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Employer-Friendly Practices

Bridging Higher Ed Practices and Employer Realities

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September 2025

Overview

Employers are increasingly investing in postsecondary education, supporting their employees as they earn degrees and credentials as a strategy for retention, advancement, and internal mobility, as well as supporting employees' longer-term career goals. Despite years of effort to build effective partnerships, though, colleges and employers often operate with fundamentally different rhythms, languages, and expectations.

The result is a persistent disconnect, which is more than a rhetorical or philosophical divide between different sectors. There are operational differences that prevent effective partnerships between employers and postsecondary institutions, and which limit the success of employer-supported education programs. Employers expect institutions to be responsive, transparent, and aligned across their academic, financial, and student service systems. When those systems fall short, it is learners, who are often juggling work, family, and education, who often pay the price. One employer put it plainly: "There is already skepticism among our employees. When we say we'll pay for college and it doesn't go smoothly, they stop believing us."

In 2025, with support from the Strada Education Foundation, UpSkill America launched a research initiative to better understand what enables and prevents colleges and universities from working effectively with employers. We wanted to move past surface-level observations and explore the structural, operational, and institutional policy-level situations that shape these relationships. We wanted to dig into the institutional "plumbing" that supports or blocks meaningful engagement.

We developed three core research objectives:

1. **Map the range of institutional policies and practices that matter to employers** from the most visible (like credential design) to the often overlooked (like contracting processes and billing models).

2. **Identify areas where institutional assumptions and employer realities diverge** revealing blind spots that undermine trust and hinder collaboration.

3. **Surface actionable opportunities for change** especially for community colleges and regional comprehensive universities, which serve the majority of working learners and are best positioned to meet the needs of local and regional employers.

To do this, we conducted in-depth interviews with more than 25 employers ranging from national brands to regional firms, all of which support employee education, and four intermediaries who represent hundreds of companies. These conversations surfaced what employers value in their institutional partners, and what slows them down, erodes trust, and leads to disengagement.

Our intent is pragmatic. We aim to highlight the institutional decisions often made deep within operations or finance offices that quietly shape the success or failure of efforts to engage employers. We want to lower the barriers for the institutions doing the hardest work: those educating working adults, serving rural and urban communities, and trying to respond to employer needs without the resources of elite or flagship campuses, or the scaling capabilities of national online institutions.

Before we proceed, we acknowledge that postsecondary institutions have their own requirements, which may never align perfectly with employer needs and which play important roles in protecting students, assuring quality, and ensuring academic freedom. This work aims to shed light on how operational roadblocks affect employers and hinder collaboration but is not intended to minimize the challenges of colleges and universities. The issues raised in this paper are a starting point for discussions as higher education strengthens its partnerships with employers and employer-supported learning.

This paper is the first in a series. It elevates the specific issues that employers indicate are key enablers or inhibitors in their relationships and partnerships with colleges and universities. In our next phase, we will translate our findings into a practical framework for action. Over the next year, we will share deeper dives into specific areas, case studies of colleges and employers creating best practice, and clear, tested strategies to support meaningful engagement. Our hope is to provide leaders across higher education with a sharper understanding of what employers need and how to meet those needs without compromising on mission, compliance, or integrity.

Employer-Supported Education

Across the U.S., a growing number of colleges and universities are reimagining their models to better serve working and adult learners, especially those leveraging financial support from their employers. These students, many of whom are navigating full-time work, caregiving responsibilities, and/or returning to education after time away, require flexible, relevant, and applied learning opportunities that align with their career trajectories and give them the skills they need to succeed. For colleges and universities, the challenge is adapting to a rapidly changing learner profile shaped by the realities of complicated work and personal lives.

At the same time, employers are not willing to be passive beneficiaries of higher education's outputs. They are stepping into the role of talent developers, investing directly in the education of their employees and using education as a tool for retention, advancement, and equity within their workforces. Education benefits have moved from the margins of HR policy to the center of workforce strategy.

How many students are impacted by these employer investments?

This question remains surprisingly difficult to answer. The federal government stopped collecting data on the provision and use of employer-supported tuition assistance in 2002, leaving researchers and policymakers to rely on estimates. However, data from the 2015–2016 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) offers some insight. That year, about **1.2 million undergraduate students** and about **270,000 graduate students** were financially supported by their employers. Employer aid was disproportionately used by older learners: 11.3% of undergraduates over age 40 received employer support, more than twice the rate of their younger peers. For colleges, this results in an estimated $28 billion in tuition revenue.

More recent data from SHRM reveals that 45% of employers offer tuition assistance. While that number has remained relatively steady over the past decade, other forms of educational investment are even more prevalent. According to SHRM:

- **82%** of employers support formal training to keep skills current,
- **80%** support education to develop new skills, and
- **79%** pay fees for certification or recertification.

Larger employers are even more likely to invest in upskilling and tuition programs. A 2023 survey conducted by UpSkill America and the Institute for Corporate Productivity (i4CP) shows a sharp increase in tuition support as organizations scale:

Business Size	% Offering Tuition Assistance	% Offering Apprenticeships	% Offering Internal Training
Fewer than 100 employees	36%	18%	36%
100 – 999 employees	64.3%	14.3%	64%
More than 1,000 employees	75%	44.6%	82.6%
More than 5,000 employees	81%	45.5%	82.5%

Mapping Enablers: Identifying Employer-Friendly Practices

There's no one-size-fits-all model for collaboration between colleges and employers. Effective arrangements take many shapes, from informal pipelines to formalized tuition programs and everything in between. Despite good intentions and mutual benefit, many employer-institution relationships are strained. In our conversations with employers and intermediaries, we heard consistently that colleges and universities are often not operationally ready to engage with employers at the speed, scale, or level of responsiveness that businesses demand.

The challenges we identify here are not unique. They reflect the current structure of postsecondary institutions, including how they organize themselves, communicate internally, engage with their communities, and adapt to meet the needs of adult learners and the employers who support them.

We identified five domains of institutional policy and practice that either support or inhibit effective collaboration with employers. These clusters reflect the parts of college operations and leadership where employer interactions most often occur and where misalignment can cause friction for everyone.

1. Strategic Alignment on Mission Goals

Across the landscape of institution-employer engagement, the most effective collaborations are built on shared understanding, a mutual clarity and a common vision about goals, constraints, and success metrics. In our conversations with employers, the most productive institutional relationships are those in which colleges demonstrate openness and curiosity about employer needs and a willingness to adapt to meet those needs. When institutional leaders take the time to understand why an employer is investing in education, whether to support retention, address skill gaps, promote equity, or spur advancement, they are better positioned to align operations, streamline processes, and deliver real value for working learners.

2. Responsive Business and Financial Practices

These are the behind-the-scenes systems that govern how money moves. Employers cited persistent challenges with billing processes, inconsistent invoicing and payment timelines, restrictions on how employer dollars can be applied to students' accounts, and limited flexibility to accommodate atypical payment structures. These issues are usually housed in the bursar, financial aid, and accounting offices, and they often operate on a timeline that is out of sync with corporate practices and fiscal cycles.

3. Working Learner-Centered Academic Practices

Academic policies ranging from course design to modality to recognition of learning can support the lived realities of working learners or may make lives harder. Employers expressed a strong desire for institutions to align content and delivery formats with the needs of employees who are balancing work, study, and busy lives. This includes modularizing learning, recognizing prior experience toward program requirements, offering asynchronous options, and ensuring academic calendars don't become barriers. These decisions are generally made within academic departments but are deeply connected to registrar and IT systems as well.

4. Actionable and Predictable Data

Employers want to know what's working in their programs, and especially how students are progressing, but many institutions are constrained by outdated systems, legal ambiguities, or internal policies that make it difficult to share timely, actionable data with employer partners. From aggregate outcomes to individual progress tracking, the ability to communicate timely student performance and program impact within FERPA-compliant boundaries is critical to sustaining trust and investment. These practices often fall within institutional research, legal, and compliance offices, which play an important role that can either enable or hinder collaboration, depending on when they are brought into the process.

5. Integrated Student Supports

Even with full tuition coverage, working learners face steep challenges in navigating postsecondary institutions. Colleges and universities that provide accessible and informed support services, including academic advising, career coaching, mental health resources, and flexible scheduling, are more likely to retain and graduate these learners. Unfortunately, many student support systems are designed with traditional full-time students in mind, leaving working adults to fend for themselves. Offices of student services, academic success, and career development are critical in addressing this gap.

Together, these domains form the foundation of **employer-friendly practices**. They aren't often complex or sexy, but they are essential. Each one is a point where things can either work smoothly or break down. When managed well, they support clear, efficient collaboration. When overlooked, they lead to confusion, delays, and missed opportunities. These areas will be our focus going forward as we develop an actionable framework for employer-friendly practices.

In the sections that follow, we explore each cluster in greater detail, highlighting specific practices and sharing employer insights that can help colleges understand and deploy employer-friendly practices.

Strategic Alignment on Mission and Goals

Strong employer-institution collaboration begins with clarity of purpose. When colleges and employers align on goals, priorities, and outcomes, they lay the groundwork for productive, long-term engagement. This alignment shapes decision-making, accountability, and how both parties define success. The following areas identified by employers highlight what effective alignment requires and where it most often breaks down.

Connecting to Business Imperatives

At their core, employer-supported education programs are designed to meet business needs. Whether the objective is to reduce turnover, improve employee engagement, or strengthen internal pipelines, employers are investing in outcomes that matter to their bottom line.

“Our objectives are certainly recruitment and retention, and brand reputation,” said one employer. Another added, “Education became table stakes for us as an employer. We were keeping up with other employers in our industry who are competitors.” A third emphasized, “Employee sentiment is the north star.”

These goals vary across companies and even within departments. “Each employer has a different reason for why they’re offering education programming to employees. Some partners don’t care as much about completion because they’re focused really squarely on turnover. Others dig in on wanting progress data, completion data, everything, to understand where the drop-offs are… Coordinating across shops internally can be challenging because departments are run differently, and have different students,” commented one employer.

Recognizing That Business Goals Shift Over Time

While colleges focus on student graduation, credential completion, or enrollment goals, employers are often focused on hiring pipelines, retention, internal mobility, and brand equity. Without a deliberate effort to understand these goals, even well-intentioned partnerships can drift off course.

“Depending on the points of contact and where the partnership lives, sometimes there isn’t alignment on our goals as a program… Getting clear on what the employer’s outcome it, which can be a lot of different things—you have to get there,” shared one program lead.

Employer goals shift with changing market conditions, labor demands, and internal strategy. An institution that builds a program aligned with one set of objectives may find itself out of sync when those priorities evolve. The most successful education partners remain flexible, communicative, and responsive. “Businesses sometimes come at this with one intention, and then it changes. Times change, things get leaner. We got into this for reputational lift and retention, but we soon started thinking that the program was our solution for key occupational shortages," shared one employer.

Leadership Matters

Employers emphasized that leadership sets the tone for successful collaboration. Colleges that prioritize employer engagement as part of their strategic growth plan are viewed as credible and committed partners. One employer described working with two small institutions: "We have two institutional partners that are really tiny. One has made it clear that this is part of their strategic growth strategy… They've grown rapidly and they're dedicated. It has been a huge overhaul, but they're dedicating themselves to the partnership because it's a massive part of their strategy."

The contrast was clear with institutions that treated employer collaboration as secondary or optional. "Another college we're partnered with—they move slow, it doesn't seem like they really care, and nothing has changed," commented the same employer.

Speed and Sense of Urgency

Working learners often make enrollment decisions quickly, and institutions that delay response risk losing prospective students altogether. Several employers noted that timing is a critical factor in partnership success. "Institutions don't move students through the funnel fast enough. When someone requests information… if you don't capture them within the first 24 hours, they're probably not going to enroll. They'll forget they requested the information. They get busy, they have lives, they might feel rejected," shared one employer.

Even when employers offered large groups of learners, colleges didn't always respond with urgency. "Definitely a lack of responsiveness, where the colleges just didn't see the opportunity… There was more arm twisting than you'd expect, given that we had potentially hundreds of students for them," commented another.

Internal misalignment also created barriers. "We'd talk to leadership and they would be really excited and then we'd talk to clerks… and they were not. We had experiences where people who would ultimately make this work inside of the colleges didn't really understand. It was dumped on them, and there was a lot of misalignment between what leaders thought was exciting vs. others in the institution," shared one employer.

Willingness to Adapt and Flex

Employers understand that academic standards matter, but they also expect institutions to accommodate new timelines and delivery models when appropriate. Unfortunately, many institutions are seen as inflexible.

In one case, a promising partnership fell apart due to process rigidity. "We went to an institution and were pretty deep into launching a certificate. We were aligned. Then we just randomly got an update after they went to their provost: the quickest they could bring it to life was two academic years. That's standard process. They weren't willing. I was put off by that," said one employer.

Leadership mindset played a role as well. "There are inconsistencies in leadership, especially the willingness and open-mindedness of college leaders. We have some who aren't as open-minded, and it limits their opportunities with us," shared a regional employer.

Consistent Points of Contact

Continuity and coordination across departments were common challenges. Employer relationships often depended on a single point of contact within the institution, and turnover disrupted progress. "Changing points of contact is a consistent challenge… What was once a strong partnership would drop off if we lost a champion at the college," noted one employer.

Even when staff remained in place, the coordination required to manage employer programs effectively was often lacking. "Points of contact have to be able to connect a whole lot of dots… and typically, they're not resourced, nor do they have the bandwidth to do so," commented another program leader.

Different Definitions of "Good"

Employers and colleges often define success differently. Institutions may view 50% retention or completion rates as a reasonable goal, especially in highly accessible programs. Employers, however, are typically focused on workforce impact and may view these outcomes as underperformance. "Colleges say, '55% retention rate is really good.' Employers want 70% minimum. There are translation problems," said one employer.

Another shared, "50% completion rates are good? Colleges are setting goals and looking to make incremental improvements… as an employer, you look at 50% and say it's unacceptable."

Employers also want to be confident that their employees are enrolling in programs that offer long-term value. "It is really important that the institutions we support won't do more harm than good… if our students have to transfer, they don't have to start from scratch. The value of the degree, long-term, must be strong," commented one program leader.

Responsive Business and Financial Practices

Financial friction points are a consistent issue between employers and postsecondary institutions. These issues, often operational or procedural, slow down program implementation, erode trust, and make it harder for working learners to access education benefits. While many of these problems remain invisible to senior institutional leaders, their effects are deeply felt by employers and students alike.

Resource Constraints Undermine Execution

Even large institutions often under-resource the units that serve working learners. Employers described partnerships where adult-focused teams were left without the tools, resources, or staffing needed to succeed. "Resourcing is a huge concern. One partner is a massive R1 institution… but all the resources go to recruitment of their freshman class and graduate students. No one really cares about the online department. They have one person who works all the leads… They don't even have a CRM or lead management system. They're manually going through the file every day," commented one employer.

Vendor Setup and Payment Systems Create Barriers

Before institutions can be paid by employers, they must often complete a vendor onboarding process, and occasionally that conflicts with their standard procurement systems. This can delay payments and program launch. "The biggest issue is in our system, schools have to set themselves up as a vendor… That allows us to work across hundreds of organizations and lets schools see how their payments are being processed. In some states, we have to register as a preferred vendor, and it is an ongoing saga," commented one employer.

Institutions Struggle to Handle Third-Party Payments

One of the most widespread pain points occurs when institutions struggle with managing third-party payments. While employers will have different processes depending on how their program is organized, and whether they use an intermediary organization, we heard from multiple employers that issues with payment introduce confusion, create unnecessary anxiety for students, and strain trust between employer and institution.

One company sends sponsorship letters to the institution on behalf of employees, indicating that the company will cover costs. That employer noted, "We develop sponsorship letters that go to the institution, saying we will pay directly. But when there's someone new in the bursar's office and they don't recognize it, they send a note to the student—and then it escalates to us."

Invoices Lack Detail and Consistency

Employers need clear, itemized invoices for their own financial systems and to manage internal stakeholders and confirm compliance with budget and tax regulations. One employer commented, "Our direct pay partners are terrible about giving all the details we need. We'll get an invoice with just a name and amount. I've complained. My response is: You wouldn't get a credit card statement with just the amount. Why would you expect a business to pay without knowing why?"

Invoicing Timelines Clash with Business Realities

Misalignment in payment timelines is a major source of disruption. Many colleges invoice based on academic calendars, especially around drop/add deadlines, while companies operate on net 30-, 45-, or 60-day terms. "We're net 45. The school was like, 'We can't do that,'" commented one employer.

This misalignment has consequences, especially for learners. A program leader shared: "We were hearing from students that they couldn't enroll in their next course because they had an overdue bill, but we hadn't received the bill yet. Or we had 30 days to pay it and hadn't yet. So now, as soon as that invoice comes in, we have to pay it. And accounts payable tells us, cross your fingers."

For companies, these delays don't just impact operations. They undermine credibility with their own workforce. "There is already skepticism among our employees… We have to tell employees, *we will really pay for it!* Oh, I can't tell you how often we had a canned response: 'Please ignore this. We promise, we've got you.' It's so frustrating," said one program leader.

Even when companies negotiate faster payment cycles, inconsistency remains. An employer shared, "We have one partner who doesn't bill us until six months into the year. My finance department says we have all this money accruing, not paid off, and we can never nail down the correct point of contact."

Inflexible policies around add/drop deadlines also create issues. Institutions often want payment upfront, but companies hesitate to pay for students who aren't continuing enrollment. "We understand that colleges need resources… but if someone drops out, we don't want to pay for that. Some colleges couldn't do that," commented one employer.

Difficulty Projecting Costs and Budgeting Accurately

Without consistent timelines, price transparency, or billing structures, budgeting becomes guesswork for employers. One employer shared, "We struggled with determining even on a quarterly basis what our spend would be."

Institutions also vary widely in how they price programs, and how well they understand the implications for employers and learners trying to stay under tax thresholds like the $5,250 limit in Section 127 of the Internal Revenue Code. "Do institutions understand $5,250, and what happens when costs exceed that amount, for the employer and the student? Institutions need to think really hard about their price point," commented one employer.

Every Institution Does Billing Differently

Employers working with multiple institutions described wide variation in billing formats, fee definitions, and eligibility rules. "At a high level, things are complicated because every institution does their billing differently. Everyone's fees are different, what's encompassed, whether it's lumped or itemized. That makes sense why some companies only partner with one school," said one employer.

These differences complicate education program policy design and force employers to make case-by-case decisions. "We run into challenges with how institutions define fees and how we set up our policy… Do we cover the graduation fee? Prior learning assessment? It's a very technical conversation. And with 300 different ways to define a technology fee, it's almost impossible to be that specific," said another employer.

Working Learner-Centered Academic Practices

Academic practices are the proving ground for employer-institution collaboration. Even with strong funding and shared goals, the way learning is structured, validated, and delivered can determine a program's success or failure. In our interviews, employers shared both optimism and exasperation when it came to academic practices. They noted real progress in areas like transfer credit and applied learning, but also pointed to ongoing gaps that hinder scale, frustrate students, and weaken employer return-on-investment.

Fit for Working Learners

Employers repeatedly emphasized that many institutions still operate with models designed for traditional students, ignoring or downplaying the realities of working learners. Rigid schedules and inflexible formats often shut people out. One employer commented, "They don't offer classes that work for our employees. Classes are during the day, no night or weekend classes. Even when we bring them enough students to support a faculty member, they say they can't do it." Another program lead shared, "We tried to set up a maintenance class for our second shift, who work until 2 AM. The only time the college could provide the course was at 8 AM… They said, 'This is when our teacher has availability.' It was really, really frustrating."

Inflexible formats are often compounded by complex processes. "We see a lot of people abandon things at some point because it's just too much, too complicated, too overwhelming," one employer shared.

Transfer and Credit for Prior Learning

Many employers view transfer credit and credit for prior learning (CPL) as essential for working learners with significant job experience or prior coursework. Institutions that actively support CPL and articulation agreements are seen as better partners. One employer noted, "A lot of our institutional partners are very transfer friendly. They have a lot of credit for prior learning and articulation agreements set up between providers."

Consistency remains a barrier. "We did a pilot with several colleges, and everyone looked at [our training] differently," said a national employer. "We can't scale with every college looking at our training differently."

Employers aren't seeking shortcuts; they want relevant experience to be acknowledged. "We're thinking a lot about how to do credit for prior learning… How do we as an employer actually be a good partner to schools and try to give credit recommendations and make it as easy as possible for schools to award credit?" one employer commented. Another added, "Our employees would love for their work to count… so they could get into the meat of things that will truly get them the degree quicker. We're not looking to dilute anything—we want it to be connected."

Degree Audits and Pre-Enrollment Mapping

Employers want their employees to make informed decisions before enrolling, which requires institutions to provide more transparency about degree requirements and transferable credits. "We're thinking hard about building out the pre-enrollment process—helping learners know what they're bringing in, what they want to pursue, and what they'll get from an institution BEFORE they choose to enroll," one employer explained.

Institutional policies often don't support this. "Universities won't audit a transcript until the person actually applies and enrolls. We really need to know what of their prior experiences will transfer in before that decision gets made," one employer commented. Failure to offer early visibility can result in significant inefficiencies. "I'm seeing students with 120 credits but no credential," one program leader said. "How is this possible? How are there not five red flags and flashing red lights in your system?"

Readiness and Screening

Employers want institutions to be more transparent about what it means to be "qualified" and to take more responsibility for ensuring student readiness. "Someone can jump through all the hurdles on paper… but when they get through the door, they're not ready," one program lead observed. "There's just a sink-or-swim mentality, and I think that's an institutional failure."

Employers are wary of developmental education, particularly when it becomes a dead end for working learners who already have busy lives and who may have insecurities about their academic abilities. One employer commented, "If a student starts in dev ed, they likely won't complete. We don't want to put them through a crappy experience and waste money."

Employers expressed a desire for supportive, evidence-based options that build skills without stigmatizing students or stalling their progress. One commented, "We want students to pick a better option so they don't experience failure first."

Competency-Based Education and Skills Transparency

Employers increasingly view education through a lens of measurable outcomes and validated competencies. Yet many say they struggle to understand what a student actually knows after completing a course or program. "Corporations tend to think in terms of product—where is quality assurance?" one employer said. "Of course, the core of courses stays the same, but if you take SOC101 from professor A and professor B, the skills aren't the same."

Employers are looking for clearer connections between credentials and workplace-relevant skills. "Every syllabus says the learning objectives, but now that you've completed the course, what are the skills you should speak to in an interview, on your resume?" one commented. Another added, "As employers are looking for solutions, they're expressing desire to move into skills-first… but on the whole, these systems don't talk to each other."

The demand for skills-first education is directly tied to workforce needs. "Our goal as an organization is to have a strong, stable workforce into the future. We do workforce planning, we focus on upskilling current talent to fill higher-level roles, and we're trying to retain employees," said one employer. "It's a big puzzle. If you take out one piece, you'll negatively impact the entire operation."

Experiential Learning and Modular Formats

Theory has its place, but for many employers, academic programs are not applied enough to real-world roles. One employer commented, "Employers are looking for job-relevant skills. Some degree programs are too generically designed… not hands-on, not experiential."

Degree programs that are too long or too rigid can discourage working adults from starting or completing. "It can be daunting for a working adult to sign up for a 2- or 4-year degree. But if something is chunked out into 6 months or even a year… and you create celebratory milestones, that drives adoption significantly."

Employers are looking for stackable, modular credentials that build momentum, give learners something tangible at every stage, and create on-ramps and off-ramps that work with real life. The demand is growing for shorter-form, skills-focused offerings that reflect how people work and learn in the real world. "Universities need to be more modular. They have these containers and that's all they're familiar with. We spend a lot of time pushing them to be more innovative in their design."

Actionable and Predictable Data

Effective data practices are essential for employer-institution partnerships to function and improve over time. Employers need timely, clear, and actionable information about learner progress, completion, and outcomes. Without it, they cannot measure impact, plan for workforce needs, or make the case for continued investment. Employers are generally aware of FERPA requirements and work to measure their requests within that policy, but described data reporting as inconsistent, delayed, or overly complex, ultimately undermining trust and slowing momentum.

Key Metrics

If there is one data point that matters most to employers, it's how close a learner is to earning their credential, and institutions struggle to provide it. Employers, on the whole, do not recognize the difficulty colleges and universities face in "predicting" a metric like this, which can change due to a variety of factors, including student behavior. One employer shared, "The key metric is how far away is this person from graduation. The problem is that they can't predict. This was mind-blowing, that they couldn't at the start of a semester predict who was going to earn a credential at the end of that term."

Another employer commented, "The most important data point for us is term-over-term enrollment and credential completion, and a lot of our partners really struggle with that. Even among the more sophisticated colleges… it felt like it was the first time they were looking at the data."

Employers aren't asking for test scores or attendance records. They want a basic signal of where someone is on the journey. A national employer commented, "We don't need to know if someone got an 80 on their exam. But is this person poised to graduate, and what's the date? What's the credential? What are the courses they took?"

Predictability matters not only for learner support but also for workforce planning, which can result in improved opportunities and economic mobility for learners. A program leader shared, "If an employer knows that someone will graduate with this in X months, they can prepare a role for that person. They don't want to let them graduate, celebrate, and then apply for a job."

Credential Stacking

Notwithstanding employers' desire for more modular learning experiences, some have difficulty in interpreting and tracking data emerging from stackable and "microcredential" programs.

"From a student motivation perspective, sure, structuring that way is great. But it's not helpful to us. It mucks up our data," one employer noted. "When someone enrolls in a community college, they can get a certificate, certification, associate's, bachelor's… our schools will report they completed, but if the degree isn't the end goal, we can't track it."

The lack of clarity in credential pathways creates confusion and limits the ability to measure outcomes or understand value. One employer added, "When you get to that micro-level, it's hard to say that this stackable piece of your program is going to lead to a particular outcome. The quality and type of those building blocks vary so greatly."

To be clear, employers are not encouraging institutions to move away from microcredentials and other innovative models, but to be very thoughtful about how these learning experiences create real value for students and employers, and to be attentive to how these credentials can "roll up" for data and broader credentialing purposes.

Timeliness of Reporting

Even when institutions provide the right data, the timing is often misaligned with employer needs. Employers operate on fast, predictable cycles. Institutions often don't.

"Their reporting timeline is super, super late," one employer commented. "You'd think at the end of a semester they'd clearly be able to report… or even just after the add/drop window."

Delays have cascading effects. They stall processes like billing and learner support, leaving both employers and learners in limbo. As one program lead shared, "At that point, the invoicing process should kick off… but the time and speed to billing is just really delayed."

Closing the Feedback Loop

One of the most effective practices cited by employers is closing the feedback loop, ensuring that early academic indicators reach employers in time to inform support. When that doesn't happen, learners can fall behind without anyone noticing.

A national employer laid out the challenge plainly: "If institutions are giving a placement test on the front side of a program, that data needs to flow back through. Whether they passed or failed, we don't want them to stall out at an add/drop date because they weren't academically prepared and no one stopped them."

The consequences of silence can be damaging. “If I’m paying for you to try to go to college but you’re reading at a 4th grade level, I’m just creating more educational shame for my employee, which is the opposite of what I want to do,” a program leader said.

Integrated Student Support

Even the best-designed programs, aligned on mission and structured for scale, will fall short if students don’t receive the right support. In employer-supported education programs, student support isn’t just a “nice to have.” It’s the front line of retention, completion, and learner well-being. Yet, employers repeatedly indicated that while institutions promise support, the systems to deliver it are stretched, inconsistent, or missing entirely. One employer shared, “There is an assumption that the university is catching people who are falling behind. The university is responsible, and the employer believes the university is responsible, but I don’t know that there is a good mechanism to communicate. That’s the gap, or opportunity, there.”

Structural Alignment and Targeted Service

Employers consistently praised institutions that structure their internal systems to meet the specific needs of working learners. Programs that succeed are designed intentionally, with dedicated staff who understand employer policies and learner circumstances.

“Our most successful institutional partners… have designed their systems to meet the needs of frontline employees. They have counselors who know our policy inside and out. Anyone who comes in with us goes directly to them. They’re paying attention and tracking the success of our students,” noted one program leader.

This kind of alignment signals readiness and commitment. It helps learners feel seen and supported, and it reassures employers that their investment is in good hands.

Advising and Career Guidance

Personalized advising is essential for working learners to make informed decisions and stay on track. But many institutions lack the capacity to provide it.

“I think about some of our schools where they have two advisors for thousands of students… What I’m asking for is not a reasonable expectation given that structure,” shared one employer.

In response to understaffing, some colleges resort to assigning advising duties to whoever is available, regardless of expertise. A regional health care employer commented, “They’ll assign faculty, anyone, as a career advisor… those people don’t really know the program, but they have to advise the students, so they wing it.”

The impact on students can be profound. "I see time and time again… students are a couple semesters in, already in debt, and they see patient care in real life and it's not what they thought it was going to be," said another health care leader.

For employers, these missteps come at a cost. Learners placed in the wrong program may disengage or drop out, undermining both the individual's goals and the company's investment.

Finding the Right Program

Navigating academic options can be overwhelming, especially for working adults managing jobs and families. Employers want their people to land in the right program from the beginning but often find institutional systems too fragmented to support that goal.

"Pathways is a huge thing. Making sure that learners can find the right program is a big thing for us. We want to create a hyper-personalized learner journey, but… trying to find the right program is really hard," one employer explained.

In many cases, employers lack visibility into what programs are available or their cost, and institutions do not offer tools to match learners to the best options based on career goals, prior experience, or transfer credit. "We need to make sure that learners know what is available to them and what's possible," said a program leader.

Upfront Counseling and Coaching

Many institutions do little to support learners before enrollment. In response, some employers are developing their own coaching programs to fill the gap.

"We are big advocates for upfront counseling required before enrollment. That was something we spoke with colleges about regularly. We built a coaching program as a response to schools not doing it," one employer shared.

Employers are not asking institutions to provide concierge-level support. They are asking for clear pathways, proactive guidance, and support structures that set students up for success from the start. As one program leader put it, "An academic plan would be great. Give students a map and a tracker, make sure students have all their prior credit transferred in."

Without these systems in place, learners can get lost, and employers are left wondering whether institutions are truly prepared to serve the population they claim to welcome.

Conclusion

Employer interest in education partnerships has never been higher. Across industries, companies are investing real dollars in postsecondary education as a lever for workforce stability, mobility, and growth. But for these partnerships to operate at scale and at the level of performance required by businesses, higher education institutions must become *operationally ready*.

This readiness doesn't rest in a single office or initiative. It requires coordination and alignment across five key domains:

1. Mission and Goal Alignment

Colleges that succeed in employer collaboration start by aligning on the *why*. They understand that employers are not monoliths. Each company brings different goals: retention, advancement, brand reputation, and filling high-need roles. Successful institutions don't just tolerate those motivations; they embrace them. They ask the right questions early, revisit assumptions often, and treat the employer as a strategic thought partner, not just a funder or referral source.

2. Business and Financial Practices

Even the most well-intentioned partnerships break down when institutional finance systems can't keep up. Inflexible billing timelines, inconsistent invoicing, and opaque fee structures leave employers scrambling and learners stuck. These are not minor issues; they are foundational. If a learner gets a late payment notice or can't register for the next course because of a delayed invoice or payment, the damage is already done.

3. Academic Practices

Employers are increasingly focused on academic models that recognize what learners already know, reflect the realities of work, and deliver real-world value. They want learning to be modular, stackable, and aligned to skills, not only theory. They want institutions to be transparent about time-to-degree, program content, and the competencies embedded in each course. And they want more flexibility in how learners move through the system.

4. Data Practices

Data is the currency of trust. Employers want to understand whether their investments are yielding results: who's enrolled, who's progressing, and who's completing. They don't need daily dashboards, but they do need timely, usable data that supports forecasting, evaluation, and communication across stakeholders. And they need systems that align with, not obstruct, business operations.

5. Student Support Practices

For working learners, support is often the difference between persistence and completion or withdrawal. These students need advising that reflects their lived reality: help choosing the right program, understanding the commitment, and staying on track. Institutions with limited advising capacity leave learners to navigate a maze of unclear pathways, uncoordinated guidance, and reactive communication.

Next Steps: An Actionable Framework for Implementing Employer-Friendly Practices

This research, focused on opportunities to improve areas of practice where employers experience friction and a resulting loss of trust with their institutional partners, is devoted to considering a new layer of partnership infrastructure: the procedural, practical, relational, and cultural policies and practices that make engagements between institutions and employers work.

As noted above, our intent is not to encourage higher education to defer to employers, or to dilute higher education experiences for the sake of employer time and ease. Rather, it's about shifting inefficient and damaging practices, often unknown until they become consequential, toward those that "make deposits in the trust bank." It's also about lowering the barriers for the institutions best positioned to educate working adults, serving rural and urban communities, and trying to respond to employer needs without the resources of elite or flagship campuses, or the scaling capabilities of national online institutions.

Over the next year, UpSkill America, with the support of higher education professionals and with ongoing employer feedback, will develop a framework and plan to support the tactical and practical implementation of these employer-friendly practices.

We invite higher education leaders who are interested in partnering and learning alongside us to connect through a brief survey here. We look forward to sharing frequently over the next year about our progress and lessons learned.

Acknowledgements

This report is based on research funded by Strada Education Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of Strada Education Foundation.

UpSkill America is grateful to Strada for the opportunity to conduct this research, and especially to Laura Love and Kevin Grubb for their leadership and insights. UpSkill thanks the many employers and stakeholders who shared their thoughts for their wisdom and for their commitment to supporting education for frontline workers.

Suggested Citation

"Employer-Friendly Practices: Bridging Higher Ed Practices and Employer Realities." UpSkill America at the Aspen Institute. September 2025. https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/employer-friendly-practices-bridging-higher-ed-practices-and-employer-realities/

About

About the Author

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UpSkill America, an initiative of the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program, supports employers and workforce organizations to expand and improve high-quality educational and career advancement opportunities for America's frontline workers. We seek to create a movement of employers, civic organizations, workforce intermediaries, higher education institutions, and policymakers working collaboratively to implement education, training, and development strategies that result in better jobs and opportunities for frontline workers, more competitive businesses, and stronger communities. Follow us on LinkedIn and learn more at upskillamerica.org.

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