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ABSTRACT

In the 1980's, changes occurring in the American economy stimulated interest in collaboration between vocational education and the private sector. Several studies collected data from educational institutions and employers to identify motives for participating in collaborative arrangements. A 1988 study found that businesses seek cooperative relationships with higher education to obtain expert advice from faculty, gain access to qualified graduates, upgrade the training of employees, and take advantage of federally sponsored research, while educational institutions sought to improve their financial situations and the quality of instruction and research. A 1989 study revealed that: (1) slightly more than one-third of all employers surveyed were actively involved with postsecondary occupational education; (2) the most common mode of involvement were recruitment of employees, advisory committee memberships, and cooperative programs or internships; (3) incentives for participation were the ability to identify a source of potential employees, provide expertise on the education and training process, and improve the productivity of current employees; and (4) while employers indicated that the inflexibility of postsecondary institutions, their perceived disinterest in employers' advice, and time constraints were major barriers to involvement, educational institutions felt that "image" was a major barrier to involvement. Such findings suggest that vocational education institutions should: be aware of the specific needs of the economy; establish alumni committees to solicit information from former students with job market experience; use advisory committees to form bridges to employers; form planning commissions to promote constructive dialogue among public and private sector employees, unions, and educational organizations; and implement carefully structured internship programs. (JMC)

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WAYS IN WHICH VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS CAN ESTABLISH EFFECTIVE LINKAGES WITH EMPLOYERS

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Ways in Which Vocational Education and Postsecondary
Institutions can Establish Effective Linkages
With Employers

Synopsis

Collaboration and linkages between business and vocational education are typically considered to be beneficial. The Dorsten and Hollenbeck study, as well as other studies, identify a number of instances of collaboration that are leading to substantial benefits. There is little question that postsecondary technical institutions must make some assumptions about the skills and knowledge that employers require when the educators are developing curricula and making instructional decisions. In essence, collaboration between postsecondary institutions and employers can lead to program improvement.

In the 80's, the trend was for most companies to launch self-improvement campaigns (example, excellence programs, quality programs) as the trend for globalization heated up many issues. In fact there were ten major issues shaping America:

1. A maturing society
2. Lure of the sunbelt
3. Computer revolution
4. Foreign competition
5. Women on the move
6. Rise of minorities
7. Declining superpowers
8. Government under fire
9. Education boom
10. Medical miracles

(U.S. News and World Report, 1984).

According to Kanter (1989), "The 1980's opened with the discovery of the entrepreneur and the promise of great wealth to be attained by the creative innovator. The decade threatened to close with a continuing stream of reports about lay offs, cutbacks, deficits, stock market plunges, airline safety crises, [an illiterate work force,] declining income and the growth of a self-perpetuating underclass".

The interest in collaboration between vocational education and the private sector was stimulated by these changes taking place in our economy and society. Thus, the time was ideal for corporations to open their boundaries and to form strategic alliances. Cooperation with vocational education and training enterprise would raise performance standards by building commitment to shared goals and enhancing the ability to work together.

Soon the lesson was learned. Strategic alliances and partnerships are a potent way to do more with less and to do it better. But, what are the ways in which vocational education and training institutions can establish effective linkages with employers?

Employer Collaboration With Postsecondary Institutions

Many ideas are being suggested to increase the collaboration between the business sector and educational institutions as a means for accomplishing program improvement. For example, in Investing in Our Children, the Committee for Economic Development(1985) suggests--

... three alternatives for corporate involvement: supporting the existing system where the schools are generally healthy; fostering inovative, incremental change; and working for major structural reforms in the system (p.12). Several studies have collected data from educational institutions and employers to identify motives for participating in collaborative arrangements. The following two studies focused on the employers perspective.

Powers and Powers(1988) identified six reasons why businesses seek cooperative relationships with higher education. These reasons were as follows:

1. To meet corporate product, service, or management needs for which faculty can provide expert advice.
2. To gain access to qualified graduates who are likely to become valuable employees, especially in fields where talent is rare such as computer science or engineering.
3. To upgrade the education and training of employees.
4. To control research development costs, particularly by gaining access to state of the art equipment and knowledge.
5. To take advantage of federally-sponsored research.
6. To keep research cost-effective(pp.22-26).

Peters and Fusfeld (1983) conducted a study for the National Science Foundation. They asked fifty six companies why the businesses chose to interact with higher education institutions. The prime motivation was having access to quality manpower, particularly for the industries requiring technical expertise(chemicals,energy, and electronics). Seventy five percent of all companies mentioned the need to acquire well- trained personnel. The second most important reason mentioned was to obtain information to make technical advances associated with usable products or processes.

What Are The Reasons For Educational Institution Involvement?

Powers and Powers (1988) outline some of the more important advantages to educational institutions for collaborative arrangements with business. They link with the business sector--

-- to improve their financial situations, particularly by increasing their enrollment and tuition revenues from education and training of corporate employees(and to boost faculty salaries);

- to improve the quality of instruction and research offered through access to equipment and research offered through access to equipment and research facilities, and through updates for faculty, through collaboration with senior staff of the private sector partner who have special expertise;
- to increase the numbers of graduates in the high demand fields of engineering , computer science and mathematics, or to allow staff to participate as adjunct faculty as part of personnel exchange agreements; and
- to foster industrial innovation, both in the development of new products and processes, and in capacity building for financially or technologically constrained business (pp.21-28).

Peters and Fusfeld (1983) found in their study of 36 universities that the reasons for involvement with business are:

1. To help diversify the university's funding base
2. To provide students with real-world problem- solving (in research issues) and better training for those going into industry.
3. To avoid the bureaucratic "red tape" associated with obtaining government grant money (as cited by Powers and Powers, 1988, pp. 22-26).

Extent and Types of Business/Vocational Education Collaboration

Dorsten and Hollenback (1989) conducted a study of the nature and extent of business and postsecondary occupational program linkages. This section relates the findings of that study.

Data from the postsecondary occupational education perspective were gathered by telephone interviews with 76 administrators of such institutions. The employer perspective was gathered through a survey of 661 employers. Half of the employers were nominated to participate in the study by administrators on the basis of current involvement with the institutions and half were selected randomly. Of the total number of employers, 62 percent were from small business.

Employer level of involvement was categorized as (1) active -- example , continuous involvement over the last 4-5 years , such as regular attendance at advisory committee meetings , ongoing customized or contract training activity, cooperative education site, part-time faculty, or some combination of these-- (2) limited active -- example, intermittent involvement and/or involvement in only one activity-- (3) minimal-- example, few contacts with postsecondary institutions, such as hired 1-2 graduates or offered tuition reimbursement to current employees -- (4) no contact -- no current involvement or minimal past involvement.

Insert Table 1 about here

Table 1 shows that slightly more than a third of all employers were categorized as actively involved with postsecondary occupational education; about one - quarter were involved on a limited active basis; about one - quarter were involved minimally; and the remainder of the employers, 14 percent, had no contact. By the design of the study, the nominated employers would be expected to have more contact with education. The random sample of employers better represents the business community as a whole. Results from table 1 concluded that three- quarters of all businesses had some level of involvement with postsecondary institutions.

Various types of employer involvement were identified -- institutional or program advisory committee membership, part- time instruction, guest lectures, equipment/cash donations, participation at job fairs/ career days, employee recruitment, upgrade training (example, tuition reimbursement) , customized/ contract training, technical assistance in management or in production, vending products/ services, cooperative education, and faculty "return to industry" programs.

Insert Table 2 about here

Table 2 shows that the modes of involvement that were identified most often were in the order of frequency:

- recruitment of employees(mentioned by 49.3 percent of employers)
- advisory committee memberships(36.8 percent)
- coops/internships(23.2 percent)
- attendance of training by current employees(20.1 percent)
- customized /contract training (14.1 percent)
- donations (13.2 percent)
- part- time teaching (12.6 percent)

The average number of types of involvement for the entire sample of employers was about 2.0 . Large business (firms whose employment size was greater than 49 employees) were involved in more types of activities (average of 2.6) than were small businesses (average of 1.6).

The survey that was conducted asked respondents to identify the specific incentives that were important in their decision to collaborate, in some fashion , with educational institutions. The motivating incentives for employers who were involved were in the order of frequency:

- to identify a source of students for recruitment purposes(mentioned by 31.2 percent of employers)
- to provide expertise in the education and training process(so that potential future employees will be better trained 21.3 percent)
- to improve productivity of current employees (19.1 percent)
- to contribute to the community or to pursue a personal interest (15.9 percent)
- to obtain technical assistance (3.9 percent)
- to sell a product/service (3.5 percent)

The most frequently mentioned barriers to employer collaboration and participation were in order of frequency:

- inflexibility/ bureaucracy of postsecondary institutions (mentioned by 34 percent of employers)
- perceived disinterest or ignoring of employer advice (22.4 percent)
- time constraints (12.1 percent)
- other features , such as loss of business or security concerns (3.6 percent)

The issues of extent of and types of collaboration are different for the administrators of educational institutions than they are for employers. Virtually all institutions collaborate to some extent and most participate in every type of collaboration. the focus of the institutional data collection was , thus more focused on incentives barriers. The four most often mentioned successful strategies for involving business were as follows:

1. Involve employers on institutional boards or program advisory committees (mentioned by 38 percent of the administrators).
2. Personal contacts with employers to determine their needs and explain institution's capability (23 percent).
3. Participation in local organizations such as the chamber of commerce or private industry council of the job training partnership act training system(17 percent).
4. Maintain continuing contacts (13 percent).

A total of 33 percent of the educational administrators felt that a major barrier to employer involvement was one of "image;" administrators believed that education was seen by employers as either having an "ivory tower" image, at one extreme ,or a "vocational education stigma", at the other. About one - quarter of the administrators felt that inadequate resources were a barrier to collaboration. Specifically, administrators identified the staff time required to make and maintain personal and professional contacts. Second they pointed to the time , and money and even equipment, that are required for carefully planned and effectively executed meetings, informational materials, and specialized training curricula.

Finally, administrators felt that several types of external factors were detrimental to the development of successful business and education relationships. Bureaucratic rigidity within their own institutions or at the business establishment, employer attempts to narrow curricula to their own specific need, and contradictory requests from employers and organized labor were commonly mentioned problems challenging administrators.

Implications for Vocational Education

Based on the comprehensive review of the literature, the following five points should be considered by vocational educators when establishing linkages with business and industry:

First, vocational education and training institutions must be aware of the specific needs of the economy in order to effectively orient the type and level of training offered to students. The institutions can thereby ensure that their educational standards, tools and techniques all conform with the manpower requirements of employers. Institutions should also demonstrate flexibility, and whenever appropriate integrate new subjects and courses, as innovative teaching techniques into the curriculum.

Second, it is often useful for educational organizations to establish Alumni Committees. These committees provide a means of eliciting important information and suggestion from former students who also have gained valuable job market experience.

Third, Advisory Committees are an effective tool to form a bridge between employers and vocational training institutions.

Fourth, the formation of a larger group which is sometimes referred to as Planning Commission, can provide constructive dialogue among representatives of public and private sector employers, unions and educational organizations.

Finally, carefully structured internship programs serve as a powerful mechanism to link graduates of vocational training institutions with prospective employers. Such programs have the added benefit of providing information to training organizations regarding the essential needs of employers.

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Table 1

LEVELS OF PRIVATE SECTOR PARTICIPATION
WITH POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS

Employer Sample				
Level of Participation	Nominated (Row Percentage)	Random (Row Percentage)	Total (N)	Total (Column Percentage)
Active	76%	24%	248	39%
Limited Active	54%	46%	161	24%
Minimal	24%	76%	161	24%
No Contact	8%	92%	92	14%
Totals	N=321	N=340	N=661	100%

Source: Dorsten and Hollenback (1989) Table 2.1

Table 2

MODES OF EMPLOYER INVOLVEMENT WITH
POSTSECONDARY TECHNICAL EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS*

Mode of Involvement	Sample Type		Total
	Nominated	Random	
Membership on program or institutional advisory committee	59.8%	15.0%	36.8%
Employer has staff member that is a part-time instructor	18.4%	7.1%	12.6%
Employer has staff member that provides guest lectures	9.7%	7.4%	8.5%
Donation of equipment/cost	19.3%	7.3%	13.2%
Employer participates in career nights/job fairs	7.5%	6.8%	7.1%
Employer recruits actively	44.9%	53.5%	49.3%
Employer reimburses (at least partially) tuition	22.1%	18.2%	20.1%
Customized/contract training	23.4%	5.3%	14.1%
Employer receives technical assistance	0.9%	0.9%	0.9%
Employer sells products/services to institution	1.6%	6.2%	3.9%
Co-operative education/internship	26.3%	20.3%	23.2%
Employer trains faculty ("return to industry")	1.3%	0.3%	0.8%
Other	8.1%	3.8%	5.9%

*Entries are percentage of respondents that participate in mode of involvement.

Source: Unpublished data from Dorsten and Hollenbeck (1989) study.