BUSINESS & COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

High-quality CTE programs actively engage business and community partners through a variety of activities to ensure programs of study are aligned with workforce needs. Maintaining partnerships will involve several layers of challenges in a COVID-19-impacted school year — from both the education perspective and the business perspective. However, business and community partnerships remain the foundation of labor-market-aligned CTE programs, and are critical to program quality across instructional models.

Key Issues to Address

- Evaluating CTE program offerings in light of new labor market information
- Prioritizing requests to business and community partners
- Using social distancing or virtual platforms to engage partners, including through advisory board meetings
- Recruiting industry professionals for virtual interactions with students

Business closures resulting from the pandemic will likely change many local and regional economies, causing some CTE programs to be less aligned to the current labor market. Education budget cuts may lead CTE leaders to streamline program offerings to those most essential to the local labor market, while in other cases, new programs may be needed, especially short-term postsecondary programs and customized training. Perkins V comprehensive local needs assessment (CLNA) findings will be a good place to start as these decisions are made, but may be less relevant in the current economic situation than before.

CTE leaders facing these decisions will need to connect regularly with their partners to align programs with current and future workforce demand and skill needs. However, businesses, even if they are able to remain engaged, may be unsure about what is needed, and needs may change quickly. Community organizations are also being stretched thin. While a number of ACTE survey respondents reported success this spring moving advisory board meetings online, others noted that their partners have been too distracted to engage. Many businesses are facing deep revenue losses or even the prospect of closure, and longer-term education and skill needs may be difficult for employers to dedicate time and resources to during the present crisis.

Educators will need to be conscious of this situation as they approach employers and community partners, reducing requests and streamlining information while businesses focus on reopening and rebuilding. Local Chambers of Commerce, local workforce boards and similar organizations — anywhere that employers and community organizations are already engaged, and that are already monitoring these changes — will be invaluable sources of information. Keeping conversations and meetings short and to the point, reducing the frequency of emails and providing multiple engagement methods will also be important to avoid overburdening partners. Programs can prioritize their needs: are there questions about modifying curriculum or assessment that partners need to weigh in on, or personal protective equipment (PPE) and supplies that are needed urgently? More tangible requests should be considered on an individual basis — some employers may still welcome interns, have resources to donate or be able to provide guest speakers; while others will not have the capacity. More information on engaging partners in work-based learning (WBL) and career and technical student organizations (CTSOs) are available in those sections of the guide.

One casualty of this new environment may be the diversity of partners that CTE instructors have built through careful nurturing of relationships. This includes diversity of occupations and industries, small and large businesses, as well as demographic diversity so that learners can see themselves represented in different careers. Small businesses in particular may face challenges engaging, but will still need skilled workers as the economy recovers, so particular consideration to those voices is important.

In-person Considerations

Beyond these overarching considerations, CTE leaders are thinking about how to maintain on-the-ground relationships if and when campuses open in person.

Several respondents to ACTE's survey noted that they can continue to meet with their advisory boards while maintaining social distancing, either on site or at an off-campus location.

Other direct interactions with partners may be able to continue with social distancing, such as employer guest speakers or mentoring programs. If campuses are open but closed to outside visitors or field trips are curtailed, these activities can occur virtually. Further considerations for engaging industry through WBL, CTSOs and teacher externships are addressed in other sections of this guide.

Remote Considerations

According to ACTE's survey, a number of CTE leaders have already turned to virtual advisory board meetings to keep engaged with business, industry and community leaders. Several survey respondents noted that virtual meetings led to increased attendance and engagement, and indicated they plan to continue these in the future, even past the pandemic.

To maximize engagement, virtual meeting hosts should follow best practices for keeping participants involved, such as using video, polls and chat functions; following a clear agenda; and keeping groups to a manageable size so all voices can be heard. In addition to the following tips, further resources on hosting virtual meetings can be found in the Resources, Tools and Examples section below:

- Keep the meeting under 45 minutes.
- Make RSVPs mandatory.
- Send out reminders.
- Acknowledge everyone in the virtual room.
- Encourage a video-on policy.
- Don't multitask and discourage others from multitasking during meetings.
- Specifically address questions to quieter advisory board members.
- Provide concrete next steps.

If virtual advisory board meetings are used, it will be important to check with any entities that require these meetings, such as accreditation agencies or state agencies that approve CTE programs, to determine any specific procedures that need to be followed or records that need to be kept. For example, if sign-in sheets were used previously to document attendance, you will likely need a new system to capture and verify remote participation. Tried-and-true email and phone communication can also work to build and sustain partnerships.

In addition, the virtual industry tours, guest speakers and job shadows described in the WBL section of this guide can help build and maintain partnerships, especially while worksites are closed to learners. Industry representatives can be reached around the nation and the globe through some of these platforms; these opportunities can provide learners with diverse mentors that reflect their identities. Some platforms are designed to match mentors and students to highlight, for instance, the successes of women and people of color in STEM fields.

Access and Equity Implications

When you are considering how to keep business and community partners engaged, remember the impact of diversity in your partnerships, which can better inform your programs and show your learners how they can access and succeed in worthwhile careers.

Blended Considerations

Blended scenarios can offer the best of both worlds related to partner engagement — with opportunities for students to engage virtually but the ability to meet in person as well. One key consideration will be ensuring all students have access to engagement with business and industry professionals, without creating undue burden on employers. For example, if a guest speaker is scheduled on a day only half the students are on campus, the session could also be livestreamed to those learning at home.

Resources, Tools and Examples

- Vivayic has produced a Guide for Planning and Hosting an Effective Virtual Meeting/Training Event with succinct tips on technology, engagement and pre- and post-meeting activities.
- The Goodman Center has resources and webinars on effective online presentations, webinars and meetings.
- This article from the Center on Reinventing Public Education describes COVID-19 innovations in industry partnerships and engagement.

This is an excerpt from High-quality CTE: Planning for a COVID-19-impacted School Year. Access the complete guide for additional content about providing high-quality CTE programs in a COVID-19-impacted school year. **Last Update:** June 22, 2020

This document is not legal advice, nor is it an exhaustive list of every consideration or action that CTE educators may need to take for the 2020–21 school year. Readers should defer to federal, state, local and/or institution requirements and guidance. The instructional models, ideas, resources, tools and examples shared do not constitute endorsements of any products, services or strategies, as different products, services and strategies will work in different contexts. As knowledge is gained, this guide may be updated to incorporate new ideas and resources and emerging issues.

Business & Community Partnerships: Key Questions to Consider

Cross-cutting Questions
- If your district or institution is facing budget cuts, will you need to eliminate programs, instructors or staff? How can your CLNA and advisory board help you make these decisions?
- If your community is facing new or shifting labor market needs, will you be able to develop new programs or customized training in response? Will you be closing or scaling back programs where demand has decreased? How can your CLNA and advisory board help you make these decisions?
- How can you prioritize requests and streamline interactions to avoid overwhelming business and community partners?

In-person Questions
- How can you host advisory board meetings with social distancing, either on campus or at another site?
- How can you modify student engagement with industry professionals, such as guest speakers or mentoring programs, to accommodate social distancing?

Remote Questions
- How can you host advisory board meetings remotely? Do you have an approved synchronous platform for meetings with third parties?
- How will you maximize engagement in virtual advisory meetings?
- How can you meet accreditor or state agency requirements for virtual advisory meetings?
- How can you keep in touch with partners through other methods like email and phone, while not overburdening them?
- How can you use virtual platforms for guest speaking, mentoring, industry tours and job shadows to continue to engage industry and community partners?

Blended Questions
- How will you schedule industry engagement opportunities to maximize access for learners, faculty and/or staff who are on modified schedules?