

DESIGN Forming Partnerships

Forging effective partnerships is a cost-effective way to broaden the scope of WFS services that can be offered.

There are two kinds of working partnerships:

- **External, with the local community**— these collaborations involve government agencies, nonprofit organizations, civic organizations, community foundations, businesses and individual volunteers.
- **Internal, within the college**— chiefly, among complementary programs aligned with the three WFS pillars. These include partnerships among WFS program leaders, college administrators, faculty, staff and even groups of students.

Both kinds of partnerships can expand the type of services offered and deepen the intensity of service provision.

External Partnerships

Colleges can extend the breadth and depth of available student support services by leveraging external partnerships. These partnerships range from very informal connections to formal memoranda of agreement, depending upon the size and scope of the college's WFS activities and the availability of community resources that are mutually a good fit with students' needs.

Common partners for WFS colleges include public agencies, community based organizations, local funders and employers. These partnerships can expand the services available to students, refer people to WFS or be available to take referrals, provide on-the-job experience, assist with job placement, deliver financial education and financial products or connect to funding.

Strong partnerships often involve one or more of the following: documentation of partnership roles and operating norms, thoughtful and collaborative leadership and robust communication protocols. Those elements can help overcome common partnership pitfalls, which include organizational culture or mission differences, leadership turnover and a lack of clarity about goals.

- **Documenting the partnership**, either through a formal Memorandum of Understanding or through an informal working agreement, is an essential step for a highly functional partnership. This agreement should outline the roles and responsibilities of each partner. It also should clearly state the purpose of the partnership, how that purpose relates to the mission of each partner and the goals established for the partners. Clearly stating operating norms for the partnership, including how to work together, make decisions and communicate, can prevent headaches down the road. This type of document is important to get everyone on the same page, and it also is vital in the case of staff turnover.

- **A data-sharing agreement** should be part of any comprehensive partnership agreement. Such an agreement should outline what data needs to be collected, who will collect it and how it will be used. Partners may need different evidence, so it is important to establish common metrics and outcomes at the start. The evidence of success desired by a community college board of trustees may be different than the evidence needed by a community based organization. See Chapter 2, Section V for more information on data tracking.
- A good partnership has **patient and collaborative leadership** pushing the work forward and keeping partners focused on the big picture. One way to structure this leadership is to establish a steering committee of partners that meets regularly and is focused on making decisions beyond the day-to-day work. Setting standards or protocols for communication between partners is essential, including what type of information should be communicated, at what level of detail and with what frequency. This is especially important because partner organizations and colleges have different cultures, calendars and goals.

These external partnerships can take a variety of forms:

- Some colleges broker **informal working partnerships** through existing contacts that their professional staff already have, for example, with local social service agencies. GTCC and Phillips each draw upon networks of relationships that some of their staff developed when they previously worked with local Departments of Social Services.
- Another prevalent external partnership has been for colleges to **host a resource fair** that invites community-based organizations, public agencies and private firms to participate in what usually is a half-day event held on campus. These resource fairs allow students to learn more about various types of support services available in the broader community.
- In yet another type of external partnership, Skyline College has implemented a **cooperative education program with industry** whereby students can earn college credit for their ongoing work experiences while they are enrolled in school. A benefit of this formal arrangement is that the school's Co-op Education Coordinator maintains regular ongoing contact with the employers, thus allowing the college to stay informed about the changing employment needs of local firms.
- Several of the colleges sustain a regular WFS **presence in workforce development centers** that often are located off-campus in the community. Typically, the college may offer basic skills training, resume development and assistance with job search, especially using computers. This presence also establishes a portal whereby community residents can learn more about the college, its opportunities for earning certificates or associate degrees and the kinds of supportive services provided through the WFS strategy.

- **Financial education** is one area where colleges generally seek strategic alliances with community-based partners. Skyline College has partnered with a local community-based organization to provide training that demonstrates to students and their families how their own financial life unfolds in the larger context of the local, regional and national economies. In this partnership, students learn about “local living economies,” the “move your money” campaign, what it means to “vote with your dollar” and pre-paid debit cards.
- In some particularly distressed economic regions, community colleges are partnering with civic organizations to design strategies for **improving economic development**. Improving the local business climate is essential, in part because graduates otherwise may need to relocate in search of better employment. Phillips Community College, for example, participates in the Delta Bridge Project that convenes teams for improving the local area across several dimensions: jobs and economic development, tourism, recreation and quality of life and education.

When forming external partnerships, colleges should be clear about what they offer back to their partners. Some partners may be interested in extending formal educational opportunities to the people to whom they provide service. Other partners might benefit from expanding the population they now serve by connecting with the student body of the college. Understanding how the purpose of the WFS strategy relates to the mission of the college and of each partner organization will make it easier to show mutual interest.

Internal Partnerships

The depth and breadth of internal partnerships often depend upon the size and complexity of the WFS-related activities already underway or being planned at a particular college.

Building buy-in across the college is important for sustaining internal partnerships, especially if you are relying on faculty or staff to refer students to your services, to coordinate service delivery or to coach or provide services themselves. Given the reality of leadership turnover, broad-based support can preserve the WFS strategy at your institution even when a champion leaves. To get that support, the college may need to bring about changes in faculty and staff attitudes about working to enhance the success of students from economically challenged backgrounds. Faculty and staff at some WFS have participated in poverty simulations as well as read and discussed books—both novels and non-fiction—that help instill a deeper sense of empathy and awareness.

Especially at colleges where WFS activities are considerably large in scope, it is important to cultivate wide-ranging networks among faculty and staff to help integrate, coordinate and support the strategy. At Phillips Community College, the multidisciplinary team that steers the WFS continually strives to integrate elements of several complementary initiatives—such as Career Pathways, Achieving the Dream and TRIO—with the WFS strategy. This ongoing coordination requires persistent ongoing dialogue among multiple departments and college administrators.

In order to enhance informal collaboration, some colleges choose to co-locate their WFS-related support services within a suite of offices or on the same floor of a building. Skyline College, for example, houses its SparkPoint Center within a facility that also shelters several other related programs, including a WFS-related community food bank that serves both students and community residents. Think broadly when identifying potential internal partners. Consider parties who will be champions for the work, as well as ones who are likely to resist change. Inviting potential opponents to participate in the planning process early on may prevent them from putting up roadblocks. They also could help identify problem areas, forcing the planning team to confront critical issues in the beginning instead of further along in the implementation process when it is more difficult to make adjustments and corrections. To do this, the college will need to have an individual on the planning team who has the necessary positional authority or networks to convene and invite new allies to participate.



Key Takeaways

- There are two kinds of working partnerships: external, with the local community, and internal, within the college.
- Strong external partnerships often involve one or more of the following: documentation of partnership roles and operating norms, thoughtful and collaborative leadership and robust communication protocols.
- These external partnerships can take a variety of forms: informal working partnerships, hosting a resource fair to allow students to learn more about various types of support services available in the broader community, cooperative education programs with industry, having a presence in workforce development centers, partnering with a local community-based organization or institution to provide information or products and forming coalitions to improve economic development.
- Internal partnerships are all about building buy-in across the college, bringing faculty and staff together to enhance the success of students from economically challenged backgrounds.
- It is important to cultivate wide-ranging networks among faculty and staff to help integrate, coordinate and support WFS activities. This ongoing coordination requires persistent ongoing dialogue among multiple departments and college administrators.
- Inviting potential opponents to participate in the planning process from the start may prevent them from putting up roadblocks. To do this, the college will need to have an individual on the planning team who has the necessary positional authority or networks to convene and invite new allies to participate.



Examples

SparkPoint at **Skyline College** has five external partners defined either by Memorandum of Understanding or contract. Extensive referral relationships enhance the SparkPoint network of services and resources. The Bay Area has a rich nonprofit culture, and there appears to be a considerable degree of synergy in that many community partners are interested in “measuring the same things” as the Center.

SparkPoint at Skyline College is an integral part of an emerging regional network of community-based SparkPoint Centers that are supported by the United Way of the Bay Area (UWBA). Skyline is using tools for mapping and analyzing social networks in order to better understand how the entire Bay Area’s regional infrastructure of SparkPoint Centers can better serve the community.

The WFS program at **Guilford Technical Community College** works informally to eliminate silos and build bridges within and across the campus. At the beginning of each term, for example, the WFS staff and some of the coaches introduce themselves to new High Point faculty.

Beyond the campus, the WFS program works closely with community-based organizations to leverage assistance to students. In return, community partners refer their own clients to the WFS program at GTCC for certain types of services. The college permits these clients to come onto the campus. Rendering such service is considered community outreach.



Tools, Materials, and Resources

- Materials from resource fairs *Houston Community College System*
- Sample data sharing agreements *Des Moines Area Community College*
- Possible services and roles for external partnerships *Tool developed by MDC*
- Stakeholder analysis *Tool developed by MDC*