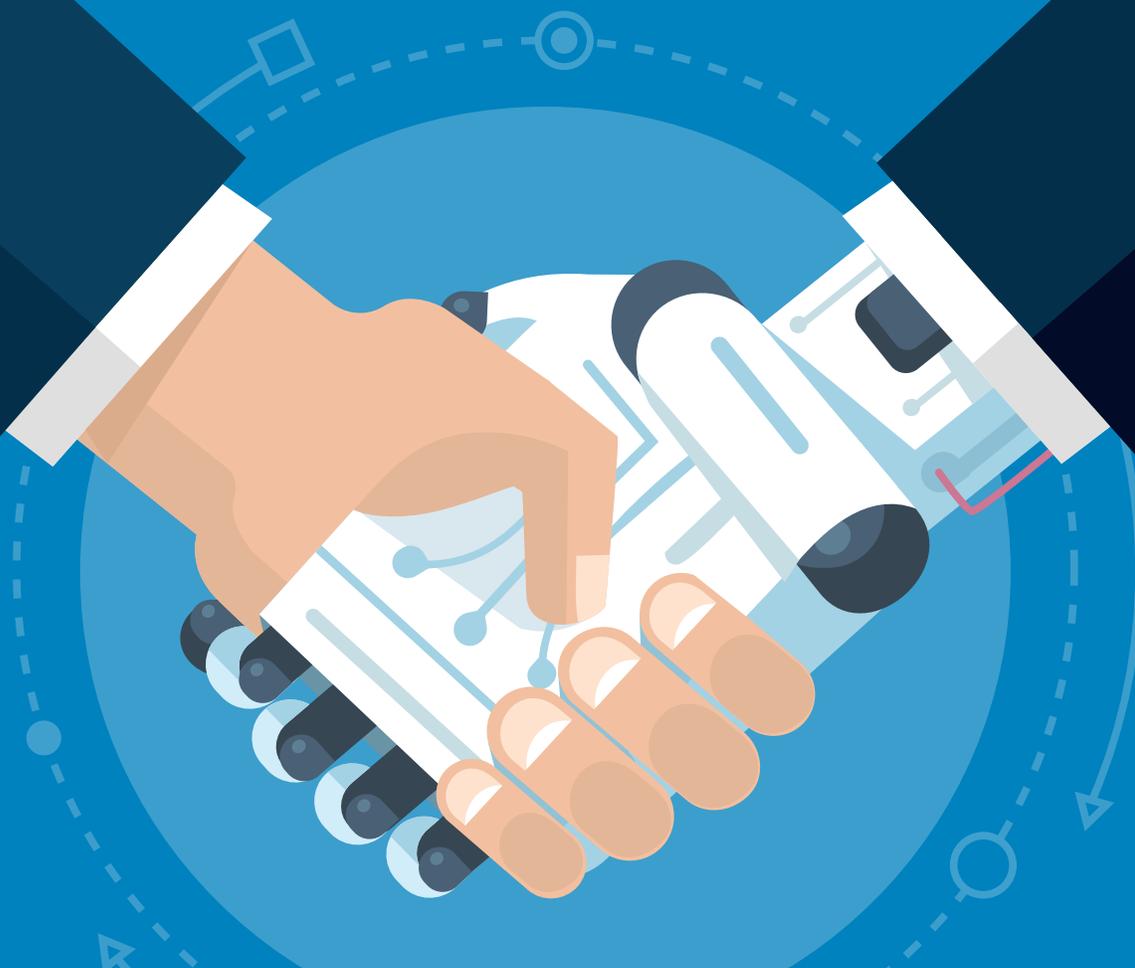


# PARTNERSHIPS FOR A FUTURE-READY WORKFORCE

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Community colleges and businesses have a shared interest in preparing students and existing workers to be successful in their careers. Community colleges seek to educate and train individuals in their community to have the knowledge and skills for current jobs and long-term career opportunities. Employers seek employees with both job-specific skills and employability skills to meet their current and future business needs. Given these shared interests, community colleges and businesses have a clear opportunity to form close partnerships to shape postsecondary education and workforce training. In this report, we detail how community colleges and businesses can form strong partnerships; national trends in employer needs and postsecondary attainment; and policies and practices that form a continuum of education and job training. Furthermore, we highlight five examples of innovative postsecondary education and workforce development initiatives from South Carolina; Washington; Miami-Dade County, Florida; Maricopa County, Arizona; and Maryland. These examples highlight how community colleges and businesses can partner directly or through broader partnerships also involving K-12 school systems, four-year colleges and universities, state government agencies, and industry organizations.

## Community College and Business Partnerships

Developing partnerships with businesses and industries are a cornerstone of the community college model. As drivers of local workforces, community colleges must work closely with area businesses to properly equip their students with the knowledge and skills needed for successful careers. Collaboration can include identifying 1) the capabilities of students and existing employees; 2) current job and career availability and the necessary skills; and 3) how to align individuals' skills and business needs through academic programs and work-based learning opportunities.

A criticism of the postsecondary education sector is that institutions are slow to respond to business needs and technological changes.<sup>1</sup> Working closely with businesses can help community colleges more quickly learn of business needs and keep program offerings up-to-date. Conversely, it is also important for businesses to learn of their local community college's capacity to offer new programs—such as funding or available faculty—and requirements based on legislation, regulation, and accreditation standards. Successful partnerships often rest on how well community colleges and employers understand each other's needs and challenges. Appointing a designated liaison with knowledge of both the postsecondary and business sectors can facilitate mutual understanding and collaboration towards shared goals.<sup>2</sup>

## Trends in Employer Needs and Postsecondary Attainment

In today's labor market, employers are increasingly seeking a trained workforce with a postsecondary degree or credential. Employers also seek to meet new business needs resulting from increased digital technologies and automation in the work place. Recent research points to several national trends in employer demand, including:

- Most available jobs are middle-skill—meaning they require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year degree.<sup>3</sup>
- The share of jobs that require high levels of digital skills has risen.<sup>4</sup>
- In the next decade, many occupations and job functions characterized by physical labor or routine tasks will be replaced by automation.<sup>5</sup>



To keep pace with the changing labor market, employees will need to pursue continual education and training, especially to learn technical skills required of increasingly digital occupations. Furthermore, employees will need to develop durable, employability skills—such as teamwork and time management abilities—to succeed in non-fully automated jobs of the future that depend on human interaction and critical thinking.<sup>6</sup> Results from national polls indicate that both employers and employees recognize the importance of lifelong learning to keep pace with changing technology; however, while most employers expect individuals to gain preparation through postsecondary education, about half of Americans believe that it is their employer’s responsibility to provide the necessary education and training for their job and almost two-thirds expect their employers to pay for retraining.<sup>7</sup>

When community colleges and businesses work together, employer-based training and postsecondary education does not need to be an either-or decision for workforce development. Both sectors can work together to provide students with options to earn a postsecondary credential including formal degree programs, on-the-job training, or corporate upskilling. One target demographic for colleges and businesses is the 16% of Americans who currently have completed some college, but not earned a degree.<sup>8</sup> Many of these individuals may hold a non-degree credential, such as an occupational license or certificate.<sup>9</sup> However, many who fall in to this category are individuals who started college without completing—and thus may not have the skills needed for gainful employment and typically do not experience the economic gains of completing a degree or credential.

Beyond supporting degree attainment, community colleges and businesses have an imperative to ensure students are completing credentials aligned to the career goals that can lead to greater economic prosperity. While many community college students pursue certificates and degrees aligned with specific industries or occupations, a large portion of community college students pursue degrees in the liberal arts and humanities. Given research showing that liberal arts associate degrees have less labor market value than associate of science degrees,<sup>10</sup> community colleges must support these students with career and academic counseling and work-based learning opportunities to prepare for the job market.

## Federal Policy Landscape and Impacts on Education and Training Programs

The federal policy context can shape the extent to which community colleges and businesses can develop and sustain education and training programs; the types of programs colleges and businesses can offer; and students’ ability to participate. Currently, three hallmark pieces of federal legislation shape postsecondary education and career training:

1. **The Higher Education Act (HEA)** authorizes funding for grants to postsecondary institutions, such as for institutional development and student support services. HEA also authorizes financial aid for students in the form of grants, loans, and work-study compensation to cover the cost of attendance.
2. **The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)** authorizes funding for state training grants supporting adults, youth, and dislocated workers.
3. **The Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Improvement Act (Perkins CTE)** authorizes funding for state grants to support career and technical education at both the secondary and postsecondary levels.



Notable trends shaping current programs and the future of workforce development, include:

- **Limited funding** has placed constraints on improving or expanding postsecondary education and career training opportunities. While federal investments in postsecondary education have increased over the past decade, increased federal funding has been offset by rapid state disinvestment since the Great Recession of 2008.<sup>11</sup> Following several decades of decreased funding for career training, cuts have continued to WIOA and Perkins CTE state grants that support programs for adults, youth, and dislocated workers.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, a loss of dedicated funding for community college career training programs and workforce development partnerships has resulted from Congress opting not to extend funding for Trade Adjustment Assistance and Community College and Career Training Grants, and for Community-Based Jobs Training Grants.<sup>13</sup> One area of increased funding for work-based learning has been for apprenticeship programs; however, the relatively small amount of funding for apprenticeships is insufficient to compensate for overall cuts to career training programs.<sup>14</sup>
- **Program flexibility and innovation** can help community colleges better meet businesses' needs and the needs of participating students, such as by reducing program length; offering options for distance education; and implementing direct assessment models to better align work and academic competencies. However, to remain eligible for federal funding, colleges must adhere to standards set by legislation, regulations, and accreditors.<sup>15</sup> Critics of loosening standards warn that experimentation can open opportunities for non-traditional education providers to abuse the federal funding system.<sup>16</sup>
- **Addressing students' financial barriers** to postsecondary education and career training is a top priority for policy makers, community colleges, and businesses alike. While many low-income community college students benefit from Pell Grants to pay for tuition, most students have unmet financial need to cover the full cost of tuition, fees, and living expenses such as housing, food, and transportation.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, currently, Pell Grants are not eligible to be used towards short-term, career-focused education and training programs; community colleges have advocated for the expansion of Pell eligibility to short-term programs to help more low-income students pursue their career goals.<sup>18</sup> Other financial assistance options for job-seekers, include WIOA funded individual training accounts (ITA); however ITA funding and requirements can vary by state and locale, and are not awarded based on students' financial need.<sup>19</sup>

## Partnership Profiles

To better understand how community colleges and businesses are working together to help students gain the necessary education and training, ACCT interviewed education and workforce development stakeholders from across the country. Some of these partnerships involve direct collaboration between the community college and a local employer, while other partnerships involve an array of stakeholders including those from the K-12 school system, four-year colleges and universities, state government agencies, and industry organizations. The partnership profiles in this report highlight different models for collaboration, as well as different strategies for postsecondary and workforce alignment.

- **The South Carolina Technical College System** offers several apprenticeship programs in partnership with regional automotive industry partners, including BMW and Michelin. The South Carolina Technical College System is also expanding apprenticeships and workforce training to growing industries in the region, including digital advertising, banking, and health care. Employers can be closely involved in curriculum planning and developing both short- and long-term programs to support business needs and students' education and career goals.

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- **Washington State Community and Technical Colleges** house 10 Centers of Excellence, which serve as liaisons between the postsecondary institutions and industry partners to develop a skilled and certified workforce. Our report profiles the Center of Excellence for Aerospace and Advanced Manufacturing’s partnership with Boeing to offer paid internships for high school and community and technical college students. The state’s 34 community and technical colleges each have autonomy over designing its programs and curriculums to meet local industry needs; however, too much variation from college to college can make it difficult for employers to find employees with a consistent skill set and knowledge base. Therefore, the Centers of Excellence have a critical role to facilitate the alignment of curriculum across the state and better ensure students are developing a common skill set.
  - **Miami Dade College** (MDC) is known for its large undergraduate enrollments—the largest of any college or university in the country—and the institution’s effort to serve a diverse student population. MDC also demonstrates a strong record of student success, based on graduate, transfer, and employment rates. Part of MDC’s success has been a result of a commitment to serving its diverse community and preparing students for emerging industries in the Miami-Dade County area. The newly **established Miami Animation and Gaming International Complex (MAGIC)** is an example of MDC’s efforts to prepare students for careers with hands-on training and opportunities to interact directly with local employers. The MAGIC program is in its infancy but has been growing rapidly with support from the program chairperson who leverages existing industry relationships, support from large employers including Univision and Disney, and students’ interest to connect their academic coursework with hands-on job experience in a growing industry.
  - **The Maricopa Community College District** contains 10 independently accredited colleges located in and around Phoenix, AZ. Our profile focuses on the district’s partnerships with the local health care system. The district has a robust healthcare training programs tailored for a variety of professions from entry-level allied health professions to multiple levels of nursing. Furthermore, many campuses offer concurrent enrollment opportunities with four-year universities and opportunities to earn stackable credentials as students move through academic programs and clinical experiences. Within the health care education program, Maricopa offers programs to meet the specific needs of its diverse student body and communities. For example, to support student veterans, Gateway Community College offers a 12-credit LPN bridge course designed for veterans with previous healthcare training.
  - **Maryland’s Pathways in Technology Early College High School** (P-TECH) program is a model for early college access with an emphasis on career preparation. Across the state, Maryland places a strong emphasis on providing students with opportunities for early college access, such as through dual enrollment or early college high schools. Specifically, the P-TECH program spans from high school through two years of postsecondary education towards the completion of an associate degree at no cost to students or their families. Employer partnerships are critical to the model to help students gain the education and skills needed for successful careers. P-TECH benefits from statewide policy to provide direct funding and considerable buy-in from educators and employers to grow the program.

To prepare students for successful careers in today’s job market and the future, it is essential for community colleges and businesses to work collaboratively. We hope the research and strategies described in this report will help community colleges and businesses support access to postsecondary education, degree completion, and alignment with businesses needs even as the nature of work changes over time. Ultimately, a partnership between community colleges and businesses can help students and existing workers be successful in their careers and achieve greater economic prosperity.

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