

Chapter 82

Partnerships between Business and Adult Education Providers

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the benefits and challenges of partnerships between adult education providers and businesses. The chapter addresses reasons for engaging in partnerships, the typical partners involved, types of partnerships, partnership activities, and the process of building a partnership. The theory is then used to analyze a specific case, the partnership between a technical college and an industrial park. Based on that case, lessons learned and future trends in educational partnerships as they relate to economic development and America's ability to remain globally competitive are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

In 2010, President Barack Obama launched the “Skills for America’s Future” campaign, designed to harness the cooperative powers of businesses and community colleges to improve adult workforce training and education. A White House report states the President’s attitude on adult education and worker training as follows:

President Obama believes that nations that out-educate us today will out-compete us tomorrow (Department of Commerce & Executive Office, 2011, n.p.).

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Indeed, as the United States slowly recovers from the “Great Recession” that began in 2007, more high-skill jobs must be created, and more workers must be trained for those jobs if economic recovery and growth are to be sustained (Gordon, 2009). Simultaneously, the United States faces global challenges that make it imperative to reconsider the role of business and industry in adult workforce preparation. Worker capabilities must be enhanced in ways never done before, as stated by Gordon (2009):

Slower workforce growth is increasing pressure for all labor force segments to more fully participate in workforce recruitment. Technological advances will enable an increase in nontraditional work

arrangements. ... The business community can avoid this talent catastrophe by finally getting serious about the overhaul of the entire education-to-employment system. This business role will be critical in helping labor markets adjust to the escalating national and global talent requirements (p. 100).

Partnerships between adult education providers like community colleges on the one hand and business and industry on the other are frequently touted as an appropriate and effective response to the challenges of globalization in that they help American businesses to maintain their competitiveness in an increasingly smaller world (Soares, 2010). Involving business and industry in adult education and training is not a new concept. Hodnett (1955) already stated it clearly: “The need for better understanding through closer industry-college relations is a matter of national importance” (p. 12). He complained that a lack of interaction led to missing out on all the benefits such relations could provide. Lipsky (1973) also argued that employer involvement was the key ingredient in successful workforce training, and Hull and Hinckley (2007) lamented that such involvement had been sadly lacking. The ultimate consensus is that employers not only must but also should want to participate more actively in workforce training because of the many benefits that can be realized.

In fact, both European countries and the United States have a long history of education and business working together to prepare adult workers for the workplace through skill-level enhancement. At the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in the late 18th century, industry increasingly was looking for competent factory workers who could be trained quickly, and workers began to show interest in more advanced skills such as chemistry and mechanics that made them more employable in the new industries. Thus, industrial training schools began to appear, often with funding from local industry. Church affiliated Sunday schools were

the first to offer education to adults, but the first non-religious adult school was opened in Nottingham in England in 1798. The Edinburgh School of Arts (1821) and the Glasgow Mechanics Institute (1823) focused on subjects such as chemistry, mechanics, geometry, arithmetic, and architecture. By 1841, 216 such schools existed across Britain, and in 1853, higher learning institutions called *Workingmen’s Colleges* were added (Bennett, 1926). In the United States, the first mechanics school was opened in 1820. In 1826, the Lyceum Movement, trying to effect adult development through lectures, was founded, and schools like the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (1824) filled a need in higher mechanical training (Gordon, 2003). It must be said, however, that these schools constituted at best limited partnerships. Although they often received some financial support from industry and oriented their curricula on what local industry needed and desired, there was no close cooperation. Schools depended on financial support from donors and on student tuition, and many of them did not survive long because of a lack of funds (Bennett, 1926). What these schools signify, however, is a new approach to workforce training, namely one in which industry itself no longer trains and retrains its workers through apprenticeship but instead outsources the training to providers. After schools had assumed the lion’s share of adult workforce preparation in the 19th and 20th centuries, the technology explosion of the late 20th century has made adult education providers’ task impossibly complex. In addition to serving their usual clientele of workforce entrants, the unemployed, and workers looking for specific skill upgrades, providers now must offer comprehensive programs to retrain incumbent workers as well as reach out to underemployed and low-skilled workers whose current skill level is insufficient for continued future gainful employment. To add to the challenge, the skills these students must be trained in are more advanced than ever before, yet many of the students have not been in school for years and have had negative experiences with edu-

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