



Rural Youth  
Catalyst

# Building Effective Employer Partnerships: Creating Rural Work-Based Learning Opportunities for Young Adults

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## About Rural Youth Catalyst

Working nationally, the Rural Youth Catalyst (RYC) aims to strengthen and create opportunities that allow rural and Native youth to realize their hopes and dreams while remaining in or returning to their communities. We work across all aspects of youth development but carry a specialized focus on rural and Native opportunity youth. We believe rural and Native young people want meaningful leadership opportunities, real work and to contribute their skills and service to their communities. RYC seeks to: strengthen capacity of local practitioners, pilot replicable innovative solutions to persistent barriers and change the policy indicators used to measure success for rural young people and their communities. <https://ruralassembly.org/rural-youth-catalyst-project>

## About Jobs For The Future

Jobs for the Future (JFF) drives transformation of the American workforce and education systems to achieve equitable economic advancement for all. [www.jff.org](http://www.jff.org)



## Introduction

Building strong employer partnerships is critical to connecting young people to work opportunities including, but not limited to, Registered Apprenticeships. Engaging employers in the design of training, selection of credentials, development of work-based learning activities, and the provision of career exploration and supportive services will help ensure that young adults can access and advance in the workforce. Successful employer partnerships will provide value to the employer, the training provider/practitioner, and young people. Implementation of a well-crafted employer engagement strategy can result in increased placements, increased retention rates, and robust employment-related exploration and experience opportunities.

Rural communities tend to have fewer employers and less concentration of employers in individual sectors than in urban and suburban areas. As a result, they need modifications to traditional employer engagement strategies created for urban landscapes. While there can be a mix of both large and small employers, smaller numbers often mean fewer placement opportunities and a varying level of readiness and desire for more formalized Registered Apprenticeships. Tailored strategies are critical to effectively engaging employers in developing pathways and placement opportunities for young people. Larger employers are usually more familiar with work-based learning and apprenticeship and are often more likely to have the means to support the training costs associated with apprenticeship. However, small businesses are generating greater numbers of new jobs and it is important to include them in outreach efforts. According to the Small Business Administration's Economic Profile for 2020, more than 65 percent of all the net new jobs created since 2000 were created by small businesses. Small businesses created 1.6 million net new jobs in 2019, with firms employing fewer than 20 workers generating 1.1 million net new jobs, or almost 70 percent of the jobs.

Rural economies are made up predominately of small employers. While there is likely a small concentration in the town center, in many rural areas businesses are spread out geographically, making communication and transportation key issues for employment success. Many times, these employers are not connected to a trade association, and few have unionized workers. These employers often require more attention and more intensive support to initiate and ensure successful work-based learning experiences, including apprenticeship.

## Introduction, continued

However, the intimate nature of these smaller work environments can make it easier to provide key training components such as mentorship, inclusion of apprentice voice, and hands-on training. This, in turn, can provide a more effective and supportive placement opportunity for young adults that face significant barriers to the labor market.

A successful employer engagement strategy in a rural setting, one that can most easily place individuals in gainful employment, is the result of strong employer relationships and a clear understanding of their needs. Combining this with program design that focuses on participant readiness and post-hiring support can result in easier placement. Greater employer and employee satisfaction leads to more stable employment and longer the job retention. These partnerships require an ability to mobilize all available resources for workforce development, including those offered by your organization and your partners. They also require the establishment of trust between your organization and employers. This is especially important when engaging employers in developing apprenticeship opportunities. Trust will help you to address employer concerns and dispel myths and misconceptions about apprenticeship, can facilitate the co-design of solutions to challenges, and enables you to support employers in navigating the apprenticeship space. To establish trust and build partnerships, training providers should be able to clearly articulate their value add, have a clear strategy for continuous engagement, and know how to draw on the capacity and services of other community partners to knit together an apprenticeship ecosystem that places employers and young adults at the center.

It is important to note that while the creation of robust employer partnerships is critical to connecting young adults to career and economic advancement pathways, having a cohort of young people ready to enter those placements is equally important. Creating placement opportunities without viable candidates to fill them, or creating demand for work-based experiences and having no opportunities for young people, can exacerbate barriers and negatively impact partnership development with employers. Training programs should ensure that they have effective recruitment practices in place to engage young people and should leverage employer partnerships to ensure that supportive wrap-around services are made available to participants to help them persist through training and job placements.

## Section 1: Getting Ready: Assessing Where You Are

Rural youth-serving programs can often lack sufficient resources and capacity to successfully meet the same participation levels as urban programs. Many federal youth workforce programs, including the Workforce Investment Opportunity Act and the U.S. Department of Labor's YouthBuild, do not differentiate outcomes between urban communities where employers and participants are plentiful and rural America where it is necessary to serve a much larger geography to find both placements and participants. As a result, programs in rural communities are less competitive for funding and when they do get funded need to work much harder to satisfy target outcome measurements. Because of this, it is important that workforce development in rural areas be considered a team sport both within your organization and with outside partners. Successful employer relationships and sufficient numbers of work-ready participants will be dependent on the interrelationships between organizations. If long-term placement is the shared goal, creating a collective strategy for engaging employers and youth participants is critical for success.

Before initiating a structured employer engagement effort, it is important to first understand your existing employer partner landscape fully. This will provide an important foundation to support your engagement efforts and will help unearth opportunities for scaling or replication of successful approaches and strategies. Below are tools adapted from JFF's Employer Engagement Toolkit: From Placement to Partnership that will get you started: <sup>1</sup>

**Tool 1.1 | Assess Your Current Partners: Internal Assessment.** This internal partner assessment is a first step to the employer engagement process. Use this worksheet to focus your efforts, outline your current partner activities, and determine what you need from your existing partners.

**Tool 1.2 | Creating Employer Partner Profiles.** Understanding how existing partners think about your organization can form the baseline of your engagement strategy and can be useful in engaging new employers. This tool helps you assess your current partners to see if you are meeting their needs, as well as how their involvement in your program aligns with the needs you identified in your internal assessment. This can be a survey but is more effective if interviews are done. Interviews demonstrate a greater level of commitment to understanding partner needs, result in more detailed answers, and help build personal relationships.

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Doyle, Employer Engagement Toolkit: From Placement to Partners (Boston: JFF, 2015), <https://www.jff.org/resources/employer-engagement-toolkit-placement-partners/>

## Section 1: Getting Ready: Assessing Where You Are, cont.

This tool also includes a set of interview questions for a potential new employer partner. During an interview with a potential new partner, you will want to talk briefly about what your program does and how it can benefit the employer. Your goal is to leave understanding the workforce needs of the business, familiarize them with your program, and gauge their interest in getting involved in simple or more complex ways.

**Tool 1.3 | Setting Goals.** This worksheet helps you analyze the information you have gathered about your partnership so that you can set goals to strengthen it. The background and baseline activities sections summarize what you already know about your partnerships, as collected through Tools 1.1 and 1.2. Now you are ready to start thinking about how you can build a mutually beneficial partnership. This tool focuses on key program activities and allows you to set additional goals. The subsequent sections will help you build your desired relationships.

**Tool 1.4 | Creating Employer Database.** Creating a database of your existing employer partners as well as targets for new partnerships will allow your organization to stay on track and ensure efficient communications with partners. Using an active spreadsheet (e.g., Google Sheets, Excel) will allow you to link names with their individual business profiles and keep track of progress and engagement across new and existing relationships. This is a living document and should be updated and added to routinely as you implement your employer engagement strategy.

Building a robust employer engagement program takes time. A critical mistake is treating employer engagement like the old help wanted ads, expecting placements to happen in a two-month window of your program. It doesn't happen all at once and this work requires persistence and patience. Once you know where you are starting from, you can begin to create plans for increasing engagement of existing employer partners and building new relationships with businesses in your region.



## Section 2: Identifying Resources and Finding Hidden Assets

The foundation of a strong employer ecosystem system starts with asset mapping. Asset mapping focuses on identifying what currently exists and on who is doing what and where. It helps everyone in the room see the opportunity for partnership and alignment of work. Most importantly, it highlights the existing assets you have to build from and any gaps that need to be filled. This process can also enhance conversations with employers, help to define what a partnership should look like, and support efforts to establish more collaborative employer and community partner ecosystems.

**Tool 1.5| Asset or Resource Mapping.** Creating an asset map including all of the organizations/programs serving (or potentially able to serve) your population helps you identify services, service providers, and resources in your community or region. In addition, a map can also point out resource gaps as well as potentially duplicative service.

By collaborating to create a systemwide map of activities you can also see where you are already working together, more effectively divide labor between organizations, and more efficiently share connections. This can help increase the organizational capacity needed to develop work-based learning opportunities, including apprenticeships.

By creating an asset map, the whole group will be able to:

- Understand where and how young people are being exposed to potential careers.
- Identify who is already interfacing directly with young people and how they could assist with outreach and recruitment.
- Inventory existing training and education resources and use them to identify employers that are offering strong skill development opportunities.
- Uncover existing employer relationships and connectors to those relationships to build on, which might also uncover additional information on specific employers.
- Identify infrastructure that can be utilized including, but not limited to, funding opportunities and critical internet-enabled space for online education, and training and access to transportation services.
- Better understand which support services are offered and how they might be accessed to support placements.





## Section 2: Identifying Resources and Finding Hidden Assets, cont.

In rural communities, where resources are scarce, collaborative engagement is critical. It is likely that employers are being contacted by more than one organization for similar things. Establishing a cooperative and thoughtful approach to outreach, engagement, and activities, one that properly identifies the role of different organizations and the services and resources offered, can make it easier to cultivate relationships with employers who may otherwise be oversaturated with requests. This tactic can also strengthen connections between training providers and community-based organizations, which can, in turn, strengthen referral networks for participants, more comprehensively knit together services, and support the creation of a work-based learning continuum that leads to apprenticeship.

### ***Identify Low-Hanging Fruit***

After completing your asset map, review it as a team with these questions in mind:

- Where are your training strengths? Where are your deficits?
- What employer connections already exist? Have they been formalized? If not, what is needed to formalize them?
- What are your youth participants looking for? How do you know? Does your programming align with their needs and interests?

Pay close attention to:

- Existing employer connections that can be built upon
- Strong training programs that apply to groups of employers that could be targeted
- Occupations that many young people show an interest in
- The wraparound services and supports you offer and those that you don't

Use this information in your conversations with existing employer partners to develop agreements that include benchmarks for success, clearly defined roles and responsibilities, mechanisms for communication and progress updates, and strategies for connecting activities.

## Section 3: Identifying Your Target Industries & Employers

Building employer relationships takes time and effort, and not all partnerships bring equal value to your program. This section offers tools to support strategic outreach and engagement with employers that offer the most value to your program and participants. A key first step to doing this includes building an in-depth knowledge of your employer ecosystem. This includes understanding where regional economic, educational, and training resources are being invested. This will help you identify and appeal to employers that offer the greatest opportunity for mutual benefit and identify who might hold relationships that could be expanded upon.

As you identify potential new partners, circle back to Tools 1.2 and 1.4. Create new Employer Partnership Profiles and add new target businesses to your database to improve your ability to stay on track.

### Finding Information about Your Employer Landscape

#### *Develop a Labor Market Profile*

Use the Bureau of Labor Statistics and your state's local labor market information, often available through local workforce boards, to get a snapshot of in-demand occupations, including information on median wages and educational requirements. You can also find information about the types of employers with these occupations. This can offer you a starting point for employer outreach and engagement.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics data can help you understand which types of employers are more concentrated in your area, which pay at or near your region's median wage and are accessible with less than a bachelor's degree. While the data can tell you about the types of businesses and their characteristics, it does not list individual employers. You will need to do this research separately, but mining for this data is a good group exercise as each individual brings to the table their own personal networks and knowledge.

In addition, this list does not normally include public sector jobs, but do not exclude these opportunities from your target list for employer outreach and placement. In rural areas most jobs are in health care, education, and social service. But many are also in the government sector. These employers are a critical piece of the puzzle when developing apprenticeship pathways for rural young adults.

## Section 3: Identifying Your Target Industries & Employers, cont.

### ***Utilize Local and State Economic Development Plans.***

It is important to understand where and how resources are being invested to create jobs. Each state, and most counties and cities, have economic development strategies that drive the allocation of resources toward job creation. Most information on these plans is accessible by searching online using your state, county, city, and the words “economic development.” It is also important to become familiar with the individuals/organizations involved and engage them in your work. This could be an area of low-hanging fruit and a place where synergy can be created.

### ***Leverage the Activities and Connections of Regional Partners***

Other entities within your community, including community colleges, workforce development boards, American Job Centers, unions, and industry associations, focus their activities on where there is current job demand and on industries that are growing. These organizations are working to engage employers and develop career pathways and apprenticeship, work-based learning, and other training opportunities. Their connections, resources, and knowledge can be valuable when building a collaborative ecosystem around youth employment and economic advancement. To leverage their efforts and enhance your own work, establish partnerships with these entities, join industry sector collaboratives, and participate in the local business development associations. These approaches can be especially beneficial for rural communities because they can expand access to funding and resources, increase employer and community networks, and offer connections to additional services and supports for young adults.



## Section 4: Setting Employer Targets and Identifying Design Considerations

Simply placing a young person with an employer is a transaction; building a multifaceted relationship with an employer, however, can be transformational. The difference is in the depth and breadth of the employer relationship and the activities of the partnership. Your relationship with employers can be envisioned along an employer engagement continuum of time and financial commitment, and can range from attending an event or supporting career awareness by speaking in a classroom to providing unsubsidized employment for young people. The goal is to, over time, develop several different levels of engagement with individual employers. The more engagement, the greater the potential for significant financial commitment—apprenticeship and unsubsidized employment.

### ***Refine and Organize Your Targets***

Organize potential employer partners based on ease of engagement—first tier (or low-hanging fruit), second tier (requiring more intentional engagement or conversation), and third tier (requiring deeper and more sustained communication to formalize the relationship). Focus on low-hanging fruit first, engaging employers who have already shown an interest in partnering, who have demonstrated a commitment to hiring young people, and who want to learn about or engage in apprenticeship and work-based learning. These employers could include current connections, groups of employers in targeted industries, or industry associations.

### ***Creatively and Collaboratively Design Programming***

Apprenticeship is often one strategy of many for an organization. In rural regions, in particular where apprenticeship systems may be less established, innovative approaches to designing programs and engaging employers are critical. Successful programs will weave together programmatic elements from different sources to offer services that support both the employer and the apprentice. They will also leverage relationships with local workforce partners to support their capacity and funding and expand connections to resources and supports for employers.

## Section 4: Setting Employer Targets and Identifying Design Consideration, cont.

Creating apprenticeships is most cost effective when one type of apprenticeship can be filled with several apprentices, for example in a large manufacturing firm, large accounting agency, or at a university. Many times, rural apprenticeships are individually crafted to meet the needs of individual employers making it time consuming with few placements. Instead, look at developing a program with a number of smaller employers in the same or similar businesses, such as automotive repair shops, in which training can serve apprentices in several different positions. Two strategies have been demonstrated to be successful in addressing economies of scale for rural programs.

### Addressing Limited Employer Capacity –Two Tactics

#### *Centralized Coordination*

Mitigate administrative challenges and potential pitfalls due to low population densities by coordinating efforts across employers and programs. Establish a strong and effective point of contact who can answer questions, help employers navigate the system and provide support through the apprenticeship development process. The right person can become a trusted ally for employers in developing apprenticeship opportunities and meeting their workforce needs. This strategy can also help you leverage experience, lessons, and promising approaches from past work.

#### *Group Sponsor Apprenticeships*

Most employers in rural areas are small with limited time and resources to allocate to apprenticeship. A group sponsorship is a collaborative partnership in the administration and execution of Registered Apprenticeship programs. This model allows members to benefit through shared resources, a primary point of contact, and administrative support. Group sponsorships can support the participation of multiple small employers by alleviating the need for individual registration and administration, creating economies of scale in building youth apprenticeship programs in geographies lacking both built and organizational infrastructure.<sup>2</sup>



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2. Boren, Pruitt, Arabandi, and Rayfield, Rural Apprenticeships for Young People.

## Section 5: Engaging Employers through Effective Messaging and Communication

Understanding and responding to what motivates an employer is important when tailoring your messaging. In rural communities, there are often two primary motivators for employers—what is beneficial for their business and their sense of civic responsibility. To develop a message that truly resonates, it is important to convey how apprenticeship can meet these needs and to highlight what you do and the value of these features of your program.

### Conveying Your Value to Employers

#### *Features*

Examples of features to highlight include:

- Recruiting
- Prescreening of candidates for readiness
- Transportation support
- Pre-apprenticeship training
- On-the-job mentor support or training
- Job design assistance (helping design the apprenticeship experience on the job to get to productivity early)
- Supportive services for the apprentices (housing assistance, counseling, substance abuse rehab)
- Funding (depending on what you can offer, training, tuition, wage support)



Your organization may not offer all these features directly, so make sure you know what is being offered by your partners. This can help you convey the work of the larger ecosystem and demonstrate how these services can knit together to support apprentices and employers themselves. (See Section 3—Asset Mapping Tool 1.4)

## Section 5: Engaging Employers through Effective Messaging and Communication, cont.

### *Benefits*

In addition to sharing the various features and activities of your program, it is also important to highlight how these activities can benefit your employer partners and how apprenticeship, in particular, can provide a value-add. Examples of benefits that your program and apprenticeship can offer employers include:

- Saving time in the recruitment process by prescreening potential employees
- A stronger candidate pool of individuals who prepared for the employer's workforce
- Subsidized wages or training (if appropriate)
- Tax benefits (depending on your state)
- Formalized industry-appropriate skill building and credentials for apprentices
- Increased diversity in the workplace
- Increased retention rates due to the mentorship and supportive services offered by your program and partners
- An ability to train their workforce for their specific needs and goals

In addition to benefiting an employer's bottom line and workforce needs your work and the apprenticeship model can also help them meet their civic engagement. Below are examples of how you can message the impact that hiring young adults through apprenticeship can have in helping employers invest in their communities:

- Apprenticeship can demonstrate an employer's commitment to investing in their community by providing quality jobs, livable wages, and career advancement opportunities.
- Apprenticeship can offer a way for young adults to stay in their communities by connecting them to meaningful work and advancement opportunities with local businesses.
- Apprenticeship is a proven training model that supports long-term career advancement and access to postsecondary education for all workers, including young adults.
- Apprenticeship training can help young adults build their social capital, which can support their own civic engagement, leadership development, and development of professional and personal networks.
- Apprenticeship's focus on mentoring and supportive services can make a positive difference in young people's lives and strengthen their connections to their communities.

## Section 5: Engaging Employers through Effective Messaging and Communication, cont.

This not an exhaustive list of examples, and creating your own list of features, benefits, and value-add for apprenticeship and work-based experiences will ensure that you will be able to tailor your messaging to meet the diverse needs of employers. Make sure to address the key features of your program that set you apart from others. These could include pre-apprenticeship training, career exploration or job design assistance, pre-screening for candidate readiness, post-place support services, or funding opportunities available to employers.

In addition to sharing the benefits you can offer, it is equally important that you are clear about what you do and don't do. Doing so will set realistic expectations with employer partners and ensure that you build relationships that are mutually beneficial and impactful. To do this, create a value proposition that highlights the impact and effectiveness of your training and the support you can offer. Acknowledge the ways in which you prepare young people for the world of work and the important contributions young people can make to the employer's workforce.

### ***Strategy Spotlight: The Elevator Pitch***

An elevator pitch is a 30-45 second speech that offers a brief introduction of your program to someone you run into casually or meet at a networking event. It is designed to lead to a second meeting where more detail can be shared. Your introduction should include the following:

- Agency name, your name, and your role
- A clear, concise description of your service and the benefit it provides
- Challenge(s) your service is trying to address
- Benefit to the person you are talking to
- Your energy and commitment—what motivates you to do the work
- Closing that opens the door to an additional meeting

Practice your pitch with your team and with existing partners. As you get more experienced you will be able to adapt it to different audiences.



## Section 5: Engaging Employers through Effective Messaging and Communication, cont.

### Leveraging Champions to Promote Your Work

Employers often look to their peers to determine whether a partnership or training model will benefit them. Leveraging a variety of champions to share their experiences with your program and the value you offer can be a very effective tool in engaging new partners. Below are examples of different types of champions that can be engaged:

#### *Community Champions*

Champions are community leaders who believe in apprenticeships and speak in support of the program, encouraging others to do so as well. A strong champion can increase employer engagement and draw new resources to the program. Community champions are, many times, driven by a civic responsibility to solve a community problem: unemployment, youth disengagement, economic development. Their messaging connects apprenticeship as a solution.

#### *Employer Champions*

These are employers with whom you have already worked and/or are already engaged in apprenticeship. They can speak to the impact of apprenticeship in meeting their workforce needs and can share the ways in which your partnership has helped them recruit, engage, and support apprentices. Examples of how they might do this include featuring your program in their communications, speaking about your partnership at local chamber, industry, or sector partnership meetings, or referring other employers to your program.

#### *Apprentice Ambassadors*

People who started their careers as apprentices can be effective spokespeople for the model. Their stories can help employers see the impact that apprenticeship has on retention and career advancement. Apprentice ambassadors can also aid in the recruitment of young adults. They can speak from experience about the value of their apprenticeship experience as well as their career trajectory. Personal stories help add color and dimension to your presentations.

### Increasing Your Visibility

To ensure that employers can find you and easily learn about the important work you do, you have to be visible not just to individual employers but to the larger community.

Start with your workforce development partners including workforce development boards, American Job Centers, high school and college instructors, vocational trainers, youth-serving programs, American Job Centers, etc. Offer to host individual meetings with those organizations to give presentations about your program or participate in employer and industry focused events that your partners host (job fairs, employer luncheons, industry advisory groups).

## Section 5: Engaging Employers through Effective Messaging and Communication, cont.

Invite partners, potential partners, and employers to visit your program. Visits could be structured as breakfast meetings, brown bag lunches, career fairs, or even community service activities done in partnership with program participants. Cohosting with your community partners, which could expand your invitation list, increases your visibility with new partners and stakeholders and can increase the likelihood that new employers will attend.

Consider joining or partnering with your local chamber of commerce; Rotary, Kiwanis, or Lions clubs; or other service organizations. Get on their meeting agendas to do presentations, invite them to visit your program, and ask to be included in their communications and mailing lists.

### Aligning Your Marketing to Existing Opportunities

Marketing needs to take into consideration the cycles of a business. Thinking about apprenticeships during their busiest season will only create frustration. For example, working with a construction firm in the fall after rains start in preparation for a new apprentice to start in the spring when construction will gear back up makes sense. Talking to that same firm in the spring, when they are starting crews up could be challenging.

It can be effective to develop seasonal campaigns aimed at industries that are likely to recruit at certain times of the year ahead of peak season. Tourism and hospitality can be seasonally oriented in their employment efforts. Employers, however, need to be aware that apprenticeship is not about filling short term employment needs.

### Staying Connected

Creating and filling apprenticeship opportunities are not the final acts, a successful and sustainable program values relationship with both employers and apprentices. Build into your program opportunities to reconnect--remember the employer engagement continuum. If an employer has made the greatest commitment, employment, you can engage them in lower-level commitments, becoming an advisor for example, providing testimonials as a champion for apprenticeships or just speaking about their business for career awareness. Apprentices can be tapped as a feedback loop—what is working, what could be better, and the role for your agency in improving the situation. In addition, successful apprentices can be tapped as apprenticeship ambassadors speaking to other young people about their experiences.