

IMPROVED REENTRY EDUCATION

RECOMMENDATIONS

As part of the Promoting Reentry Success through Continuity of Educational Opportunities (PRSCOE), the Department of Education's Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE) released the [Reentry Education Toolkit](#).¹ This Toolkit offers guidelines, tools, and resources designed to empower education providers as they implement the [Reentry Education Framework \(Framework\)](#). The Framework promotes development of an education continuum, through which incarcerated individuals receive education services in corrections facilities and, after reentry, through community-based education programs. The Framework identifies five critical components for consideration:

1. Program infrastructure
2. Strategic partnerships
3. Education services
4. Transition processes
5. Sustainability

With each component, the Toolkit provides resources and guidance to help providers implement Framework components. This product provides tools and guidance that complement the tools provided in the [Strategic Partnerships](#) section of the Toolkit.

¹ The Reentry Education Framework and Toolkit were developed by RTI International for the Department of Education's Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education.



JOBS FOR THE FUTURE



STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

The following recommendations will help you develop sustainable strategic partnerships.

The Toolkit identifies [partnerships](#) as a critical component of successful reentry education programs, and the toolkit provides practitioners with guidance for mapping partnership resources and establishing partnership agreements. Per the recommendation to engage partners, these tools help practitioners identify the right partners with whom to build the education program while delivering services to the target reentry population.

As partnerships develop, the needs for the program and participants may shift: instead of looking for the right partners, providers need to make sure their partners have the right capacity. As a complement to partnership tools in the Toolkit, this tool provides guidance for building partner capacity to ensure ongoing success.

Tool 1. Building Partner Capacity

Reentry education program providers recognize the need for partners to provide comprehensive services for people released from incarceration. The first step is finding the right partners. Over time, the needs of the program and the target population change. Existing partners may need to build new capacity.

The example below briefly illustrates a program faced with this issue of partner capacity followed by some questions for consideration by teams who are working to address this issue.

Example: Building Partner Capacity

Every County Community College (ECCC) (pseudonym) expanded an existing program, Second Chances, to provide a high school equivalency diploma and postsecondary credentials to individuals who are returning to their community from incarceration through residential halfway house programs. Workforce development is a critical element of this program. ECCC engaged partners who offered job training programs in entry-level positions that had clear advancement opportunities in industries with growing demand.

With the success of the program, more individuals enrolled and persisted—growing from 12, to 15, to 20 people per cohort. But as the program demand grew, one of the partners, Ready2Work (pseudonym) struggled. The outcomes in for participants in their training programs declined. Initially, Ready2Work had met expectations, but as the number of Second Chances participants started to reach the goal of 20 per cohort, the organization struggled to meet expectations for training and placement despite their previous experience.

ECCC and Ready2Work began to meet more frequently to explicitly address this performance issue. Through regular meetings, the partners found that the workforce partner was struggling because the customary supports they offered could not stretch to meet the complex needs and higher numbers of people being served in the Second Chances reentry program. ECCC's program director identified the challenge as follows: Ready2Work had a strong training program with supports for their traditional population—low-skilled but relatively stable in their life circumstances. They did not have experience working with people returning from incarceration with acute needs for social, emotional, and academic support who were navigating these issues within the context of reentry (e.g. probation meetings, securing a drivers' license, and mandated courses).

ECCC and Ready2Work worked together to develop a plan for building program capacity. This program included a set of interim benchmarks for progress as well as a timeline. ECCC also sequenced the implementation so that this partner's deliverables were delayed; this gave the partner more time to build capacity. With clear direction and expectations and a reasonable timeline, the workforce partner is now meeting expectations.

Drawing on this example, here are some questions to consider when assessing and addressing partnership capacity.

1. What roles and responsibilities does the partner need to implement in order to deliver a successful program? (The *Mapping Partners* chart below can be used to clarify partner roles and responsibilities.)
2. In what areas is the partner(s) struggling to deliver or meet expectations? (Be specific in responding to the question. For example, instead of "not getting enough placements," try to identify the reason: "not enough counselors to provide career counseling" or "existing employer network is not open to hiring people with a history of incarceration.")
3. What strategies would address the core challenge(s)? What practices, resources, and programming need to be implemented?
 - a. Are there existing partners who could provide support, professional development, or resources to address the challenge?
 - b. Would delaying the timeline for the partner's deliverables address any or all of the capacity concerns?
4. What benchmarks does the partner need to meet in order to demonstrate progress? What timeline is reasonable and acceptable?

TIP: This is definitely a process to implement when a partnership is being developed. As the work evolves, partner roles also evolve. New roles and responsibilities may require existing partners to stretch. It will be important to recognize when this is happening and ensure the partner(s) has the necessary supports to grow into new roles so the program can grow as well.

WORKSHEET: MAPPING PARTNER ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

When determining partnership roles and responsibilities (as recommended in Tool 1), it is useful to map backwards. Begin with the needs of the clients/students/participants and the resources and expertise needed to address those needs, and then work toward the partner who can meet those needs. Often, a partner has most of what it takes, but there may be some gaps. It is also useful to use this worksheet to note capacity strengths and gaps.

Client Needs	Resources and Expertise	Identified or Potential Partner	Capacity (Strengths/Gaps)

Tool 2. Strategic Employer Partnerships

Employers are critical strategic partners for any reentry education program. Too often, however, employers' engagement or partnership is limited to the role of providing employment placement at the end of the training. This is a critical role to fill, but for programs seeking to change employer behavior, namely getting them to hire people with criminal backgrounds, there are advantages to deepening these relationships.

This tool provides guidance for building strategic partnerships between reentry education providers and employers, outlining how to more deeply engage with existing employers and overcome the myths and misperceptions about hiring people with criminal backgrounds.

Tool 2.1 Myth busting

Employers tend to be risk averse in their hiring practices. Hiring people with criminal backgrounds opens employers to risk of liability if crimes are committed. They may also be concerned about negative perceptions from customers and current employees' fears of working with "ex-cons." The following recommendations may help efforts to engage more employers.

Employer to Employer

Employers have particular concerns about hiring people with criminal backgrounds, especially those who have only recently been released from incarceration, concerns which only other employers can address. Encourage employers who currently hire participants from your reentry education program to become champions for your program and its graduates.

Breakfast Club

Host an employer breakfast. Ask employer champions to be speakers, and invite employers whom you have been courtin, but who have reservations about hiring participants from your program, to the breakfast. In these small gatherings, potential employers can learn how the champion employers overcame concerns of customer perceptions, fears of current employees and other risks associated with hiring people returning from incarceration. In this setting, concerned employers can also hear the success stories from hiring these individuals.

Waving the Banner

Sometimes all it takes is one employer with a large bully pulpit to start a movement. For example, [Butterball Farms](#) in Michigan has a very public commitment to hire and promote people who have been incarcerated, and they are challenging other employers to join forces with them. The [30-2-2 Initiative](#) encourages 30 employers to hire at least 2

people with criminal backgrounds and track their progress for 2 years. This campaign aims to increase hiring opportunities and build evidence that employees who have been incarcerated can develop into skilled, productive employees.

✚ **Putting a Face on the “Ex-con”**

In many instances, employers do not know anyone who has been incarcerated, and the images in their mind are at odds with the image of a trusted, loyal employee. You can help put a more realistic and positive face on “ex-cons.” Invite employers to participate in mock interviews with the participants in your program so the employers can meet and talk with them in person. In classes where participants make presentations or demonstrate their proficiency, encourage faculty members to invite prospective employers. Inviting employers to these program activities will help employers see the participants as prospective employees first and formerly incarcerated second.

Tool 2.2 Expanding the Continuum of Engagement

When employers work with reentry programs at phases beyond the hiring and placement phase, it strengthens the program and it builds personal connections between prospective employers and program participants. Awareness grows and perceptions of “ex-cons” change to recognition of the talents of individuals ready for a second chance.

A tip for deepening employer engagement:

- ✚ Think of employer engagement as a continuum. Instead of asking employers to do everything or a little, identify specific areas where deeper or different types of engagement could strengthen or expand program resources, capacity, or impact. This “ladder” from [Jobs for the Future](#) provides a useful framework:
 - **Advising:** Program provider’s interview or survey employers about their needs for employees and the employers’ willingness to hire people with criminal backgrounds. They are consulted informally about hiring or training needs through interviews or surveys of businesses in a sector or region. More formally, employers participate on program advisory boards by providing ongoing information about workforce challenges and support the success of employers, students, and communities.
 - **Capacity building:** Program providers and employers identify and respond to one another’s needs. Providers develop customized training to prepare a pipeline of skilled job candidates and employers assist programs by providing equipment, space, or skilled employees to provide training.
 - **Co-designing:** Employers are invited to shift from being passive advisors to active collaborators with the educational institution on education and workforce initiatives, including design of new curricula and pathways.

- **Convening:** Educators work actively to recruit and convene businesses and their associations as substantive, ongoing participants in addressing workforce needs. Colleges serve as hubs or brokers of workforce collaboration with employers and other education and training providers.
- **Leading:** Colleges, employers, and other stakeholders build partnerships that transform local or regional workforce systems and enhance the growth of targeted industries or sectors. Some of the most effective and long-lasting regional partnerships are those that are led by industry representatives.

Reflecting on this ladder, consider current and potential employer partners: Are there areas where deepening their involvement would enhance your work? The worksheets below can help you identify and plan steps for deepening employer engagement and the “pitch” you will deliver to employers.

WORKSHEET 1: DEEPENING WORK ALONG THE EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT CONTINUUM

This worksheet supports efforts to identify the type of engagement a program provider would like to encourage (e.g., co-designing) and then to identify the activities that would be effective and the employer who could support these activities. Keep in mind, that more than one employer can participate in a given activity.

Ladder Step	Activities	Potential Employer	The “Pitch”
Advising			
Capacity Building	Example: <i>Professional development for instructors empowers them to teach the effective use of the latest technology.</i>	PEPCO	<i>People returning to the workforce after incarceration need to be well trained if they hope to overcome misperceptions about their employability. To ensure high-quality training, instructors need to be well prepared. PEPCO’s staff trains instructors in the current technology in line with industry standards. This ensures that the students are ready for the PEPCO workforce and work in the industry in general.</i>
Co designing			
Convening			
Leading			

WORKSHEET 2: PLOTTING ENGAGEMENT FOR EXISTING EMPLOYERS

In some instances, there may be a particular employer that program providers may want to engage with more deeply. In these cases, they can plot their current engagement with the employer and then develop a plan for deepening that engagement.

Ladder Step	Current Engagement	Proposed Engagement
Advising	Example: <i>PEPCO provides advising on curriculum and credential requirements.</i>	
Capacity Building		<i>PEPCO frontline staff provides professional development to instructors to ensure that the curriculum includes the most up-to-date skills and technologies.</i>
Co designing		<i>Based on capacity building, PEPCO staff works closely with the institution to redesign curriculum including sequencing and relevant industry competency. The aim is to ensure the training prepares people for work.</i>
Convening		
Leading		<i>PEPCO takes the lead in promoting the benefit of training and hiring people returning to the workforce from incarceration.</i>

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