



Mapping the Opportunities

How Industry-Led Public-Private Partnerships Are Engaging Postsecondary Institutions to Benefit Employers, Postsecondary Institutions, and Students



Executive Summary

To strengthen students' pathways through postsecondary education and into in-demand careers, employers and colleges must work more closely together. Industry-led public-private partnerships have tremendous potential to build and grow these employer-college relationships, but little information is available on these partnerships and their postsecondary initiatives. This project aims to fill this gap and foster the growth of these initiatives by highlighting the features of industry-led public-private partnerships' initiatives with postsecondary institutions¹ and providing lessons and opportunities for developing, sustaining, and scaling these initiatives.

Our findings presented in this report stem from our literature review, interviews of key intermediary organizations and industry-led postsecondary partnerships, and a survey of industry-led postsecondary partnerships. Our survey captures the key features of 23 active postsecondary initiatives run by industry-led postsecondary partnerships. These initiatives are in 10 states throughout the United States; there are also two national initiatives. The initiatives covered in the survey began as early as 2004 and as recently as 2023 and encompass a broad range of industries, with manufacturing and healthcare the most common.

INITIATIVE CHARACTERISTICS

Based on AIR's 2023 survey of industry-led postsecondary initiatives

100% involved a **public two-year college**

43% of initiatives with a population of focus **involved this population of focus** in developing or maintaining the initiative

96% offered **career awareness/exploration activities**

70% received **state funding**

91% provided **job training and placement** for potential and new employees

9% were **funded solely by partnership members**

61% provided **activities related to upskilling and retention** for current employees

¹ We define industry-led public-private partnerships' postsecondary initiatives as including more than one employer and including one or more universities, community or technical colleges, and/or trade or vocational schools.

THIS PROJECT FOCUSED ON SIX RESEARCH QUESTIONS. THOSE QUESTIONS AND KEY FINDINGS ARE AS FOLLOWS:

Who is involved in industry-led public-private partnerships' postsecondary initiatives?

The majority (86%) of survey respondents representing their industry-led public-private partnership's postsecondary initiative reported that an intermediary organization facilitated their partnership. Common intermediaries included a local workforce development board or a local economic development agency. Local chambers of commerce, funders of the postsecondary initiative, or an independent entity also served as intermediaries. In interviews, key informants from organizations indicated that the involvement of an intermediary that championed the initiative was central to the success of these postsecondary initiatives. As for postsecondary and employer partners involved, 39% of initiatives had between 11 and 25 participating employers. About 13% had fewer than 10, and 26% had more than 50. Every initiative also had at least one public 2-year community college as a partner, and 74% of initiatives had a public 4-year college as a partner.

What are the goals and activities of these initiatives?

Survey respondents reported that their postsecondary initiatives had multiple goals. Some respondents (39%) referenced educating individuals about industry careers and opportunities as a primary goal of their initiative. About 26% framed their work as focused on creating or expanding the talent pipeline for a particular industry or career. Another 26% noted targeting the skills gap through education, training, and upskilling; 22% described their work as focused on addressing workforce growth challenges. To address these issues and goals, postsecondary initiatives worked with colleges to provide activities that can be categorized into several buckets. Almost all (96%) offered career awareness/exploration activities, and nearly all (91%) provided job training and placement for potential and new employees. Working with colleges to provide activities related to upskilling and retention for current employees was less common, at 61%.

How many individuals are participating in these initiatives, and what are their populations of focus?

The overall number of individuals who participated in partnerships' postsecondary initiatives in the prior year varied. Of the initiatives that could provide this information, 38% served 49 or fewer individuals, and 19% served more than 600 individuals.

All but four initiatives had a specific population of focus. The most common focus populations were K-12 students (32%), people of color (32%), and entry-level or low-skilled workers (21%). A quarter of initiatives only served participants from their populations of focus, whereas other initiatives also engaged other populations. Of the initiatives with a population of focus, 43% also involved this population in the actual work of developing or maintaining the initiative.

How are these initiatives financially supported?

70% received state funding, 57% received funding from the private sector, and 43% received federal funding. Only 9% were funded solely by partnership members. Regarding the cost of the initiatives, 26% of initiatives could not provide that information. Among those that could provide cost information, about a quarter of initiatives listed a yearly cost of less than \$30,000, and another quarter reported a yearly cost between \$30,000 to \$99,999. Many initiatives (78%) also received in-kind support from partners, such as mentoring, coaching, and wraparound services.

To what extent are initiatives' goals being met?

We asked survey respondents how their initiatives were progressing on their established goals. More than a quarter of respondents said their initiatives were just beginning to meet their goals, 57% said they were meeting some of their goals, and 17% reported they were meeting all of their goals. These percentages did not vary depending on the length of time an initiative had operated.

What additional insights and lessons did this study yield?

Developing and sustaining initiatives can be challenging. Having a strong intermediary who can bring employers and postsecondary institutions together and manage the initiative is helpful. Securing early wins and tracking progress can also assist in maintaining partner engagement and securing more funding.

This investigation also highlighted the need for better documentation of return on investment in order to sustain and scale these programs. Survey respondents often had difficulty reporting the number of individuals participating in initiative activities, the extent to which participants were members of the focus populations that the initiative aimed to support, and initiative costs. Gathering metrics from employers was also a struggle. The full report discusses ways in which an independent evaluator could support growth of partnership initiatives by providing assistance in collecting and analyzing initiative outcomes.