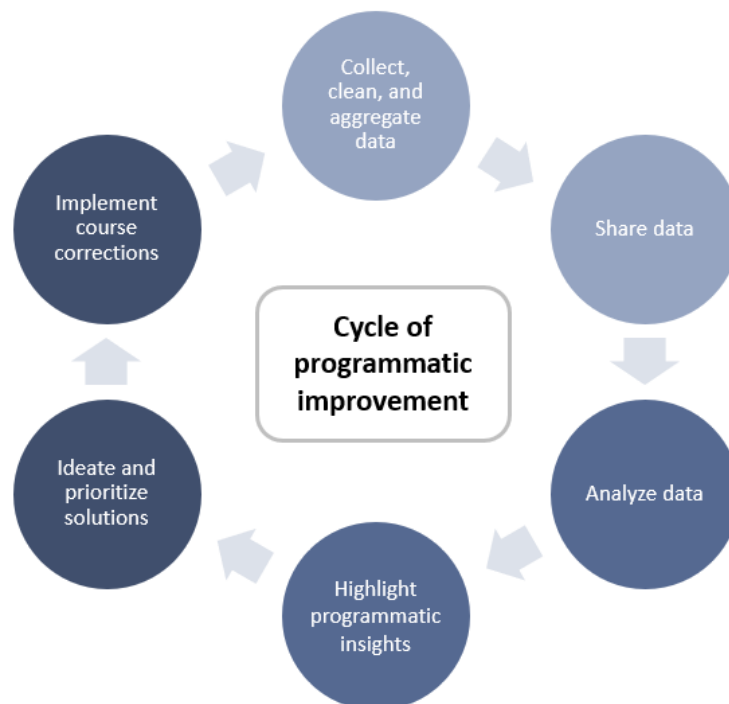


In addition to using data to proactively identify challenges, community colleges can anticipate issues that might arise based on learnings from their other programs and peer institutions. When we asked industry experts to identify critical challenges for workforce programs, the following pain points came up most frequently:

**Figure 16. Common Partnership Pain Points and Potential Action Steps**

| Pain Points | Examples | Potential Action Steps |
|---|---|---|
| **Student attrition** | • Decrease in number of students enrolling in program<br>• Decrease in number of students persisting in program<br>• Decrease in number of students obtaining a job | ❑ Provide wraparound supports<br>❑ Explore dual enrollment<br>❑ Re-assess labor market needs<br>❑ Phase out a program and/or form a new partnership |
| **Limited resources** | • Limited staff capacity (e.g. faculty, institutional research department staff)<br>• Limited funding availability<br>• Lack of a strong career center or workforce department | ❑ Use adjunct faculty from partners<br>❑ Braid funding sources<br>❑ Use third-party organizations to receive technical assistance |
| **Communication** | • Challenges in articulating the value proposition<br>• Feelings of competition between partners<br>• Misaligned responsibilities | ❑ Deepen community college President engagement<br>❑ Identify a "boundary crosser" to help unite partners<br>❑ Use third-party organizations to facilitate conversations |
| **Labor market demand changes** | • Industry migration<br>• New types of workforce opportunities due to new industries/employers<br>• Change in specific skills needed for workforce opportunities | ❑ Take a regional (vs. community) approach to aggregate demand across employers outside the college's catchment area<br>❑ Re-assess labor market needs<br>❑ Form advisory committees |

## GETTING STARTED

Experts identified steps that rural community college leaders can take to troubleshoot and adapt:

| Workstream | Potential Action Steps |
|---|---|
| **Develop data-driven evaluation and monitoring process** | ❑ Appoint a data **analytics and evaluation champion** within the IR department<br>❑ Start **collecting data** around the program's key performance metrics (including those defined in the "Prioritize Outcome Metrics" section)<br>❑ **Analyze the data regularly** to highlight programmatic insights, such as trends, strengths, and/or challenges<br>❑ **Share these insights** with internal stakeholders, such as the program director, instructors, and community college leadership |

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| **Make data-informed decisions to improve the program** | If the insights point toward **potential improvements** to the program:<br>❑ Bring together **internal stakeholders** to identify potential actions<br>❑ If the decision impacts other organizations and/or is critical to the program, **engage external partners** in the decision-making process<br>❑ Review the data as a team and **come to a decision** |
| **Implement course corrections** | ❑ **Identify sources for funding** for proposed changes<br>❑ **Develop a pilot program** to test whether the solution is effective<br>❑ **Incorporate the plan** into next year's evaluation metrics |
| **Anticipate potential challenges** | ❑ Review learnings from other **workforce programs at the college** to understand their challenges and how they addressed them<br>❑ Host **focus groups with potential students** (e.g. from local high schools) to identify student needs (see "Understand the Students" section)<br>❑ Have **one-on-one conversations** with **HR administrators** from employer partners (e.g. VP of HR) to understand lessons they have learned from past workforce partnerships<br>❑ **Connect with other community college leaders** to learn from their experiences with workforce programs |

## RURAL CONSIDERATIONS

| | Key Considerations | Potential Action Steps |
|---|---|---|
| **Assets** | **Power of local relationships**. As mentioned in the "Identify Potential Partners," "Assess the Demand," "Align on Structure," and "Identify Initial Funding Model" sections, leaders in rural communities tend to be more connected through their professional or personal lives. | ❑ Leverage existing relationships with local employers and workforce experts to invite them to **sit on advisory committees** to help improve the workforce program |
| **Challenges** | **Limited capacity of institutional research (IR) departments.** As mentioned in the "Prioritize Outcome Metrics" section, many rural community colleges do not have robust IR departments due to understaffing [29] and a | ❑ **Adding IR capacity through temporary staffing:** Beaver County Community College, which initially had one IR FTE, improved the college's data scorecard by hiring two graduate student interns [31]<br>❑ **Advancing IR capacity beyond compliance:** Tallahassee Community College invested in a data warehouse and |

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[29] The National Survey of IR Offices from the American Institute of Research found that public, two-years with less than 5,000 students have 2.33 FTE working on IR on average; average of three-year average enrollment at rural, public, two-year institutions is ~4,400.
[31] Achieving the Dream

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| focus on mandatory data reporting over programmatic analysis.[30] | knowledge management system to reduce the amount of time staff spent on producing reports [32]<br>❑ **Expand IR capacity through reorganization:** Durham Technical Community College centralized all research and planning functions into one office, leading to increased staff productivity levels [33] |
| **Challenge in finding necessary staff.** Finding experts to lead program evaluation and monitoring systems with relevant data analysis skills can be challenging due to smaller population sizes in rural communities and a difficulty to attract prospective employees to move or commute to a rural area. | ❑ **Hire workers** from employer partners to lead the program or as IR staff as they have the content expertise and understand employer needs. For example, West Hills College hired staff from The Wonderful Company to lead their dual enrollment programs<br>❑ For a longer-term solution, **build a program at the college** that will train the needed talent. The college could also work **with a nearby four-year institution** to train the needed talent. For example, MGCCC has worked with the University of Southern Mississippi to ensure that the graduates of their PhD program in higher education research have the relevant skills to join MGCCC's IR team |

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[30] Association for Institutional Research: The fields are "Data reporting—mandatory: federal requests for data"; "Data reporting—guide books / rankings / surveys; IPEDS data reporting"; "Factbook development or equivalent"; "Data reporting—mandatory: state / district requests for data"

[32] Achieving the Dream

[33] Ibid

**EXEMPLAR IN PRACTICE:** Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College (MGCCC)

*Overview* MGCCC is home to several strong workforce partnerships, such as the Instrumentation and Controls Academy and Shipbuilding Apprenticeship program, that exemplify how to troubleshoot programmatic issues and adapt to improve outcomes. According to Jonathan Woodward, Executive Vice President of Teaching and Learning at MGCCC:

> **"In order for us to stay relevant in a fast-paced world, we have chosen to fuse together strategy and execution. It is a plan to continually make adjustments and, periodically, dramatic pivots."**

*Journey to date.*

<u>Collecting, Sharing, and Analyzing Data</u>: MGCCC has a strong institutional research (IR) department focused on supplying real-time data to drive decision-making. For example, the department developed a dynamic tool to automate data collection and analysis. This allows MGCCC to understand the health of a program by looking at key indicators, such as enrollment, graduation, and placement rates. Employees across MGCCC utilize Tableau reports built by the IR department to make relevant and timely programmatic decisions.



Over time, the team evolved from focusing on compliance-related data reports to providing interactive program metrics—largely due to the vision and push of an influential champion within the department and support from the administration. Since then, MGCCC shared that the success of their IR department is directly correlated with the talent that they hire. Their advice to other community colleges is to hire employees who understand data analytics, computer programming, and data visualization.

MGCCC also collects qualitative data from employer partners through informal and formal communications. For example, the MGCCC point of contact and the employer counterpart at Ingalls Shipbuilding interact daily and formally meet bi-weekly to discuss program effectiveness, including but not limited to class retention, instructor loads, and average grades. This ensures that the partnership team has a pulse on the day-to-day operations and can identify required adaptations quickly.

Using Data to Develop Insights and Solutions: Every MGCCC program has an advisory committee comprised of subject matter experts, employer partners, and college administration. During the biannual or quarterly meetings, the committee reviews detailed programmatic reports (created by the IR department), qualitative employer feedback, and industry best practices to assess whether the curriculum is relevant to current industry standards.



Executing Course Corrections: Once MGCCC determines a program needs improvement, the partnership team follows these core principles:
1. Consider whether the specific issue can be improved or if the course needs to be terminated
2. If the issue can be solved, explore what specific solutions might address them
3. Implement solutions into the program, potentially tapping into resources (e.g. adjunct professors or necessary machinery) from employer partners as needed
4. Incorporate the plan into next year's evaluation and methodology goals

MGCCC followed this process to convert an electronics program into the Instrumentation and Controls (I&C) program. When reviewing programmatic data, MGCCC found that the electronics program had low enrollment but was stumped on why that was the case. This prompted the college to talk to their employer partners, industry experts, and their advisory committee to understand if there was a disconnect between the course curriculum and industry practices. Based on these conversations, MGCCC made changes throughout the program, from updating the equipment to moving from a narrower (electronics) to broader topic (I&C), to better align with the industry needs.

Brock Clark, the Dean of Workforce Development at MGCCC, describes the changes by saying:

**"Sometimes, companies express a specific need around which a program is developed, but then, the needs of the company change … [The I&C program] is an example of this metamorphosis, and it is now one of the strongest programs. It is very popular with students."**

# Ensure Ongoing Sustainability
## How will the partnership remain resourced and relevant?

### OVERVIEW

When developing a community college workforce partnership, partners should plan for sustainability to achieve long-lasting impact. As programs move past their first few years of operations and their initial sources of funding decrease, community college leaders should re-assess their funding models. Over the course of a program's lifecycle, a program typically becomes less reliant on external sources as earned revenue and internal allocations increase.

Another component to ensuring sustainability is securing institutional buy-in from college leaders, including faculty. This allows the partnership to flourish, even if there is turnover with members in the program. Importantly, community college leaders should consistently review how the program aligns with student, college, and industry needs to ensure the program remains relevant.

### GETTING STARTED

Experts identified steps that rural community colleges can take to ensure ongoing sustainability:

| Workstream | Potential Action Steps |
|---|---|
| **Reassess financial models** | After the first few years of operations, review **program costs and revenues and ask:**<br>❑ Will the program be able to offset costs after external funding runs out? If not, what adjustments are needed?<br>❑ How can the partnership make sure there is sustained revenue from the program itself? |
| **Continuously look for additional sources of funding** | Encourage employers to help **cover ongoing costs** by:<br>❑ Funding tuition for students<br>❑ Lending their employees to the college to serve as instructors<br>❑ Provide in-kind contributions through equipment or machinery<br><br>Work with **the IR department** to highlight important outcomes to include in grant applications, such as:<br>❑ Retention rate, graduation rate, transfer rates, and placement rates for state and federal grants<br>❑ Outcomes disaggregated by race and gender for philanthropy |

| | ❑ Earn accreditation status from the Department of Education so that **students can be eligible for financial aid** |
|---|---|
| **Secure institutional buy-in from the college** | **Establish importance of the program** for the college and the community:<br>❑ Include faculty and administrative members in designing the program to gain buy-in<br>❑ Highlight program success (e.g. high job placement rates, sustained enrollment), lessons learned, and alignment with college goals<br>❑ Build high-level program goals into the long-term strategic plan of the college<br>❑ Collect evidence that the program has improved the community, such as an increased employment rate |
| **Determine program relevance by revisiting questions posed in the "Exploring" stage** | Understand the Students:<br>❑ Is the program continuing to meet the needs of the students, and are any key groups being left out or experiencing different outcomes?<br><br>Identify Potential Partners:<br>❑ Is the community college maintaining existing relationships and developing new ones to create long-term support and trust?<br><br>Assess the Demand:<br>❑ Is the program still valuable to employer(s) and students?<br><br>Clarify Partnership Goals:<br>❑ Does the mission still unite partners and incorporate each of their objectives?<br>❑ How might have partners' objectives changed and how can partnerships adapt? |

## RURAL CONSIDERATIONS

| | **Key Considerations** | **Potential Action Steps** |
|---|---|---|
| **Assets** | **Rural-specific funding.** Partnerships in rural areas may have access to funds set aside for rural geographies. Though these grant programs are limited in number, some (such as the US Department of Agriculture's Rural Development Community Facilities Direct Loan program) can provide significant funds. | ❑ Connect with **local economic development agency** officials or **rural community college membership organizations** to identify rural-specific funding opportunities |
| **Challenges** | **Funding requirements.** Some funding opportunities—often, state and federal grants—come with minimum program enrollment requirements. This can be especially challenging for rural institutions, | ❑ Community colleges can work with **local economic development agencies and job centers** to proactively recruit potential students into the program |

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|---|---|
| where fewer students are available to sign up for classes. | ❑ In the grant application, community colleges can reach out to the government agency and **request an exemption** from the minimum enrollment requirement |
| **Limited number of businesses in some rural communities.** In rural communities, a lower concentration of employers (e.g. only 1-2 major employers) means that, for community college programs that are dependent on employer funding, the risk of losing a critical revenue source might be higher in a rural environment than an urban environment | ❑ To minimize this risk, community college leaders should find ways to **diversify their revenue streams** through program tuition and other external sources<br>❑ Identify the needs of **multiple regional employers** to build programs in a way that allows them to pull in other employers if necessary |
| **Declines in local tax bases.** As mentioned in the "Identify Initial Funding Model" section, due to migration out of rural areas and economies that never fully recovered after the Great Recession, rural community colleges have seen a decrease in funding. As a result, they may have more limited budgets to allocate. | ❑ Look for **creative ideas** to bring in more and earlier funding. For example, if they have an equipped training facility, they can rent it out to employers who need to train their staff.<br>❑ Solicit **in-kind donations**, especially when they can offset cash expenses (e.g. equipment, food, utilities)<br>❑ Once the program is up-and-running, the community college could **offer technical assistance** to other colleges looking to start similar programs |

### EXEMPLAR IN PRACTICE: Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College's (MGCCC) Shipbuilding Apprenticeships

*Overview.* MGCCC's shipbuilding apprenticeship program began in the 1950's and has been a successful mainstay within the community. The program's longevity can be partially attributed to deep buy-in from the college and their employer partner, Ingalls Shipbuilding.

*Journey to date.* MGCCC's strong relationship with Ingalls has been sustained by strong program outcomes, such as employee retention rates of 90-95%. Ingalls was happy to provide programmatic and financial support for the successful program. Similarly, the shipbuilding apprenticeship has support within MGCCC from the college operations staff working onsite at Ingalls' training center to the President, Dr. Mary Graham.

This buy-in across the different levels of the partnership proved to be extremely helpful when MGCCC was developing their long-term strategic plan. Leaders and program directors showcased the power of the program by pointing to its evidence base. They highlighted how the program has positively impacted community development by creating local jobs and meeting the needs of one of

MGCCC's most important partners. By clearly articulating the program's value, MGCCC's leaders built the case for the college to incorporate the high-level outcomes aligned with the shipbuilding apprenticeship program into the college's strategic plan. The program is a priority for the college due to its interconnectedness with the overall success metrics of the college (i.e. job placement rates and strong employer and community engagement).

MGCCC's longstanding apprenticeship program illustrates how strong partner relationships and internal buy-in is essential for a program to establish long-term impact within the community. Dr. Jonathan Woodward, Executive Vice President of Teaching and Learning at MGCCC, summarizes the partnership by saying:

**"[Our partnership with] Ingalls is an ideal example of a public—private partnership… We have been in a relationship [with them] for over 50 years."**

# Conclusion
## A call to action for rural community college leaders

**The future of our nation's rural workforce system—and the lives of millions of students—rests on community college leaders.** For the 350 rural community colleges across the country collectively serving nearly 1 million students each year,[34] the responsibility to build effective workforce partnerships that enhance student outcomes and support community prosperity has never been more important. Today's community college leaders have an opportunity to make meaningful progress on challenges we have endeavored to address for decades—income inequality, wealth inequality, economic mobility, and racial disparities. Population emigration, technology barriers, and limited transportation infrastructure are a few of the many challenges rural workforce partnerships face. But rural community college leaders also have tremendous assets at their disposal, including close relationships, convening power, and community pride, as well as their own staff and students. By building on these strengths, adopting best practices, and learning from exemplars, community college leaders can propel students toward gainful employment and bright futures.
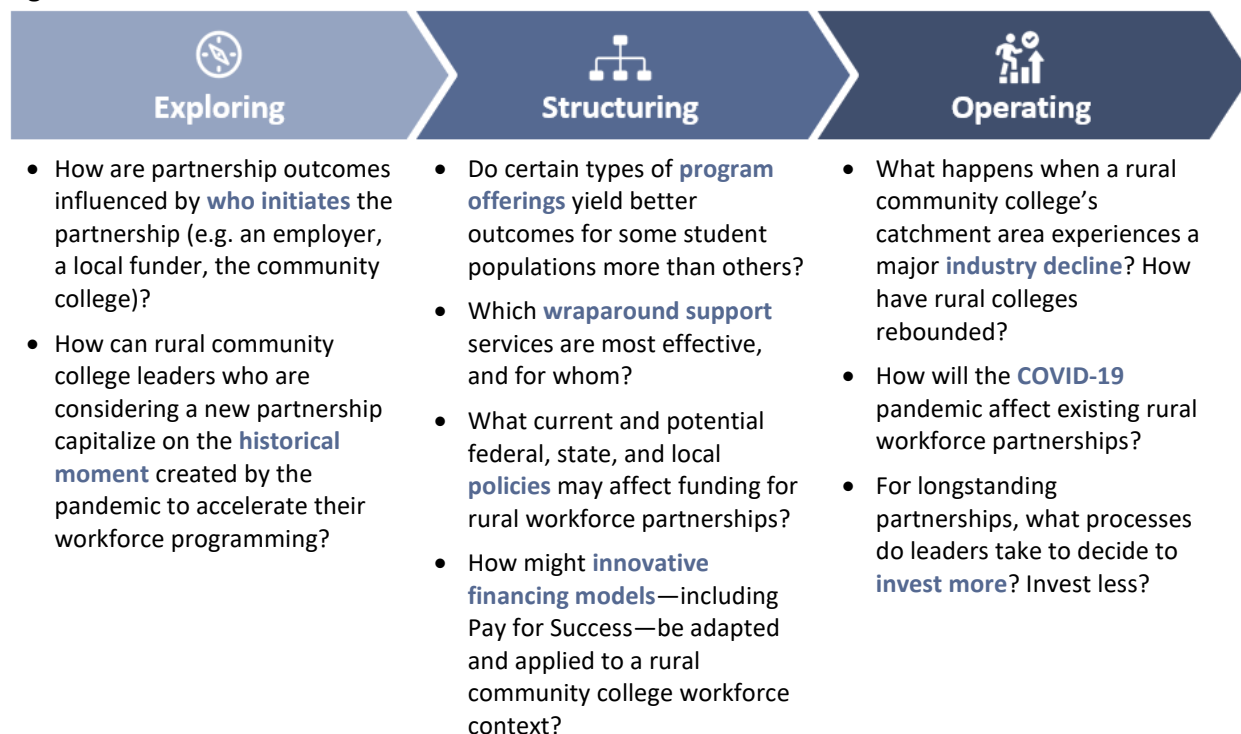
**This report is both a roadmap and a compass.** Weaving together the many specific "practices" surfaced through our research are a set of general "principles" that can help rural community college leaders address unforeseen challenges that may arise in their partnership journey. These principles include maintaining an asset-focused mindset, listening attentively to the needs of others, designing partnerships with students at the center, defining outcomes clearly, making data-driven decisions, establishing strong governance and accountability, and continuously improving. Community college leaders and their partners can adopt these principles as they chart the direction for their collaboration.

**Our research also reinforced a foundational imperative underlying all these principles: to embed a rural focus into our nation's workforce efforts.** For employers, expanding their footprint into rural areas near a community college can create opportunities to build robust talent pipelines and strong community relationships, while operating facilities in lower-cost areas. For philanthropy, deploying capital toward critical wraparound service providers and promising workforce programs in rural areas can help address the unique needs of students in these communities. For government, adopting a rural lens can reveal potential policy interventions, such as broadband provision, investment in transportation infrastructure, tax incentives for specific industries, refined procedures for reporting rural labor market data, and rural-focused workforce development grants. And for students, enrolling in a rural community college can mean attending one of the region's go-to workforce training hubs and gaining direct access to in-demand jobs at the college's employer partners.

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[34] Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System

**As with all research, the best practices surfaced through our exploration stir up more questions for further research.** As shown in Figure 17, these questions span the workforce partnership journey:

**Figure 17. Areas for Future Research**

| Exploring | Structuring | Operating |
|---|---|---|
| • How are partnership outcomes influenced by **who initiates** the partnership (e.g. an employer, a local funder, the community college)? <br><br> • How can rural community college leaders who are considering a new partnership capitalize on the **historical moment** created by the pandemic to accelerate their workforce programming? | • Do certain types of **program offerings** yield better outcomes for some student populations more than others? <br><br> • Which **wraparound support** services are most effective, and for whom? <br><br> • What current and potential federal, state, and local **policies** may affect funding for rural workforce partnerships? <br><br> • How might **innovative financing models**—including Pay for Success—be adapted and applied to a rural community college workforce context? | • What happens when a rural community college's catchment area experiences a major **industry decline**? How have rural colleges rebounded? <br><br> • How will the **COVID-19** pandemic affect existing rural workforce partnerships? <br><br> • For longstanding partnerships, what processes do leaders take to decide to **invest more**? Invest less? |

**Above all, we hope that this report and subsequent research lead to action.** Whether it's launching a student survey, forging a new employer relationship, convening potential funders, revamping an outdated curriculum, or experimenting with a new financing model, the decisions community college leaders make in the months and years ahead can secure the vibrancy of our rural communities and bolster our competitiveness as a nation. The experts and exemplars whose experiences are reflected in this report instill us with hope and optimism for the path ahead. We look forward to learning from and with rural community college leaders and their partners as they use the information in this report to improve workforce outcomes for students.