Building a Data-Driven Partnership

Putting data at the center of your work results in better partnerships and happier partners

People who build partnerships have seen firsthand how they change lives, yet they don't happen nearly as often as they should, and the topic continues to sit at the margins when people talk about school improvement strategies or which new initiatives to fund. Why is that?

The reason that partnerships are so often overlooked is the field's Achilles Heel: Little to no emphasis on gathering and sharing the data that could prove the impact of business/education initiatives. If educators want to see a real investment in partnerships, both by education and industry leaders, then we must all make evaluation a key consideration in our work.

WHY SHOULD YOU EVALUATE?

While evaluation sounds like a good thing on its face, there are a host of reasons why it rarely happens. Educators (and typically their industry partners) aren't taught how to do it. There's no additional funding for it. It's time consuming, and it puts an additional burden on educators and participants. And educators are required to report on so many other things that partnership data, which are not linked to compliance, it simply gets put on the back burner as a priority.

But there are three compelling reasons why you should do it anyway.

- **Your partners want it.** In their day-to-day work, businesspeople are focused primarily on creating outcomes: How many units produced, how many people served, how much profit generated. And, as noted in Guide 1 ("What Your Partners Want"), they have incorporated this focus on outcomes into their work with social and educational programs. For current partners to continue to invest in your work, and for new partners to join you, you need to be able to prove that their investment is producing real improvements in the lives of students.
- **Your administrators need it.** Partnerships can't happen without administrator support; they often need to sign off on student activities (particularly off-site), use of institutional resources,

and the sometimes-significant time that you'll be investing in partnerships. To do that, they need to understand the value that those activities produce in terms of student outcomes and improved education measurements.

- **You and your students deserve it.** Partnerships represent a significant investment of your and your students' time – time that could be spent in other productive instructional activities. If you're going to invest your time in partnerships, you owe it to yourself and your students to be sure it's the best use of your time and efforts, and evaluation is the key to providing that guarantee.

Evaluation may require extra effort, but it's the only way of ensuring that your partnerships are producing the outcomes that you, your students, your administrators and your partners need them to create. It is possibly the single best investment you can make in your partnership efforts.

WHERE TO START?

It doesn't make sense to just slap an evaluation piece on to the partnership you've built; that's like shooting an arrow and then calling whatever you hit the target. Instead, take the time to think through what you're trying to accomplish, and then build an evaluation model that tells you whether you're actually accomplishing what you want.

- **First, define the outcomes that you want to achieve.** Think about the reasons you're starting this partnership. Are you trying to help students learn about certain professions within an industry? Are you trying to help them develop specific skills? Are you trying to improve academic or social characteristics, like improving grades or attendance rates? Once you've identified desired outcomes for students, do the same for your educators and business partners (remembering that in a partnership, all parties – not just students – have to see a return on their investment).
- **Second, identify your metrics.** Once you've identified your outcomes, you need to attach some metrics. Improving student attendance, for example, could be defined as reaching a 95% daily attendance rate; increasing student interest in an industry could be expressed as having students state that they are "very interested" in pursuing a career in that area.
- **Third, identify your starting point.** Change efforts involve students (and others) going from point "A" to point "B." In order to set up a partnership, you need to know how far the journey is – do you have to walk a foot or a mile? If you want to reach a 95% daily attendance rate, for example, are you starting at 70% or 94%. If you want students to develop specific skills, are they already somewhat proficient or total novices? This will also serve as your baseline measure as you track their progress towards your goal.
- **Fourth, figure out how you're going to collect information.** If you want to track students' progress on attendance, can you tap in to the school's tracking system, or do you need to manually do a daily tally in a notebook? If you want to see students become "very interested" in pursuing certain careers, can you get that information through a student information system or a career exploration or portfolio system, or do you need to set up your own periodic interest surveys? There are many free or low-cost tools, such as SurveyMonkey and others, that are easy to use and offer a variety of reporting formats.

- **Finally, consider that your different stakeholders may have different data needs.** It is important to remember that the different stakeholders in your partnership will care about different outcomes, and that all should be addressed through your data collection efforts. You and your business partner might want to see student proficiency rates increase, but your business partner might also want to see employee morale go up for those who volunteer for your program, or see the number of job applications increase among students coming from your program. Be sure to accommodate the data needs of all your partners as you plan your initiatives.

TYPES OF DATA

As you start to think about the data question, it helps to understand that there are different types of data that can tell you different things:

Qualitative/quantitative data

The difference between "qualitative" and "quantitative" data is the difference between words and numbers. Qualitative is softer, typically text- or survey-based data that gives you more insight to the thoughts and feelings of your students; you typically collect qualitative data through focus groups, interviews, text-based surveys and observation notes. Quantitative data is your factual information, typically expressed through numbers or percentages; you usually gather quantitative data through assessments (including proficiency scores or industry certifications) or the data systems managed by your educational institution (grade point average, graduation rates, etc.). Both are relevant and valuable, and can be used together to get a fuller picture of your outcomes.

Program activity and outcomes

Program activity does not tell you about the benefits students are receiving from your partnership effort; instead, they tell you about the health and efficiency of your partnership. For example, it may make sense to track attendance and dropout rates for your initiative. If students aren't attending, or are dropping out of the program entirely, that's a red flag they're not seeing value in the work. Similarly, tracking your resources, like cash flow (if appropriate) and volunteer hours, helps you determine the true cost per participant, and what it would take to expand your work in the future.

Outcome data focuses on the impact your work is having on its participants. Despite the name, you'll want to measure at several points along the partnership, and not only at the end, in order to see whether participants are making progress towards your desired outcomes.

WHAT TO MEASURE

With all that in mind, what kinds of data points might you focus on when attempting to measure student progress? Following are just a few options to consider:

- School/college statistics – graduation rates, attendance rates, grades, incident rates, scores on state assessments
- Employability skills – As assessed by employers, educators, and employability skills assessments
- Industry certifications
- Employer evaluations

- Student evaluations (such as surveys regarding their experiences with the partnership)
- Student activity – Changes in course selection and completion, college applications, participation in extracurricular activities and competitions, participation in work-based learning experiences
- Student knowledge, interests, and plans for the future

TOOLS AT YOUR DISPOSAL

There are any number of ways to look at the work you're doing, using both qualitative and quantitative data gathering techniques. Some of the tools you can consider using include:

- **Existing data sources** – Most educational institutions have student data systems that track grades, attendance, course selection and more; these are excellent resources. In some cases you may have to pull data manually; ideally, however, you would add a marker to the records of your participating students (such as course enrollment) so you can easily pull their information as a group, and compare it to the student body overall as a test/control analysis.
- **Formal assessments (internal and independent)** – Whether they're assessments that you create or that are hosted by others (such as those of industry certification organizations), formal assessments can provide you with valuable hard data.
- **Employer reports** – If students are working with employers directly, such as during co-op or internship experiences, the evaluations completed by employers provide an independent review of students' knowledge, skills, and behaviors.
- **Student work product** – You can track student portfolios, journals, and other forms of student-created materials to gauge their knowledge and interests.
- **Pre/Post surveys** - One of the simplest, and most common, approaches involves giving subjects the same assessment prior to, and after, your intervention. This allows you to track changes over time, whether those changes involve knowledge, interest, perceptions, or something else.
- **Observations** - Evaluators and program leaders alike can observe program participants and report on their progress, particularly in areas such as interpersonal relations or development or use of certain skills. You might consider a mid-point site visit to review activity and behaviors.
- **Interviews** - You can always interview participants at the end of your program to find out what they thought, what they learned, and how it affected their lives, either individually or in groups (i.e., focus groups). These sorts of anecdotal reports can be particularly powerful in telling the story of your program.

ADDITIONAL TIPS

The effort you put into evaluation is going to be tied in to the size of your partnership initiative. You'll probably want to invest more resources into evaluating your internship program or summer camp than you would into a guest speaker series (though they should all include some level of evaluation). The tips below should be considered for all large-scale partnership efforts, and elements of them can be considered for your smaller-scale efforts:

- **You should establish control sites** - i.e., sites with comparable student populations that do not participate in your partnership activities - to see whether changes in your target population are actually being caused by your program or by other outside forces. (For example, are students improving because of your partnership efforts, or is it because a new curriculum was introduced, changing outcomes for all students?)
- **You should measure frequently where possible**, with smaller-scale assessments if need be. This will allow you to change course if your efforts aren't working, and will allow you to identify any patterns in the rate of growth among participants.
- **When possible, you should enlist independent practitioners and use independently-developed assessments to gauge progress**. It's very easy to introduce a positive bias into your results if you design and/or implement your own assessments.
- **Take advantage of internal resources**. The school district or college may have a data team that can help with developing assessments, setting up data queries and analyzing data. And pulling information from internal sources can either reduce your data collection needs or enhance the information you do receive, at very little effort or additional cost.
- **Think carefully about what data you need to track progress for your target audiences (students and partners), and collect only the information that you know you'll use**. Measurement takes time and it usually takes money, so it makes sense to only ask for what you need. Further, an increase in the number of questions asked often reduces the response rate you'll receive, particularly with your industry partners. Minimize the cost to your program by collecting only that which you'll actually use.
- **Take the time to explain why you're collecting information and how that information will be used to improve student and partner outcomes.** People running your partnership might resist collecting data because they don't understand whether, or how, the data will be used.
- **Once you've got data on outcomes, share it with your partners in full**, whether it's good or not. Data on positive outcomes points to a job well done; data that doesn't show an impact gives you an opportunity to retool your efforts in ways that will increase student outcomes going forward, and your partners will be deeply appreciative of your commitment to creating change. In addition to sharing data with partners directly, consider also including it in annual reports or other public vehicles.
- **Respect student privacy**. There are laws regarding data security, notably the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA). When sharing data, do so in aggregate, avoiding situations in which information on individual students will be exposed. And look at ways to safeguard raw data (using passwords, storing information on secure devices) to protect those students.

ACTION ITEM: BUILDING AN EVALUATION PLAN

Follow the steps below as you plan your evaluation activities:

Step	Activity	Done
PLANNING		
1.	Talk with partner about what what we want students to gain from this activity.	
2.	Talk with partner about their desired outcomes; share ours.	
3.	Identify the specific things we're going to measure (i.e., metrics) based on all desired outcomes.	
4.	Determine our starting points. (i.e., if we want graduation rates to hit 95%, what are they now?)	
5.	Determine the methods and tools we'll use to collect information during, and at the completion of, the partnership activity. (See "Selecting Outcomes and Methods" below)	
6.	If there is a cost involved, get a firm estimate and determine who is responsible.	
7.	Build a project plan that includes markers for when data will be collected.	
8.	Determine who is responsible for collecting data, including field data or data from internal or external sources.	
SELECTING OUTCOMES AND METHODS		
1.	Identify the specific metrics you wish to track and measure.	
2.	Determine if your desired outcomes are best assessed through qualitative (words) or quantitative (numbers) methods, or a combination of both.	
3.	Select the specific type(s) of tool you'll use (surveys, school/college data system, etc.).	
4.	If the data collection instrument does not yet exist, such as knowledge/attitude surveys, or focus group questions, or employer assessment forms, build the survey instrument(s).	
5.	Share data collection instrument(s) with your partner and anyone who can offer expertise in order to improve it and get buy-in.	
6.	If others will be involved in implementing your program and its assessments, train them on the importance of evaluation and share tools with them.	
REPORTING		
1.	Collect and analyze project data in a neutral way; don't overhype positive outcomes, don't hide negative outcomes	
2.	Share data fully with partners as a benchmark for improving the program in future years	
3.	Share data with others involved in the project (facilitators, administrators) for their feedback on how to improve in the future	

ADDENDUM: LEVERAGING DATA

An essential part of CTE helping to "ensure a thriving Colorado economy by providing relevant and rigorous education that is connected, responsive and real" is keeping connected to Colorado labor market data. Below are a few examples of where to access data to contextualize your program evaluations:

- Talent Pipeline Report – Annual report re: Colorado's labor market https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/cwdc/colorado-talent-pipeline-report
- Colorado Labor Market Information Gateway- Access to robust Colorado-specific data and projections, including industry-specific profiles https://www.colmigateway.com
- Connecting with Colorado Workforce Centers- Access local workforce data https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/cdle/wfc
- Colorado CTE- Data reports http://coloradostateplan.com/administrator/data-reports/

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide has been developed by Colorado CTE, housed at the Colorado Community College System to help Colorado CTE educators build strong and lasting relationships with employers and other stakeholders. For more information on CTE and other resources available to help you, please visit http://coloradostateplan.com/.