

Better Align Workforce Programming with Partnerships

Madeline Pumariega | President, Miami Dade College



As the workforce continues to evolve rapidly, higher ed and employers need to strengthen their relationships to prepare learners for the work and meet the needs of employers.

Today's learners are looking for programming that will make them employable and employers are looking for graduates who meet their specific needs. To create a seamless pathway for students to enter the workforce and stay there, higher ed needs to establish closer relationships with industry partners. Together, industry and institutions will be able to meet the needs of both students and employers. In this interview, Madeline Pumariega discusses the challenges in meeting industry needs, the importance of partnerships and focusing workforce programming on the lifelong learner.

The EvoLLLution (Evo): What are the common challenges when it comes to the connection between workforce programming and industry needs?

Madeline Pumariega (MP): I believe ongoing communication is critical to working collaboratively having transformational partnerships with industry. This allows institutions like MDC to work more closely with industry to tailor programs to meet the needs of learners today and in the future, while developing job ready graduates and an effective talent pipeline for business.

MDC has strategic partnerships with major area chambers of commerce, the Beacon Council—our economic development organization, and state, county and local governments. Moreover, current industry partnerships include IBM, SoftBank, Amazon, Disney, Tesla, Nickelodeon, Microsoft, Google, SAP, Cisco, Facebook and Oracle, to name a few. From digital badges to industry certifications and traditional degrees, MDC allows students to acquire skills through stackable and rapid credentials as they work toward completion, allowing them to enter the workforce more expeditiously and to succeed within it.

Evo: Why is it important for colleges to partner with employers to overcome these obstacles?

MP: Colleges serve the important role of powering the economic mobility of the students and communities they serve. Partnering with employers allows us to create a bridge between students and the companies in need of skilled workers. The world is changing quickly, and it is critical for industry and colleges to develop nimble partnerships. Creating formal structures such as advisory boards and mentorship programs within institutions provides opportunities for partners to be more deeply connected and invested in the success of students and the community.

Evo: How will the collaboration between Miami Dade and IBM prepare students for the rapidly evolving workforce?

MP: We are excited about our ongoing partnership with IBM. In this latest collaboration, we will enable students of diverse backgrounds and experiences to gain the strategic skills necessary to succeed in a rapidly changing workplace, especially in the arenas of cloud computing and artificial intelligence. To make this vision a reality, MDC and IBM are collaborating on building unique workforce offerings that serve MDC students, faculty and the community at large. New offerings will build on and expand MDC's already successful programs by training faculty and offering courses in key areas including artificial intelligence, cloud computing, cybersecurity, and quantum computing. As a leader in workforce innovation and development, MDC is poised to meet the growing demand for skilled technology experts across the country.

Evo: How does tech-focused workforce programming benefit the lifelong learner?

MP: Students who complete tech programs are conditioned to be lifelong learners. Technology is constantly evolving and so must the educational programs that teach or refine the necessary knowledge that powers this industry. These students know that and always want to be at the forefront, gaining the latest skills and information they need to be at the absolute top of their game. They understand that success over the long haul involves constant training and refreshing of skills. And MDC offers returning students short term coursework to stay ahead of the curve through its programs such as Upskill and Kickstart, with many courses at little or no cost.

Evo: What are some best practices to building strong partnerships between colleges and employers?

MP: You have to start with being open, proactive and have a continuous dialogue with employers. Then going further, get your partners involved. Have them be a part of the mentorship programs, advisory boards and especially with your community engagement. A best-of-both-worlds situation would be to also have opportunities where partners can come in and share their expertise with students and stakeholders. Another thing that can be done is to create a formal process for assessing partnership and training needs. This allows for more collaborative and seamless communication between the college and employers. All in all, it's most important that we're ensuring partnerships are win-win for the college, partner, students and the community.

This interview was edited for length and clarity.

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Key Takeaways

- Companies are looking for partnerships—look to your community to see who needs help and begin building that bridge for students and employers to succeed together.
- Be strategic in your partnerships—look at industry partners who make most sense for your institution, and develop programming that will best serve your audience.
- You don't have to start from scratch. Evaluate your current offerings and resources to see what you can build on to meet the demands of today's workforce.