**WorkforceGPS**

**Transcript of Webinar**

**What Employers Value in Partnerships with Community Colleges**

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LAURA CASERTANO: I want to welcome everyone to today's "What Employers Value in Partnerships with Community Colleges" webinar and I'm going to turn things over to your moderator today, Jenn Smith with the Division of Strategic Investments, OWI, the Employment and Training Administration. Jenn, take it away.

JENN SMITH: Thank you, Laura. And thank you all for joining us for this session, which is the final in our three-session series highlighting key briefings from TAACCCT evaluations. This roundtable will highlight employer's perspectives on partnering with community colleges, summarizing the findings from one of the evaluation components of TAACCCT round IV that shared information from selected round IV employer partners to better understand their perspectives on how to develop and maintain strong relationships with community colleges.

Sorry. Working through technical issues here.

Today I'm joined by Lauren Eyster and Lesley Mara. Lauren is a senior fellow in the income investment policy center at the Urban Institute, where her research focuses on innovative workforce development programs and how to best evaluate and learn from them. Most recently, Lauren has examined industry-focused job training and career pathway initiatives implemented through the workforce investment system and SCC colleges, and she's one of the authors of the brief we will discuss today,

I am also joined by Lesley Mara, who serves as director for strategic initiatives. Lots of research and outreach at the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities, the umbrella organization for Connecticut's 12 community colleges or regional comprehensive universities, and the state's only full online public college. In this capacity, she is responsible for building system-wide employer partnerships. But prior to this position, she was the senior project director for the CP [ph] health and life sciences career initiative, funded by a $12 million TAACCCT grant from DOL. She managed a consortium of seven institutions dedicated to creating new certificate and associate degree programs and revising existing programs to prepare students for jobs in the growing healthcare and bioscience fields.

Of course, this is just a small sampling of Lauren and Lesley's accomplishments, but I want to make sure we have time to discuss employer perspectives. That being said, I will ask Lauren and Lesley to provide one quick, get-to-know-you fact about themselves before we get into the meat of the presentation. Lauren, can you name a significant thing that influenced your chosen career pathway?

LAUREN EYSTER: I can. I was a kiddo during the Watergate era and I just thought I was going to be a journalist someday and did my training in journalism school, but found that wasn't quite for me and, you know, but was still curious and interested in writing. So becoming a researcher was a natural progression for me, so Watergate. Talk about a throwback.

MS. SMITH: I love it. That's wonderful. Lesley, same question to you.

LESLEY MARA: Sure. I'm not sure there's a connection to Watergate, but I'm actually a lawyer by training. And so I was in private practice and I have to be honest, I didn't find it very satisfying. And so I managed to find a niche in government where I felt I could make a difference and I ended up here seven years ago in higher ed with the TAACCCT grant and I really believe in the mission of community colleges. I have watched them transform lives and generations. And so I think it's a privilege to be part of this work and I find it very meaningful, so that's kind of how I got here.

MS. SMITH: That's wonderful. Thank you both.

At this point, I'm going to turn it over to Lauren to give us a high-level overview of the employer perspective study and what was learned, followed by the thoughts from Lesley. We then have a series of questions to ask both Lesley and Lauren. If you have questions or comments during this session, please feel free to put them in the chat and we will address them as we go along. Lauren, I'll turn it over to you now.

MS. EYSTER: Thank you so much, Jenn. I'm really excited today to talk about our employer perspective study that was part of the larger TAACCCT grant evaluation. This particular study was part of this really large effort, but it's so interesting when you finally get to talk to employers and understand, you know, kind of their experiences in working with community colleges. Really, it was great because we got to interview them and you get that sort of richness and understanding of who they are and where they're coming from and what they're really hoping to gain from connecting with a community college in their area, and what's been accomplished so far.

And so really we focused on employers that the colleges ranked as their strongest partners. So we started off. We took the lead colleges as well -- the consortium leads and institution grantees. There were 69 of them in round IV. And asked them about these employers and how they ranked them in terms of their type -- the types of contributions, their employer partners made, and the types of interactions and activities they undertook together. And we ended up with a total sample of 288 employer partners, and then we looked at the top 25 percent with our ranking scheme. So we ended up with 64 employers and actually were able to interview over 40 employers for this particular study.

Again, just as a quick reminder, these were employers that were deemed to have stronger relationships with their community college and that was the goal there. It wasn't just to -- I think we understand a lot about the challenges of working on these partnerships and how to work together, but really, what made for a strong partnership from the employer perspective?

And so we have a longer report, but we wrote up our findings really tailored to state and local policy makers and practitioners on the ground so that it could be usable and actionable for you all. So this was a -- this took place from about 2015 to 2018, so definitely during a very strong economy. And so you know, the economic conditions also, you know, probably influenced the eagerness of employers to work with their community colleges.

And I think we're in a somewhat similar situation here. We do have a lot of employers very eager, you know, as the pandemic is chugging along here and, you know, wanting people to be able to work in factories, build and assemble solar panels, be in healthcare and be able to help patients and be a part of an IT application. So there's just a -- I think there's a similar need here and I think that the insights that the employers provided really still resonate to that.

We really embraced DOL's conceptual framework for employer engagement. This was part of a TAACCCT effort and shared with grantees-wide, that there's this continuum of employer engagement and having even the partnership from, you know, advisor roles to strategic partnerships. And so of course, you know, the colleges have their advisory boards with industry representatives on them and that's a really valuable tool for engaging with employers. And you know, looping them in on the program and the skills and the curriculum, but it is a more transactional kind of engagement sometimes. Sometimes colleges really use their advisory board pretty well too. That keeps them in that engagement, but just as a more advisory role.

But then they can become more hands-on and employers can work closely with faculty, you know, have a little more engagement in developing curriculum with programs, really thinking about those technical and the softer 21st century skills that they desire and having that reflected in the curriculum programs. And employers may also offer work-based learning opportunities, have industry staff serve as instructors as well, so they can become more entrenched and engaged in the program, so --

And then finally, employers can become strategic partners. So they could have a sector partnership of multiple employers working together to design career pathways and programs and stackable credentials. And employers may also do things like cover tuition for students for their employees maybe that are going back to the college to learn new skills. They can make hiring commitments. They can provide financial resources and, you know, maybe even establish a registered apprenticeship program. So there are a lot of ways that employers can be engaged and it does range, so we just wanted to ground what we're talking about here in DOL's conceptual framework.

So these are our findings from our interviews with the employers and, you know, tailored to what state and local policy-makers and practitioners might really need to know about what employers are thinking. So first off, employers that we spoke with really valued colleges efforts to address hiring needs and in fact, that's often included having newer, upgraded facilities, programs that were really responsive to employer needs to that that quality piece coming was something that was very important to these employers. And it was very welded to that TAACCCT-funded programs because of course those dollars were being used to upgrade facilities, really build out career pathways and curriculum and employer engagement was a big part of that. But that was good that we could hear that from the employers themselves that they thought that was valuable.

The employers do want to engage with colleges in many ways and it ranges from that advisory partner to strategic and it's usually a continuum, right? If you're trying to engage them having a smaller ask of them, having a conversation with them about the skills they value or what their particular needs are and then slowly bringing them on because they're seeing the value in the program that you're providing.

The employers appreciated when colleges came to their locations and respected their time, so again that sort of gradual effort of bringing them on to advise, but slowly building up that level of engagement. But really coming to them, meeting them where they are, understanding their capacity and making them value propositions to them that for investing some of their time they're going to get something out of it as a result. So that was also really important to employers, that meeting of where they are.

And employers really want industry-savvy college staff to reach out to them. They want somebody within the college that understands their needs. They liked people that came from their industry a lot, but it was just having some savviness about those, about that industry and that employer's needs and having that relationship was really important. So that person that would have the time to talk to them.

And then we also saw that employers really wanted to engage with the college before the education and training programs were fully developed so they felt like they had some say in what the program was going to be or if it was being upgraded, what the enhanced program might be. So you know, spending time with them on assessing their skills needs from their employees and being able to shape curriculum and the experience of the student.

And I have some quotes here that we took from the employers and, you know, we -- this one in particular says, “Colleges can listen to employers' business needs and try to address those needs. Too many times colleges have established programs, and they discuss what they offer, and do not listen to what the employer needs from them.” So I think that just -- I think this employer in particular was speaking of their past experiences, but now they have had this positive experience and so they feel like this was something that they now understood better.

And then maintaining these relationships was really important and it's really important to colleges and employers definitely had some insight into this. And, you know, they really said that long-term relationship may have been slow, and then this was it ebbs and flows with the economy. It ebbs and flows with -- they have a sufficient set of workers that are better trained. And the program gets established too, so you know, just trucking along just fine. There may not be as much need for engagement but maybe there is a change in technology that still needs that then the employer re-engages more deeply again to help upgrade that curriculum program.

So one thing we found was because of, you know, it's a long-term relationship, people come and go and that makes it really hard to come and go from the employer as well as at the college, so having those multiple points of contact and just being able to stay somewhat connected really helps.

And then finally, the employer's investment in a college's programs is an ongoing -- is an investment in an ongoing relationship. So if they're providing equipment or sending their employees to upgrade their skills, renew their skills, that there is this -- employers see their investment as a contribution to that relationship. And their not sending -- we found some of these employers. They're not spending time being, counting on these relationships or making some detailed calculation on return-on-investment. They know when their getting quality and skills and so employees coming in their doors. And so they know the faculty and they understand the curriculum and what they're doing to get out of it. So they feel the connection there and that is there investment and they want to keep it that way.

So that's just really everything important and these employers that we saw here that were talking about working, trying to do this work through their tuition reimbursement program and we found something, that that worked well. It was something that they could get the employees and the commitment from them and then they wanted to be sure. They wanted to really calculate what went into that if a person had to be off from work, there's other things that went into that calculation of sending their employees to their program. But then they really saw that these students, these employees really understood that commitment and then that really started paying off, in particular round III, their skills and internment and work. That was really something that was exciting that we found.

Now I'm going to go back here and ask first to Lesley just to get your thoughts on what we found, and anything to add to it based on your experience.

MS. MARA: Sure. Thank you. I guess I want to start with a couple of points that maybe haven't been emphasized but I think are really critical in terms of the workforce that we bring to the table. When I talk to employers, it often comes up that they need to just develop a more diverse workforce, not to check some box in an affirmative action plan, but to create innovative, creative teams. And they're finding that when they have diverse teams, they get a better product and a better outcome for their business. And so I was just talking to some women in biotech, small company startups and they were talking about needing assistance with that. So I think community colleges are uniquely suited to bring a talented, top-flight, diverse workforce for our employers.

The other thing that I would mentioned also that I think is unique to community colleges is this idea that the students who are trained here have deep roots here and they stay here. So we have folks that have been through our nursing program and they've been at Hartford Hospital for 26 years. They are deeply rooted in the community and if they seek their education in those communities, they tend to look for employers there and they stay. A lot of our employers find that to be really valuable. So I think those would be a couple things I would just add to kind of the what we bring to the table and what employers value in us.

Before TAACCCT, before I joined and before we got involved with TAACCCT, we had a lot of our relationships that were largely transactional. So I joined the TAACCCT grant about a year and a half in to a three-year grant. And so I made appointments to meet with various employers. Some were involved in advisory boards. Some had done a letter of support, but we hadn't really seen them after that. And so I chose to meet with them one-on-one and I'm going to start by saying sort of the foundation of everything is building a relationship. So you can imagine, I don't do too well with this flat screen because I think it's all about building relationships and this certainly is a challenge.

But I met with those employers and I asked them about their experience with our colleges, about what they saw, what they were getting out of them, what they thought they could contribute. Many of them said they felt underutilized, so advisory boards can be terrific but we had several employers who said, to tell you the truth, I feel like I come there, I get a sandwich and I get talked at about what you're already doing, and then I leave. And so it was a great opportunity for us to take a look at why were we engaging employers? Others said that we had folks coming to association events, which is a great thing to do, but that they were kind of grabbing employers saying that we need internships for our X program. Can you provide it? And they felt it was sort of a little bit of an onslaught at these events. And so we had also a lot of relationships that we could learn from where folks said I wouldn't go anywhere else but your college to trainer folks.

So we really had a lot to learn from pre- TAACCCT. And I think this came up -- I think it might have been Julie Parks [ph] yesterday, one of the sessions I was in, but I heard a theme yesterday about you can go through a grant and check the boxes and you can maybe -- your program officer might even let you get away with that. But the reality is it is an opportunity to be transformative and even if you haven't definitely said that is number one, deliverable number two. Everything you do, you should be looking at how you can make it bigger and more lasting.

And so what we found through TAACCCT was that we were able to really develop partnerships with employers. But we started first not with what we wanted to get out of them or what we thought they wanted to get of them but recognizing the role we each play in our communities. And so we have very big defense contractors who have a role as a corporate citizen in our communities. We too consider ourselves to be the hub of our community in any of our 12 community colleges.

And starting out, really trying to build the relationship, which for me meant going to visit some places. I didn't always know what I was looking at these startup biotech companies, but it meant something to them that I went to see where they live. And likewise, we invited them to the campus when there were other philanthropic events going on, when there were other employers gathering, but we invited them as our guests without necessarily wanting anything. And so I think post- TAACCCT, we have a whole range of ways that our employers get involved and that they've been able to help us and we've been able to help them.

And so we do have advisory boards still but we've done some professional development for new faculty. Sometimes folks find themselves in the position of being a program coordinator. They've never actually been given the training about how to do that. There a top-flight professor of whatever it is for the biotech program or the (pet kept ?) program, but they haven't necessarily been shown how best to cultivate these relationships. So professional development for them, supporting them. We also have advancement featuring outstanding relationships where employers can then say hey, we need this, these are the competencies we want, and we actually craft the curriculum together.

We have legislators who are big allies -- employers who are big allies with our legislature. And so as you begin to develop these relationships and think about them broadly, they also are going to be big advocates for what you do. And it's one thing if I say all the fun stuff. I'm paid to be here. But it's another thing if other constituents in a legislator's district are writing letters or testifying, saying we need this college to be here and we need them to be appropriately funded.

So there are a whole host of ways that those relationships can evolve. We certainly have been involved in placement and in helping us give our students work-based learning opportunities, ultimately being hired. But I do know we do also a lot about educating and sometimes it seems like it's one employer at a time.

So in biotech, the word was that nobody with an associate's degree is going to be needed. And so I said, you know, we've made a pretty big investment in Connecticut in biotech, and so I went to some employers and I said if I have 30,000 to 50,000 community colleges, depending on the pre- or post-pandemic numbers, if they and their families can't see themselves in this industry, they're going to wonder whether we should have invested all this money in this industry.

And what I found was that employers were often kind of taking the easy way out. They would say, well Lesley, I have community college students, I have students with Bachelor's, I have Master's. Why wouldn't I take the Master's? And I said well, that would be like hiring a lawyer to mow your lawn. I like being able to mow your lawn, but I might not stick with that job very long. I might not actually do it very well. And so we encouraged them to take a look at the kinds of jobs, the data, the sequencers, there are plenty of jobs. And one employer at a time, they hired community college students. And they then became our biggest ally in terms of spreading the word to other employers. And we have many community college students employed in biotech.

So I will stop here because we know we want to give an opportunity for questions, but I think there are many opportunities. But I guess the themes for me would be seeking the relationship as broadly as you possibly can. And one final note I would also say is we do a memorandum, understanding letter of agreement with employers in part to address the idea that there is a lot of turnover and can be a lot of turnover. And so that may be one way for you to also help sustain those relationships, even when you do go through a lot of change.

But I'll stop there and I know we have questions, and I look forward to talking more.

MS. SMITH: Thank you so much, Lesley. I mean that was so much good information. I was thinking rapid-fire notes, but you know, I do want to just circle back really quickly to one of the first things you said that I think also is so important and is, as you said, underemphasized.

I had an informational meeting with a community college president yesterday, and he said very much the same thing you said about the community aspect, right? Really emphasizing community in community colleges and the fact that these tend to be local workers and that people, students who are going to stay in the area and how important that is in terms of the local relationship and really looking at that local, labor market picture. That's not something that I think is emphasized enough and that really is a valuable aspect of how you're presenting that relationship.

I also want to point out that I see that we've already gotten one really excellent question and we will come to that question, but we're going to walk through a couple of the pre-planned questions that we have first and we will integrate that really awesome question from Matt as we move along. And again, if there are other questions, please do continue to put them in the chat and we will address them.

So let's move to our first question here. And I think again, we started to touch on this in a variety of ways and the comments you've both made so far, but many community colleges have employers certified through the board a few times a year. How can community colleges engage employers beyond the advisory boards to develop stronger partnerships, and what are some effective approaches to really get the colleges involved? Lauren, can I turn this over to you to kick us off, based off of what you saw in the research?

MS. EYSTER: Oh yes. Sure. And you know, I think -- gosh. Lesley really I think hit on a key thing that we heard from employers.

Like bombarding them and making an ask of them kind of right away, like around internships or work-based learning opportunities, that -- the employers did not like that. They wanted some relationship-building. They want to be the college take-home and make a value proposition to them. And maybe starting small building that relationship, finding ways to engage with them in small ways that then just build that trust over time. And to gradually make that ask around work-based learning opportunities and hiring commitments and even, you know, we definitely saw a lot of employers in these kinds of efforts sending staff to e instructors. So I think there's just a lot of ways and it takes time to build that relationship.

MS. SMITH: Great. Thank you. And Lesley, any additional thoughts? I mean again, I think you talked about a lot of this relationship building in your opening comment, but --

MS. MARA: I guess just two things that I didn't mention. One is when you talk about kind of community and leadership in the community, whether it's the president of the college hosting a breakfast for key community stakeholders, that can be an effective tool for drawing them in. And our secret but not-so-secret weapon is our students. And so I should mention that upfront.

You know, we find that when employers meet some of our students and get to engage, they very often are more enthused about our colleges, even when they meet our great faculty and staff. So I would say don't hesitate to create opportunities or include employers in opportunities that they might have to engage with your students also. They make a really compelling case for why they should get involved in supporting them.

MS. SMITH: Absolutely. Okay. How about this? Once a college and employer develop that initial relationship, how can colleges successfully maintain those partnerships and help them grow, and how do they change over time? Lesley, do you have thoughts on this?

MS. MARA: Sure. I can use an example from the TAACCCT grant, which now counsels and employer relationship that's gone on over seven years, and I think one of the things that has been really helpful in continuity. So I have been the point person for seven years.

And so it's had its ups and downs but when we did the TAACCCT grant, we got a letter of support from Jackson Laboratory. So from those of you maybe not from Maine or Connecticut, you might not have heard of them but they're very, very significant in the bioscience field. They're the major provider of mice for experiments, and they do a whole host of other very relevant work. They literally are there trying to cure cancer. And so they did a letter of support and when I came into the grant, they weren't involved at all. And some of the grant staff were saying well, they just don't want community college students. You know, they're looking for graduates and all that stuff.

And so I just really reached out to the person who signed the letter and I just said if you could give me 15 minutes of your time, you know, you signed off on this letter. Your president or CEO did and I'd just love to talk. Well, she gave me the time. An hour and a half later, after talking about the vision of the community colleges, why we thought it was so important to have them involved with the grant in the first place, she connected me to their director of education and we began -- I think he was from Maine. I'm from Connecticut. I can remember meeting at a coffee shop with a napkin, where we sort of jotted down ideas for things that we might be able to do together to get our relationship off the ground.

And so I found out from info what was important to them. They were doing -- Connecticut really cared about how they were going to develop a footprint in Connecticut, how they were going to be a good neighbor. We had a source of employees and they were interested in the education field. So were we. So the long and short of it is that we did sign them up to an activity that we knew we could do together, because sometimes you don't know where the partnership is going to go and you say, what might benefit both of us to start with?

So they're a little bit of a non-traditional employer because they also do research and education, so we decided to partner to do a bioscience careers forum in the state that would benefit my system of students, who would include K-12 and we would involve them. And so I won't belabor it but this bioscience careers forum has been going on. I think we will be doing our seventh year in April. It has grown. It has now included internships for students. We're now involved in BioT, which is the association for biotech companies in our state.

And so I think starting out and maintaining them, we have a number of people -- I think this has been mentioned before. We have a number of people, different points of contact to kind of maintain that relationship and nurture it. So we have a university that's taken the lead. We have some community college folks. So I do think successful maintenance requires a leader, where they know somebody has the juice to kind of get to the president and to sort of make things happen or remove barriers, but it also is those folks at multiple other layers, because the employer wants their staff to be involved often and to be getting something from this partnership over time.

So I think that's an example of how we did do and we'll do, as I mentioned earlier, a way of maintaining it, should any one of us key players leave. But I think involving more people, exploring what different kinds of activities you could engage in together to help sort of build trust and build the relationship, I think those are helpful components.

MS. SMITH: Thank you, Lesley. Lauren, is there anything additional you'd want to add that you saw from the research and the conversations with employers?

MS. EYSTER: Yeah. And I think Lesley's got a lot to add to that question there, just stating employer relationships and caring about their employees, not just hiring. But you know, I think the one thing that maybe was somewhat underutilized in the TAACCCT grant is just really thinking about career pathways and communicating those with employers, right? I think employers get it. They weigh in on that visual and everything but caring about their employees and their advancement and having, reducing turnover is making sure those entry-level jobs then can turn into higher-wage jobs. Building on their skills, having -- being able to have successful and easy on- and off-ramps into getting additional training at the community college, building credentials.

So ensuring that you aren't just supplying the college isn't just supplying employers with new employees, but that there is that engagement on continuing their advancement and their skill building. It's lifelong learning over time. But that theme is an important resource coming from the college and then they can visualize and understand that career pathway that builds in at the college to support that advancement.

MS. SMITH: Definitely. And I see that TAACCCT agrees. Thank you. That's very helpful, and I agree. The career pathways approach is not only something that employers visualize the same way we ought to talk about it on the workforce development side, so that's very impactful.

So here's a great question. I think let's start with you, Lauren. Tell us from the evaluation perspective how do you measure the success of a college employer partnership?

MS. EYSTER: This is something that we have heard from employers. Of course, it is getting that high trained worker in, seeing that they're successful in their job, that they're staying at that company. So that is of course the number one thing that employers mention.

But ultimate -- I mean the quality of that relationship with the college, that they're feeling heard, that they feel like they're satisfied with the program. They feel invested in it and they're coming back to the college, right? It's not just this one-time investment because there was a TAACCCT grant or other type of grant, but that it is ongoing and that the employer continues to feel like they're contributing and their getting value out of that relationship. So we've heard a lot about that.

MS. SMITH: Okay. Great. That seems to align with what Lesley has said so far, but Lesley, speaking from the practical side, how would you measure the success of a college employer partnership? And do you feel like this would be the same measurements that an employer would have in terms of equating it to success?

MS. MARA: I think so. I think mine might be a little bit less ambitious, but I think the first order of business is to try to find common needs, if you will. And I tend to take out bioscience people, so the bioscience careers forum that I mentioned was not mentioned in our grant necessarily, but it was something that we tried to identify common needs beyond the obvious. I train people. You need people. So that's great, but I think we try to identify other things.

And a lot of employers do have interest in the community, so you might not think it right upfront or they might be interested -- they're a small startup and they might be interested in tapping into training or getting to know some of the big guys or the supply, some of the folks that they supply. So we try to identify that and try to identify some very concrete things that we could do together in the course of an academic year or a calendar year.

And I think it gave us an opportunity to kind of increase investment, increase commitment, increase trust. But it also at the end of the year gave us kind of something to celebrate because we said, geez. That one was great, or we have to kind of revamp that, or this employer really was hoping to get better access to other employers or a network that they hadn't really been able to create but we were able to help them with that.

So I think you can look at, measure success kind of retroactively and say how successful were we? Or you can say what bite-sized chunks are we going to take out in terms of defining our relationship, and how can we measure whether we're kind of making good on those things? So I think those short-term, concrete measures can also be really helpful in building a partnership that lasts over time.

MS. SMITH: Thank you. I don't want to spend too much time on this question because honestly, I think in the natural course of conversation we really kind of tapped into this. So I'll just say for either Lauren or Lesley, are there any additional things that we haven't discussed that you would want to share here around successful strategies for engaging employers? It's okay if not.

MS. MARA: Yeah. I feel like we've covered a lot.

MS. SMITH: Yeah. I agree. Okay. Okay. And at least we have another system question, so we'll circle back to that. I -- and again, all in the same vein. I think we've sort of answered this one as well. What, Lauren and Lesley, would you share with community college leaders and other stakeholders trying to better align community college programs with employers' workforce needs?

I also again just want to circle back to the fact that we alluded to answering the question that we got from a participant at the outset, which just to bring that question into this because again, it's sort of related. Based on this current train of events with the great resignation, how can you sustain the mentality that employers should always care about their employees' growth, not only when the employer needs the workforce?

And I think those things kind of, they're aligned here, right, the question of how do you align with the employer's workforce needs, but also how do you get the employers to think more thoughtfully about their employees? Any additional thoughts to share here? Lauren, I'll turn to you first if you have anything to add.

MS. EYSTER: Sure. Sure. Yeah. You know, I think one thing that -- this isn't TAACCCT-related but I think you're probably familiar for you all is the desire of employers to not just have workers but the technical skills that the softer 21st century skills that they need, and that that is recognized I think is -- and asked about that employers. They weigh in on curriculum and technical skills, but building those soft skills, building students' workplace, job writing work skills is definitely something we've heard from employers that they really value when they have somebody coming in for a work-based learning opportunity or being hired, that they have those well-rounded set of skills that they're going to be successful in that job.

And you know, so I think that's just one thing that we definitely have heard, not just through TAACCCT but through multiple studies done on community colleges and engaging employers. That's something really important to take into account that employers see as really valuable when they get that employee who's developed those professional workplace skills that make them successful.

MS. SMITH: Okay. Lesley?

MS. MARA: I guess I would add in terms of the lessons about aligning, I think it is also about building the relationship -- I can't say before you use it because that probably is impractical. But I think sometimes our employers might feel that we have something already kind of in the can and that we aren't necessarily as open as we could be to their input about competency. I think they're -- our folks generally respect that they're going to tell us what they need at the end, but the sort of steps along the way are do they have confidence that the curriculum we're building is going to get them there? Are we willing to debrief?

We have a lot of good experience in advanced manufacturing. But I think that one lesson I would give is to try to create a culture where faculty and staff have the ability to connect with employers, either through associations or through meetings where you really begin some of those discussions and there is kind of a mutual respect for what each does and understanding that employers might very well have something to contribute to curriculum. You know, I might be the trained professor but I think we stand to really gain a lot from each other.

So I would say for leaders, to the extent that you can start to create those across-sectors opportunities for people to really mingle and get to know each other, because I find people less defensive and they're more willing to accept sort of constructive how do we make this better kind of feedback when they have a relationship with somebody. So they're not likely to say, well what do they know? You know that kind of speech. So I think that would be one lesson.

And I guess how to encourage employee growth. I think we've been lucky with a lot of our employers. They really do care about being good for the community, for citizens, and we seem to agree -- to share a common sort of belief that it is easier and better for them to keep good employees than it is to lose them and have to sort of rehire and do all of that. So I think when you can create the pathways, I think that really is a way for them to see where their focus to go. But there again, you have to be connected to positions along a path that are relevant to their only particular needs. So think that, too, would require some longer term investment.

MS. EYSTER: I just would add, you know, Lesley has been talking all along really about sector strategies. I mean I think we use that term and there could be a lot of ways to go about that, not just bringing employers together in a room and having great thoughts with agreeing on those things or disagreeing on things, right? I think there is just a lot of ways that within an industry employers can be strategic partners, can collaborate but also have those one-on-one relationships. And we saw a lot of that within our study of, you know, it could be both things and work really well for the colleges.

MS. SMITH: Okay. And yeah, you know, sort of building on that same thing, you're absolutely right. This is definitely a big part of the sector strategy approach, and we talked about career pathways a little earlier and being able to communicate about that to employers.

So sort of related to that, we got a question about whether -- did you feel that employers understand that employees are wiser and more strategic about their career goals? You know, they're more invested in their own career pathway approach and have the knowledge and planning around that. Lauren, did that come out in the conversations that you had with employers?

MS. EYSTER: It did. It didn't. I can't say that it did. We didn't ask them questions directly about them. I think that's a great question to add though, next time we do this kind of work. It's such a great question. But it didn't -- there wasn't a lot of employers that were thinking about their pathways at all, but they were thinking about upgrading skills certainly and that's a part of it. But of their own employees, just reporting them to gain those skills, but not necessarily around their understanding of their goals.

MS. SMITH: What about you, Lesley?

MS. MARA: I think it's a more aware of it pre-Covid. They are aware of it now in Connecticut and I think certain sectors really stand out. Biotech is one of them, the life sciences. I think employers are taking a look at the environments. I mean, just the idea of working from home, the kind of flexibility. I recently spoke with a biotech employer who said, you know, and he's the CEO and wants to ride his bike to work. And so depending on the sector certainly. Our defense contractors, you know, electric folks, they have a little bit different opinion of the world, but even they are taking a look.

I thank the pandemic for all of the other things it's given us. It has caused employers to take a little bit of a look, and I think employees at least in some sectors are saying gee, you know, this is something we want about the place that we work, which may be more of a work condition than sort of a competency and training issue.

But I do think that in Connecticut, at least in some sectors, we really are taking a look because I would say the employees, I don't know if they're wiser or more strategic but they just are going through a pandemic and I think they're asking themselves what do I want in my job? And what do I -- what are the kinds of conditions that are going to help me balance my life? And so we have seen some of that coming out in terms of a recognition of what employees are now looking for for themselves in this experience we've just had or that we're still going through.

MS. SMITH: Yeah. I mean that is a very excellent point. This conversation is a little different now than it was three years ago, and certainly we've talked on this in the opening remarks and our session on Tuesday. A big focus in this administration now is job quality, right? And that certainly, a piece of that is the workers have to work as well, but I mean that's also an important acknowledgement that part of their employees being involved in their own career goals and career pathways is towards that quality piece.

And we have definitely seen the pandemic sort of turn that on its head in terms of who has the power and the influence in a very unique way. So obviously that has some very key lessons learned and different approaches that will need to be undertaken when it comes to working with employers and helping them to figure out that alignment of their workforce needs with their employees desires and their employees actions in terms of whether they go to a different job, based on those factors. So yeah. It's a really, really interesting pact we're in right now.

Okay. Well, this has been a great conversation. We actually have one more question. How can federal and state governments support stronger community college-employer partnerships? Lesley, do you want to do this one first?

MS. MARA: Okay. More grants. No. I think honestly, when you do this employer work it is actually very time-intensive and I do think, to the extent there are federal and state opportunities, I think it is going to be helpful.

One thing I want to highlight that not everybody is going to have the good fortune to have is we have in Connecticut under our relatively new governor a governor's workforce counsel. And it's not that they necessarily have money that we didn't have in the state legislature, but they are now, they have a cabinet-level position in the office of workforce strategy, reports directly to the governor. They've engaged around five industry sectors, bringing in the workforce development board, community-based organizations, the colleges and universities, employers, and doing engagement. They're creating sector partnerships by region in the state.

And I do think that that kind of leadership can be really, really helpful. I know Connecticut is a very small state, but you'd be amazed at the silos. You'd be amazed at the meetings we all go to that are related to workforce development, but it's a different one here and a slightly different angle. So to an extent, there can be some executive leadership at the state or federal level to really kind of brig people together and to kind of force that a bit. I think that it's been really helpful in Connecticut. It's a lot to manage and it doesn't happen overnight, but I think it's a great piece of government support that can be really helpful.

And I think many of us who had the experience of TAACCCT know we didn't learn it the first time. So I think to an extent there are funding opportunities that are coupled and kind of do require that there be these employer relationships. It forces us to stay out of our silos and continue that work, which I acknowledge is very painstaking and can be very time-consuming.

MS. SMITH: Lauren?

MS. EYSTER: Yeah. I'll just say two things. You know, I learned from the TAACCCT grants -- one of the things was this investment really did lead to partnerships with employers, increased engagement. And one of the reasons, according to colleges was there was money to have that person on the ground building those relationships. Lesley talked about faculty, that being their job. They've got a huge job already and TAACCCT allowed those colleges to have that person building those relationships.

But some colleges were very concerned once the TAACCCT dollars went away about keeping that kind of person onboard that could continue those relationships. So sustainability planning is a way with the institution to keep that person onboard or carve out that role for somebody. And as a college, states can support that kind of structure within community college. I think that's a big thing with that role. But once grant dollars go away, it's a struggle.

MS. SMITH: Yes. Absolutely. And thank you for bringing up sustainability. I mean, that is always an ongoing issue and certainly a part that federal and state government can support in various ways.

Well, so we're actually just about at time. We have a minute left. I don't see any additional questions from participants, although I want to thank those of you who provided comments and questions. Really appreciate it. I think it's been a great discussion and I have learned so much. What I will say here is we have some resources for you. There's of course the link to the OC [ph] brief and the larger funding report on the employer perspectives for those of you who would like to look at it, as well as additional resources related to TAACCCT.

And you know, if I was just going to summarize, I think what I would say is it's just really sounds like any relationship, right? It starts at a very personal level. It was interesting to hear that sometimes employers can feel underutilized or not engaged in some of these more transactional types of interactions. So really be thoughtful about developing that relationship on a very personal and individualized level is very important. I think that was really interesting to hear. And not to make assumptions about the level of engagement that employers may be interested in investing in because it can be a lot more engaged than you think.

And also, just what you said, Lesley, about the community colleges being well-positioned to bring diverse teams to the workforce and that community piece is still tied to the local labor market. I think it's very important to keep in mind and certainly in terms of communicating with your employers about what community colleges can bring.

So I just want to thank you both so much for your time. Thank you to the audience. And at this point, I will turn it back over to Laura. Thank you everyone.

(END)