



How to Increase Adult
Student Enrollment through
**Organizational
Partnerships**

The shifting landscape of today's workforce means universities and colleges must continue to adapt to meet the complex needs of more and more adult students—those who do not fall within the traditional 18-22-year-age range—with relevant and innovative degree programs, credentials, certificates, and other educational offerings. While adult students include those enrolled in master's, doctorate, and continuing education programs, they also make up those enrolled in non-traditional bachelor degree completion programs. Of this latter degree type, there has been tremendous growth in the number of prospective and current students. In fact, the majority of students seeking a bachelor's degree are considered adult students. And that's likely to be the case from now on, as the workforce increasingly favors individuals with the skills and expertise acquired from earning a bachelor's degree.



There are a number of ways to attract adult students using traditional marketing strategies but, for many schools, these strategies alone no longer suffice. The market is saturated with adult programs, meaning that higher ed institutions with the strongest brand names and the most money to spend on advertising have the greatest advantage, leaving smaller schools vying for scraps. However, some forward-thinking and innovative schools have begun to attract and acquire these coveted adult students with the help of a critical and successful strategy: forming strong partnerships with third-party organizations—businesses, nonprofits, government agencies, hospitals, and more—and offering programs tailored specifically for them.

Whether through one-off lectures or full-scale degree programs, the decision to offer curricula on site at these partner organizations can bulk up your prospective adult student pipelines, expand the reach of your brand and programs, and bring massive revenue to your institution.

Likewise, it can help organizations attract and retain talented and committed employees to address the modern challenges facing their industries. And, of course, it can serve adult students, helping them acquire more education in order to widen their professional opportunities and reach their career goals. In other words, an organizational partnership is a win-win-win situation for your school, third-party organizations, and students.

Yet forging organizational partnerships is an opportunity of which many schools are not taking advantage. The Georgetown University Center on Education estimates that colleges and universities are missing out on a share of \$772 billion, which is roughly the amount the U.S. spends on postsecondary education and training each year. Not only does this mean that organizations are willing to invest in educating their employees, but also that they are willing to pay a hefty price for it. This should be no surprise as organizations come to realize the host of costs associated with not properly responding to employees' various needs—needs that include employee education and engagement. A Gallup report cites:

“...lack of employee engagement costs American businesses anywhere from **\$450 billion to \$550 billion** a year when workplace accidents, absenteeism and larger health care costs are included. The same principle goes for employees' relationships with their employers. Nearly \$11 billion is lost due to annual employee turnover.”

Losses like these have made organizations look desperately for ways to educate and engage their employees in order to help them feel supported and valued. Additionally, organizations need more employees who are well educated, capable of demonstrating creativity, critical thinking, and interpersonal and leadership skills. This is good news for higher ed institutions, which can provide just what both employers and employees alike are searching for. And with many institutions' need to more effectively tap the adult market in order to avoid shutting their doors over the next couple of decades, it's all the more necessary that they forge strong organizational partnerships to offer on-site educational opportunities to grow their adult student pipelines.

Identifying the Right Organizations

It's important to be clear about the right type of organizations with which to form partnerships. Obviously, this will have to do with the type of adult programs your school can offer. For a business-oriented degree completion program or MBA program, you'll mainly be concerned with local businesses related specifically to the type of expertise your school provides. If you have a Supply Chain and Logistics concentration, for example, then it will be more effective to hone in on organizations, or departments within certain organizations, that are in need of that business-related expertise. It's much more compelling to pitch an MBA program that is specifically designed to meet a certain skill set, such as logistics, sports marketing, or healthcare management, than a general, catch-all degree. Of course, for an RN to BSN program or a master's in Public Health program, you'll consider hospitals and other healthcare facilities.

This is a rather obvious but important first step: only seek organizations with which you can actually offer something of value. Simply telling these organizations you are going to offer their employees a degree that gives them “valuable skills” without detailing how they are relevant and tailored for that industry will not be an effective approach.

Kathryn Hutchinson, Ph.D., is VP of the Division of Student Affairs at St. John’s University. Eight years ago, she helped revamp its University Career Services Center in order to better serve traditional undergraduate students. The result was an increase from an 80 percent graduate placement rate to an over 94 percent graduate placement rate, a rate that has held steady over the last five years. While her experience specifically relates to serving traditional students, their strategy to align with third-party organizational partners translates to serving adult students as well.

When identifying an organization with which to partner, Hutchinson advises that you start with individuals at your institution who already have informal connections.

“We did a wide university outreach to see who already had partnerships with local organizations,” Hutchinson shared. “There are a lot of faculty and administrators across campuses who have their own informal relationships happening, and they just don’t have a formalized process yet.”

Hutchinson understood that there are often faculty on every campus with strong professional connections. Her plan? Go after this low-hanging fruit initially: she cited the example of a professor at St. John’s in the Communication department who had relationships with professionals at CBS and NBC from previous work experience. But Hutchinson is careful to note that it isn’t about taking over these relationships, but rather supporting the individual with the connections.

“We partnered with those across campus with industry contacts and rather than worrying about who owned the contact we focused on developing a trusting relationship,” Hutchinson said. “The goal of the partnerships on campus was to assist the community and bring more opportunities to students. We engaged the community in working on helping to enhance these connections.”

Understandably so, faculty and others across campus are going to be protective of the relationships they have. It’s important, then, to honor those relationships by making it clear that you want to support them and not merely commandeer their connections. Hutchinson and the team has had success in the long run because they were able to help faculty and others understand that the goal was ultimately to widen the benefits of their connections to more students across campus beyond the smaller handful of students whom the faculty or staff member knows.

“We wanted to make it scalable since we have a lot of students. It was a very delicate balance and it took some time for individuals to trust us, but because we didn’t try to usurp or go around those relationships but augment them, we were able to make scalable the benefits of these connections, ones that still exist today along with literally hundreds more,” Hutchinson said.

The same approach should be taken with adult programs. If an adjunct faculty member is also a nurse practitioner at a major nearby hospital and you’re looking to support your pipeline for your RN to BSN degree completion program, or if an MBA accounting professor is a consultant for a local business and you are looking to support your finance certificate program, then it’s much more effective to collaborate with these members of your institution who already have their foot in the door, so to speak.

This relates to another effective approach to consider when seeking to form partnerships: reaching out to your school’s alumni and donors who are already connected to relevant organizations. Hutchinson also employed this strategy at St. John’s.

“Once we identified what organizations we were going to go after, we worked with the Alumni Relations Office and the Office of Institutional Advancement to find out if they had contacts in those organizations,” Hutchinson said. *“We found our connectors, and with some of the larger organizations we were trying to find connectors at the highest level. Then we could reach out to these individuals and talk about what we were offering and how we want to partner and they were really excited about it. We looked for champions inside the places we were trying to partner with.”*



Forming and Sustaining Organizational Partnerships

It's much easier to begin a partnership by way of an alum or someone otherwise associated with your institution than it is to contact someone with no connection at all. Better yet, it is more effective to collaborate with individuals at your institution who regularly work with the contacts you're pursuing.



It might be better to have an advancement officer introduce you to their contact, via email or in person, to ensure all departments across campus are comfortable with and aware of the school's multi-faceted engagement efforts with a particular donor or alum. Not only could it create friction between departments to go around the individual's primary school contact, but it might also harm your institution's relationship with the individual altogether. The individual might not take kindly to being contacted by unfamiliar staff without notice from their primary school contact. Make sure you and anyone else involved with a given donor or alum are all on the same page with how you plan to approach and collaborate with them.

Of course, it's possible, and often necessary, to reach out to organizations with whom you have no prior contacts. While this might be more difficult since you won't have an immediate in, you could find great success with a compelling case for how you and your institution conduct business with corporate partners.

Hutchinson clarifies, though, that it's imperative to have an organized and professional way of communicating with such organizations. She and her team found in a survey that a lack of streamlined communication was one of the primary obstacles organizations identified from their work with higher ed institutions. That might come in the form of not having a regular contact at the school to serve as a consistent and dependable liaison, a lack of responsiveness from the school, the tendency not to follow up promptly, and so on. Organizations, at least the very best ones, prize efficiency and professionalism and naturally seek relationships only with other institutions that follow suit: ones that are prompt, professional, and open to collaboration.

"What we learned was that when trying to partner with professionals outside the university, that too often universities focus on asking industry professionals for what they need." Hutchinson explained, "It has to be a mutually beneficial relationship. As universities we need to show how it's a mutually beneficial relationship and then act on it. The business world expects you to act. When they see that the school is efficient, easy to work with, and delivers they will want to align themselves with that institution."

This aligns with a similar findings detailed in an article from The EvoLLLution:

“Corporations express concern over the responsiveness, agility and relevance of university-based providers. Universities need to be cognizant of and successfully manage these perceptions, whether the perceptions are based in the reality of a previously negative experience with another institution or are merely based on a lack of awareness.”

Once you do finally get into a room with people from a given organization, be that through leveraging faculty or alumni connections or reaching out cold, it's time to pitch how your institution can help them. This is going to look different depending on what type of relationship you want to form, but for those looking to build pipelines for adult programs, it's critical to explain clearly what's in it for the organization as well.

Christine Carpenter is the VP for Member Engagement at the Council for Adult Experiential Learning (CAEL), where she has worked for ten years linking learning to the workplace for the adult learner, and the Director of the Director of Energy Providers Coalition for Education (EPCE). Extremely familiar with the world of employer education initiatives and programs, she can't stress enough how important it is to make clear what the benefit to the employer would be in forming a college or university partnership.

“Schools really need to offer a solution for employers with their curricula,” Carpenter shared. *“There are a lot of great colleges with a lot of great curricula, but they need to be geared toward employees gaining the competency and the skills that the employer is looking for?”*

Carpenter clarifies that it's not enough to assume that employers will see the inherent value in a bachelor's or master's degree simply because it's a college degree. The programs need to address specific organizational and workforce development needs. Higher ed institutions need to be able to explain why a digital marketing certificate or a degree completion program in organizational leadership on site will offer employees skills that specifically address employer's workforce needs and problems.

“A return on education as a benefit is important to employers. Especially in the case when employers align their employee benefits with education tuition assistance programs, it becomes an ROI perspective. Companies and employers want a strong return on an education investment. When companies support and/or pay for ‘X’ degree it’s important to correlate it to ‘Y’ dollars saved, some definite type of employee retention improvement, or other important value for the company,” Carpenter explained.

Brandman University is an institution that understands this well. On its website are statistics, testimonials, information for each organizational type (business, government, healthcare, and education), as well as clear calls-to-action to help explain the value of strategic partnerships for both their employees and organizational goals. This demonstrates that the university understands the needs and concerns of potential organizations and its willingness to collaborate closely with them.

Ruben Abarca has over ten years of experience in higher education working with corporate partners to help build adult student pipelines. His expertise and experience in this important and critical space within higher ed has led him to start his own consultancy company called Corporate Education Partners, Inc.

He explains the need for universities to clearly articulate why it’s important for potential partners not only to educate their workers, but also to rely on a school’s given resources. This requires research and a clear case for why a school would benefit from educating its employees.

“We explain how organizations need to do a better job of attracting Millennial talent or of retaining these folks, because every two years they are bouncing to another company. We would present a lot of research, being able to point them to this Deloitte study or that Mackenzie study, and explain that their employees want more than ping pong tables. They are looking for constant learning opportunities and growth,” Abarca shared. *“We would also highlight studies that revealed that tuition reimbursement was the second most important benefit right after a 401(k).”*

Abarca explains that while many organizations need more employees who think critically and are adaptable in the high-paced world of work, the best solution is to invest in the talent currently on hand, giving them opportunities to learn and grow along with the demands of the marketplace. Not only would this make their organizations much more efficient, but it would save money as it fosters employee loyalty. Higher ed institutions must therefore prepare to sell potential relationships in a well-researched and compelling manner.

Implementing Programs That Serve Your Institution and Partnering Organizations

Once you have identified the right organizations, convinced them of the benefit of your institution's adult programs, and are ready to implement them, you can consider two main options. The most common partnership offering is a simple tuition discount or scholarship to the organization's employees. That is sure to appeal, but you can garner even more interest with the second option: on-site curricula.

It's this second option that has tremendous potential for helping you build your adult student pipelines. You can offer free presentations, workshops, or one-day courses at the organization itself, where faculty or staff lecture or facilitate a discussion on some relevant topic. Better yet, you could create a short bootcamp, certificate, or credential program (though no longer for free). Or you can offer full programs, such as a bachelor degree completion or graduate degree program, on site and for a discounted rate.

Abarca unpacks the two major types of partnerships from his experience implementing them at DePaul University.

"The first one is a general partnership, which offers a standard discount to employees to enroll in our university's programs. In our case we offered 10 percent on most programs," Abarca explained. "The second type of programs are teach-on-site cohort programs. At DePaul, we would teach an entire MBA program, or whatever program they were looking for, bringing our professors out to the organization to regularly teach. We offered a larger discount for these programs, up to 25 percent off the cost of tuition. We also offered additional perks, such as a streamlined application process and dedicated advisors to walk alongside employee applicants. We launched 26 or 27 of these programs. 70 percent of them were MBA programs, the rest included bachelor completion programs, a doctorate, a master's in Public Health, and so on."

Since the standard reimbursement amount granted to employees by organizations is \$5,250 (due to the fact that anything above that amount is taxable income), Abarca worked with organizations to help employees get the maximum benefit with a strategic, structured schedule—one that was in accordance with both the academic year as well as the tuition reimbursement schedule, which resets every calendar year. Although this required working with each organization and program on a case-by-case basis, the more they could make the program worthwhile for the student, organization, and the university, the better.

As far as curricula at the organization's location is concerned, options include both free, one-off workshops as well as cohort programs.

The free, one-off lecture presentation or workshop can be effective in getting your school's name out there and acquiring a pool of prospective adult students to whom you can later market. Can your school put together a presentation on techniques for managing others for lead nurses at a hospital? Can your school conduct a workshop on the profile of Gen-We for a group of sales and marketing employees? This is where you can leverage the expertise of your university to provide value to your organizational partner. The benefits, of course, are that you're able to obtain contact info for those who attend these free, on-site offerings and add them to a lead-nurturing campaign for appropriate degree programs, certificates, and credentials. It also helps with branding, fostering word-of-mouth marketing for a relatively low financial cost.

Compared to launching a full program, the financial and resource requirements are quite low. However, these on-site offerings still require some planning, coordination, and effort. It can be challenging to find professors who are willing to give a two-hour lecture for free, and the truth is that not all professors make the best teachers or lecturers when it comes to the corporate setting.

DePaul developed a vetting process to ensure that participating professors would be a good fit. Initially, Abarca or other members of the development team would give the presentations or lectures themselves. Word at DePaul eventually spread, however, and professors soon realized that participating would come with many benefits, including additional speaking or teaching engagements for pay by the organization. As the program became successful, one of the colleges was eventually able to offer honorariums for professors willing to participate.

This strategy is essentially a complex form of content marketing—offering free and valuable educational content to an organization in the hopes of being able to later market to participants.

“You are not just selling them something, now you are a content provider and you are an asset to them,” Abarca said.

The second strategy, offering degree programs, micro-credentials, certificates, and other longer-term programs on site for the organizational partner, is much more involved. It requires faculty who are willing to teach on site as well as a curriculum that is tailored to the organization’s needs. Abarca helped set DePaul up for success, building demand with an up to 25 percent discount and a minimum requirement of 20 students enrolled in order to launch a given cohort (though these cohorts usually started with around 35 students).

It’s also important to assist the organization with marketing the on-site programs to their employees, such as offering them templated emails that they can send to employees or brochures and posters that can be placed in break rooms. The more buy-in you can generate from higher-ups who are willing to encourage their employees, the more employees will enroll. This is where, again, it’s necessary to build strong relationships with key organizational stakeholders and demonstrate prompt communication and follow-up as well as a willingness to collaborate and make things as easy as possible for them.

Abarca touched on the pros and cons of offering both complimentary, one-off presentations and lectures and full, on-site cohort programs.

“By doing a one-off presentation or lecture, you are probably ultimately going to get several leads which may ultimately lead to one to two students,” Abarca said. *“By offering cohort programs, you are getting a much larger number of paying students, though the downside is that these, especially with bachelor degree completion programs, require much more effort and coordination.”*

Abarca elaborated on the difficulties of launching on-site bachelor degree completion programs.

“With those programs, you have adults all starting at different points. You have a couple of people who have no credits, some who already have an associate’s degree, and so on. So what we did was just offered certain classes that were required courses everybody had to take and we would cohort those, and then students would branch out and finish whatever they needed to finish through our school’s regular adult programs. We worked with students throughout the entire process to make sure they were completing their classes,” said Abarca.

Remaining Agile and Forward- Thinking

Whether your institution is offering a graduate program or a single afternoon workshop on site for an organization, it's critical that your institution is constantly re-evaluating the material being taught in light of the organization's shifting needs and industry-wide trends.

CAEL's Carpenter honed in on this need for higher ed institutions to be more agile and flexible with their organizational offerings.

"It's important for schools to stay abreast and in tune with these evolving workforce needs and make ongoing curricula updates while students are in the program or else students will complete the program years later and not have the most relevant skills needed in fast-changing industries," Carpenter said.

While there will always be barriers for higher ed institutions to make quick adjustments to their curricula and educational offerings, the most successful programs will be those that can best keep pace with organizational needs.

Northeastern University stands as a great example of a school that is adapting quickly to address the needs of their organizational partners. Due to its partnership with IBM, the university now recognizes IBM digital badge credentials (which the company gives out to its employees) toward graduate degree programs and certificates at the university. It's a great strategy to encourage IBM employees to consider enrolling in a credential or graduate program at the university; their already-earned Northeastern credits will make them more inclined to finish a program more quickly and for less money than they would at any other university.

Hutchinson provided another example from her team's work at St. John's. The school's relationship with ESPN enabled them to discover that the famous sports media company was struggling to find individuals with the necessary skill set in sports analytics. Learning of this need, they began collaborating with members of ESPN and faculty from the sports management, marketing, and mathematics departments on campus to develop a program that could fit this emerging industry trend.

"What ended up happening as a result of this collaboration was that we changed the curriculum, and now we have a course in sports analytics, and one member of our faculty even started a sports analytics and management club on campus. We discussed what changes needed to be made in the spring and had a sports analytics class on the books in the fall," Hutchinson shared.

Hutchinson applauded the faculty that were able to quickly develop a new curriculum through this collaboration, ultimately providing a huge opportunity for students and strengthening a relationship with a major and well-respected company.

Abarca understood this need to adapt as well, recognizing a trend among some employee students. Abarca and the DePaul team noticed that some adult students were dropping out of the MBA on-site cohorts for some reason. After they did some digging, they found out these students were re-enrolling in DePaul's part-time MBA program instead of continuing with the cohort model on site.

“They were doing this because they wanted to choose their own electives, so they were dropping out of the cohort to enroll into the part-time program to take what they perceived to be more relevant classes,” Abarca said.

The solution they came up with was to restructure the MBA cohort model. After taking a certain number of classes with employee peers on site, students would then take a few elective courses at the university (whether on site at DePaul or online) before coming back to the original on-site cohort for a final, concluding course. This maintained the camaraderie of the original cohort, keeping it intact while also allowing students to take courses that were more relevant to them, such as in finance or marketing. It also allowed students to meet others outside of their organization, opening the door for networking opportunities and exposure to what other companies and industries are doing.

The point is that, once you get these on-site programs rolling, it’s necessary to continue to evaluate if they are meeting both organizations’ and students’ needs in an ever-changing and highly competitive marketplace. This ensures that organizations will continue to see the value in such partnerships and help grow your school’s programs across even more organizations (because the word-of-mouth marketing from your partner organizations can pay off tremendously). And your ability to cite a history of quick adaptations will make it easier to convince even more potential stakeholders to form a relationship.

Keep in mind that it’s also necessary to be aware of your school’s limitations. It’s impossible to support every single organization and address every industry’s needs. Instead, it’s worth it to build programs that are sustainable: ones that play to your school’s strengths. It only damages your school and its brand by trying to launch programs for which you don’t have the faculty expertise or long-term support.

Carpenter suggested partnering with other local universities to understand how every school can work together to support the more-than-enough organizations in a given community. It can be ill-advised for a school to try and compete unnecessarily with another school. For example, a university with tremendous medical resources and expertise might not be worth going head-to-head with in your community’s healthcare sector when there is an opportunity to work with nonprofit or governmental organizations that your school is better equipped to support.

“Sustainability around all of these types of strategic partnerships is important,” Carpenter said. “The idea that a single school can be everything to everybody does not work. It’s okay to look around and see which schools are doing certain programs better than you can, and then thinking through how you can partner with them or how you can pivot and get involved somewhere else where you might have better resources to do it longer.”

An Investment Well Worth It

There are many benefits to forming organizational partnerships that build student pipelines for adult programs, certificates, and credentials. And, again, it's becoming increasingly necessary to invest in such partnerships as the adult higher ed market becomes saturated with marketing and advertising from other institutions, especially for-profit ones.

Of course, developing a coherent strategy to manage these partnerships is not a small investment. To start, it's important that a team is hired and dedicated as much as possible to the purpose of forging, managing, and evaluating these organizational partnerships. Asking a team of faculty or adult program admissions counselors to take on this responsibility simply "when they can" is not feasible; a real investment in this kind of strategy requires dedicated human resources to make it run effectively.

"A lot of schools don't know where to start. They don't know what they have to build internally, and they think they can have their faculty reach out to corporate contacts but that's not going to work. They need an intermediary between the organizations and the university," Abarca advised. "Number one, I would say a school needs to build a corporate outreach team, which is going to be the most successful thing to do."

Reaching out to alumni and donors established at certain organizations, empowering and supporting faculty who already have strong organizational contacts, collaborating with organizations' HR departments to develop program pricing structures, securing faculty to teach workshops or full cohort programs, advising employee students as they work through a given program—all this, and much more, simply can't be accomplished without a team dedicated to doing these things. The team doesn't have to be large to start; a team of just a couple of people (or a third-party consultancy serving as your "off-site team") can yield tremendously more fruit than other departments tasked to take on these responsibilities in their "spare time."

"There are multiple players that are doing it at the national level, but I think every higher ed institution has to look at themselves and say why don't we at least try. I often ask universities, 'What is holding you back?'" Abarca continued. "People are comfortable with what they know. Universities, when they run into admissions issues, will follow the exact same steps that they've always done. They will start buying mass media and they will spend millions of dollars on radio and ads. There is nothing wrong with doing this because it helps build brand recognition in general in the marketplace, but that can't be all they do."

Abarca can't stress enough how successfully DePaul's organizational partnerships were able to support its adult programs.

"There is plenty of need in the marketplace for these types of partnerships. The universities that understand this and know how to implement it can do well. DePaul makes tens of millions of dollars on these programs," Abarca said. "It was an extremely lucrative program for the university when I was there. I started my own firm, and I am now starting to help other institutions create a similar model."

The bottom line is that, in such a competitive marketplace for adult students, it's becoming increasingly difficult to support and grow adult programs through traditional marketing and strategic efforts. On top of that, organizations are realizing that offering educational opportunities has tremendous benefits in creating and retaining employees who are motivated, knowledgeable, and ready to address the shifting landscape of industry needs. The higher ed institutions that understand this huge opportunity and are willing to make the investment are the ones that will be set up for increasing revenue from adult programs and, ultimately, best serving the many adult students in our constantly evolving world.

Forming Organizational Partnerships Checklist

Identifying the Right Organizations

Develop a list of local organizations from various industries (business, tech, healthcare, etc.) with which you would like to partner to support your adult programs based on fit and capacity.

- Do you have educational programs and/or expertise to benefit these organizations?
- Do you already have a strong relationship with organizations through another partnership that you can leverage?
- Do other local colleges or universities already have a partnership with them?
- Are they organizations you want to be publicly associated with? Do you admire their work culture and aims?
- Are these organizations large enough to benefit from your intended partnership?

Reach out to faculty and staff on campus to identify who already has relationships with relevant target organizations.

- Can you speak with deans or department heads to recruit their help in identifying faculty with organizational connections?
- How can you make it known across campus that you are eager to work with those who already have contacts?

Develop a plan for meeting with these individuals to get a better idea of the nature of the relationship and whether or not it can serve your goals of forging organizational partnerships to support your adult programs.

Empower faculty and staff to sustain and nurture these relationships.

It's important to get faculty and staff to understand what your goal is — to ultimately serve students and local organizations — and that you want to collaborate with them in order to benefit more people. It's critical to make it clear that you plan to support and not usurp these relationships.

Reach out to your Alumni office and University Advancement to identify alumni and donors who are already working at (or somehow connected to) your target organizations.

It will be important to meet with members from these offices to discuss an appropriate and agreed upon way of reaching out to identified alumni and donors to inquire about beginning partnerships at their organizations. Naturally, it will be best to start with alumni and donors who have the most influencing power within their given organization.

Forming and Sustaining Organizational Partnerships

Develop a presentation or set of talking points that you can use when meeting with stakeholders at new organizations in order to convince them of the value of a partnership.

- Can you pull data and findings from industry reports to highlight the benefits of educational programs for employees with respect to retention and morale satisfaction rates?
- Can you highlight the effectiveness of former organizational partnerships?
- Are you prepared to address organizational stakeholders' concerns related to outdated academic curricula, costs, and program structure?

It will be important to develop a general set of material that can then be customized and tweaked depending on each organization.

Establish a clear and standard operating procedure for communicating with organizations.

- Will communication with an organization be addressed by an individual or team of people?
- How often will you follow up with the organization to check in on the status of the partnership and relevant programs?

Not only should you have a clear, streamlined way of communicating with them but you need to be able to convey your communication process to them right at the outset. This will help the organization feel more confident that it is dealing with a professional and well-run institution.

If possible, conduct a survey with organizations you already have relationships with to see what is working well and what needs improvement.

This can help you identify blind spots to shore up before aggressively pursuing partnerships with other organizations.

Detail how your educational offerings are going to address organizations' specific problems.

You will need to do this with each organization with which you intend to partner (while there will be overarching similarities between organizations, a given outline should be tailored to each organization). This is also where it can be valuable to highlight case studies of previous success stories if possible.

Provide information on your website about the opportunity to partner with organizations and the benefits that such a partnership can offer.

While it is usually most effective to be able to present this information directly to organizational stakeholders, it can be valuable to also have it online since organizations (or donors and alumni connected to an organization) may stumble upon it and reach out to your institution proactively. This is where you can also highlight current partnership success stories and case studies.

Implementing Programs That Serve Your Institution and Partnering Organizations

When it comes to offering on-site programs, identify which programs you have the capacity and expertise to offer (a series of workshops, a credential, a degree completion program, etc.).

- How are you going to support these programs with faculty and staff resources?
- Do you have staff in place to handle admissions and the organizational operation of these programs for students?
- Can you recruit faculty to teach one-off programs for free? Perhaps you can offer them an honorarium?
- Do you have faculty members with specific expertise in marketing or finance, for instance, who can contribute? Or perhaps you have nursing or kinesiology faculty who can provide value to local healthcare companies?
- How can you communicate to faculty the benefits to them of participating in these programs onsite?

While you should have already considered this when identifying organization to reach out to, the goal here is to identify the specific faculty and/or staff who can actually help teach and facilitate these programs as well as the staff to handle the operational support of these programs.

Develop a process of vetting on-site speakers, teachers, and facilitators.

- Can you meet with faculty and staff to determine how they might do teaching in a corporate setting?
- Can you identify if they already have experience speaking and teaching in non-traditionally academic settings?
- Do you know of certain professors or staff members who you think would be skilled at conducting one-off workshops that you can personally invite to participate?

Develop materials that you can provide to organizations in order to help them get the word out about your offering.

- Can you create a series of emails that stakeholders can send to their employees?
- How about print materials than be placed up throughout the organization?

The more you can help them to pitch your programs to their employees (and the less work it is for them to do so) the more likely they will become influential advocates.

When offering smaller, one-off lectures, series, or workshops onsite to obtain leads, develop a plan for nurturing them afterward.

- Can you establish a lead nurturing email campaign?
- Can you develop a process for having counselors call lead a week after participating?

Without a long term strategy for converting participants in these one-off offerings into prospective students for your adult degree, credential, or certificate programs, the initial effort and work will be mostly wasted and not directly benefit your school.

Remaining Agile and Forward-Thinking

Develop a process to ensure your academic offerings remain relevant as industry needs change.

- Can you develop a consistent plan to meet regularly with faculty, organizational stakeholders, and others in order to check in and ensure onsite programs are meeting industry, employer, and student needs?
- How often will you conduct industry research or employee surveys to ensure your offered curricula match current needs?

Monitor how students and attendees are responding to your programs.

- Are organizations enjoying better morale and productivity because of your programs?
- Can you develop a survey to obtain feedback from participants to ensure programs are meeting the goals of your institution and partnering organizations?

Address problems found with your on-site programs.

- Are students dropping out of your on-site programs?
- Are you struggling to find faculty to support your programs?
- Are prospective students at partnering organizations navigating the admissions process effectively and, if not, how can you better support them?

This should be a continuous step that occurs throughout the entire lifespan of a partnership with an organization.

Ensure the programs you're offering (or intend to offer) are justified and provide a real service to organizations.

- Can you reach out to other local schools to see what they are offering and try to collaborate with them by offering unique programs to serve different needs within the community?
- Is there an area where you have expertise and a distinct advantage over other schools that you are not capitalizing on for some reason? If so, why not?
- Are you offering programs because there is a real market demand even though you don't have the adequate resources or expertise to offer them sufficiently?

While it is important to not offer programs you are not adequately equipped to offer, it is also important to consider whether a plan can be developed to sufficiently offer such programs down the road, especially if they have a substantial market demand.

An Investment Well Worth It

Identify your internal stakeholders who need to be involved in developing a plan for offering adult programs through organizational partnerships.

- Are stakeholders onboard with the benefits of doing so? If not, how can you convince them of the need to adapt in order to meet the demands of a changing adult student marketing and workforce economy?
- How can you reference the success of other institutions, pull from industry reports, and point to organizational demand to make your point?

Determine how much human and financial support you have to launch or expand your organizational partnerships.

- What is a realistic possibility for your institution in forging organizational partnerships to support your adult programs based on your limitations?

If you can only serve by offering one-off workshops, for example, it's important to be honest about your limitations and focus your efforts accordingly until you are able to widen your capacity and develop more robust partnership offerings.

Establish a team (or outside agency/consultancy) responsible for identifying, managing, and implementing these programs.

If you are unable to do so currently, then it's important to persuade stakeholders of the value of having a team dedicated to organizational partnerships (this is a critical investment in order to maximize the return of launching on-site programs at organizations).

If you have no plans to forge organizational partnerships to support your adult programs, clearly identify your reasons for not doing so.

- Do you have valid reasons for not moving forward? Or do these reasons have to do with fear, an unwillingness to try new things, or uncertainty about the developing process and work involved?
- If you determine that the reasons for not moving forward are not legitimate or well-reasoned, then what can you do to begin seriously considering moving toward forging these organizational partnerships? What stakeholders can you reach out to in order to discuss the possibility of these partnerships?

It is important to be clear about why your organization is not moving forward with forming organizational partnerships if it is not, especially if one of your institution's major goals is to acquire more adult students. As the market for adult students continues to become more and more saturated, forging organizational partnerships to support adult programs will continue to become a critical and necessary strategy for many institutions.



About Abound

Abound is a college recognition and guidance system from Colleges of Distinction, designed specifically for degree-seeking adults. We help small- and mid-sized schools get recognized for their program excellence, and help students find the best place to earn an undergraduate degree, graduate degree, nursing degree, or MBA.

Looking for a way to start increase adult student enrollment and build successful organizational partnerships? You will find it especially effective to demonstrate third-party validation from a respected organization, a critical step in conveying authority to students and potential partners.

Working in higher education since 2000, our team has become a recognized, trusted resource that helps students find schools that are truly good fits for them, all while helping great higher ed institutions gain the distinction and visibility they deserve.

Reach out today to learn how we can help you achieve the distinction you deserve and elevate your school's brand in the eyes of your audience.

Contact us at info@abound.college for more information