Building Bridges: Lessons from the ECCP Initiative

By Haley Glover, UpSkill America

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Overview

In 2022, Strada Education Network (Strada) launched the Employer Community College Partnership (ECCP) challenge to strengthen connections between community colleges and employers. Strada supported 11 cross-sector collaboratives involving diverse industries and geographies to build partnerships characterized by shared ownership, mutual accountability, and aligned goals. Partners were expected to co-invest time, knowledge, and resources to support student success and meet labor market demands.

As the initiative concluded, Strada engaged UpSkill America to examine what worked and what didn't. Across the board, we found this: when employers and colleges co-owned the work, committing to shared goals, shared risks, and shared results, the partnerships flourished. When they operated from a distance or treated the relationship as optional, outcomes lagged.

This brief highlights the facilitators of partnership success: key behaviors and strategies that community colleges, employers, and partnership structures used to drive impact.

Community Colleges – Key Principles for Partnership

Community colleges are uniquely positioned to support talent development, especially for small and mid-sized businesses or large employers anchored in specific geographies. ECCP revealed key actions colleges took to strengthen employer partnerships.

Solve Employer's Problems First

Colleges that centered their approach on solving business problems, not just increasing enrollment, built credibility with employers. "This was a new approach for us, one where we started by listening to businesses and understanding their specific needs. Traditionally, our focus has been on educational goals like increasing enrollment and program completion. This time, we asked, 'What do you need?' and shaped the program around that," said Crystal Folger-Hawks, Executive Director of Surry-Yadkin Works.

When the college was viewed as a strategic problem-solver, more businesses joined the table. Stephanie Qualls at Carl Albert State College shared, "We had so much success with our employer partners that now more businesses are coming to us, saying, 'We want to partner with you, too.' It's a win for us, for our students, and for employers."

Be Willing to Adapt

Successful colleges didn't ask employers to fit into rigid programs. They flexed, shifting delivery methods, adjusting credential formats, and addressing gaps in real time. This agility supported trust and accelerated outcomes. Crucially, colleges also confronted internal barriers and program structures that made it difficult for working learners to participate. Acknowledging that many students cannot choose between school and work, colleges aligned learning with lived realities. Julie Johns-Cole, Vice Chancellor of Career Link at Ivy Tech Community College commented, "Some students just can't be on campus five days a week because of work and family responsibilities. Hybrid programs allow them to stay in school without sacrificing income."

Support Skill Demonstration, Not Only Credential Attainment

Employers want proof of ability, not just degrees. Colleges responded by co-designing ways for students to demonstrate competencies. This not only enhanced student readiness but also gave employers greater confidence in hiring outcomes. David Kay, Clinical Operations Director, Intermountain Health Surgical Services commented, "We spent a lot of time with industry partners figuring out what scenarios students should be working through. It wasn't just about teaching theory; it was about preparing them for the exact types of challenges they'd face on the job."

Partnership Spotlight

The results of Surry Community College's project, "Grow Our Own: Strengthening the Rural Health Workforce," were transformational for the region's health care employers, for the college, and for students. In partnership with Surry-Yadkin Works, a regional non-profit, and Northern Regional Hospital, the project developed pathways into health care careers.

- Over the course of the project, partners far exceeded their goals, **growing pre-apprenticeship participation by 573%, and apprenticeships by 126%**.

- Hundreds of students **earned key certifications** in CPR, OSHA 10, and CNA.

- **121 students are employed** as pre-apprentices at Northern Regional Hospital, and the current average **salary of recent RN apprentices is $70,000**.

- Prior to the project, Northern Regional Hospital had persistent nursing shortages. Today, **Northern Regional Hospital is fully staffed** – vacancies are filled by apprentices who complete their RN degrees and licensure.

Break Structural Bottlenecks

In fields like healthcare, capacity constraints like limited clinical hours or outdated equipment often choke program growth. Partnerships helped colleges expand clinical space and update technology, removing these barriers and increasing throughput. Angela Belnap, Associate Dean of Allied Health at Salt Lake Community College, said, "We had a strong surgical technology program with excellent faculty, but we didn't have appropriate teaching facilities, requiring us to lease space from a near-by center. Because of the inability to house our program within our building, we were limited on times we could teach and could not bring in more students. So, this partnership with Intermountain Health, plus shifting programs within our institution to provide space, was really timely. It allowed us to create a teaching space within our facilities, which allowed us to expand the program."

Build Institutional Capacity

Staff turnover was a frequently-cited challenges across ECCP initiatives. When one person owned the partnership, its future was fragile. Colleges that built cross-functional teams, secured leadership buy-in, and embedded partnerships institutionally were better positioned to weather transitions. College project managers are also vulnerable to shifts at the top of the organization. Keau Wong from MiraCosta College commented, "Every time leadership changes, priorities shift. What was urgent last year may not even be on the radar this year, and that affects long-term projects."

This factor affected partnerships as much or more than other more complex situations. Taking steps to ensure that no partnership is wholly owned by one person and is instead supported by a team is a good first step to removing this key-person risk, along with ensuring that campus and department leadership are fully bought into supporting work-based learning and employer partnerships.

Employers – Key Principles for Partnership

Employers face competing pressures and limited bandwidth. But in ECCP, those employers who remained present, transparent, and invested saw stronger outcomes for their companies.

Create Clear Pathways and Transparent Demands

The most effective partnerships aligned education with visible career trajectories. Students could see the destination, and employers could track talent from classroom to job. These structured pathways benefited all parties.

Labor market data is useful but often insufficient. Colleges need direct input. Employers that were candid about talent needs, partnership gaps, and shared challenges helped colleges build better programs and be more responsive in meeting their needs. Stephanie Qualls at Carl Albert State College commented, "One of our industries is undergoing major growth. At

full scale it will create 800 new jobs. So, we have obviously had to pull up the chairs to their table and help them meet their needs in robotics, business, HR, and more. We're trying to look at what we need to add for them."

Stay Engaged Over Time

While time and capacity are always challenges, employers who were willing to invest in the partnership supported successful outcomes. ECCP projects benefited from employers who stayed the course and were able to dig into the hard work of understanding each other and building for long-term impact.

Like community colleges, turnover among employer partner staff created real challenges to sustaining partnerships for ECCP participants. Turnover can be even more challenging for employers – new staff may be coming to their roles without any experience in working with college partners, or with distrust or bias for partnerships. "When key people leave, especially employers who we have built relationships with, you basically have to start from scratch rebuilding trust and engagement," shared Steve Cromer, Vice President of Economic Development at Western Georgia Technical College.

Invest in Students' Success

While community colleges are likely in the best position to understand what is going on in students' lives, employers are often better positioned to support students financially. Creating scholarships and stipends, supporting paid internship experiences, and enabling students to earn while they learn are specific ways that employers can contribute to student success, and to positive outcomes for the partnership. "We had students who couldn't afford to take unpaid internships, so we worked with local businesses to provide work-based learning through funded internships and apprenticeships. That small change made a big difference in participation," said Keau Wong at MiraCosta College.

Designing Partnerships for Impact

Smart partnership design helps ensure that effort results in outcomes, not just activities.

Anchor in Shared Goals

Sustainable partnerships emerge when both sides benefit, and clear expectations are set. ECCP's most impactful projects solved problems for both employers and colleges, creating a natural incentive to invest, iterate, and continue. Alison Bedsaul, Director of Nursing Education at Northern Regional Hospital, said, "The best thing we did was communicate. Don't suffer in silence. Whoever is leading this, the school or the employer, communicate about what you want. Talk, email, have meetings, especially at the beginning. We share goals here – the school wants students to graduate, and we need more nurses."

Prioritize Relationships

Trust, especially in rural communities, was a foundational asset. Where partnerships were reinforced by personal relationships, stakeholders moved faster and achieved more. While personal trust can't be engineered, its presence amplified impact. Stephanie Qualls at Carl Albert State College, shared, "The same employer that I work with here, I'm sitting by at our kids' basketball games, or sitting by in different board meetings and things like that. I think that's important in a rural setting—it's all about relationships, about being invested not only in the success of their business but in their lives."

Use Intermediaries Strategically

Not every college has the capacity to manage complex employer relationships. Several ECCP sites partnered with intermediaries—sector associations, workforce organizations, or nonprofit connectors—to bridge gaps and broker trust. Green River College partnered with the Washington Technology Industry Association, Computing for All, and Mentors in Tech. Tyler Schrock, faculty member at Green River College, said, "We're so fortunate to have our partners as our intermediaries to the industry. No way a college can build this in-house. Faculty are busy teaching, running the program. We try to do this, and it lasts for a month and then it falls apart. There is not a sustainable solution at the college. The connector between our students and this broader industry is essential."

Partnership Spotlight

MiraCosta College in San Diego County, CA partnered with Open Biopharma Research and Training Institute and several other employer partners to move more students into entry-level biotechnology roles, creating better outcomes for learners and a more robust pipeline of talent for biotech employers. The partnership created two new apprenticeship programs, as well as improved project-based learning, professional mentorship, and closer alignment of curriculum with employers.

- Pre-Apprenticeship for Biological Technicians, registered with the California Division of Apprenticeship Standards.
  - Over 150 trainees (and counting) have completed the Pre-Apprenticeship program, **94% of completers** have secured employment as a result of the program.
  - 12 pre-apprentices **graduated with a bachelor's degree** in Biomanufacturing – 8 of those students are **continuing in graduate programs** while employed. Four students graduated with an MS in Bioprocess engineering in Spring 2025.
- Registered Apprenticeship for Biological Technicians, registered in partnership with the South Bay Workforce Investment Board.
  - **19 students are apprenticing** with partner employers (federal and state).

Remaining Questions

The ECCP initiative demonstrated that real partnership between community colleges and employers is possible, and when done right, it is powerful. Across both rural areas and high-need sectors like healthcare, these collaborations produced measurable benefits for students, institutions, and industries. But ECCP also raised important, unanswered questions:

What is the ideal organizational structure for partnerships?

Redundancy is necessary. Where and how should partnership responsibility sit within institutions? How can colleges build the long-term capacity and "muscle" to develop and sustain effective employer partnerships? How can employer partnerships grow as a priority in funding, staffing, and prominence within community colleges?

What is the return on investment for employers?

While some pathways like tuition assistance and apprenticeship are well studied, the ROI for work-based learning, internships and early pipeline development remains unclear, especially for smaller firms.

What is the natural evolution of a partnership?

ECCP projects were new. But as they mature, what happens next? How do partnerships deepen, shift, or even sunset over time?

Partnerships are not easy. They demand time, trust, and persistence. But as ECCP showed, they remain one of the most promising strategies we have for improving outcomes for learners, fueling economic growth, and strengthening local communities.

Acknowledgements

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About

About the Authors

Haley Glover is the senior director of UpSkill America at the Aspen Institute. Connect with her on LinkedIn.

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upskillamerica.org

upskillamerica@aspeninstitute.org