



"Employer Engagement in the New Jersey Health Professions Pathways to Regional Excellence Project (NJ-PREP): Fostering Alignments and Alliances to Support Student Employment Outcomes," by Sara B. Haviland, Ph.D. and Michelle Van Noy, Ph.D., Rutgers University, Education and Employment Research Center, NJ-PREP, TAACCCT Grant is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0)

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**New Jersey Health Professions Consortium:
A Collaboration of
Community Colleges**

Issue Brief

Employer Engagement in the New Jersey Health Professions Pathways to Regional Excellence Project (NJ-PREP): Fostering Alignments and Alliances to Support Student Employment Outcomes

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Sara B. Haviland, Ph.D. & Michelle Van Noy, Ph.D.

In 2010, the Northern NJ Health Professions Consortium (NNJHPC) received a Health Professions Opportunity Grant from the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). The 10-college consortium from across Northern NJ had a mission to create pathways in Health Professions education leading to gainful employment. In 2014, The Consortium received a TAACCCT grant from the USDOL and became known as the New Jersey Health Professions Consortium (NJHPC). At this time the Consortium grew to 12 colleges across the State of NJ and broadened its career pathways focus to include non-credit – credit credentials, prior learning assessment and employment. Overall, NJHPC has represented and continually connects with the community colleges in the State. Its focus is to build, develop and foster communication and collaboration to ensure students enter and complete educational programs in the health professions leading to family sustaining wages in this high-demand sector. The TAACCCT grant ended in 2018 after serving 3,500 New Jersey residents. NJHPC has commissioned Rutgers to prepare this brief describing lessons learned throughout the Consortium.

Community colleges have long held the mission of workforce preparation, though the extent to which they focused on workforce education varied from region to region.¹ Community colleges have also been a common source of contract training for incumbent workers, and in some cases they have participated in economic development activities.² These missions also exist in various degrees of emphasis across colleges. As community colleges have focused attention on meeting their multiple missions of transfer education, workforce preparation, and community education, fewer have developed the capacity to conduct activities that engage deeply and directly with the labor market.³ However, multiple recent initiatives focused on community colleges have been designed to promote and expand those institutions' capacity for workforce preparation, increasing the focus on employability and vocational skills.⁴ Given their evolution to serve workforce needs, community colleges also have a mandate to serve employers in their area, and leaders from community colleges are often actively involved in strategies to improve local labor markets and economies. Prior work on labor market responsiveness examines the strategies that colleges have used to reach out to employers and the processes involved in connecting colleges to the needs of local labor markets in ways that consider both internal operational issues and external relationships with the community.⁵

The success of any workforce education program is predicated on the value employers place upon it. If employers value the skills imparted by a program and believe in its quality insofar as delivering those skills, completion of that program will be an asset for job-seekers. If employers do not understand and value the skills imparted, or do not believe in the quality of the program conferring those skills, program completion will be of little benefit to the job-seeker. Employer engagement is one strategy colleges can take to ensure employer buy-in for their programs, which involves creating alliances between educators and employers that can become pipelines between programs and employment and aligning skills training to the needs of local industry.

In this brief, we define *employer engagement* as the sum of activities a college implements that are aimed at building relationships with local employers and are intended to ensure that its students are instilled with the highly valued skills that lead to success in the labor market. Employer engagement can involve many strategies, which can range in intensity and purpose and can span a continuum from a simple transactional relationship between colleges and

employers to a more embedded relationship in which the two institutions may share practices, policies, or even staff members.⁶

In recent years, federal investment in community colleges has focused heavily on the vocational aspects of community colleges. Employer engagement was a key goal of the U.S. Department of Labor's (US DOL) Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant program, a \$2 billion investment that marked an unprecedented move toward promoting the workforce mission of community colleges. Launched in 2009, TAACCCT sought to help community colleges expand programming that 1) could be completed in two years or less, and 2) would lead to high-wage, high-skill jobs. The TAACCCT program continued through four waves of four-year grant awards and ended in September 2018. Over the life of the TAACCCT program, 256 schools or consortia were awarded grants, touching 60 percent of community colleges in the United States. According to the TAACCCT grant guidelines, the goal of the grant program is to help colleges "drive changes in designing and delivering programs that provide career pathways to good jobs for adult workers and meet employer needs for highly skilled workers in growth industries" (3). With this grant program, the US DOL and U.S. Department of Education sought to create institutional reform designed to change the infrastructure of community colleges to orient them toward preparing students for work. The grant program reflected this priority in its requirements by requiring, for example, that colleges work on sector-based initiatives, engage with employers to develop industry-relevant programs, and build their program offerings around industry-recognized credentials.

This major federal investment in workforce-focused training was designed, ideally, to meet the needs of both workers and employers by teaching students skills that were sought after by multiple employers and by giving employers access to a skilled workforce that facilitates growth. Community colleges that received these grants developed or refined their employer-engagement efforts, and in this brief, we examine these efforts at the NJ-PREP Consortium of schools, which designed healthcare career pathways. *At these schools, career pathways consisted of aligned, connected programs designed to allow individuals of all skill levels to enter and exit educational programs in the way most appropriate to their skill level and desired occupations.* We investigate how the NJ-PREP Consortium worked with local employers to build and support career pathways. We discuss the goals employers and colleges have for these relationships, organizing our findings around both the perspectives of the employers and the perspectives of the colleges on these collaborations in a way that demonstrates not only the similarities of both the employers' and colleges' goals but also their differing experiences of the relationship. We also discuss one major structural change the schools implemented to engage area employers – the introduction of college-based job developers – and describe employers' satisfaction with engagement efforts from their area schools.⁷

METHODS

This brief draws on data from a third-party research evaluation of the NJ-PREP program conducted by the Education & Employment Research Center at Rutgers University. (Present authors were included in those data collection efforts.) The evaluation followed a mixed-methods approach that included interviews with site coordinators and Consortium leadership (N=195) and interviews with local employers (N=13). All data described were collected between Fall 2015 and Spring 2018 and were analyzed using established data analysis software and techniques. Qualitative data were managed, coded, and analyzed using NVIVO 11 qualitative analysis software. For this brief, these data were analyzed to address the following research questions:

- What were the motivations for Consortium colleges and employers to engage with one another?
- How did the Consortium colleges utilize the job developer role to engage employers?
- To what extent were employers satisfied with their engagement with the Consortium schools?

FINDINGS

We begin with a description of why schools and employers participate in employer engagement: what they seek and what they feel has been gained as a result of their participation. We then move to an examination of the job developer role as a bridge between educators and employers in which we address some of the key elements that drive colleges and employers to engage with each other. Finally, we explore how satisfied employers are with their engagement with NJ-PREP schools.

Motivations for employer engagement. Fundamentally, employers and colleges wanted the same thing: students who are ready to participate in the local labor market. Beyond that, colleges wanted employers to support their healthcare programs through commitments of time and resources, and they hoped to serve employers' incumbent workers in the future. Employers wanted more involvement with schools, and they wanted more graduates, particularly graduates who were trained in both their professional field and in soft skills.

College Motivations for Employer Engagement: Facilitating Aligned Programs, Building Pathways. Colleges sought to align their programs to local employer needs, but they needed input from employers in order to do so. In our interviews with site coordinators and Consortium leadership, three key areas of contribution the colleges sought from employers included participation on advisory boards, assistance in providing students with opportunities for hands-on learning, and donation of equipment. Most programs had already established employer advisory boards prior to the TAACCCT grant, but they were often limited in their meetings and, based on employers' feedback, seemed to be an underutilized resource. This is an area where colleges can expand their activities to more meaningfully incorporate local employers by soliciting advice and creating more opportunities for area employers to build connections with the programs themselves. Schools also needed hosts for their practicums and internships or apprenticeships. Employers could connect with these programs as a way to meet potential new employees and see them in action. Finally, having just received an influx of equipment and supplies through the NJ-PREP grant, schools were concerned that they may need help maintaining and replacing this equipment in the future; in the meantime, high-volume disposable items (e.g., gloves, masks) would be welcome.

Colleges are also interested in developing their relationships into more expansive alliances with local employers that involve not only colleges supplying employers with qualified employees but also employers supplying colleges with students (i.e., their own incumbent workers) as part of a broader implementation of the career pathways model. Career pathways are designed such that education and employment are intertwined; individuals may complete one certificate or program and begin employment in that area (e.g., as a nursing assistant) while continuing in school to achieve the credential required for a more advanced level position (e.g., as a registered nurse). In this model, workers never truly complete their higher education until they reach a terminal degree; they always have options to return to further their education and advance in their field. To support this model, employers could 1) provide funding for students to enroll in these programs, and/or 2) promise incumbent workers the opportunity to train towards higher-level positions (a grow-your-own strategy). One college leader described the NJ-PREP program as structurally similar to other initiatives at their school, with one big exception:

The idea of training incumbent workers is something more new. I think that was a new concept for [employers] and for us. More new for them. That [idea of] training their own [workers] to fill their vacancies, rather than going to the outside – it was something they hadn't really thought of much before. I think they like it, from what I hear. I think they think it's a good idea. And this makes sense: Take people who already understand the environment and move them up in the organization.

In aiming to support incumbent worker training, colleges furthered their pursuit of career pathways, a model in which workers are always seen as having the potential to improve their skill sets through formal education and are presented with opportunities to move forward into jobs that feature increasing pay and increasing responsibilities. While colleges helped students enter at the beginning of these career pathways, they could also help incumbent workers who are further along the path. This goal of training incumbent workers was a logical extension of colleges'

recruitment efforts and could prove to be a strong step toward program sustainability if the colleges are successful in translating the concept from a vision into a reality. At this point, it remains more ideal than realized. However, if the Consortium colleges can continue to build and strengthen their relationships with local employers, communicating more strongly and engaging employers more meaningfully, this is a realistic future goal.

Employer Motivations for Engagement: A Job-Ready, Available Workforce. In short, the prime factor driving employers to participate was an organizational objective to secure good employees who have both the technical and soft skills needed to succeed in a healthcare environment. This led many to participate in alliances with local schools when opportunities were presented. Employers cited a lack of qualified workers to fill their jobs or noted that they appreciated the opportunity to help shape the school programs to ensure the skills developed in these programs matched their needs.

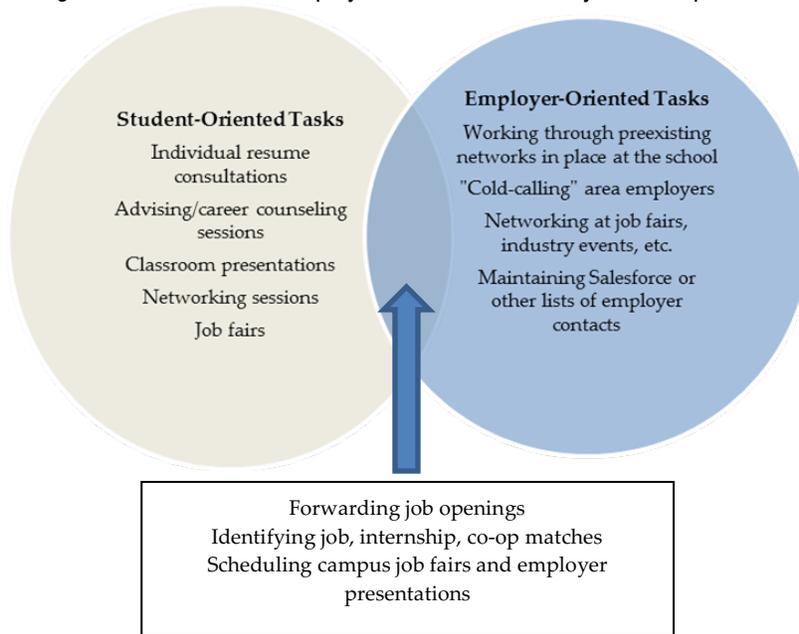
The employers we interviewed wanted community colleges in general to offer more vocational training for adults since there are few alternative programs serving these needs, and they reported having had positive experiences working with the NJ-PREP schools. One employer said, “I think the community college is one of the best places to create programs for individuals who . . . need vocational training.” This view was not limited to the care-oriented work in healthcare but extended to other jobs in the industry as well; employers suggested a variety of additional programs that would help fulfill their workforce needs, including dietary and food services, environmental services and housekeeping, and security.

Employers are eager to have schools fill critical staffing gaps. Multiple employers were happy with the graduates of the NJ-PREP programs; they just wanted more of them. Some employers wished there were a higher volume of graduates in the fields they needed to draw from; while EMTs and CNAs were mentioned most frequently, CNAs were the clear focus of this frustration. One employer mentioned feeling that their school was not taking enough initiative to fill CNA class. Another employer discussed their disappointment with a local school’s choice to cancel a CNA program and wished the school were able to offer more concrete information about when it may be reintroduced. Still another noted that their local college had recently run a CNA class that started with ten students but ended with the employer receiving only two graduates due to students dropping the program.

Program planning is another area where keeping employers apprised of plans and progress via advisory boards and regular communications such as newsletters may be useful; they want to know when there will be program additions and expansions in more concrete terms, and they were frustrated when they were told programs would be coming back “in the future” without clear indications when that would happen. In addition, if employers were to serve on advisory boards, they could make their own case for expansion when needed. One employer even stated interest in sponsoring classes at their local community college. Some employers saw involvement with the schools as a way to gain direct access to their graduates, an arrangement that would give them a leg up on other employers in the race to fill high-demand positions.

Bridging Education and Employment: The Role of Job Developers. One key way that the NJ-PREP Consortium colleges linked their programs to local employers was by introducing the role of the job developer, a position based in the educational organizations but meant to build bridges to employers that would foster student placements. Job developers handled a range of duties that included both student-oriented and employer-oriented tasks. (These tasks are summarized in Figure 1.) Some schools favored a more student-oriented job developer, and others favored a more employer-oriented one. Most colleges, however, preferred a job developer with a relatively balanced approach. The level of employer engagement also varied. Job developers typically made employer contacts by networking, word of mouth, and going into the field for cold calls; some spent more time on these activities than others, and not all job developers used every strategy. They also varied in how they served the needs of local employers. Some job developers simply acted as a conduit for information, forwarding job listings to students as well as student résumés to employers. Others put together a pool of pre-screened job-seekers for employers that provided a selective cross section of students representing a variety of skills and experience levels.

Figure 1. Student- and employer-orientations in the job developer role.



As a relatively new classification of employees at these schools, it took some time for the role of job developer to be worked out in many schools, and for the job developers themselves to learn the roles and responsibilities. Some job developers had come from a more general career advising or similar background, so it took time for them to learn the specificities of healthcare and become connected with area employers. One college leader noted that she was still making visits to hospitals and area employers because, though her school's job developer had learned a lot about the professions, she still was not yet fully aware of the intricacies of healthcare.

As job developers matured in their roles, some reported great success in cultivating relationships with employers. One estimated having worked with roughly 100 employers after starting with only two or three hospitals. This job developer's search for contacts expanded to include clinical sites and a broader range of placements, and by the time of our interview, hospitals and other employers had begun to take the initiative to reach out to the college on their own based on word of mouth. The job developer was able to place multiple students at many sites as these relationships blossomed, a task that can take a lot of time. Some job developers noted the importance of developing a trusting relationship with employers to ensure that they will "take your calls." One developer mused that the key to building and maintaining this trust was the quality of the "product" they offered: students trained in the skills employers need. After that, she felt building an alliance with the employer was an "easy sell."

Job developers who had stronger relationships with employers often initiated conversations with them about their needs and how the college could meet those needs. One college was able to add PCT credentialing to its CNA program based on employer feedback, which their job developer credited with opening doors to placing students in hospitals. Noted one respondent, "[Employers] have staffing needs [that] they come to us and discuss. We make decisions whether we can make a training program for it." As that college's job developer noted, "I've talked to employers about the local market. Future industry. They have the same agenda I do: to fill their jobs."

In their role bringing students and employers together, job developers also had a birds' eye view of employers' hiring practices and job qualities, and in some instances they were able to see why some employers were not succeeding in filling jobs. As many employers are constantly seeking new talent, and job developers have access to that talent, they are in a good position to offer some advocacy for their students in the market. However, one job developer described frank conversations with employers about what made their jobs unattractive to candidates. She sized up

employers and avoided recommending students to employers she did not trust or deem professional; essentially, she did not want students working in a bad situation or having their own professionalism compromised:

If there's a shady employer that is cutting corners . . . bad financial practices, lack of insurance, or history of filing insurance cases, certain practices, doing insurance fraud, I don't want students to get compromised. When I hear things like that, it disturbs me with the ethics. I try to guide students away. Professionalism and integrity are key. . . . Sometimes it's a difference in wage. Sometimes it has do to with assignment.

This practice involved a depth of knowledge about area employers and a level of comfort and familiarity that facilitated frank discussions.

Why did more job developers not push harder for students? This is in part due to pushback they were receiving from employers and a sense that there were hard ceilings for some positions. Some described the difficulty of the industry: Due to low insurance and Medicare/Medicaid reimbursement rates, there were limits to what employers could pay for the work and still turn a profit. One job developer described the issue this way:

The price point is \$9 to \$11 an hour for CHHA. [Employers have] said 'I need to make money, too, [or] I'd have to shut my doors.' Agencies now have to be licensed and undergo financial audit every year, and it will cost them near \$25,000 to meet all these requirements by the State. I foresee a market change; there may be an uptick in salary for employees – but not in immediate future. People are locked in at that 9-to-11.

It is also likely that it was difficult for job developers to push back with employers when there was no established relationship; job developers were working to expand their portfolios of employers and therefore may have been reluctant to sacrifice contacts. This issue can be alleviated with longer job tenure and further work to establish meaningful connections with employers.

Though faculty and staff were important contributors to employer relations, the job developer was the only staff member at the colleges with the sole purpose of linking students and employers. One college leader noted that the addition of the job developers helped schools overcome a common challenge: colleges focusing on educating and training students but losing sight of placing them in jobs. Pondering the effect of the job developers on placements, one instructor said, "I would say maybe a fifth of them were employed prior to the grant. Now I would say three quarters. It's a tremendous difference." As part of the grant, the job developers had clear numerical objectives that guided their work including placement objectives and specific activities that were to be conducted each week or month, such as number of students counseled and number of employers contacted.

Another college leader noted the importance of job developers for student recruitment:

We are in a competitive environment, and when we interview our students, they should know there is help and support for employment opportunities. Workforce requires an answer to job placement assistance. The grant allows us to answer, "Yes." Many students will choose a place for their education where they get an education and support. Many students are unemployed, and it is important they can pay for their kids and pay their bills. The fast-track training program and employment are crucial to their educational success and personal well-being and survival.

However, despite their promise, few schools will sustain the job developer position post-grant; these positions are difficult to fund permanently. One program director noted that having the job developer and added counseling services was beneficial, especially as the TAACCCT-funded job developer's work was geared specifically to healthcare students, but the benefit was simply not sufficient to outweigh the costs. A dean was concerned that removing the job developer position could be detrimental, noting that as they were moved on to college budget support, the job developers would have to take on broader caseloads in the school; without greater manpower, the

dean feared that “the healthcare students probably won’t get enough individual attention or focused attention. It will be students across the board.”

Some schools were able to reallocate elements of the job developer role to existing staff (e.g., career services staff). These strategies are interesting work-arounds for schools that are no longer able to fund the job developer position. However, they return schools to the position of having no single person in charge of building bridges between healthcare students and local healthcare employers, and they are no substitution for a strong, employer-focused job developer.

Employer Assessments of Engagement with Local Schools. The relationships that employers had with their local Consortium colleges varied, and many were quite satisfied with the schools in general. However, several wanted more involvement, even if they were enthusiastic already about the schools and programs. For example, some mentioned that they would be willing to serve on advisory boards. Creating advisory boards for programs that do not already have them may be one way to further engage employers with these programs, help them to stay involved and aware of the programs, increase their familiarity with what is being taught, and let them know what they can expect from program graduates as employees. Communicating with employers about opportunities to serve more broadly or transparently may also be useful. Several employers referenced previous success with advisory boards at other institutions stating that it helped both the employer and the schools. One employer wanted a more collaborative relationship:

I think we're growing our relationship with our local community college, but I think there should be more of a collaborative [relationship] . . . having our companies come and talk to the students, or having the students come and meet the staff and [to find out] what it is we do on a day-to-day basis, so it takes the guesswork out of what their responsibilities are going to be in the next step.

Another employer spoke about what they could offer community colleges statewide:

I would love to be involved with every community college that has a nursing program in the state. That would be my goal. The more would be great because we do cover the whole state; we can employ anybody in the state. I would like to have a global relationship with the community colleges because we can provide that career path and hiring potential to all new grads that most people cannot. And we could literally hire every new graduate.

Fostering these types of engagements may also aid in long-term sustainability for the programs, securing buy-in and support from employers and enabling the programs to become go-to sources for new employees.

In addition to seeking formal engagement opportunities with program faculty and staff such as advisory boards, some employers expressed a desire for more tools related to hiring program graduates. Some asked for job fairs, indicating either the school could put job fairs in place or better advertise existing events. (It is important to note that most job developers and site coordinators reported hosting job fairs or employer meet-and-greets.) Employers were generally short on time, but they made time for these events. While speaking about a college that already hosts job fairs, one employer said,

Whenever they do a job fair, we're usually there. I have spoken to the Student Nurse Associations. We also will, I mean, wherever anyone reaches out to us we will come in and speak, but the job fairs are pretty much our biggest mechanism.

One employer suggested a quarterly newsletter, or something similar, that could outline programs that are currently running or planned, when to expect graduates, how long before the next cohort, etc. A newsletter tied to advisory board meetings and distributed throughout the job coordinators' networks could be a useful tool for employers as they plan their staffing strategies.

Employers pointed to the general need for more job preparation in terms of soft skills and professionalization. Though generally the tone was positive about students and their levels of preparedness, some employers thought the schools could help students better prepare for the job market by making them aware of the full range of opportunities available to them and by coaching them on how to conduct themselves in their interactions with employers. An employer noted that schools were not producing students in their field (EMTs) who were aware of all of their employment opportunities and options:

I honestly think that the EMTs out there that are going to these schools don't know the other side of EMS in the sense of all that they know is that as an EMT you work for a volunteer organization. They don't know of the opportunities of working at a private ambulance company providing services such as this.

Another employer mentioned students who were not prepared for the interview process:

I find myself doing a lot of interviews that sometimes students don't know – or students or candidates, shall I say – don't necessarily know what to say and what not to say during interviews. . . . I feel like when it gets down to somebody speaking and conversing, I feel like a lot of times they don't really know what to say.

This theme of graduates from nearby community colleges appearing unprofessional was repeated by multiple employers. One employer noted their biggest challenge was finding candidates who understood how critical punctuality was, a job skill that could be emphasized through NJ-PREPs soft skills-oriented networking sessions. The importance of these soft skills was especially clear when one employer said “I could get somebody with a doctorate or a master's degree, but if they have a sour demeanor about them, unfortunately, that's not going to provide the patient care and compassion that we're going to want.” As employers were speaking in general terms about the market, such comments are not necessarily related to NJ-PREP graduates, but they speak to the importance of the work that was handled by job developers throughout the grant period.

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

Employer engagement is one method schools use to ensure that their programs are preparing students for today's jobs, that their graduates will be hired, and that their rosters will be filled with incumbent workers as well as new students. For employers, engaging with their local community college presents them with opportunities to shape training in their field, to ensure a pipeline of workers, and to build new areas for formal training based on their own needs. Communication is a key to ensuring employers and colleges are both satisfied with the engagement process.

Job developers are one tool that schools can use to bridge education and employment. In high-demand fields such as healthcare, where workforce shortages are projected, job developers can use their relationships with employers to help shape better jobs for their graduates. Other tools that can help schools and employers connect meaningfully include program advisory boards and formal meetings.

As college staff persist in their efforts to engage with employers, they develop organizational knowledge of the labor market learn new and better ways to engage with employers. These innovations may evolve over time as resources and funding lines shift, but colleges can continue to adapt to the general principles and lessons of engagement. As colleges continue this engagement, further research can seek to identify and document effective practices to share more broadly.

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¹ Grubb, N. (2002). Learning and earning in the middle, Part 1: National studies of pre-baccalaureate education. *Economics of Education Review*, 21(4), 299–321; Dougherty, K. J., & Bakia, M. (1999). *The new economic development role of the community college*. New York, NY: Community College Research Center.

² Dougherty & Bakia, 1999.

³ Deil-Amen, R., & Rosenbaum, J. (2004). Charter building and labor market contacts in two-year colleges. *Sociology of Education*, 77(3), 245–265.

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⁶ Wilson, R. (2015). *A resource guide for engaging employers*. Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future.

⁷ In addition to engagement with employers, engagement with the public workforce system is also an important strategy to help meet labor market needs. The Consortium's efforts in this area are discussed in another issue brief: Van Noy, Michelle and McKay, Heather. (2018), *Community College-Workforce System Relationships: New Jersey Health Professions Pathways to Regional Excellence Project (NJ-PREP)*, New Brunswick, NJ: Education & Employment Research Center, Rutgers University.

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