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Co-Designing Assessment and Learning: Rethinking Employer Engagement in a Changing World

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We are in an economy that competes on talent. The business community succeeds or fails based on its ability to find and develop a consistent and reliable pipeline of high-quality talent. Thus the business community is very interested in what is taught in our nation's postsecondary institutions. Rather than an intrusion on postsecondary education's mission, it is a realization that what postsecondary education does and does not do has a real impact on the success of the business community and the competitiveness of the United States.

What is needed is a way to bridge the world of employers with postsecondary education so together they can co-design the future of assessment and learning. Rather than placing limitations on the curriculum or taking away academic freedom from faculty, such a partnership has the potential to unlock new learning pathways that can meet the needs of today's diverse learners.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce—the world's largest business federation—and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation have for the past five years been attempting to bridge that gap. This is motivated by pressing business needs to find talent that can

drive business growth and competitiveness and to address key equity gaps in our education and workforce system.

Today, employers find themselves unable to fill job vacancies either because the talent available does not have the skills they need, or there simply is not enough people to fill the jobs. For these reasons and more, the Chamber and its Foundation have been seeking to not only close the equity gap, but also improve the overall quality of the talent pipeline—that is, the flow of talent needed to meet employer workforce needs.

Mending a fractured relationship.

We are aware that there are trust issues on both sides—postsecondary education and employers. Postsecondary education is concerned about a narrowing of the curriculum to job training rather than a well-rounded education that prepares students for careers, life-long learning, citizenship, and other purposes. Employers see postsecondary education as slow or non-responsive to the needs of the economy.

What we also know is that these arguments pose a false dichotomy. Postsecondary education can be many things and have many purposes. It can be an academy of learning and academic pursuits as well as an engine for producing top workforce talent.

Employers are rarely interested in converting the postsecondary credentialing system into a workforce system. Today's workforce is valued for its ability to work in teams, be creative and solve problems, think critically and apply new ways of thinking to drive innovation. Put another way, employers are eager for talent that has breadth and depth when it comes to knowledge and skills, something postsecondary education touts as a particular strength of theirs.

A new narrative.

We must reframe this narrative and begin the more important work of establishing and strengthening these trusted partnerships. Employers and postsecondary education need one another to be successful. In an economy that is increasingly dynamic, where in-demand competencies and skills are changing faster than ever before, there are unique challenges to developing these partnerships and defining successful engagement.

The [Talent Pipeline Management](https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/talent-pipeline-management) (<https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/talent-pipeline-management>)[®] (TPM) movement as an effort to bridge this divide and define a framework for these agile partnerships. It is not an attempt to convert postsecondary education into workforce training or to outsource training responsibilities. Instead it is an attempt to reimagine connections between postsecondary education and employers, and help employers do their part to provide better signaling around in-demand jobs, skills,

competencies, and credentials. This framework also establishes new partnerships that clearly define the roles of employers and their education partners.

In a paper, [released today](#)

(<https://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/publications/occasional-papers/>) by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, we continue this conversation by describing the unique challenges a dynamic, changing labor market poses for employer-education partnerships, and explore the inherent limitations of current alignment practices and tools. Then, we introduce TPM[®] as a partnership model that allows employers to more meaningfully signal their competency needs to educators and how educators can in turn describe their evidence of learning in ways that are understood by employers relative to those competency needs.

This approach is active in 26 states, engaging more than 2,000 employers. One of the most common questions we get asked about TPM is about the real-world application of this framework. How is it being used and what are the results?

In [this paper](#) (<https://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Occasional-Paper-39.pdf>), we explore how employers and education partners are using TPM as a framework for engaging one another in co-designing learning pathways that produce evidence of learning that is meaningful to both sides. Stories collected from [Vermont](#) (<https://www.forwardtalent.org/stories/vermontbr/>), [Texas](#) (<https://www.forwardtalent.org/stories/greaterhoustonpartnership/>), [Michigan](#) (<https://www.forwardtalent.org/stories/dte-energy/>), and [Arizona](#) (<https://www.forwardtalent.org/stories/hospital-workforce-collaborative/>) show how this framework is the right path forward for co-designing authentic, performance-based challenges and learning experiences that address the real gap between postsecondary education and employers.

