



Partnering for Success

Coordinating Cross-Sector Partners to Drive Outcomes and Increase Synergy

AT A GLANCE

Effective design of education and workforce pathways requires strong coordination and collaboration between cross-sector groups. New initiatives and funding opportunities can result in a duplication of efforts within a region, leading to fatigue and confusion for education and workforce groups. Learn about the actions that funders, leaders, and practitioners can take to align and coordinate their regional, statewide, and national efforts to drive innovative pathways design and implementation.

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About JFF

Jobs for the Future (JFF) drives transformation of the U.S. education and workforce systems to achieve equitable economic advancement for all. www.jff.org.

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About the Trellis Foundation

Trellis Foundation is a grant-making, public charitable organization focused on improving postsecondary attainment for low-income students and students of color in Texas. Using a highly collaborative approach that prioritizes catalytic investments, the Foundation focuses on changing or informing policy, practice, and systems. www.trellisfoundation.org



01. Introduction

Over 16 months, JFF aided the Trellis Foundation's Regional Upskilling and Regional Initiative by supporting the nine grantees across Texas. The goals for this work were to support grantees in strengthening their upskilling and reskilling strategies, identify opportunities to braid regional pathways, and foster stronger regional collaboration.

The nine grantees represent workforce development boards and chambers of commerce, community-based organizations (CBOs), regional intermediaries, and community colleges. Each grantee plays an important role in its regional postsecondary and workforce pathway ecosystem. Many serve as lead intermediaries for several initiatives across their region, and others are partners in regional efforts, but all bring a strong focus in their area of expertise. The makeup of the cohort provided an opportunity to examine how different ecosystem partners contribute to robust upskilling and reskilling pathways.

02.

The Value of Different Types of Partners

At a 2023 summer convening, participants in the Trellis initiative took a deep dive into the mutually beneficial roles that each organization type plays within a pathways ecosystem to highlight best practices, identify areas of growth, and build cross-sector relationships. The table below illustrates some of the strengths each organization type brings to a partnership.

The Value Add	
CBOs and direct service providers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are a trusted source in the community for resources and expertise and can provide a personalized approach for clients• Understand the complexities that exist in learners' lives and the systemic barriers that can block learner success• Can pivot quickly, meeting client's immediate needs as they arise• Are key partners in recruitment and a valuable source for potential talent
Education and training organizations, including community colleges	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Understand how to develop learning experiences that align with labor-market demands and can provide learners with relevant training and industry-recognized credentials• Recognize the need for collaboration across sectors and can devise creative ways to make partnerships beneficial for learners and employers• Can tap into federal funding streams, such as Pell grants and Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) funding, to provide free or low-cost training• Can facilitate introductions and make critical cross-sector connections to foster new partnerships

Employer-focused intermediaries (chambers of commerce or workforce boards)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have access to key labor-market data and industry insights to drive initiatives and inform program design • Have direct relationships with employers • Provide short-term learning options for clients • Can help learners understand the career options associated with different pathways
Local or regional pathway intermediaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Able to coalesce and bring together partners through setting a shared vision for the city or region • Have the capacity and knowledge to strategically convene key cross-sector partners • Can sometimes serve as a hub for community data and/or lead policy and advocacy efforts

Potential Roadblocks in Partnerships

In developing cross-sector relationships, partners should be keenly aware of behaviors and attitudes that may unintentionally hinder progress. Identifying these derailers early enables partners to communicate openly, address problem areas, and avoid roadblocks to a project's success. Potential derailers include these four:

- **Not being transparent with partners:** It is essential to identify issues as they arise and work to promote open, honest communication. Transparency in partnerships can help avoid misalignment, nurture strong working relationships, and improve overall project outcomes.
- **Having a narrow focus:** Cross-sector partners who focus on the minutiae of a particular workstream, such as funding or reporting, may lose sight of the larger picture and intended outcomes. Partners should work to staff projects strategically, ensuring that each partner has a holistic understanding of the various aspects of a project.
- **Failing to recognize one's limitations:** Partners should have the humility to be open and honest about gaps in their own knowledge and capacity. Partners should see that they all make equitable contributions, and that one organization cannot complete the work alone and thus, they should be more open and honest about strengths and weaknesses. The result will be project workstreams that utilize each organization's expertise.
- **Harboring ulterior intentions:** Project teams should seek new partnerships only when motivated by community need and good intentions. Partnerships that are sought to gain funding or make connections can be misaligned during the project, leading to frustration and conflict.

03.

Strengthening Relationships

Naturally, a sense of urgency to drive innovation and create solutions will pervade any project. Still, partner organizations should commit themselves to devoting the time and effort needed to develop and maintain relationships and thus ensure positive, sustainable outcomes. While the following recommendations are not exhaustive, they provide the foundation for lasting partnerships across new and existing relationships.

Take Time to Build Trust

Strong partnerships require time and intentional effort to ensure that the needs of all partners are met. By emphasizing early partnership development, partners can maximize time and effort to ensure positive impact. Formalized structures such as partnership agreements can clarify roles, responsibilities, and expectations. Regular check-ins enable partners to monitor the project's progress, forecast upcoming milestones, quickly collaborate on problems that arise, and support nurturing and growing relationships. New partnerships that dedicate time to nurturing relationships will learn more about each partner organization. Touring partner facilities, joining relevant events, and learning how partners operate and what their mission and goals can foster a deeper understanding of project partners and can create a strong foundation for successful cross-sector relationships.

Align Existing Work

When building new relationships, it is crucial to align across organizations' existing portfolios to avoid duplicative efforts, which can lead to initiative fatigue. Partners should consider and discuss the implications of engaging in competing work, if it exists, and reflect on each organization's strengths and abilities to manage similar initiatives. Engaging in open dialogue and being willing to work together to develop mutually beneficial relationships will save organizations time and money while ensuring the needs of the community continue to be met.

Recognize Subject-Matter Expertise

Each organization pursues a project's innovation goals using its own expertise, and partners need to recognize and respect the expertise and unique perspective that each partner brings to the work. In many cases, a given problem can be addressed in a number of ways, and different partners may see different paths forward based on their expertise. To streamline efforts, partners should be clear about where they can lead and their constraints.

04.

Taking Action

Strong partnerships are vital to building and sustaining a healthy pathways ecosystem. As this work is integrated across multiple sectors, partners who take time to nurture and develop strong cross-sector partnerships can better ensure that the outcomes will be innovative and impactful because they will be better able to leverage each partner's expertise. Organizations can start by assessing their current relationships and engagement with cross-sector partners, identifying gaps in the relationship (e.g., trust, mutual goals, understanding of strengths) and how the partnership can be strengthened. A good exercise for a team is to identify one new strategic partner to connect with in the next month or a current partner whose expertise is being underutilized and then start applying these lessons. Organizations that invest the time needed for relationship building will improve the landscape for education and workforce initiatives across their regions.





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