CTE | TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER OF NY

Nine Strategies for Business/Education Collaboration

Common--Sense Approaches for Exceptional Results

The following guide outlines nine of the most common types of business/education partnerships being used in career and technical education (CTE). There are countless variations of each already in place in schools across the country, but there are common features and prerequisites within each model, and this document outlines them to help inform the development of your own programs.

There are a few key concepts to address when developing your partnerships with businesses or business coalitions (such as chambers of commerce), regardless of the particular model. These include:

- **Partnership versus Sponsorship** – It's natural to think about what kinds of outcomes you want from a relationship with a business partner. But if you set the project outcomes, design the partnership, and then seek out a business, you've set up a sponsorship, not a partnership. The key distinction: your program doesn't reflect your partner's interests, nor does it take advantage of the resources they're able to bring to the table. Better to find your partner first, and then set joint goals and build a plan for reaching them.

- **Return on Investment** – If you're going to invest the time in building and implementing a new program, you want to produce certain outcomes. Calculating what you put in and what you get out is called your Return on Investment (ROI). Your business partners have these same thoughts: If they're going to dedicate staff time or other resources, they want to gain certain benefits, both in terms of student outcomes and in terms of their business. Find out what they want or need to accomplish and you'll greatly increase the odds of securing them as a partner.

- **Defining Success** – When you and your partners talk about what you want to accomplish, both for your students and your organizations, try to quantify exactly what success means: "Engage students" is a very hard goal to measure, but if you can couch it in measurable specifics like "increase attendance rate to 95%" you can gauge your progress much more accurately.

- **The Importance of Measurement** – If you've defined success, make the effort to track your outcomes on each of your key metrics. There is no more powerful tool for retaining your partners, or for attracting new ones, than having good data on your effectiveness.

- **Getting It In Writing** – Handshake deals are common in partnership programs, but they really shouldn't be: It's too easy to forget who agreed to what. Write down what each party has agreed to do and have everyone sign it; you'll be glad the specifics are on paper

I. Advisory Boards

Description

Because advisory boards are required for CTE programs in many states, it is easy to look at them as an obligation and not as one of the most powerful tools available to enhance your program. Advisory boards are a vehicle to enhance business voice and involvement in your work, providing you with access to the talents and resources of leaders in your industry and your community. They give your program a window into the community, and give the community a window into your program.

Options

- Most CTE programs have a general advisory board, made up of members of the appropriate industry
- Some programs also feature subcommittees dedicated to topics that are important to your program. These may include a postsecondary subcommittee dedicated to strengthening ties with continued learning programs, or a cluster advisory committee focused on exploring the future of your industry cluster and looking for future trends so you can prepare for change.
- You may also consider dedicated task forces to accomplish key goals, such as raising funds for needed equipment, or building a facilities plan for an upcoming expansion.

Additional Thoughts

- Some of your members will come from industry, of course, including both major employers and up--and--coming “gazelle” companies. But remember to add representatives from appropriate postsecondary programs to strengthen that pipeline, and look for community leaders with both the contacts and the management skills that can help you move forward.
- One of the first jobs for your board each year is to set goals: Decide what you want to achieve and come up with a plan for making it happen. Once those goals are set, many of your board’s plans will fall into place.
- While much of your board’s time will be spent on hands--on issues, it’s always good to plan for an annual big--picture review of your program. Take the time to step back and gather information like teacher and student satisfaction, community perceptions of your program, and longer--term industry trends to see whether more fundamental changes would help you continue meeting student needs going forward.

II. Expertise

Description

Businesses, business coalitions, and trade or professional groups represent a tremendous pool of expertise in areas that may be of great interest your program. In addition to a deep pool of knowledge in your field, many have skills in management or other areas that you can leverage, and are happy to share their knowledge, experience and resources if asked.

Options

- Many of your business partners are accomplished professionals, and have strong skills in areas you may want support. In addition to recruiting those with management skills to your advisory board, you can look for businesspeople with expertise in web design, outreach, finance and accounting, and strategy to help you enhance your efforts in those areas.

- There are examples of skills based volunteering in which business partners take on major projects for their education partners. Deloitte Consulting, for example, partnered with College Summit and realized that they could have a much greater impact if they had more useful tools to review their student data – so they assigned a team, pro bono, to rebuild the nonprofit's entire IT operation.

- Many of your business partners, of course, also have expertise in your content area. These partners can inform instruction by helping you align curriculum or serving as guest speakers; they can also review student work, such as judging student competitions.

Additional Thoughts

- Think about the major improvements you want to make to your program in the coming year or two, such as creating a website or building an evaluation model to gauge the impact of your program. Before sending out RFPs to recruit a vendor, send word through your channel of these needs as a volunteer project.

- Ask close partners, such as advisory board members or longstanding volunteers, if they would complete a skills inventory; this allows you to see what talents you may be able to call on through your existing network. This skills inventory can either be formal or informal.

III. Mentors

Description

While nearly every CTE program has an active base of volunteers, far fewer have active mentoring program. Mentors are different than volunteers: Mentors build longer--term, direct relationships with students, and focus on improving targeted outcomes. There is a significant body of research showing the impact such programs can have, and they are highly cost--effective, requiring little more than the staff time needed to set up and track relationships, and the cost of a background check.

Options

- Mentoring relationships can vary widely, focusing on academic, social, or career/college outcomes (or more than one of these); they can take place inside or outside the school; they can involve one--on--one or group meetings; and they can take place daily, weekly, monthly, or even less frequently. The key is to decide on the desired outcomes and work out a plan that respects the time and availability of students and mentors.

- One variation on the mentoring model involves executive--level mentoring, in which an experienced business leader mentors a new principal or program leader on topics such as managing a large enterprise, improving culture, or change management.

Additional Thoughts

- As with any program involving students, one of the top considerations is safety: Be sure to require background checks of all mentors and set up mentor/mentee meetings in a safe and public environment. Your school or district's central office will have experience with background checks and safety standards.

- Mentoring involves establishing personal relationships, and that takes time. Make sure that all parties agree on a minimum time commitment of at least one year.

IV. Real--World Challenges

Description

Students in CTE programs benefit greatly from exposure to the real--world environment in the industry of their choosing. You can extend the exposure they get via guest speakers, site visits, and job shadowing by introducing some real--world challenges they can tackle with your business partners.

Options

- Some programs host challenges each year in which students work with partners to complete a major project. One example would be having students build a house in collaboration with multiple industry partners, including companies in construction, plumbing, and electrical. In some places, the resulting home is then sold as a fundraiser to fuel the next year's effort.

- Business partners may consider letting advanced students tackle one of their immediate challenges; this could involve building an online marketing presence (website, social media program, etc.), creating a new store display, or adding on to an existing building.

Additional Thoughts

- Remember to have students involved in the planning and design phases of a project, and not just in implementation. Project management is another key skill they can practice throughout any such project.

- Document each phase of your major projects; you can share this with administrators and with future partners to show them what students have accomplished and what they are capable of.

V. Student Work--Based Learning

Description

One of the features of CTE programs that sets them apart is the direct connection to the workplace. This is an area in which business partnerships are essential: There is no substitute for giving students a firsthand look at what happens within your industry, and then to give them hands--on experience in the field in which they want to work.

Options

- Ask business partners to host tours of their workplaces (whether at the company or at a client site) for students. This can include tours of postsecondary institutions as well.
- Employers can offer job--shadowing opportunities to interested students, either individually or as a group. This gives students an initial feel for careers without investing too much time.
- Business partners can offer students short--term or long--term internships or full--time summer positions; these types of positions can be offered after students have gained some knowledge, are confident that they want to learn more in a specific career area, and have developed a basic level of knowledge and skills that allows them to contribute in the workplace.

Additional Thoughts

- Try to offer students a variety of workplace tours and job--shadowing opportunities; this gives them a better sense of what is available to them and allows them to better target their future exploration efforts.
- Don’t send students into a job--shadowing or internship opportunity unless they’re prepared to act appropriately. This may mean a few days of instruction and practice on workplace behavior (dress, showing up on time, etc.).
- Internships should be reserved for older students who are more mature and who have gained enough experience to know that a field is of interest to them.

VI. Teacher Learning Experiences

Description

While many CTE educators come from industry, most fields change over time, so there is a need for them to stay in close touch so they can provide the best and most relevant instruction possible.
Students aren't the only ones who can benefit from exposure to the workforce: Partnerships present educators with a similarly positive opportunity to stay current on knowledge, practices, equipment, and changes in the market.

Options

- Business partners can provide your teachers with current resources from the field, such as recent trade journals, materials from conferences, and training videos.
- Partners regularly train their employees on new equipment and practices; they may be willing to invite your teachers to participate.
- Similarly, their staff members may be available to train your staff on various job functions, either on--site or at your school.
- Some businesses and business coalitions have set up summer internship programs for teachers, giving them a full week or two weeks at the workplace to get an immersive experience in the field. Many of these programs encourage teachers to write one or more lesson plans based on their experiences, and some encourage the employees with whom they worked to visit teachers' classrooms to support the lesson.

Additional Thoughts

- Ask your teachers, informally or through a blind survey, what their interests are in industry--related professional development, and use that to make connections.
- Ask board members and other partners to keep you regularly informed on changes in their markets, particularly as it might relate to your programs; share that information with teachers, and see whether your partners can offer opportunities to keep your teachers current.

VII. Advocacy

Description

Partnerships almost never start with a focus on advocacy; however, once businesses learn about your work and feel they have a voice in what you do, they often involve advocacy as an element of the broader relationship. Having business partners speak on your behalf, to various stakeholders as appropriate, can be very powerful: You can only go so far "tooting your own horn," so having prominent members of the community testifying for your work lends credibility and power to the message.

Options

- Business partners who have some public exposure, such as retailers or companies with delivery or service trucks, may be willing to use their channels to share information on your successes or needs. For example, companies that send billing statements or promotional materials to local customers might send information on your work or your needs, while others may be willing to put notice supportive of bond levies on their trucks.

- Large employers have an opportunity to regularly share information with employees, some of whom will be parents of children within the schools, and others who are taxpayers, voters, and potential volunteers or mentors.

- Influential business leaders may be willing to use their business and political connections to advance your efforts, whether that involves recruiting additional partners or lobbying for budget allocations from local or state government.

Additional Thoughts

- Your best advocates are those who know you the best – namely, the members of your advisory board. They will be particularly attuned to key opportunities and challenges, and can help to identify ways in which advocacy can make a difference in your work.

VIII. Resource Support

Description

In education, school budgets rarely cover all of the resources educators want for instruction and student use. Business partners have historically been an important source of additional resources, especially within career and technical education. While some businesses may be willing to provide direct financial support, most are more comfortable offering resources, including supplies and equipment. This may be a particularly good fit for some businesses who can buy resources at wholesale to contribute to your program, or who can write off the cost of donated equipment.

Options

- For businesses willing to offer financial support, some schools and districts set up special funds for targeted use. Consider setting up a scholarship fund or a fund for teacher grants, either on your own or with the help of your local education foundation. Do not run financial giving programs through the general fund; there is rarely any legal mandate that deposited funds have to be used for their intended purpose.

- Consider tying gifts to a specific element of your program, like a FIRST Robotics Club or other extracurricular program, and presenting it as a sponsorship.

Additional Thoughts

- Think about the kinds of resources you use the most, and think about which of your partners (either current or desired) might have good access. This could be a byproduct of what they do, such as a restaurant giving you unused fruits and vegetables that could be composted for an agricultural program or at least at discounted rates. It may instead be something they can acquire at a better price than you can, making it easier for them to contribute those resources.

- If your advisory board has identified major needs for your program, such as the acquisition of a major piece of equipment, ask them to take the lead in identifying used equipment through their network and approaching likely donors. They may also help set up relationships for ongoing donations of “daily use” items.

- Consider your partners’ vendors. Each year, the nonprofit Share Our Strength hosts “Taste of the Nation” events in cities across the country, and donates 100% of ticket proceeds from these celebrations of local restaurants. They’re able to do so because all of the local restaurants participating in the event ask their vendors to donate the food for the night, which they do in order to maintain good relationships with the restaurants. Your partner’s vendors may be just as interested in helping you in order to maintain good relationships with their clients.

IX. Program Start--up or Retro--Fit

Description

Sometimes there may be a large gap between 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.

Options

- When the need for a new program becomes apparent, gather an ad--hoc working group of local business advocates that represent the specific industry sector. This group should identify the following information:
    - Current jobs in this industry within the region.
    - Prospective job growth in this industry sector based on non--proprietary projections of company expansion and industry trends.
    - Average wages and benefits for jobs within the industry sector.
    - The knowledge and skill sets that are needed for jobs in the industry sector
    - Relevant industry certifications that exist for jobs within the industry sector.
- When the ad--hoc working group has its facts together, members should begin scheduling appointments with numerous stakeholders, including the school district's CTE coordinator, the district superintendent, and members of the school board. Committee members should also meet with stakeholders from appropriate local postsecondary programs. In each of these meetings, members can share the information you have gathered and ask if there are any current programs that address some or all of the skill sets called for in your industry sector.

Additional Thoughts

- When business partners want to start a new program or significantly retro--fit an existing program, they should proceed with urgency, but also with an understanding of the education decision--making process. Build and maintain goodwill between business partners and existing teachers and school staff. Business partners should know that change is possible, but there is a process that schools must follow and that process may take longer than it would in private industry, as teachers and school leaders are subject to policy and funding decisions from the school board. Further, in a tight fiscal environment, new program funding may require reallocation of resources, a process that can engender opposition. From the education

perspective, a CTE coordinator or other administrator will need to be an internal champion, working with the various decision--making bodies and navigating rules, regulations and budget issues. This person should stay in close contact with one lead representative for the business partners, keeping them informed of the process, next steps, and when more external participation is needed.

- If the business partners can bring resources to the table in terms of volunteers, equipment and direct funding, that will speak loudly about the potential value of the new or refurbished program.