Tool: Engaging Businesses in Degree Attainment Collaboratives

Degree attainment collaborative efforts can use this tool to determine the roles businesses can play to support their work and have a clear rationale for why a particular business would benefit from engaging in the effort. **When collaborative efforts wish to develop a business engagement strategy, it can be helpful to examine the following 4 questions:**

1. WHAT Does the Collaborative Need from Businesses?

To engage business effectively, collaborative effort leaders should **think about the different roles businesses can play and how those roles align with the effort's needs.**

1.	Collaborative Infrastructure Supporters	• Provide funds to support the collaborative infrastructure or backbone organization • Offer employees or leaders the opportunity to serve on steering committee or work group(s)
2.	Conveners	• Use their connections, relationships, and business acumen to move the work of the collaborative forward (e.g., executives provide critical introductions and leadership)
3.	Strategic Partners	• Partner on implementing work group strategies, especially on workforce development • Align business practices with the effort's strategies (e.g., through core business activities related to production/services, employment, or wages/benefits) • Provide workforce and industry data to inform strategy development
4.	Consultants	• Lend specific technical expertise (e.g., offer assistance on human-centered design or consumer research) • Provide capacity for shared measurement and continuous improvement activities
5.	Community Advocates	• Engage with local, state, or federal government agencies to change policies in support of increased college attainment • Apply for funding from local, state, or federal government agencies to implement new programs, particularly on workforce development • Advocate for education in chamber of commerce meetings and other gatherings
6.	Educators	• Provide internships and apprenticeships • Inform curriculum development for careers related to their industry • Invest in employees' talent development (e.g., tuition reimbursement, certifications, in-house education)
7.	Employers	• Conduct career fairs for students participating in programs related to the collaborative effort • Offer internships to students in careers related to their industry
8.	Donors	• Offer in-kind donations to support community engagement activities (e.g., space to meet, gift cards or refreshments for focus groups) • Providing grants or support to nonprofits in alignment with the effort's strategy

2. WHO Should Collaborative Efforts Seek to Engage?

To engage the right businesses, **answering the strategic questions below can help collaborative efforts leaders better understand their business context**.

Business Partner Diagnostic

Business Landscape
- Who are the major businesses in our community or region?
- Who are the key business leaders?
- Are any business leaders in our region particularly interested in education or college attainment?

Business Challenges
- What are the overall challenges in our business landscape?
- What are the main talent gaps in the community, and how are businesses currently affected?
- To what extent and how are businesses currently involved in solving our community's talent gap?

Business Engagement
- Where along the education pipeline have businesses demonstrated the most interest in investing and collaborating?
- How are businesses currently engaging, if at all, in degree attainment and workforce development?
- Do we currently have strong business leadership at the table? Why or why not?

Roles Businesses Can Play in the Collaborative Effort
- In what ways do we think businesses can support our collaborative effort?
- What are our needs?
- What assets do we have as a backbone to engage with businesses?

3. WHY Should Businesses Participate?

Successfully engaging businesses is important to understand why a particular business might be interested in supporting the work. There are three main business motivations:

1. **Build brand and reputation.** Businesses want to increase customer acquisition and loyalty by demonstrating support of local students' development and access to degree attainment.
2. **Support the local economy.** Businesses want to contribute to the development of a prosperous regional economy by improving degree attainment, which will strengthen the local workforce and increase local purchasing power.
3. **Develop a talent pipeline.** Businesses want to develop a strong regional talent pipeline that produces the skills their business and industry require.

Business motivations are not mutually exclusive, which means that a business might have multiple motivations for engaging with the collaborative effort.

4. HOW Can Businesses Effectively Participate?

To create a compelling value proposition, **collaborative efforts should tailor their strategy for engagement with different businesses based on what might motivate the business to participate in the effort**.

1. BUILD BRAND AND REPUTATION: STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGEMENT

Who to Engage?	How to Engage?

Types of Businesses:
 	
• Primarily larger or medium-size businesses focused on brand and reputation; not necessarily reliant on local talent or suffering from talent gaps (e.g., national bank, cellular telephone company, regional superstore)
 	
• New businesses trying to increase their visibility in the community (e.g., new cable company, new restaurant chain in town)
 	
Key Staff:
 	
• Executive leadership (CEO, VP)
 	
• Corporate foundation leadership
 	
• Communications
 	
• Marketing
	• **Build and maintain relationships** with executive leadership to ensure the collaborative effort is visible to key decision-makers and relevant staff (e.g., HR)
	
	• **Make the business case by:**
	
	  • Emphasizing the effort's reputation in the community (e.g., highlight media appearances or endorsements by local or national leaders)
	
	  • Signaling brand and reputation gains for the business (e.g., number of people who participate in events or number of students participating in the effort's programs)
	
	  • Highlighting diversity of organizations involved and high-level visibility with key community organizations and potential consumers (e.g., parents, teachers)
	
	• **Continue to engage** executive or foundation leadership on effort's board; keep informed of progress and impact
	
	• **Provide ongoing opportunities** for executive leadership to network with other community leaders

2. SUPPORT LOCAL ECONOMY: STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGEMENT

Who to Engage?	How to Engage?

Types of Business Partners: Primarily medium-size and large businesses with strong local footprint and likely affected by local economic dynamics (e.g., national and locally based retail and insurance companies, companies with corporate headquarters in the area, chambers of commerce, economic development agencies)
 	
Key Staff:
 	
• Executive leadership (e.g., CEO, VP, Strategy Officers)
 	
• Corporate social responsibility (CSR)/governance leadership
 	
• Communications and human resources
	• **Build and maintain relationships** with executive leadership, strategy officers, and CSR leadership
	
	• **Make the business case by:**
	
	  • Effectively linking the effort's work on degree attainment to improving the local economy
	
	  • Highlighting the effort's goal and accomplishments so business can see the opportunity for supporting a program that is demonstrating impact
	
	  • Clearly presenting the business opportunity to contribute to regional economic prosperity.
	
	• **Continue to engage** executive or CSR leadership on effort's board; keep informed of progress
	
	• **Provide ongoing opportunities** for businesses to broker strong relationships with higher education partners

3. DEVELOP A TALENT PIPELINE: STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGEMENT

Who to Engage?	How to Engage?

Types of Business Partners: Businesses of any size that rely on local talent pool and face current talent gaps (e.g., businesses in middle-skill industries such as nursing, manufacturing)
 	
Key Staff:
 	
• Executive leadership (e.g., CEO, VP, Strategy Officers)
 	
• Operation managers
 	
• Human resources (focus on developing and managing robust talent pipeline)
	• **Build and maintain relationships** with executive leadership, strategy officers, and HR
	
	• **Make the business case by:**
	
	  • Identifying potential partners who are grappling with workforce needs and face current talent gaps in the region
	
	  • Leveraging current partners already participating in the effort to start making connections with others in the industry
	
	  • Utilizing current business forums where different stakeholders might already be meeting (e.g., chambers of commerce or workforce investment boards)
	
	  • Developing a strategy for talent development to show potential to bring partners together to improve the talent pipeline
	
	  • Bringing data and evidence to the current talent gaps in the region
	
	  • Demonstrating the costs of current talent gaps on the business or its broader industry or sector
	
	  • Highlighting the potential benefits from improved productivity and decreased hiring costs due to an improved talent pipeline
	
	• **Continue to engage** executive leadership on the effort's board while also engaging HR and other relevant staff in working groups, specific workforce development programs, or as ad hoc advisors on talent development issues; keep informed of progress
	
	• **Provide ongoing opportunities** for business to broker strong relationships with institutions of higher education and other community partners working on developing the talent pipeline (e.g., chambers of commerce, workforce investment boards, economic development divisions, city government, etc.)

This tool is part of a research project conducted by FSG in partnership with Lumina Foundation to better understand how degree attainment collaborative efforts can more effectively engage with businesses. For more information on this topic, including examples from collaborative efforts effectively engaging businesses, please review the full brief.