

Improving Employer Engagement in Bachelors Degree Pathways

A two-year initiative for select Talent Hubs, focused on redesigning existing partnership structures to better connect employers with faculty and institutions.

The Purpose

The chasm between employers and postsecondary education providers is growing in the United States. Despite the strong demand for upskilled and reskilled talent across several industries, collaboration between education providers and employers is notably low. Several studies have been authored in the past five years that underscores the challenge. These studies often report low self-scoring when rating partnerships between colleges, universities, and employers, and a disconnect between what postsecondary institutions provide and what employers need. CivicLab's work with partnerships across the country also points to this issue, as several Talent Hubs have requested specific support in creating stronger partnerships between education providers and employers.

While every community and partnership is unique - and the reasons for this chasm are contextual to each place - a few common challenges have emerged:

1. *Partnerships between postsecondary education providers and employers are overly reliant on labor market data.* Working groups (e.g., advisory boards, industry councils, curriculum task forces) meant to design pathways aligned to labor market demand tend to prioritize secondary labor market data from sources like Lightcast. While this data is helpful in understanding macro conditions, its retroactive nature prevents partnerships from building a talent system for future economies. Further, most labor market data only captures a subset of employers that use third-party job seeking platforms (e.g., LinkedIn, Indeed), thereby hiding economic opportunity from pathway planners. Finally, labor market data does not include the voice, choice, and interest of the learner/worker, rendering those the system intends to serve voiceless in pathway design.

Through CivicLab's work with partnerships across the country, we have found success in complementing labor market data with rich qualitative and place-based data. Using a distributed ethnographic tool called SenseMaker, which allows for the large-scale collection of narrative data layered into quantitative frameworks, successful education-employer partnerships have uncovered hidden economic opportunity, the education/work interest of their target population, and insights into key barriers preventing people from entering a postsecondary pathway. This qualitative data is combined with place-based data, which reveals spatial diversity and opportunity, to help partnerships understand where they can make the most progress in the community they serve. Together, labor market data, high-quality qualitative data, and place-based data give education-employer partnerships a clear picture of the current state from which a future state can be built.

2. *Most postsecondary education providers in our networks express frustration with their current partnership structures and processes as it pertains to pathway design.* Almost all higher education institutions have various committees, industry councils, and advisory

groups that are intended to incorporate employer voice into pathway and curriculum development. However, when asked if these partnership structures are working well - or if they are following an intentional process for their engagement with internal and external stakeholders - almost all of them report dissatisfaction. For example, in serving a recent cohort of community colleges to improve external stakeholder engagement, CivicLab received requests from 14 of the 16 participating community colleges for help in redesigning existing collaborative structures. After conducting an initial assessment, we found that none of the colleges were following a process to guide their advisory work, and almost none had an intentionally designed collaborative structure (e.g., clear purpose, role clarity, facilitator, shared measurement system) to hold the work together. In short, by leaving their process and structure to chance, they were leaving their outcomes to chance.

CivicLab was established to discover what is now called the *Stakeholder Engagement Process* - a relationship-based, systems-building approach to collaboration. The process serves as a foundation for cross-sector and/or cross-functional teams working together to achieve something no one organization could do alone. Having been taught to over 23,000 people in 400+ communities, the *Stakeholder Engagement Process* has been used to address food insecurity, increase postsecondary attainment, revitalize downtowns, and reduce homelessness. It provides a common language and approach that all partners can understand, presents social change as a visible process, and allows partnerships to co-create their own way of working, ultimately sustaining their successful partnership through an incubated change methodology.

3. *Many employers, especially local and regional employers with fewer than 5,000 employees, are unsure how to work with postsecondary education partners and haven't examined how their hiring systems influence the talent system.* In many communities across the country, employers are still treated as consumers of talent, playing an external role in the talent development and connection system. As such, many employers are unsure how to participate in conversations focused on pathway development and curriculum design, let alone take steps to provide internships, apprenticeships, guaranteed interviews, and employer-supported learning. Further, many employers are still relying on the "spot market" to fill their talent needs, placing locally developed talent (i.e., graduates from local education providers) through the same hiring channels as they would a candidate from outside the community.

CivicLab has been working with our Fellows and a select Talent Hub to test out a new employer-engagement continuum called the Hire Forward Framework to help employers understand their role and position in the talent system. Building on the early success of the continuum, the same Talent Hub has created a collaborative "secret shopper" operation in which five employers are sharing real-time application and hiring data back with the Talent Hub. Through this process, they have identified errors in their automated HR technology that preemptively removed qualified candidates, identified skills gaps in recent graduates to inform curriculum tweaks, and, in some cases, redesigned hiring processes to favor local talent.

To address this chasm, and to create proof-points among a group of exemplary Talent Hub partnerships, CivicLab has partnered with Lumina Foundation to create a two-year program that will strengthen university and business relationships.

The Program

CivicLab will partner with two Talent Hubs in a two-year program (beginning January 2026; concluding December 2027) to strengthen university and business relationships. The objectives are to:

- 1) redesign partnership structures and processes used to ensure bachelor degree pathways, programs, and curricula are aligned across postsecondary, employer, and worker/learner needs;
- 2) better connect teaching faculty with employers to create rapid-cycle processes to modify coursework in real-time; and
- 3) build the capacity of partnerships to “speak the same language” when it comes to developing the talent needed for today’s and tomorrow’s economy.

Participating Talent Hubs must identify at least one existing partnership structure (e.g., advisory boards, industry councils, curriculum task forces) that is inclusive of university faculty, business representatives, and the Talent Hub convening organization to participate in the program. The group must have a focus on bachelors degrees pathways - partnerships between community colleges and employers are ineligible for this opportunity. Further eligibility criteria can be found in the eligibility section below.

Through this program, selected partnerships will:

- 1) Redesign existing partnership structures to strengthen functional relationships between employers and education providers, creating effective feedback processes that allow for strong pathways and curriculum development aligned to employer demand and increased participation by employers in talent development;
- 2) Apply labor market information; census-block demographic, economic, and education data; local administrative data; and, high-quality, primary qualitative data in system strategy development;
- 3) Gain greater understanding of the community's education and workforce systems, demands, and goals, resulting in actionable projects and targets for their region;
- 4) Build stronger collaborative teams that continuously improve the learning system, emphasizing economic mobility; and
- 5) Elevate their lessons learned and successes to a national platform.

Partnerships in the program will receive:

- 1) Three in-depth, multi-day labs over the course of two years hosted in the partnership's community. Each lab will allow partnerships to bring together key stakeholders to learn and apply system-building principles, tools, and frameworks to their work, resulting in stronger education and employer structures and processes. These labs will be held within each community (i.e., CivicLab travels to them) to allow for greater participation among local stakeholders.

Note: Each lab will be scheduled in coordination with local partners. Generally, the first lab should be completed by June 2026, the second by December 2026, and the third by August 2027.

- 2) No fewer than four, cohort-wide, virtual community of practice sessions focused on applying system-building principles and tools, cross-partnership learning, and providing content expertise. Outside experts and expert practitioners will also provide content within these sessions, addressing common problems of practice.

- 3) A static data book and interactive data map using ArcGIS from CivicLab's Fellow Dr. George Towers that visualizes census-block data to uncover invisible demographic, education, and economic trends within a community.
- 4) A time-limited license to SenseMaker - a distributed ethnographic tool that allows for large-scale capture of qualitative data into a quantitative framework - to collect "voice and choice" data from workers, learners, faculty, employers, and other key stakeholders. Each SenseMaker project will be conducted in consultation with CivicLab, providing each partnership with rich, large-scale qualitative data on desirability, viability, and hidden economic opportunity.
- 5) Explicit training and customization of the Hire Forward Framework, a tool that bridges the divide between education and employer partners seeking to improve the talent system. Supported by CivicLab staff, Fellows, and Affiliates, partnerships will use the Hire Forward Framework to assess the current state of employer offerings, provide a path for employers to revise their participation in the talent development system, and allow for local customization, creating a local continuum that articulates a path for scaled and deep employer engagement.
- 6) Continuous support from the team at CivicLab, including CivicLab Fellows and Affiliates, to address challenges as they arise. Such support includes direct coaching of key leaders and conveners responsible for stakeholder engagement.
- 7) A subgrant award of \$30,000 to partnerships to support local meeting costs and incubate new strategies. The investment is intended to add financial capacity to the increased human resource requirement for systems work. This funding cannot be given directly to students or other direct-to-student services (e.g., coaching, advising, technology, books, vouchers).

At the end of the program, success will be measured in the following ways:

- 1) The partnership structures engaged in the program have made noticeable changes in the way they operate, creating more meaningful and productive partnerships between universities, faculty, and business.
- 2) Stronger alignment between what is taught in bachelors degree coursework and what is needed by employees is achieved, thereby increasing the number of credentials of value.
 - a) Credentials of value is currently defined by Lumina Foundation as *the share of the labor force with a post-high school degree, certification, or certificate and are making at least 15% more than the national median annual salary of a high school graduate.*
 - b) In this program, credentials of value will be defined by a 15% wage premium above the region's median annual salary of a high school graduate, plus additional criteria defined locally by the partnership.
 - c) This program is primarily focused on bachelors degrees. Further information can be found in the Eligibility section below.
- 3) In addition to the above, each partnership will develop it's own success measures and objectives unique to their context, allowing the partnership to define success on their own terms.

Eligibility

This opportunity is only available to designated Talent Hubs. Only two Talent Hubs will be selected for this inaugural program. CivicLab hopes to use this program as a proof point, securing additional funds in the future to support more Talent Hubs. Given the need for a successful proof point, a short program timeline, and in aligning with the portfolio-level priorities within Lumina Foundation where the funding is sourced, the following eligibility requirements have been put in place:

- 1) The partnership must be a designated Talent Hub. The Talent Hub will co-lead the development of the application with at least one partner university within its partnership.
- 2) The partnership must focus on an existing partnerships structure (e.g., advisory boards, industry councils, curriculum task forces) that includes, at minimum, faculty/teaching faculty, university leadership, employers, and the Talent Hub organization.
 - a) Creating new partnership structures is not permitted in this program. This must be an existing group.
 - b) The group must include employers directly. Groups that represent employers (e.g., chambers, associations, industry councils, etc.) are welcome but insufficient.
 - c) The group must include faculty and/or teaching faculty that are currently providing coursework.
 - d) The group must have the ability to alter teaching practices and curricula that are currently being provided. This program is not intended to build out new pathways that do not currently exist. Rather, it is to improve the current state and rapidly create alignment towards credentials of value.
 - e) The group must have the ability to adjust and enhance employer practices, ranging from work-based learning, internships, and apprenticeships, to hiring practices.
 - f) We understand that Talent Hub convening organization staff may not have historically been engaged in these teams. In those instances, the partnership must acknowledge that the convening organization may begin to participate as part of this program.
- 3) The partnership must be focused on bachelors degrees. While two-year degrees and other credentials can be part of the conversation, the primary focus of this program is on bachelors degrees.
 - a) Preference is given to those focusing on Bachelors of Arts degrees, not just Bachelors of Science or other applied fields.
- 4) The partnership must have a state of readiness and willingness to change the ways they currently operate. The group must acknowledge a need for redesign and express willingness to try new approaches. The desire for change must come from within the group, not only from top-down leadership.

How to Apply

A two-step process will be used for application. The first step is to submit a Preliminary Review Form to indicate your interest in the program. After review to ensure fit, those advanced for the second step will be asked to submit additional information and an assessment.

Step 1: Preliminary Review Form - Due January 23, 2026

The Preliminary Review Form will require the following information:

- 1) Indicate the Talent Hub convening organization, university/universities, and employer(s) that would participate in the program.
- 2) Indicate the partnership structure(s) (e.g., advisory boards, industry councils, curriculum task forces) that would participate in the program.
- 3) Indicate the bachelors degrees that are within the scope of the partnership structures that would participate in the program.
- 4) Briefly provide a rationale that describes the readiness to participate in this program.
- 5) List three primary contact people that can provide further insight into readiness and the partnership applying for the program. The contacts should include 1) an university representative, 2) an employer representative, and 3) a representative of the Talent Hub.

The university and employer representatives should be active members of the partnership that would participate in the program.

You are welcome to attach pre-existing materials such as rosters and agendas from recent meetings to meet the above requirements.

Step 2: Selection - Due February 6, 2026

After reviewing submitted materials in step 1, eligible Talent Hubs will be advanced to step 2. Talent Hubs will be asked to submit the following:

- 1) Letters of commitment from, at minimum the university partner and the chair or lead of the partnership structure. Additional letters of commitment from employers are also welcome. The commitment letter should indicate that the partners agree to participate in the program and express a willingness to try new approaches to their existing partnership work.
- 2) A full roster of the partnership structure (e.g., advisory boards, industry councils, curriculum task forces) that will participate in the program.
- 3) Completion of a partnership health assessment provided by CivicLab. This assessment will be issued to a small number of individuals that are active in the partnership structure. Data will be shared back with the applicant irrespective of selection.
- 4) Additional information that may be required to add clarity to materials submitted in step 1.

Any additional materials should be emailed to **both** Dakota Pawlicki (dpawlicki@civiclab.org) and Megan Langdon (mlangdon@civiclab.org). Questions should also be directed to Dakota and Megan.

Thank you for considering working with us to strengthen your talent system. We at CivicLab hope to have the opportunity to serve you, your partners, and your community.