Strategic Employer Engagement

Understanding Industry Opportunity.
Enhancing Student Outcomes.

Introduction, Purpose, and Scope

Establishing meaningful connections with regional employers and industry leaders is a fundamental aspect of City Colleges of Chicago's (CCC) mission and crucial to both enhancing student labor market outcomes and impacting regional economic prosperity. Each CCC Center of Excellence (COE) is expected to engage employers for the sake of validating industry data, communicating critical and emerging talent and skill needs, aligning programs and curriculum to those needs, offering valuable work-based learning experiences (e.g., internships, mentorship, job shadowing), and connecting students to in-demand employment and career pathway opportunities. This engagement also results in essential industry insights regarding industry-recognized and valued credentials and required certifications. The ultimate objective of intentional and sustained employer engagement is to cultivate successful relationships with employers that build mutual value for all parties (i.e., employers, students, faculty, and staff) and impact CCC's labor market outcomes for in-demand careers across the Chicago region.

Pillar 2 of CCC's COE Playbook describes the role District Office and COE staff and faculty play in fostering employer engagement across the college system. It emphasizes the importance of all CCC faculty and staff understanding and addressing the needs of employers. Employer engagement is a team effort, with District and COE staff actively contributing to the success of CCC students and a thriving economy through strategic collaboration with employers.

This resource shares insight and strategies to improve CCC's COE outcomes through effective, strategic, and sustained employer engagement.

PILLAR 2

**Industry Engagement, & Curriculum Alignment**

COE leaders, staff, and faculty are knowledgeable about the nuances of the regional economy, labor market, and skill needs, especially for their industries of focus. COEs build relationships with employer leaders, industry associations, and workforce partners for leveraging industry expertise to align programming and curriculum to industry needs, ensuring that students gain the knowledge, skills, abilities, and credentials required for in-demand careers.

- Industry-Informed Curriculum
- Structured Industry Leadership and Involvement
- Regional Partnerships
- Industry-Knowledgeable Staff and Faculty
- Dual Customers and Incentives

Developing an Employer Partnership Mindset

Seeing Employer Partnership through a Mutual Benefit Lens

CCC is committed to actively seeking positive outcomes that mutually benefit students, colleges and COEs, faculty and staff, and employers. Each COE should focus on identifying and cultivating "win-win" scenarios for all parties involved. The aim is to foster relationships where value is distributed equitably, striving for mutual benefit that elevates outcomes and experiences for everyone involved.
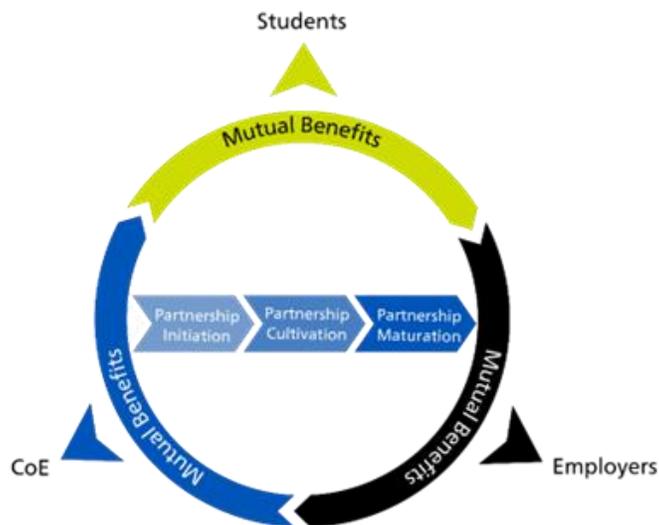
Matching the Speed of Industry

To keep pace with the critical and emerging needs of industry, COEs should establish and maintain frequent, adaptive, and responsive communication protocols. Proactive preparation for all employer interactions is key to ensuring readiness and responsiveness in meeting industry expectations and, ultimately, student outcomes. This commitment should extend beyond initial engagements, with a dedicated focus on prompt follow-up actions and constant feedback loops. Consistent follow-through on commitments is paramount, as they establish trust and credibility, which are fundamental pillars of successful, productive, and sustained employer relationships.

Efforts to "match the speed of industry" may include the following:

- Providing comprehensive agendas for all employer meetings

- Focusing on value and action items during meetings, valuing the employer's time

- Anticipating employer needs with innovative and creative solutions that meet immediate and future needs

- Prompting communication and consistent follow-through

- Conducting proper research before all employer meetings focused on industry trends and challenges, past partnering efforts, etc.

- Tailoring discussions based on specific employer history and recent projects

Strategic Partnership Prioritization

To cultivate the most impactful employer relationships, COEs should place strategic emphasis on building meaningful and sustained connections with "employers of choice." Recognizing that not all employer

partners hold equal strategic value, CCC takes a nuanced approach to understanding the priorities of different partners. This understanding guides the level of responsiveness and services provided, creating a tailored and effective engagement strategy and balancing capacity and impact. CCC classifies employers into four tiers. This allows for a systematic approach to prioritizing and enhancing strategic partnerships. This model also ensures that CCC's efforts are aligned with the most valuable and impactful relationships, contributing to the overall success of employer engagement initiatives.

For more information about tiering determinations, definitions, and level of service and turnaround expectations, please reference the COE Employer Classification Levels guidance resource, which further describes the tiers listed below.

- **Tier 1:** Highly Engaged and Influential Employer Partners

- **Tier 2:** Moderately Engaged and Influential Employer Partner

- **Tier 3:** Mildly Engaged Employers with Limited Influence

- **Tier 4:** Employers with Low Levels of Engagement and Influence

Key Stages of Strategic Relationship Growth

For each identified stage of strategic employer relationship growth, we have included some key, high-level pointers and considerations for cultivating sustained and meaningful employer partnerships.

Stage 1: Initiation

STRATEGY	CONSIDERATIONS
Establish a "No Wrong Door" Approach	• **Collaborate with internal partners** across COE roles, academic departments, colleges/locations, and with networked colleges to collect and share employer information. • **Maximize employer interactions.** Let no encounter with a business go to waste. Collect information and facilitate connections to appropriate contacts. • **Utilize your network of partners** to access new employer partners, make referrals to services not provided by CCC, and access additional industry knowledge and expertise. • **Share employer intelligence** across COE-networked colleges and academic departments, routing system-wide strategy development through the appropriate COE.

Engage in Regional Industry Groups Events, Boards, and Committees	• **Attend networking and industry association events** to establish connections, personal and organizational relationships, and credibility, as well as obtain additional industry intelligence. • **Imbed COE/college staff and academic leaders in regional industry groups'** boards, committees, and working groups.
Conduct Pre-Meeting Research to Establish Background and Credibility	• **Research company details ahead of time**, including company background, industry and products/services of focus, industry trends, news articles about company hiring needs and other news, and open roles. • **Know your audience and tailor your approaches**. Understand who you will be meeting with, their role, and their goals. Identify decision-makers and tailor your approach to match their interests and needs.
Take a Consultative Approach to Understanding Needs and Partnership Opportunities	• **Ask questions about employer needs and partnership interests**. Seek to *understand* before *offering solutions* to ensure relevance, value, and sustained partnership and commitment. • **Provide solutions and partnership opportunities that solve a problem or challenge** or meet identified talent, diversity, and pipeline growth goals important to employers.
Tap into CRM Insights (Salesforce) to Ensure Continuity	• **Review any previous contact with and participation** by the employer to gather historical context, including any Salesforce case notes and attached communications or partnership agreements. • **Reach out to CCC colleagues** who have previously communicated and/or partnered with the employer to tap their knowledge and ensure ongoing coordination. • **Determine the time since the last interaction** and with whom the contact may have been.

Stage 2: Cultivation

STRATEGY	CONSIDERATIONS
Keep Employer Partnership Simple and Accessible	• **Be clear about the value and mutual benefit (ROI) of partnership**, including the impact partnership will have on employer talent needs and pipelines, quality of education and programming, student outcomes and career preparedness, etc. • **Make access to resources and participation clear and easy**, providing clear points of contact, minimizing administrivia, and promoting continued involvement and repeat engagement.

	• **Recognize and maximize employers' time** to ease the undue burden and sustain quality partnerships and student experiences.
Avoid Duplicative Outreach, Efforts, and Reporting Requirements	• **Utilize single points of contact (SPOCs)** to streamline communications between employers and CCC, managing responses across multiple colleges (i.e., COEs and networked colleges), academic and continuing education departments, and relevant faculty and staff. • **Prepare and debrief employer interactions with colleagues** to promote knowledgeable interaction and coordinated responses to employer needs and interactions. • **Streamline intake, reporting, and formal agreement** processes for a single employer's multiple interactions with CCC to avoid confusion, supplicative efforts, and administrivia.
Nurture Key Relationships with Responsiveness and Adaptability	• **Adhere to the CCC Employer Classification Guidelines and tiering system** for COEs to maintain consistency and prioritize turn-around times and levels of service. • **Be responsive to inquiries and follow through on partnership commitments and talent solutions provided** to ensure trust, satisfaction, and repeat business. • **Be adaptive and responsive** with processes, communication patterns, solutions provided, partnership opportunities, student engagement, and industry-influenced program and curriculum development efforts. This will encourage ongoing and meaningful partnership and interaction and promote collaborative innovation.

Stage 3: Maturation

STRATEGY	CONSIDERATIONS
Embrace Consistent Partnership and Engagement Tracking	• **Maintain consistent documentation processes and records**—in Salesforce and elsewhere—to promote accuracy, knowledge transfer, and ongoing partnership development and maturation opportunities. Accurate documentation of interactions captures the "story" of an employer relationship and allows for tracking and reporting of levels and types of partnership inputs and outcomes. • **Lean on CRM documentation for targeting and implementing outreach efforts** to current and future partners, based on their employer tiering status and associated levels of support and partnership opportunity.

	• **Pinpoint employer partners (and their interests) that align with student needs** and program objectives.
	• **Celebrate partnership success** by tracking and acknowledging COE team milestones and highlighting positive employer engagement and partnership outcomes and impact.
Build and Sustain Trusting and Productive Partnerships	• **Cultivate sustained credibility, trust, and value** with employers by delivering on commitments, promoting transparency, and providing reliable and quality services.
	• **Demonstrate partnership commitment** through consistent follow-up and follow-through. This fosters trust, ensures reliability, and showcases CCC's dedication to meaningful employer relationships and services.
	• **Embrace an "under-promise and over-deliver" approach**, being sure to set realistic expectations and achieve them.
	• **Focus solutions and partnerships on the most critical employer talent and skill needs** and understand potential employer roadblocks and constraints. Avoid forcing partnerships or solutions that do not provide value to employers and students.
Fully Leverage Ongoing Partnership, Expertise, and Financial and In-Kind Support	• **Fully leverage employer expertise and partnership** to improve student, COE, and institution-wide services, outputs, and outcomes.
	• **Cultivate and nurture lasting, mutually beneficial relationships that lead to financial and in-kind support** for programming, work-based learning experiences, and career-connected student achievement.
Engage in a Collaborative Continuous Improvement Process	• **Include employer partners in measurement, assessment, and continuous improvement efforts** as laid out and discussed in the CCC COE Playbook.
	• **Focus continuous improvement efforts on prioritized and highly engaged and invested employer partners** to maximize their satisfaction and sustain and grow their level of involvement and commitment to COE efforts and providing quality student/worker experiences.

Designing Meaningful Conversations

Maximizing Impact: Practical Tips for Effective Communication

TOPICS OF DISCUSSION	QUESTIONS TO ASK
Understanding Employer Needs: Gather feedback on their needs, pain points, and expectations.	• What specific skills or qualities do you look for when hiring entry-level talent? • What occupations and career pathways are most critical to your success? What makes them critical? • Can you share insights into your expectations and most critical needs regarding hiring interns and graduates? • What are your expectations for partnership with CCC and our COE? For the specific program/opportunity, we are discussing?
Discussing Program and Curriculum Alignment: Discuss how existing programs align with employer needs.	• Tell me about where you see the industry moving forward with regard to emerging occupations, skill sets, and credentials? • How can our programs better align with the evolving trends in your industry? • What do you find is the most impactful experience a student can have before starting with your organization to ramp them up quickly (achieve full productivity)? • What needs do you have for your existing employees? What upskilling and reskilling opportunities might we explore with you?
Evaluating Current Programming: Explore how current COE programming might (or might not) meet expressed needs and assess the quality and results of current programming and graduates.	• In what ways can we enhance our internship and job placement support for students? • How would you describe your most immediate talent needs, especially for junior-level employees? • What specific skills, knowledge, or competencies do you wish your employees had gained during their training or degree programs?
Industry Prominent and Merging Industry Trends: Explore industry trends in skill needs, tools, technologies, competency/learning objective assessment and on-the-job demonstration, etc.	• What new tools and technologies has your organization been using over the last few years? • Can you provide insights into new competencies or certifications the industry is gravitating towards? • Can you highlight any challenges in your industry where our college's programs could make a positive impact?

Employer Engagement Dos and Don'ts

Do...

- **Understand the business.** Learn about the business first. Find common goals and interests.

- **Actively listen.** Ask questions. Listen. Then respond with appropriate repsonses and solutions that meet both employer *and* student needs.

- **Lean in.** Ask "why?" to understand more about needs, pain points, and partnership expectations.

- **Use business-oriented language.** Focus on value and meeting employer needs.

- **Be open to change.** Employers work in a dynamic landscape. Be prepared to adapt your plans and be honest about the hurdles that you may need to overcome.

- **Understand local resources.** Reach out to additional partners who might provide solutions and supports beyond what is provided by CCC.

Don't...

- **Use acronyms and academic lingo.** Avoiding these pitfalls will enhance clarity in communication and meet the employer where they are.

- **Jump to solutions before understanding needs.** Resist the urge to jump to solutions, and listen for understanding first before exploring ways employers can partner with the college.

- **Over-Commit.** Stay in your lane when making commitments. Be aware of team members/partners with whom you should collaborate.

- **Force participation or solutions.** If there is not a match between what CCC currently offers and an employer's need, do not force it. Sometimes the best way to serve a customer is to wait until there is a better opportunity for alignment.

- **Be afraid to say "I don't know, but let me get an answer for you." Y**our willingness to find an answer promptly helps build a trusting relationship.