

Informing Perkins V:

Employer Input on Career and Technical Education in Illinois

Commissioned by the
Illinois State Board of Education
and the
Illinois Community College Board

December 2019

Background + Acknowledgments

With the generous support of the Joyce Foundation, this report was commissioned by the Illinois State Board of Education and the Illinois Community College Board to ensure that employer perspectives inform the Illinois Perkins V plan. Independent consultants Simon Moore and Laurel Foglia were contracted to facilitate employer input and produce this synthesis report.

Many thanks are due to the 74 employers and 8 workforce development leaders from across Illinois who volunteered their time and perspectives in the interest of building a robust Career and Technical Education system in the state. Gratitude is also due to our colleagues who encouraged employers to participate and to the sites that hosted employer input sessions: Carl Sandburg College, Rock Valley College, the Saint Clair County Regional Office of Education, and Woodruff Career & Technical Center.

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I. Executive Summary

Purpose

Process

Leading Recommendations

Executive Summary: Purpose

Illinois is currently developing its proposal for Perkins V Career and Technical Education (CTE) funding from the U.S. Department of Education. This report is a component of engagement efforts coordinated by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) to ensure the state's Perkins V proposal is informed by community stakeholders.

Specifically, **this project was commissioned by ISBE and ICCB to gather input from employers**, who are key stakeholders in CTE initiatives. Our education systems play a central role in developing the talented workforce that business and industry needs to thrive, so employers have a vested interest in the effectiveness of CTE. Further, **employers have unique insight into the capabilities workers need to succeed and the extent to which recent graduates of our education systems have developed those capabilities.** As such, the employer input captured in this report provides a valuable perspective on the best path forward for CTE in Illinois.

Executive Summary: Process

With the support of the Joyce Foundation, project consultants Simon Moore and Laurel Foglia gathered employer input via **five group input sessions, 1-on-1 phone interviews, and an online survey**. A total of **74 employers participated**. Over **40% of respondents work in manufacturing**, which was by far the most highly represented sector. This was followed by Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resources and Health Sciences, each of which constituted just over 10% of respondents. Participants are based in geographically diverse communities across the state, but **the Chicagoland area, Central Illinois, and Metro Saint Louis accounted for the vast majority of responses** with 37%, 25%, and 19% respectively.

When offered various avenues for providing input and the possibility of remote participation, employers were enthusiastic to share their perspectives. They offered candid views on the quality of the workforce pipeline, the state of CTE, and how business and education can better coordinate efforts.

This report is a synthesis of employer input and identifies points of commonality among participant views. Across all modes of participation, **employer input was guided by five key questions:**

1. How well do the capabilities of recent high school and postsecondary graduates align with your needs as an employer?
2. What are the primary strengths of the current state of CTE in Illinois?
3. What are the primary challenges with the current state of CTE in Illinois?
4. In your opinion, how can our education systems better coordinate with business and industry?
5. How would you like to be involved in developing career pathways at the state and local level?

Executive Summary: Leading Recommendations

Leading recommendations are the project's primary findings. **These are the ideas for strengthening CTE that employers most frequently and clearly raised.** In accordance with employer input, leading recommendations are listed in priority order:

- **Forge relationships between employers and education institutions** that are grounded in shared purpose, mutual commitment, and a willingness to be transparent and vulnerable. Authentic relationships between education and industry are foundational to both localized career pathways and system-level coordination.
- **Raise the profile of skilled trades and technical careers**. Employers believe that these pathways are stigmatized and often considered less desirable than a four-year degree, to the detriment of both students and employers. A key element of these efforts is crafting a contemporary image of CTE as a high-tech space that offers family-sustaining careers.
- **Expand work-based learning opportunities**. This serves the dual purpose of (1) giving students more exposure to career options and fostering their interest in high-demand, high-pay, high-growth sectors and (2) enabling students to develop a valuable combination of soft skills and technical skills.
- **Prioritize the development of students' soft skills**, including communication, interpersonal intelligence, adaptability to new cultures and expectations, and basic professionalism. The extent to which students are proficient in these areas is a strong predictor of their success in the workplace, yet employers reported recent graduates are often unprepared.
- **Capitalize on employers' desire to contribute** to the development of a robust array of career pathways. Approximately 85% of respondents expressed interest in involvement or were already involved in the development of career pathways.

II. Methodology

Modes of Engagement

Participant Characteristics

Role of Consultants

During two phases of employer engagement, participants chose from multiple modes of providing input.

Phase I: ISBE and ICCB designed the structure of Phase I, which comprised a series of facilitated group input sessions at four sites across Illinois. ISBE and ICCB identified host sites and the timeline for the input sessions. Additionally, ISBE and ICCB led outreach efforts, which included individual invitations to Local Workforce Board Chairs and requests for community colleges and Education for Employment Directors to invite employers in their regions. Employer participation in Phase I was very limited, necessitating Phase II.

<i>Host Institution</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Time</i>
Saint Clair County Regional Office of Education	Belleville, IL	09.19.19	630-800pm
Woodruff Career & Technical Center	Peoria, IL	09.27.19	600-730pm
Rock Valley College	Rockford, IL	10.01.19	600-730pm
Carl Sandburg College	Galesburg, IL	10.08.19	600-730pm

Phase II: ISBE, ICCB, the project consultants, and a Joyce Foundation representative collaboratively planned Phase II, which offered employers greater choice in how to provide input and the option to participate remotely. Phase II ran from October 31, 2019 to November 8, 2019. The project team identified a small group of allies – district administrators, community college administrators, and CTE/workforce development leaders – who were asked to encourage their employer colleagues to participate. This approach yielded a far stronger response from employers, who provided input via the following avenues:

- Online survey
- 1-on-1 phone interview with a project consultant
- Facilitated group input session via conference call hosted by ISBE from 300-400pm on November 6, 2019

Employer participants represented a diverse mix of industries and geographies, although the manufacturing sector was a strong plurality.

The following provides insight on participant characteristics:

Total participants	74	
Participants by mode of engagement	In-Person Group Session – 3 (4%) Remote Group Session – 9 (12%)	1-on-1 Phone Interview – 2 (3%) Online Survey – 60 (81%)
Most Common Participant Sectors	Manufacturing – 32 (43%) Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resources – 9 (12%) Health Sciences - 8 (11%)	Marketing, Sales, and Service – 7 (9%) Transportation, Distribution, and Logistics – 5 (7%)
Participants by Region	Chicagoland Area* – 25 (37%) Central Illinois – 17 (25%) Metro Saint Louis – 13 (19%)	Northern Illinois – 7 (10%) Western Illinois – 4 (6%) Southern Illinois – 2 (3%)

The input process was designed to elicit candid participant perspectives. This report highlights the most prevalent ideas conveyed by employers.

ISBE and ICCB generated a preliminary set of prompts about employer engagement with CTE. We shaped those into a core set of guiding questions, which was reviewed by ISBE and ICCB before implementation. The guiding questions served as the central element of all modes of input we utilized. Additionally, each input mechanism incorporated background on the project, CTE, and Perkins V, which aimed to address employers' varying levels of familiarity with the field. Finally, we communicated to employers that we would be neutral facilitators and made clear that their input would be anonymized in notes and this report.

This report synthesizes employer input and focuses on the themes they most frequently communicated through their participation. The aim is to highlight those points of commonality. Quotes are provided to enable the reader to hear from employers in their own words. Some quotes have been edited for the purposes of readability and anonymity.

III. Findings

Overview

5 Guiding Questions

Additional Findings

Five core questions guided employer input, and findings are organized around these areas of inquiry.



1. How well do the capabilities of recent high school and postsecondary graduates align with your needs as an employer?



2. What are the primary strengths of the current state of CTE in Illinois?



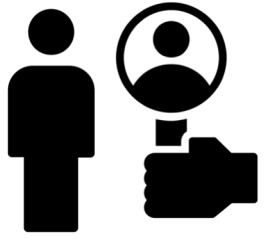
3. What are the primary challenges with the current state of CTE in Illinois?



4. In your opinion, how can our education systems better coordinate with business and industry?



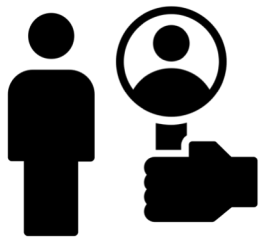
5. How would you like to be involved in developing career pathways at the state and local level?



How well do the capabilities of recent high school and postsecondary graduates align with your needs as an employer?

Employer responses coalesced around the following themes:

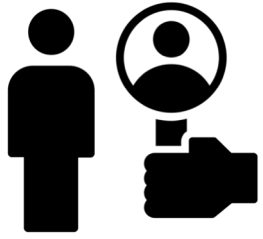
1. **Varied Perspectives** – Employers did not have a clear consensus on the extent to which there is a pipeline of recent graduates who are well prepared for the workforce.
2. **Points of Alignment** – Employers who viewed recent graduates' capabilities as aligned with their needs frequently described general satisfaction with CTE and recognized high-performing postsecondary programs.
3. **Points of Misalignment** – Employer perspectives on the ways recent graduates are underprepared for the workforce converged around a lack of soft skills, technical skills, and commitment to their field.



How well do the capabilities of recent high school and postsecondary graduates align with your needs as an employer?

What we heard from employers:

1. Varied Perspectives	2. Points of Alignment
• Evenly Distributed Perspective, No Consensus – About one third of employers reported that the capabilities of recent graduates align well with their needs. One third reported variation in the degree to which capabilities align. And one third reported that capabilities fall short of employer needs. • No Industry Specific Viewpoints – Perspectives on the skillsets of recent graduates did not correspond to specific industries. There was a broad spectrum of opinion within each of the industries represented.	• General Satisfaction with CTE – The employers who reported being pleased with recent grads feel that CTE allows students to gain both relevant technical knowledge and sufficient employability skills to meet or exceed hiring requirements. These employers feel that recent grads adapt easily to the work environment and make valuable contributions right away. • The More Training, the Better – About 30% of employers expressed greater satisfaction with postsecondary CTE graduates and/or those who have completed a specialized program in a relevant pathway. They feel the technical capabilities and leadership potential of these applicants are significantly more aligned with employer needs.

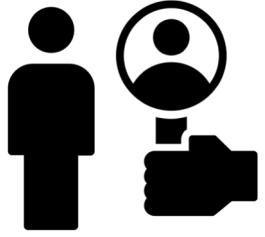


How well do the capabilities of recent high school and postsecondary graduates align with your needs as an employer?

What we heard from employers:

3. Points of Misalignment

- **Missing Soft Skills** – A significant number of employers described recent high school and community college grads as lacking interpersonal, professional, and communication skills. They noted that many applicants and first-time employees struggle with punctuality, motivation, and critical thinking.
- **Lacking Technical Proficiency** – Of the employers who view recent grads as underprepared, many noted inadequate technical skills. Half find advanced skills lacking, and half find basic skills lacking. Several employers explained that some degree of on-the-job training is often necessary for new hires, even for those with postsecondary credentials.
- **Less Familiar, Less Committed** – Employers speculated that the shortage of qualified candidates is due to a decrease in familiarity with career opportunities in skilled trades. Some employers also noted a lack of desire for long-term engagement in a trade field.



Talent Alignment: Employers in Their Own Words

The following illustrative quotes highlight the relevant themes:

“High school diploma candidates transition well into our assembly positions and are able to easily bid for forklift, quality tech, more advanced assembly roles, and team leaders. **Skilled trade positions require a postsecondary certificate, training, or degree.”**
- *Manufacturing Employer, Nashville*

“They often do not have the skills required to perform the tasks that we utilize in our business as most high schools have eliminated their technical skills training programs.”
- *Manufacturing Employer, Geneva*

“I feel they are improving. The focus of high schools and community colleges to prepare a student for a working career as opposed to next level academics is helping. My observation of our industry is that the challenge we face is 1) finding a person that 2) is able to hold the job (attendance, communication, and accountability) and that 3) has the desire to be educated and prosper. **It is exciting when we find a 3rd-level candidate.”** - *Manufacturing Employer, Schaumburg*

“The capabilities of recent grads don’t match with our needs as an employer. We are learning that we need to get out in front as early as junior high to build qualified candidates.” - *Healthcare Employer, Peoria*

“We have had mixed results with employees directly out of high school. They are the greatest opportunity for improvement per our experience. The candidates that have struggled the most lacked life skills such as self-discipline, reasoning, and critical thinking. We have had better success with employees that were graduates of Danville Area Community College, both technically and life skill related.” - *Manufacturing Employer, Danville*



What are the primary strengths of the current state of CTE in Illinois?

Employer responses coalesced around the following themes:

1. **Positive Momentum in High Schools** – A significant number of employers reported that high schools are taking positive steps to strengthen CTE programs.
2. **High-Quality Community College Programs** – Many employers stated that postsecondary degree and certificate programs produce qualified job candidates and are a key source of talent.



What are the primary strengths of the current state of CTE in Illinois?

What we heard from employers:

1. Positive Momentum in High Schools	2. High-Quality Community College Programs
• Changing Priorities + Perceptions – Of employers who commented on the strengths of CTE, many reported a slow but tangible increase in interest and investment in CTE. They observed that some high schools are starting to prioritize preparing students to be career-ready, not just college-ready. • Employer Partnerships – Employers noted that certain high schools are forging stronger and more sustained relationships with local industries in order to jointly address skill gaps and negative perceptions of careers in the skilled trades. • More Guidance, Earlier – Some employers saw an increase in applicants from high schools that incorporate CTE and career counseling in earlier grades. Employers found that the combination of academics and hands-on experience enables these applicants to develop the technical knowledge and employability skills to succeed in an entry-level position.	• Resources and Services – Employers expressed appreciation for the range of community college programs that are available to high schoolers, college students, and continuing education students. They consider the strongest programs to be those with passionate teachers, up-to-date equipment, and a commitment to remaining responsive to industry needs. • Industry-Standard Technical Training – Employers spoke highly of postsecondary programs that are designed to meet the specific technical needs of an industry.



CTE Strengths: Employers in Their Own Words

The following illustrative quotes highlight the relevant themes:

“Strengths include **increasing partnerships and networks between employers, schools, and community colleges** for communicating about the skill gap and actively engaging to change the perception.”

- *Manufacturing Employer, Nashville*

“A strength is the resources and services available through community college programs. **Our local community college is very attuned and responsive to employer needs.**”

- *Manufacturing Employer, Peru*

“I think the **strength lies in the partnerships with community colleges** and that it now appears that it's making its way into high schools. Kids are understanding what their options are at an earlier age than in the past.” - *Recycling Employer, Danville*

“Career counseling at the local high schools and dual enrollment at Danville Area Community College is a difference-maker for area employers in my opinion. **Students are being challenged to think in structured ways about what they would like to do after high school much earlier** in their high school career due to career counseling. This opens the door to young people being challenged academically for those that wish to continue their education. Graduating with an associate's degree from high school is huge for the student and the family supporting the student.” - *Building Products Employer, Danville*

“The culinary department at our healthcare company has been our one pocket of success where we have managed to find and retain employees from HS programs. We are only **finding success with programs that have counselors to support the students.**” - *Healthcare Employer, Peoria*



What are the primary challenges with the current state of CTE in Illinois?

Employer responses coalesced around the following themes:

1. **Limited Coordination** – Employers conveyed that opportunities to work in concert with schools are limited, which results in mismatched priorities and practices.
2. **Lack of Technical and Soft Skills** – Many employers stated that the talent pipeline is insufficient in terms of both quantity and quality of candidates to meet their hiring needs.
3. **Under-Emphasis on CTE** – Employers observed that preparing students for trades and technical careers is often not a priority in high schools, which has a detrimental effect on the talent pipeline.



What are the primary challenges with the current state of CTE in Illinois?

What we heard from employers:

1. Limited Coordination	2. Lack of Technical and Soft Skills
• No Seat at the Table - Many employers expressed frustration about limited collaboration between educational institutions and industry. They feel that better coordination between employers and schools would accelerate the process of reshaping CTE to meet current industry demands. • Outdated Material - Some employers suggested that limited interaction with area manufacturers and other businesses has left some CTE curricula far behind industry standards. They also feel that improved partnerships would enable company policies and practices to evolve in step with the motivations of the current generation of students.	• Underqualified Applicants: Many employers reported finding it a challenge to meet their staffing needs due to both a shortage of applicants and applicant skill deficits. They often assess the applicants to be lacking in technical skills, work ethic, and the necessary soft skills. Many of these employers stated that their businesses do not have the capacity to provide all the necessary training, so they would like more on-the-job training integrated into CTE programs to bridge these gaps.



What are the primary challenges with the current state of CTE in Illinois?

What we heard from employers:

3. Under-Emphasis on CTE

- **Limited CTE Offerings in School** – A significant number of employers felt that a reduction in high school vocational programs is responsible for decreased student interest in the trades and technical fields and, as a result, a shortage of job applicants. They feel that schools are not encouraging students to engage in career exploration, especially not into areas that do not require a bachelor's degree.
- **Over-Emphasis on 4-Year College** – According to many employers, there is a pervasive belief among teachers, counselors, and parents that trades and technical careers are a less desirable option than pursuing a bachelor's degree. They feel that this contributes to a gap in awareness of and participation in training opportunities and in-demand careers.
- **Delayed Introduction** – Employers noted that offering CTE too late in a student's academic trajectory decreases the likelihood that the student will discover and develop an interest in a skilled trade.



CTE Challenges: Employers in Their Own Words

The following illustrative quotes highlight the relevant themes:

“The system is fragmented and often does not allow for incumbent worker training under the standard semester model. Many of the schools operate in silos and see business as a threat as opposed to a partner they can collaborate with. Many programs lack proper funding and the students struggle to receive the financial support to upskill themselves.” - *Manufacturing Employer, Geneva*

“Mom and Dad think of the stigma against manufacturing: that it’s dangerous, dirty, old... But it’s not. It’s cutting edge, clean, and safe. We need to change that narrative. Some parents look down on 2-year schools. They feel like they have failed if their kid attends a 2-year school. I attended Harper’s career day with my young kids and it was amazing. There are so many options for a meaningful career.” - *Manufacturing Employer, Schaumburg*

“A primary challenge is overcoming the lack of knowledge in families and communities regarding the industries, opportunities, and training programs available.” - *Manufacturing Employer, Nashville*

“As we have become more active in partnering with local high schools, we have found **many don't even have a program that matches our industry any longer**. The courses that were related to auto, machinery, engines, diagnostics etc. have been removed from many metropolitan high school career curriculums. **Many of the school faculty are not even familiar with our industry opportunities** and the priority is getting students into 4-year schools. We have found a few vocational programs that provide a great introduction to our industry, but they severely lack exposure to the new technology and innovation within our industry.” - *Heavy Equipment Employer, Naperville*

“The students and graduates seem under-prepared even after completing the programs. There is a clear need for more robust on-the-job training and experience as part of their education in order to be competitive in the job market.” - *Manufacturing Employer, Danville*



In your opinion, how can our education systems better coordinate with business and industry?

Employer responses coalesced around the following themes:

1. **Expanding Work-Based Learning** – Employers placed a high value on experiential learning and suggested various ways to provide students with more opportunities for workplace engagement.
2. **Strengthening Relationships** – Employers expressed that committed, honest relationships with schools are a key building block for effective CTE programs.
3. **Raising the Profile of CTE** – Employers consistently communicated that emphasizing career outcomes and highlighting career opportunities will grow the pipeline of qualified workers.



In your opinion, how can our education systems better coordinate with business and industry?

What we heard from employers:

1. Expanding Work-Based Learning	2. Strengthening Relationships
• Site Visits + Shadowing – Many employers stated a willingness to host field trips and shadow days – not just for students, also for parents. They suggested it is a means of generating awareness and enthusiasm. • Employers in Schools - Many employers said they should spend more time in schools, sharing their experiences, explaining jobs in their industry, and even mentoring. • Internships + Apprenticeships – Employers recognized that internships and apprenticeships are highly valuable in preparing students for careers. A number of employers even suggested making it a graduation requirement.	• Honest Dialogue – Many employers expressed a desire for dialogue with schools to communicate their needs and the extent to which they are (or are not) being met. • Building Alignment – Employers believe these conversations enable CTE programs to align with industry needs and standards. Further, a number of employers expressed that schools need the freedom and flexibility to respond quickly, adapting both what programs they operate and what is taught in those programs. • Educator Awareness – Sustained relationships with employers enable educators to stay current on evolving industries and job markets, positioning them to better communicate effective career advocacy and advice to students.



In your opinion, how can our education systems better coordinate with business and industry?

What we heard from employers:

3. Raising the Profile of CTE

- **Prioritizing Career Outcomes** – Employers communicated that emphasis on career entry as a positive student outcome conveys a value statement and creates an incentive for schools to focus on CTE, build employer relationships, and develop career pathways.
- **Changing Perceptions through Engagement** – Employers expressed hope that more engagement with students and parents would be a means of changing negative perceptions and generating interest in the trades and technical fields. Many employers believe in their ability to cultivate interest in their fields if they have the opportunity to connect with students and their families.
- **Educators as Advocates** – Employers think that equipping educators with the information to champion careers and trades to students and their families would make schools more effective at generating enthusiasm for careers and building a workforce pipeline.
- **No Mutual Exclusivity** – A significant number of employers suggested emphasizing the message, and ensuring the reality, that CTE and a four-year degree are not mutually exclusive. Ideally, they want college and career paths to be concurrent and credentials to be stackable.



Coordination: Employers in Their Own Words

The following illustrative quotes highlight the relevant themes:

“The schools are short on funding so most have discontinued technical classes such as shop. Offering this to students earlier may help foster students who like to work with their hands. If **businesses could partner with the schools for field trips or opportunities for students to learn more and see first hand what it is like** to be a technician (for my industry) or other trades, students’ interest may be sparked.” - *Automotive Employer, Metro Saint Louis*

“Education systems need to be in very close contact with industry **to keep apprised of the industry needs and to assess skills gaps** in graduates of their programs. This is also very important for certification testing - schools have to teach to the test but sometimes the test is not reflective of the industry, which leaves students unprepared upon exit and being taught from the ground up in the field.” - *Healthcare Employer, Decatur*

“A barrier to partnership is the wide breadth of requirements in the industry. To combat that, education and industry need to work very closely together to ensure the base knowledge is present that the employers can then build upon. **Never will education perfectly and completely train an employee** but the base knowledge needs to be in place for the employers to build upon. Employers need to understand that **there will be more industry and business-specific training required** for employees.” - *Manufacturing Employer, Danville*

“Set up and develop forums for the **counselors and parents to be able to tour plants and talk to the people doing the job**. They will then see that a shop is not a dirty place but a clean and high-tech place to work.” - *Manufacturing Employer, Belleville*



How would you like to be involved in developing career pathways at the state and local level?

Employer responses coalesced around the following themes:

1. **Desire to Contribute** – The vast majority of employers stated an interest in supporting the development of career pathways.
2. **Varying Levels of Commitment** – Employers expressed a diversity of sentiments on how and how deeply they would like to engage.



How would you like to be involved in developing career pathways at the state and local level?

What we heard from employers:

1. Desire to Contribute	2. Varying Levels of Commitment
• Widespread Interest in Involvement – Approximately 85% of respondents expressed interest in involvement or were already involved in the development of career pathways. It is clear that across industries and geographies, the cultivation of a strong worker pipeline is a primary concern for employers, and they want a role in building it.	• Dearth of Depth – Many employers said that deep, sustained work-based learning is integral to effective CTE, yet roughly a mere 10% of respondents expressed willingness to offer internships or apprenticeships.* • Awareness + Advising – The most frequently shared employer preference for involvement was building the profile of trades and technical careers by offering windows into industry and information on compensation. Employers suggested accomplishing this via a variety of one-time activities like field trips to workplaces and employer visits to schools. Many employers are also interested in serving in an advisory capacity through local workforce boards and other councils to help align industry and education.



Future Involvement: Employers in Their Own Words

The following illustrative quotes highlight the relevant themes:

“We can contribute by **speaking to students, community members, and groups** about the opportunities and providing a window into manufacturing and the skilled needs. Also, we can connect our leadership with local institutions to **develop and implement training programs that align with our true needs.**”
- *Manufacturing Employer, Nashville*

“We have been part of discussions of curriculum and position requirements, to **giving educators and students tours**, and being involved in strategic plans for school districts.” - *Manufacturing Employer, Danville*

“We are already involved with our local high school. **We work together and offer internships.** Some of our skills cannot be learned strictly from books but rather hands-on training.”
- *Manufacturing Employer, Wheeling*

“I would be glad to be a **resource to explain what we need in a future employee.** We may be interested in hosting an apprenticeship program that is coordinated with the college.”
- *Agriculture Employer, Sullivan*

“I would like to serve on an advisory board and/or to work and partner with local high school teachers and parents to help **educate them on what employers are looking for in candidates**, and most importantly how they can best help facilitate their children to meet the demands.”
- *Manufacturing Employer, Crystal Lake*



Additional Findings

Although not as prevalent as our key findings, there are additional topics that warrant attention.

Employers' Role in Building the Pipeline

While not one of the most frequently voiced views, there was a small but vocal cadre of participants who shared the sentiment that employers need to be more self-reflective and commit deeply, work collaboratively, and be conscious of the barriers they create. The following bullets summarize these sentiments:

- **Step Up and Open Doors** – A higher education employer said, *“Businesses need to be more open to taking students on in shadowing, internships, and professional practice settings. Too many businesses won't allow students in, don't allow them to do anything hands-on, or claim they are too busy to take students.”*
- **Own the Work and Be Collaborative** – A common refrain in employer input was, “Schools need to...” A manufacturing employer offered an alternative perspective, saying, *“We would be willing to invite young adults into our facility for class or school tours, speak at career nights at the high schools, or offer internship opportunities, job shadows or cooperative work opportunities, etc. The possibilities are endless and until employers stop complaining about the lack of workforce and do something about it, they will not see the movement.”*
- **Break Down Policy Barriers** – Some employers maintain HR policies that are barriers to both attracting the best candidates and equitable hiring. A healthcare employer explains, *“Employers are among the biggest barriers to success relative to policies and procedures. **We need to ask ourselves what we may be doing to limit success.** For example, convictions is more of an issue in healthcare. We have so many people in the community who need a job, but if they have a criminal conviction, they can't work in any of our facilities.”*



Additional Findings, Cont'd

Workforce Development Leader Input

During Phase I of this project, 8 workforce development leaders* attended facilitated input sessions at sites around Illinois. This group included school administrators, economic development executives, and government staff. These participants have extensive experience with CTE and they shared valuable insights, most of which closely overlap with employer input. The following are prevalent themes from workforce development leaders that are distinct from employer findings:

- **CTE program design should be developmentally appropriate.** We often ask students to make singular (and what are perceived to be lifelong) career choices at ages when they are not yet ready, both as a function of human development and limited exposure to options.
- **Core academic skills are critical.** Many students are unable to enter certain postsecondary programs because they lack the basic math and literacy skills to pass entry exams or succeed once enrolled.
- **Equity in CTE demands a holistic approach to student development.** Students are more likely to succeed when their basic needs are met. For example, if a student lacks reliable transportation or stable housing, it is incredibly difficult for them to take advantage of internships.
- **Employers are inundated with requests** from education institutions and workforce development entities. Because the sector is fragmented, employers may perceive this outreach to be disorganized and ineffective. Further, schools and workforce development organizations often ask employers about immediate job openings for students, which is short-term transactional engagement rather than an invitation to a long-term, reciprocal partnership.
- Both employers and educators value the **development of soft skills, but there needs to be a common definition** of what the term means. Without that shared understanding, they often approach the work with divergent purposes. There is also a lack of clarity on whether it is the role of educators or employers to support students in building these skills.

IV. Conclusions

Leading Recommendations

Additional Recommendations

Leading Recommendations

Leading recommendations are the project's primary findings. These are the ideas for strengthening CTE that employers most frequently and clearly raised in their input.

- **Forge relationships between employers and education institutions** that are grounded in shared purpose, mutual commitment, and a willingness to be vulnerable. Authentic relationships between education and industry are foundational to both localized career pathways and system-level coordination.
- **Raise the profile of skilled trades and technical careers.** Employers believe that these pathways are stigmatized and often considered less desirable than a four-year degree, to the detriment of both students and employers. A key element of these efforts is crafting a contemporary image of CTE as a high-tech space that offers family-sustaining careers.
- **Expand work-based learning opportunities.** This serves the dual purpose of (1) giving students more exposure to career options and fostering their interest in high-demand, high-pay, high-growth sectors and (2) enabling students to develop a valuable combination of soft skills and technical skills.
- **Prioritize the development of students' soft skills,** including communication, interpersonal connection, adaptability to new cultures and expectations, and basic professionalism. The extent to which students are proficient in these areas is a strong predictor of their success in the workplace, yet employers reported recent graduates are often unprepared.
- **Capitalize on employers' desire to contribute** to the development of a robust array of career pathways. Approximately 85% of respondents expressed interest in involvement or were already involved in the development of career pathways.

Additional Recommendations

Although less frequently voiced than leading recommendations, these additional recommendations reflect other views commonly expressed by employers. Some address next steps or additional details that flow from leading recommendations.

- Affirm the idea that **postsecondary education and CTE are complementary and should be integrated**. Many employers report that candidates with a postsecondary certificate or degree tend to be better prepared in terms of both technical and soft skills.
- **Support educators to be effective CTE champions**. To prepare students for post-graduate success, advisors need up-to-date and accurate information on a breadth of career pathways, and instructors must be well versed in current industry standards and practices. A component of this professional development is ensuring that educators have significant exposure to workplaces.
- **Assess school performance based on career outcomes**, not just college outcomes. School practices and programs are shaped, in part, by system-level priorities. Currently, employers perceive there is an emphasis on four-year college enrollment to the exclusion of other career pathways.
- **Cultivate a sense of shared responsibility among employers**. As long as business and industry sees its role as telling education what to do, it will be highly challenging to forge the reciprocal relationships and trust that are key building blocks for coordination.

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