

The Broken Pathway

*What we're getting wrong
about higher education
and workforce
partnerships –
and how to
fix them*



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INTRODUCTION

Robust pathway partnerships between higher education and the workforce serve a critical role in seamlessly bridging the gap from academia to practical application, ensuring that students' knowledge and skills align with real-world demands — ultimately fostering individual career success and driving economic growth. Despite a clear and long-standing recognition of the importance of more effective pathway partnerships between institutions of higher education (IHEs) and the workforce, the prevalence and impact of these partnerships remain limited.

The development of meaningful relationships between IHEs and the workforce has been stunted by [persistent structural barriers](#), including:

Outdated structures and norms
that lock IHEs into continuing to develop opportunities for students that don't directly correlate with clear career opportunities.

Misaligned incentives
that dissuade productive collaborations, which is best evidenced by the generally low engagement of employers and higher education representatives.

Resistance to timely innovations
capable of connecting and preparing individuals with the skills needed to meet today's rapidly changing workforce demands.

Even with these historical challenges, there is a growing appetite to develop stronger partnerships between IHEs and the workforce given today's shifting social, financial, and political landscape. Yet there is still no scalable model of how such partnerships can offer better pathways from learning to earning. So, what are we getting wrong about higher education and workforce partnerships?

To find out, we convened a group of stakeholders including experts from higher education, workforce, philanthropy, and policy in New Orleans on June 13, 2023. Together, we explored the barriers impeding the development of effective pathway partnerships from education to careers — and ideated solutions to bridge the gap.



Why WGU Labs?

The biggest challenges in education need effective and scalable solutions.

*From removing barriers, to access for students from under-resourced communities, to streamlining the learn-work-learn cycle, stakeholders in higher education and workforce development need ways to **redesign the current learning experience**. The challenges are complex, sometimes contradictory, and ever-evolving.*

They are education's wicked problems.

*To design collaborative solutions to these complex problems, WGU Labs works with higher education leaders, faculty, students, entrepreneurs, philanthropists, and other stakeholders. As the **innovation arm of Western Governors University (WGU)** — an institution that reimagined the traditional university 25 years ago — we are **driving practical ideas to action by remaining close to the student experience**.*

*We use our unique position as an organization that is both part of and separate from higher education to drive systemic change. The leaders we collaborate with count on us to ask **astute questions, thread disparate information into insights, and push bold, learner-centered ideas**.*

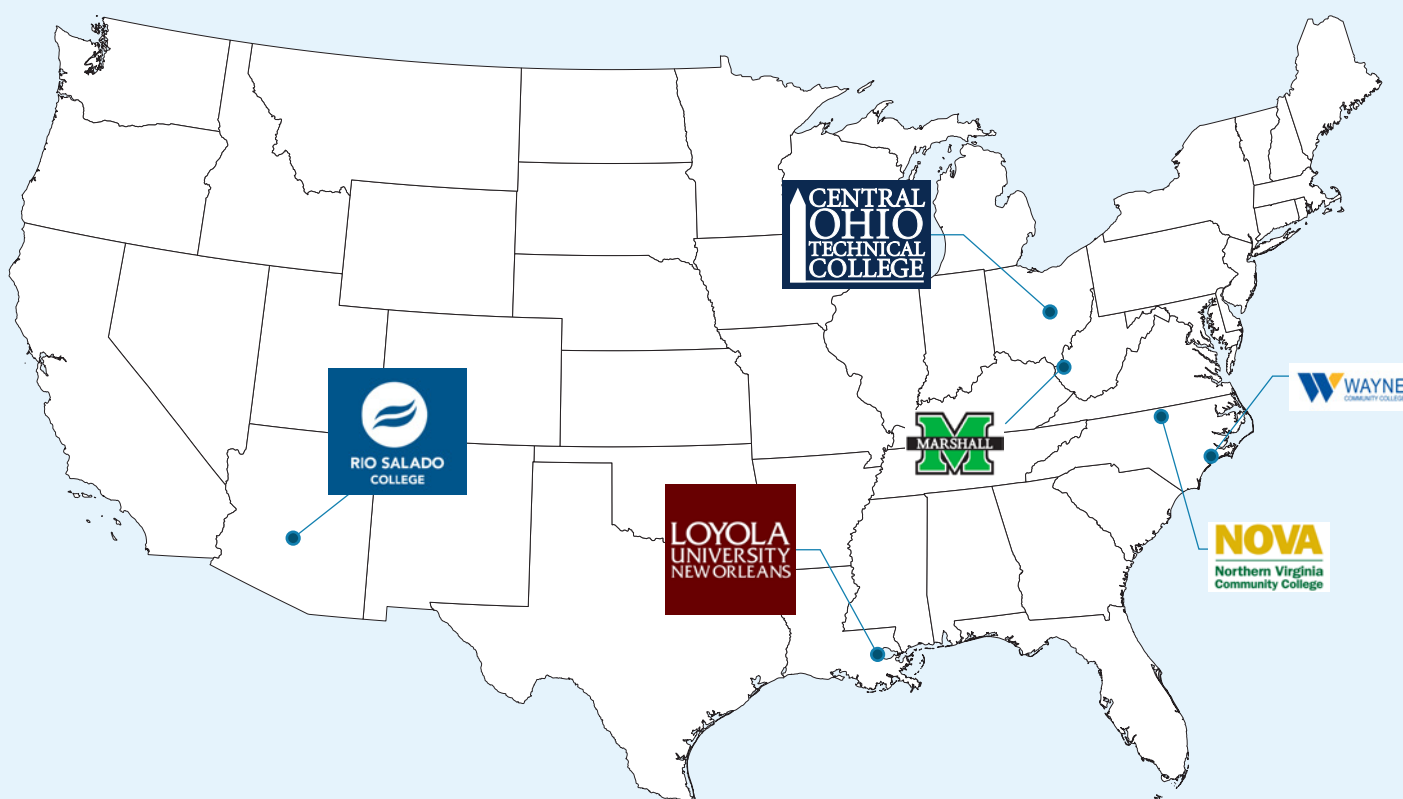
Then we investigate, test, and refine those concepts into workable solutions that support learner outcomes and advance equitable access.

Acknowledgements

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Calbright College
Christensen Institute
Coalfield Development
Instructure

Juvo Ventures
Kaufmann Institute
KC Scholars
Koch Foundation

Lightcast
State Business Executives
STRATA9
Walton Family Foundation

Western Governors University
WGU Academy
WGU Advancement
WGU Labs

WHAT WE KNOW

To better identify the key challenges impeding pathway partnerships — and ideate potential solutions to these challenges — it's important to understand the current landscape and the unique needs of all the key players.

Here's what we know:



Students want to see employment value from their education

They are demanding more ROI from their postsecondary education. Many graduates find it challenging to secure a job in a timely manner after obtaining their degrees and end up working jobs that don't require a college degree.



29%

29% of Americans think a traditional four-year degree does not prepare students for a well-paying job in today's economy.

SOURCE: [Pew Research](#)



50%

Half of graduates (50%) didn't apply to entry-level jobs because they felt underqualified.

SOURCE: [Cenage](#)



21%

One in five (21%) graduates say their college didn't provide them with needed job skills.

SOURCE: [Cenage](#)



40%

40% of recent college graduates in the U.S. are underemployed.

SOURCE: [Statista](#)

2

Employers need workers with rich social, organizational, and analytic skills.

Across all preparation programs, employers want more visibility into the [skills students leave their education with](#). While they continue to primarily hire workers with college degrees, employers have expressed more willingness to accept certificates, microcredentials, and other demonstrations of skills in [lieu of college degrees](#) within certain sectors.



62%

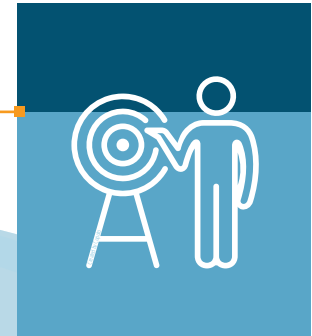
Just 62% of employers believe that most or all college graduates **possess the knowledge and skills needed to succeed** in entry-level positions.

SOURCE: [AAC&U](#)

72% of employers say they **don't see a degree as reliable.**

SOURCE: [JFF & ASA](#)

72%



87%

87% of executives say their organization **has a skills gap.**

SOURCE: [McKinsey](#)



3

IHEs are frustrated with the low level of engagement from employers.

Colleges are trying to design more skills-oriented programs, but struggle to get employers to participate in curriculum development, identify the competitive skills they need, and provide internship and apprenticeship opportunities for their students. Similarly, many employers don't offer the robust on-the-job training needed to help candidates and employees acquire the skills needed for success in their roles. Employers, therefore, expect colleges to do the majority of the work when it comes to skills development — and aren't willing to collaborate fully to make these programs effective.



10%

Only 10% of community college leaders **believe employers will offer job guarantees to students** who complete a program.

SOURCE: [Harvard Business School & AACC](#)



40%

40% of employers **don't offer any type of paid work-based training** — internships, cooperative education programs, apprenticeships or programs such as clinics and team projects — to students or potential employees.

SOURCE: [SHRM](#)



31% / 94%

94% of organizations offer some form of skill-based training, but **only 31% offer all of the following:** initial skill training, job-maintenance training, employee development, and upskilling. SOURCE: [SHRM](#)

Higher education-workforce partnerships can create more effective pathways for students to move from learning to earning. When done right, everyone — the student, the college, the employer — is assured of the value students gain from their learning. But these partnerships continue to miss the mark. We explore the obstacles preventing their success in the next section.

KEY CHALLENGES

During our convening, we asked mixed groups of university administrators, workforce advocates, and business leaders to reflect on a [framework for effective partnerships](#) proposed by the Aspen Institute to unpack why partnerships have fallen short of expectations.

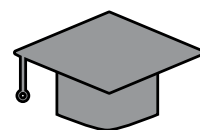
Several common themes emerged:

1. **The primary participants in the hiring process aren't communicating in the language of skills.**

[Hiring for skills is five times more predictive of job performance than hiring for education.](#) But employers struggle to identify the skills they need from talent. Institutes of higher education struggle to articulate the skills their programs provide. And students struggle to communicate what they learned as the skills employers are seeking. This lack of clarity results in ineffective communication between all stakeholders. Consequently, the two groups in a hiring situation that need to speak in the language of skills — hiring managers and candidates — aren't doing so. And that's a big part of the reason why the diploma has become a stand-in for skills.

Today, most candidates experience highly subjective hiring processes. Even when industry leaders are explicit in the skills their workers need, hiring managers rarely have clear expectations and guidance on how to hire for skills. Hiring managers may not know how to articulate the skills needed for a job — or how to screen for them. And they frequently aren't supported to develop a new employee with a foundation of skills into a highly effective employee. At every point of the hiring process, we depend on luck: luck that a hiring manager is experienced and knowledgeable enough to know the skills that matter and have clear and unbiased ways of selecting for them; luck that candidates can recognize the skills that matter and can communicate their own skills; luck that employers have the time, experience, and disposition to develop newly skilled talent still building their experience.

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SOURCE: [McKinsey](#)

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2. Institutional resources to support learners on their career pathways are missing the mark.

According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), the majority of students don't use the career center's most impactful services. Their survey revealed just 26% of students use the career center for help with internships, 21% take part in mock interviews, and 21% visit for networking preparation.

Students are often encouraged to seek off-campus opportunities, such as internships, to prepare for their future careers. But internships are underdeveloped and still the province of the privileged. Students living on limited income simply cannot afford to take unpaid or low-paid internships. Likewise, students without inherent social capital, such as first-generation students, often don't have the connections that help more privileged students get a foot in the door.

student services at the career center

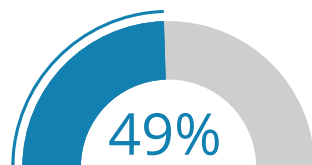
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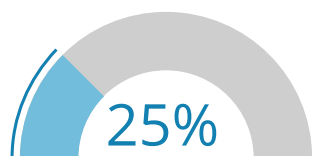
21% of students visit to prepare for networking

SOURCE: [NACE](#)

recent grads



Nearly half of recent graduates **feel underqualified** for entry-level jobs.



Only 25% of recent graduates **would pursue the same education path**.

SOURCE: [Cenage](#)

Even if access to internships was more equitable, off-campus opportunities don't solve a core issue: most students don't see the connection between their coursework and their future careers. Nearly half (49%) of recent graduates feel underqualified for entry-level jobs, and only 25% of recent graduates would pursue the same education path.



3. **The current learning model is one-way.**

The established model of learning segregates the roles and objectives of higher education and the workforce. As a result, we tend to overemphasize the sending process and underemphasize the receiving process. That is, we talk a lot about what higher education needs to do to prepare students for careers, but relatively little about what employers need to do to help recent graduates launch successful careers. By helping employers become better recipients of talent, we can create stronger pathways between learning and earning.

There is value in cultivating a unified and common goal of continuous development that starts in education and follows the individual into the workforce, where ongoing learning continues to be of utmost importance. Once the workforce sees itself as a partner with higher education in lifelong learning, then we may have the foundation needed to establish skills standards and language that connects the two entities.



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4. **Transitions within and between education and the workforce are largely unsupported.**

Transitional periods, such as the time between graduation and starting a job or between an entry-level position and a more skilled role, are the most prone to leaks in the pipeline.

After graduation, students abruptly lose the support of their college and launch into an entirely new, often un- or under-supported journey toward the workplace. Internships are one strategy to help fill this gap, but, as stated above, these opportunities as we've known them are inequitable in nature and too limited in number to have a scalable impact.

Similarly, students are cut off from a valuable social capital resource after graduation — their network of teachers, advisors, and peers. While privileged populations can lean on their ingrained networks, individuals from under-resourced communities, such as first-generation students, often lack access to these vital connections.

As noted above, preventing these leaks should not solely be the onus of higher education. But because employers currently view themselves primarily as the recipients of talent, they are less invested — and largely not incentivized — to support a more equitable bridge between learning and earning.

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POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

After discussing the key challenges to establishing stronger pathways between higher education and the workforce, we asked small groups of convening participants to reflect and propose potential pilot solutions. Several common themes emerged from these discussions:

1. **Address local needs with scalable solutions.**


Instead of scaling pathways, what if we created pathways at scale? Historically, the majority of students have attended college [within 50 miles of where they grew up](#), a trend that only increased [when the pandemic hit](#). Likewise, 69% of college students on average plan to [stay in their regions after graduation](#). Institutes of higher education, therefore, don't need to focus on how to prepare students for every job in the marketplace. Instead, IHEs, especially regional serving institutions, could focus on developing skills tailored to the local marketplace while articulating the relevance of those same skills across the broader workforce. Articulation is crucial here. Existing higher education courses are not necessarily irrelevant to the workplace. The problem is that many students lack the language needed to convey how what they learned in school applies to work. By connecting these dots, students will be more successful when applying to local jobs, as well as similar roles outside their regions.

Of course, for these pathways to be successful, businesses need to play a role too. Articulation is crucial here as well. It's easy to blame IHEs for not preparing graduates to fill the roles needed in today's workforce. However, [companies could do a better job clearly defining the skills they're looking for](#). More importantly, businesses should



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play a bigger role in curriculum development to ensure graduates possess the skills required to work in their organizations. While the workforce is under enormous pressure to fill widening talent gaps, businesses should also recognize that higher education is under its own pressures and lacks the time and resources to develop highly tailored training programs in the absence of employer partnerships.



To better incentivize higher education participation, businesses should consider guaranteeing interviews, internships, or job opportunities to graduates from these programs. For example, Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) — one of our convening participants and a member of [WGU Labs' College Innovation Network](#) (CIN) — developed the **Guaranteed Interviews program**, which, as its name suggests, guarantees students who successfully complete their programs interviews with more than a dozen participating employers.

Several of the solutions proposed at our convening relate to this idea. One group proposed creating an entrepreneur temp agency aimed at aligning employer and institutional incentives to drive better career outcomes. This could involve creating an accelerator within a school where employers invest to create project opportunities and build a recruiting pipeline. Another group suggested on-the-job training (OJT) agreements between employers and higher education, wherein students spend some of their time working at a local business, gaining both academic credits and job experience simultaneously.



The exact implementation of these solutions will differ depending on the school and its region's employment needs. But we could create a network of universities and workforce communities who work together locally but share their approaches, initiative models, and engagement strategies across the broader network. By lifting up from the local level, we create a nation of skilled workers

2. Modernize existing services and leverage latent capacity.

Most students either aren't leveraging existing support services at all, or find them lacking. Only about 60% of students [know about the full range](#) of mental health, financial aid, and career services offered at their institutions. There are also relatively few resources to support individuals during transitional periods between graduation and work or between entry-level jobs and more skilled ones.

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full range
of services
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SOURCE: [Tyton Partners](#)

At the same time, academic advisors and career services counselors have been under-resourced for years. In a recent Tyton Partners survey, 47% of advisors and administrators said the [top barrier to improving advising was high caseloads](#). Anecdotally, several advising experts [told Inside Higher Ed](#) that “the field is a historically undervalued and under-resourced component of student success, and that long-standing concerns about lack of opportunities for career advancement, stagnant pay, and high caseloads were exacerbated by COVID-19, prompting some colleagues to leave advising altogether. These departures don't help lower caseloads.”

It's clear these services need to be reimaged to better support both parties. One solution participants at our convening consistently surfaced was the idea of “advising beyond advisors.” For example, one group suggested developing a platform for peer advising, in which peers can connect with other peers for advice on courses and careers. This could extend to the workforce, enabling colleagues to connect with one another for advice on advancement. By decoupling these solutions from higher education, they can also provide support to individuals during transitional periods.

Another group proposed a similar model that incorporates alumni to provide counseling and guidance. The concept of leveraging peers isn't new. [Protopia](#) — a [WGU Labs Accelerator](#) client — is a networking platform focused on [fostering alumni-student relationships through AI technology](#). By maximizing the latent capacity of peers and alumni, students gain easier access to what is often more relevant support. One participant at the convening commented on how challenging it is for students to connect with advisors who have been out of the education system and haven't had to search for a job in some time, especially for post-traditional students

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SOURCE: [Tyton Partners](#)

with diverse experiences and backgrounds. Peer advising also eases some of the burden on traditional academic advisors, enabling them to add value in more meaningful ways.

Another group suggested embedding short-form social media that highlights different career paths within the LMS. Not only is this solution more approachable for today's students, it likewise takes some of the more repetitive work of explaining these options to students off the shoulders of career advisors.

3. **Redesign the internship model.**

One desperately needed solution we repeatedly heard from participants was to redesign and democratize the internship experience. Internships are often divorced from the skills and networks they are meant to build and typically don't align with the developmental stages of learners. This isn't surprising given that many internships are considered off-campus opportunities, and therefore exist in a gray area where many IHEs offer little support in locating or navigating them, and employers don't know how to structure them to meet the needs of learners. And, as noted previously, obtaining an internship often requires existing social capital and the ability to work for no or low pay, making these opportunities out of reach for many first-generation students and those who are living on limited income.

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One group at our convening suggested redesigning internships to more clearly **deliver on the interconnection of career needs: skills, experience, and networking contacts**. They also suggested these internships should be designed explicitly for students furthest from opportunity, which would benefit all students by making these experiences more accessible and inclusive.

Another group recommended a learn and earn model, similar to the one already in place at [Coalfield Development](#), one of the participating organizations at the convening. Coalfield Development employs a [33-6-3 model](#): "Each week, crew members complete 33 hours of paid work, 6 credit hours of higher education, and 3 hours of personal development mentorship. At the end of their 2.5 year contract, crew members earn an Associate's Degree and gain traction on life goals."



IHEs can play an important role in centralizing internship opportunities to improve access and equity too. Old Dominion University, for example, just unveiled its [Monarch Internship and Co-Op Office](#), with the goal for all students to participate in an internship or experiential work-based learning opportunity before graduation. To make internships available to all of the university's 24,000 learners, the office intends to establish or expand partnerships with external organizations, with a particular focus on underrepresented majors. "I am heavily investigating those unpaid, mandatory work-based learning experiences and how we can fix this problem, especially when you're talking about industries that are traditionally led by women or underrepresented populations," the office's executive director [shared with Inside Higher Ed](#).

4. **Make learning continuous.**

We've talked a lot about improving pathways from school to work in this paper. But the reality is that we shouldn't even be thinking of these as "paths" in the strict sense, with distinct starting and ending points. Learning should be continuous — and the responsibility of more than just the educator. Rather than waiting for qualified candidates to walk in the door, employers should start seeing themselves as part of the training continuum — not the end of the road.

IHEs can play an important role in centralizing internship opportunities to improve access and equity too.

While most companies provide some form of employee training and development, these **opportunities are often limited in scope, put the responsibility on the employee to find relevant learning modules, or require participants to jump through hoops to receive funding or reimbursement.**

In addition to developing more robust upskilling and reskilling programs, employers should consider partnering with colleges to develop microcredentials or provide continuing education that helps their employees advance or pivot according to industry needs.

Amazon's Career Choice program, for example, [leverages partnerships with institutions including WGU to offer employees opportunities](#) to develop foundational skills, receive the training needed to find a new job at Amazon or elsewhere, and start or continue earning credit toward a college degree.

CONCLUSION

Leaders across higher education and the workforce have been talking about improving pathways to opportunities for some time now. But a collective frustration with progress is leading a new urgency to these efforts. [Despite research that shows that earning a degree is almost always worthwhile](#), individuals are questioning more than ever whether higher education is really worth the rising costs. Employers say it's growing increasingly harder to find talent with the skills needed to work for their organizations. And institutes of higher education are under immense pressure to solve the problem with limited support and resources.

Now is the time to turn our collective frustration into collaborative action that benefits all parties. While the discussions we had at our convening were inspiring, we recognize that they are only the beginning. Action is necessary to turn these conversations into real change. That's why we're currently exploring pilot projects based on the insights captured during the convening, with the goal of engaging participant organizations as pilot partners. We look forward to reporting back on these efforts and continuing to surface tangible solutions that solve the challenges preventing successful pathway partnerships.



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WGU Labs is the nonprofit EdTech consulting, incubation, research, and design arm of Western Governors University (WGU), where our mission is to identify and support scalable solutions that address the biggest challenges in education today.



College
Innovation
Network

The College Innovation Network (CIN) at WGU Labs is a network of higher education institutions committed to navigating uncertainty in an increasingly tech-enabled world. We leverage technology and community to promote belonging and engagement in the modern higher education environment, building highly engaged learning communities from enrollment through graduation — and beyond.