



Working with Business:

A Guide for Educators

In education, it seems there are never enough hours in the day. And, while business partnerships are commonly understood to be a good thing, partnership development often becomes one of those “nice to have” items on the priority list, the thing you’d like to do but never quite have the time for.

But there are good reasons to carve out the time to find and engage local businesses in your programs. For one, it goes to the heart of the mission of Career and Technical Education (CTE): If you’re preparing students for the workforce, you need to know what employers need in terms of applicant knowledge and technical and employability skills. You also need to be able to provide students with real-world exposure to the types of people, work sites, and equipment they will find when they enter the workforce. And finally, the changes in school funding brought on by the recent economic downturn are not temporary, but rather the start of a new era: Schools and programs that want to secure the resources they need will have to look to private sources, like business partners, in order to thrive.

What Do Your Business Partners Want?

Businesses rarely engage in partnerships with schools out of a sense of charity: Like any other business investment, they do it to see some kind of benefit in exchange for their contribution (known commonly as Return on Investment, or ROI). In CTE, they often look at improving their workforce pipeline, seeing how they can help introduce more students to professions in their industry, making sure those students are prepared, and making early contact with them in order to be considered when students graduate and start looking for work.

But there are other benefits as well. Some businesses are interested in boosting community goodwill, being seen as good corporate citizens. Some focus on the benefits to their current employees, knowing that providing volunteering and mentoring opportunities can boost employee morale and retention. And some look at how their education partnerships can improve relationships with key stakeholders and influencers such as the media, unions, or industry regulators. The best option, of course, is to ask your prospective partners what they want to achieve – every business is different, and tailoring your partnerships to the individual needs of your partner will strengthen your relationship considerably.

How Can Business Partners Help?

Many CTE programs already look to area businesses for student support (mentors, internships, site visits and the like) and to secure needed resources. But there is a much wider array of opportunities to consider, all of which can benefit students, staff, and/or management in some way. These include:

Advisory Boards

Most CTE programs are expected to have an advisory board, and for good reason: They offer an ideal forum for businesses to share their workforce needs and requirements, helping schools to shape their programs and better prepare their students for the future. But advisory boards can be much more than that: Engaged business leaders can help you set and achieve major program goals, provide invaluable guidance on your work, offer management expertise and needed skills, and connect you to others in the community.

Expertise

Partners can offer their expertise in a number of areas. They can share their expertise with students through guest instruction or judging student work and competitions; they can also offer their knowledge and skills at a program level by helping you make decisions about the structure and focus of your program. They can even help at a management level, either assisting you individually in areas like PR or website design or by having their company take on a major project on behalf of your program.

Mentors

Mentoring is a valuable component of career and technical education, and business partners are a primary source of mentors for your students. Mentoring can focus on academic, social, or career outcomes, and there is a significant body of evidence supporting work in each of these areas. Some schools and businesses have also set up mentoring programs for administrators, particularly new school or program leaders who would benefit from experienced guidance in areas like facilities management, goal-setting or culture change.

Real-World Challenges

Students benefit greatly by being involved in real-world scenarios related to their focus area, and businesses can offer the goals, resources, and talent to support these kinds of challenges. This can range from participating in a program like the FIRST Robotics Competition to building and selling a house to designing and executing a marketing campaign.

Student Work-Based Learning

Businesses are deeply involved in providing students with work-based learning experiences; these can involve introductory programs, such as workplace tours and job-shadowing, to more in-depth opportunities such as short- or long-term internships or summer employment. Many CTE programs and academies require this type of exposure, and business partners are necessary to achieve it.

Teacher Learning Experiences

In your effort to connect students to the workplace, it's easy to forget that teachers need to maintain a connection to industry as well. Businesses regularly train employees on the latest equipment and practices, and your partners can invite your teachers to participate in these sessions as appropriate.

Some businesses even offer teachers summer externships to give them extended exposure to the workplace, which helps their instruction immeasurably.

Advocacy

Business partners who understand and feel part of your program can speak on your behalf in ways that you sometimes can't; further, because of their positions in the community, they may be able to influence people you may not otherwise be able to reach. There are numerous examples of business leaders lobbying for schools at the local and state levels, advocating for passage of bonds, and promoting programs across the business community.

Resource Support

Business partners, particularly those who are already connected to your program in other ways, are reliable sources of support for the kinds of resources you need. Business can provide raw materials for programs, and can offer special gifts of equipment and supplies; they can offer scholarships, and underwrite the cost of student participation in trips and competitions; and they can offer targeted support, such as teacher grants.

Pioneering New Programs or Retro-Fitting Old Programs

Sometimes there may be a large gap between your existing CTE programs and the current and emerging employment opportunities in your region. In fact, a needed program may simply not exist. It could be that the industry sector is relatively new to the region or there has not been a serious review of industry needs for several years. In other cases, industry needs may have shifted so much that the current program is aligned in name only, and the program needs a top-to-bottom makeover. In this situation, business partners may want to advocate with numerous stakeholders, including the school district's CTE coordinator, the district superintendent, and members of the school board, to build understanding of, and support for, launching a new program. Business partners can rally other companies that operate in the same industry space.

How Do You Find Business Partners?

Prospective partners are everywhere and, odds are, you have a great many more connections than you think. In addition to deepening relationships with the partners you already have, consider the following as you extend your network:

- Use your existing connections. You already know people who can connect you to local businesses, including your teachers, administrators, district and state coordinators, vendors, parents, postsecondary partners, and of course your current business partners. If these contacts see value in your program, they'll likely be happy to make introductions on your behalf.
- Follow up with past students. If your former students have made their way into local businesses, they're in a perfect position to ask management to start working with your program, and they serve as an excellent example as to why such a relationship would benefit the business.

- Identify established professional networks. Chambers of commerce and industry trade groups are invaluable resources when connecting with business partners. The key is to be active by attending meetings and sitting on committees. You can also ask staff who you should know and make introductions on your behalf; you can also offer to host committee or general meetings at your location.
- Build on existing relationships with your program. You should look for some small-scale, low-risk ways to introduce people to your program, and then use those initial meetings to develop stronger relationships. The idea of hosting a chamber meeting is one example; you could also host an open house for area employers. One thing the Detroit Chamber of Commerce does is host bus tours of area schools, taking executives for a firsthand look, and they've found that this program has really ramped up business engagement.

Other Tips

A few other things to consider when working with business partners:

- You may need to spend some time educating partners on the fact that today's Career Technical Education is different from the "old" Vocational Education they may remember from their youth. Of course, you need to make sure that your programs are actually living up to their billing. Show them how today's secondary, postsecondary and adult Career Technical Education (CTE) programs are preparing a highly skilled, world-class workforce with the technical expertise, work ethic and employability skills that American business and industry need to remain globally competitive. CTE is aligned with the interests of business and industry—and the interests of our nation.
- Remember that a partnership reflects your shared interests; you should both play a part in identifying the purpose of the relationship and how it will be structured. For a partnership to be strong and sustainable, everyone needs to see some benefits for their contribution.
- Know your needs, but don't be bound by them. You probably have a few key ways in which you'd like to work with businesses, but if those models don't fit with your partner's interests and resources, stay flexible enough to find a model that does work for them.

Find ways to measure the success of your program and your partnerships. Businesspeople want to know that their contribution is having an impact, and if you want to keep them engaged you'll find a way to document your outcomes.