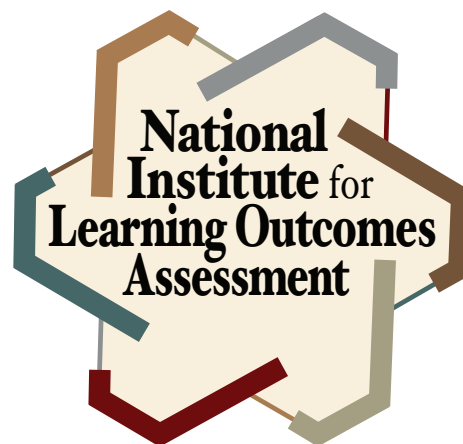


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Working with Employers: Tips for Success

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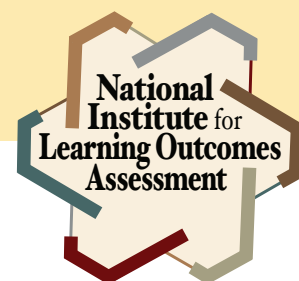
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NILOA Mission

The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), established in 2008, is a research and resource-development organization dedicated to documenting, advocating, and facilitating the systematic use of learning outcomes assessment to improve student learning.



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Abstract

Stronger connections are needed between employers and higher education, however, questions abound about how best to work in partnership. Stemming from various conversations with members of the higher education and employer communities, this Occasional Paper provides tips for fostering successful partnerships and collaboration. Three lessons learned from successful employer and higher education partnerships are introduced: the importance of context, tips for sparking conversation between faculty and employers, and which questions to ask one another to find common values and deeper understanding. We hope you consider some of the tips and possible conversation foci presented in this guide as you engage in relationship building and find them useful in your employer partnerships.

Working with Employers: Tips for Success

Natasha A. Jankowski & Gianina R. Baker

Since the release of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) paper by Jason Tyszko and Robert Sheets (2019) on *Co-designing Assessment and Learning: Rethinking Employer Engagement in a Changing World*, various questions have been raised on how best to work in partnership with employers. This short guide provides tips for success, pulling three lessons learned from successful employer and higher education partnerships and dialogues together.

Context Matters

When employers indicate to their partner institutions that skills or needs are not being met, the response of higher education has generally been to claim that in fact it is addressed by pointing to the curriculum map where the learning outcome of interest lives. This has the effect of shutting down a conversation and perpetuating the status quo without getting to the bottom of the disconnect or addressing an issue that was clearly raised by the employer partner. Instead, faculty who engaged in further conversation about what exactly employers thought was missing found three different elements at play:

1. The language between the program and the employer did not align such that the learning outcomes and skills did not appear to be similar. This can be remedied by each side clearly stating what they each mean and does not require adopting the same language but understanding how to translate between the two.
2. While faculty addressed the learning outcome in the curriculum, students were not aware of the connection between the course and the job and were not making the connection or transferring their knowledge, leading to an issue of lack of transparency. This can be remedied by alerting students to instances of assessments of value or interest to employers.
3. The context for the assessment or the demonstration of learning did not align from higher education to employment. This can be remedied by sharing assessments and discussing assignments with employers.

Employers want assurance that students can apply what they know and can do within the context of the specific job or position of interest to the employer. The context piece was the biggest area of disconnect between faculty and employers. Even if the learning outcome language was aligned and faculty and employers agreed on the language, the means by which demonstration of mastery was shown differed between employers and faculty. For instance, within the employer context, an academic paper may not be the best means by which to demonstrate writing clarity or mastery of communication. Instead, the ability to distill a larger document down to a succinct summary may be the demonstration employers want to see. Indicating to students when they are being assessed

Employers want assurance that students can apply what they know and can do within the context of the specific job or position of interest to the employer.

in higher education which assessments matter in which context is invaluable to students in the hiring process and for meaningful, engaged employer relationships.

The importance of context also means that when presenting information to employers about a program or the curriculum, simply sharing the learning outcomes and the course descriptions will not provide enough information to address concerns on context. The means by which students will be assessed is vital information for employers to determine relevancy to their context. Talking about assessment is also a good starting point to avoid confusion on language because it does not matter what you call it, only what you can do.

Tip: Take the time to determine if the way student learning is assessed is of value to employers.

Get Faculty and Employers Talking Together

With the focus upon context and assessments as valuable sources of information for dialogue and partnerships, it is key to employer engagement to get faculty and employers talking together. This does not mean the CEO of a local company sitting down with faculty to review curriculum, but instead someone from HR who intakes information and those on the front lines of working with or making hiring decisions about the students who may work there in the future coming together with faculty. The employer community is not homogenous and is generally driven by local or regional needs as opposed to national data sets. The CEO is too far removed from the process to be of value to the dialogue. Instead, be intentional about the positions within the organization that are invited to join faculty in dialogue. This intentionality ensures that everyone's time is put to good use and the people with the information needed to inform educational design are the ones participating.

Further, be clear on participation expectations. This means that faculty are not there to simply “show off” the curriculum, but to seek targeted advice and/or information from the invited employer partners. The most effective employer and faculty conversations were open dialogues, not about having employers create curriculum or of making the program employer-driven, but instead finding ways to determine which elements faculty wanted to address and embed in the program, which elements they wanted to refine, and those that were not of interest to the faculty to address in the program at all.

The most valuable conversations were those that focused on faculty sharing assignments with employers to determine which were valuable to the employers and which could be modified to be of use in hiring discussions or provide proof of knowledge, skills, and abilities. Conversations on the actual “doing” were further advanced when faculty asked employers about the type of work “assigned” to employees at different levels within the organization. Both parties in the conversation came away with new ideas, employer endorsed assignments, and sometimes co-created assignments as well as a deeper understanding and appreciation for each other's work.

Tip: Have faculty share assignments with employers and discuss how employers assign work.



Ask Different Questions

Often in higher education, when a new initiative is undertaken around documenting or capturing student learning such as badges or digital comprehensive learner records, the question is raised as to whether employers care. Will employers find the information valuable? Will they use it? And ultimately, will it get students a job?

In examining meaningful employer partnerships a different set of questions was generally raised. Questions such as: are the graduating students aware of what they know and can do? How is the learning signaled on the resume so that HR picks up the information? At which point in the hiring process is different information of most value to employer partners?

This alternative set of questions comes from the understanding that while having an ePortfolio for students may not get them an interview simply because it exists, the ePortfolio has great value during an interview when a student provides examples during conversation—meaning the hiring process is a process and at different points in times within that process, different signals matter. It also means that it is not the employer who finds value in the efforts, the value comes from how *students* use the resources and tools when engaging with employers.

Of greatest interest to employers, however, was student awareness of their own learning and ability to talk about that learning. Simply indicating that a student knew something in an interview because they had taken a class in it did not satisfy the employer desire for context. The employer wanted to determine if what the student knows and how they do it is transferable to the specific employer's context. Students who graduated from programs unaware of what they had learned were at a disadvantage to talk about their knowledge and skills.

Further, students self-selected out of talent pools and did not apply for positions because they were unaware that their academic program had prepared them for the job description. A problem that unnecessarily perpetuates the skills gap by producing capable graduates who are not even aware they can apply. While employers might not find a particular type of assessment information directly useful themselves or may only find value in it at different parts of the hiring process, they do find value in how different tools and resources inform students of what students know and can do. Thus, while an employer may not inherently find value in a badge, for example, they do value the utility of the badge for making clear and transparent to the student what the student knows and can do.

Tip: Ensure students are aware of what they know and can do so they do not self-select out of talent pools due to lack of awareness.

Final Comments

Conversations with employers can serve many different ends including raising awareness regarding programmatic offerings and finding internship opportunities for students. It can include employer sign off on curriculum design and may include a feedback loop on whether the intended design led to performance in employment. The key is to be open to dialogue, listen to employers and process what was said, then choose what to

When engaging with employer partners come with a clear ask—what is it that you want them to do, how much time will it take, and what are the benefits for involvement?

include or modify in the curriculum based on the conversations. Lastly, it means also communicating to students the connections to employment presented by employers—employers are the experts in their areas so when they say there is a connection, we should believe them.

When engaging with employer partners come with a clear ask—what is it that you want them to do, how much time will it take, and what are the benefits for involvement? Simply inviting a dialogue is unlikely to be successful without clear intent and direction. We hope you consider some of the tips and possible conversation foci presented in this guide as you engage in relationship building and find them useful in your employer partnerships.



Reference

Tyszko, J. A., & Sheets, R. G. (2019, September). *Co-designing assessment and learning: Rethinking employer engagement in a changing world*. (Occasional Paper No. 39). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment.

Additional Resources

To learn more about Talent Pipeline Management:

<https://tpmacademy.uschamberfoundation.org>

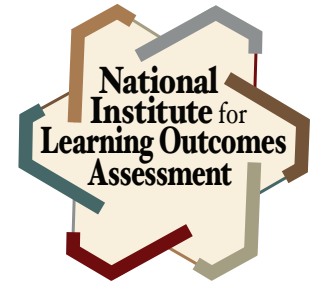
To learn more about the Talent Pipeline Management Resource Guide for Career and Technical Education (CTE):

<https://tpmacademy.uschamberfoundation.org/tpm-cte-resource-guide>

To learn more about innovation challenges: <https://www.innovationchallenge.com>

About NILOA

- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008.
- NILOA is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.
- The NILOA website contains free assessment resources and can be found at <http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org>.
- The NILOA research team has scanned institutional websites, surveyed chief academic officers, and commissioned a series of occasional papers.
- NILOA's Founding Director, George Kuh, founded the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE).
- The other co-principal investigator for NILOA, Stanley Ikenberry, was president of the University of Illinois from 1979 to 1995 and of the American Council of Education from 1996 to 2001.



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