Developing a Sector Strategy

The early phase of developing a sector strategy is a discovery, examination and collaborative phase driven by market factors and intelligence in order to validate and prioritize a potential opportunity. Elements for developing a sector strategy includes the following:

1. Identifying the opportunity by evaluating various market factors
2. Developing market intelligence to validate the opportunity and add specific detail
3. Updating the sector strategy to prioritize the opportunity within a larger set of initiatives

1. Identify the Opportunity

Track Market Signals. This initial phase involves tracking market signals that could create opportunities for student success. Often the signals are anecdotal, but compelling enough to warrant further investigation. In other cases, state policies and economic forces point to these opportunities. Industry workforce reports, when available, are useful in building a case for support. Standard labor-market data may assist in scoping the opportunity and may provide the primary signal of an opportunity. The role of the sector team is to evaluate these signals and translate them into initial concepts of how students could benefit through community college solutions.

Verify Opportunity. This typically requires significant industry input to preliminarily determine what a college's solution would look like and the kind of support the industry is willing to provide. At this point, industry support can be expected as offering guidance and continuing the dialog necessary to frame a preliminary solution. Verification is an essential step. Standard labor-market data by itself is not always a reliable indicator of durable value to students. Industry relationships are fundamental to identifying the opportunity. Without these relationships the initial market signal is missing a critical component. This analysis of industry inputs is key to determining how the opportunity fits within the sector strategy. Questions about bandwidth, funding and strategic value determine the opportunity's priority within the sector's portfolio.

Develop Coalition of the Willing. Once it's decided that more time and energy will be invested in the opportunity, likely candidates among the colleges identify potential partners for a pilot program. Initial relationships are recommended at the dean level, where strategic decisions are made regarding the introduction of new workforce initiatives and the programmatic elements to support them. Working with the colleges, the sector team identifies a "coalition of the willing" that will engage in further developing the opportunity.

2. Develop Market Intelligence

Create Research Plan. Labor-market *intelligence* combines industry inputs, plus economic and market factors, with standard labor-market data to create a robust profile of the opportunity. Collaboration with the Centers of Excellence builds a credible research plan to augment intelligence collected by the sector team, assuring a consistent statewide picture of the opportunity to the colleges. The research plan is designed to answer specific questions to enable decisions about the size of the supply/demand gap, required skill sets, major employers, trade-offs in education versus experience, common hiring practices, etc. Research can be conducted by the Centers of Excellence or through an outside research firm, at the discretion of the sector team.

Conduct Analysis. LaunchBoard data enables analysis of programs at each college as a potential home for the pilot. The sector team completes an independent analysis and works with Centers of Excellence to build a profile of colleges in the region that could support the pilot. Relationships at potential colleges build credibility for the initiative as LaunchBoard data and market intelligence are interpreted and addressed.

Engage Stakeholders. It's important to draft unique value propositions for each of the various stakeholder groups through this process. Students comprise the priority group of stakeholders, with the Vision for Success metrics as the dominant factor in deciding whether the opportunity is viable. Of course, the industry value proposition is crucial in determining whether students are likely to be employed in family-wage jobs. College administrators and industry stakeholders need to hear a value proposition that resonates with their priorities in order for the program to be adopted.

Validate with Industry. Good market intelligence requires validation by industry. Organizations such as industry associations, economic development councils and local workforce boards are helpful in convening a mix of qualified employers that provide this validation. At this point, relationships create the basis for employer engagement through the validation process, building a "coalition of the willing" within industry.

Decide Go/No Go. Market intelligence at this juncture may consist of broad strokes that clearly define the opportunity and offer key elements of the business case but lack the depth to fully inform a curriculum. A go/no-go decision on starting an initiative can be made based on the strength of the research and buy-in by industry.

3. Update the Sector Strategy

Prioritize Opportunities. Not all opportunities can be addressed, even though they merit serious consideration. Factors of bandwidth, funding and strategic value determine which initiatives can be implemented using the sector team's limited resources. For that reason, prioritization of new opportunities is critical in comparison with other initiatives in the sector portfolio.

Verify Stakeholder Support. A key factor is the strength of partnerships needed to implement the new initiative. Industry support may not be organized well enough to assure success, especially if support is too heavily dependent on volunteers, a common occurrence among regional or local chapters of an association. Faculty champions at participating colleges are essential. Without them, curriculum development and approval processes become difficult, at best.

Develop Project or Initiative. If all signals point to "go." The next step will be to develop the project or initiative plan for moving forward with the opportunity.