



## Ron Cole: What colleges offer businesses that businesses need

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Employers in our region need workforce development at all levels. They are having trouble filling jobs and retaining employees. The essential skills they need aren't just technical. They include skills the liberal arts can provide.

Years ago, fresh in my role as provost at Allegheny College, I reached out to local manufacturing business leaders with the idea of developing partnerships for internships and research projects that could serve both our students and neighboring industries in Western Pennsylvania.

### The wrong questions

Initially, I was rebuffed with a polite, "You're a liberal arts college. You don't have anything that we need." I realized that I was asking the wrong questions. So, instead of trying to explain what the college has, I started to ask "What do you need?"

It turned out that they needed many things we could help supply. How can higher education, particularly liberal arts, meet employer needs?

A 2021 report from the American Association of Colleges & Universities, "How College Contributes to Workforce Success," reveals that more than half of employers view teamwork, critical thinking, analyzing and interpreting data, and complex problem-solving as very important skills for their workers. These are essential and transferable skills that are squarely in the wheelhouse of liberal arts education.

Some people see liberal arts education as useless in the work world. But these skills are part of making well-rounded workers. At their best, they integrate a depth and breadth of knowledge from different fields, including STEM, social sciences (including business and economics) and humanities.

### Western Pa. examples

For example, my college has the Allegheny Lab for Innovation and Creativity (ALIC), developed in partnership with local manufacturers and the Economic Progress Alliance of Crawford County. ALIC provides

workshops and microcredentials as in-demand curriculum for traditional undergraduate students and for upskilling those already in the workforce.

It offers training in business leadership, 3-D modeling, editing and publishing, health anatomy and a range of other topics identified as real workplace needs, as a result of building relationships and asking employers what they need.

Western Pennsylvania boasts other examples of this approach: I-HACK at Gannon University; the Center for Intelligence, Research, Analysis, and Training at Mercyhurst University; Future Works at Pitt-Johnstown; the Education and Training Center at Pitt-Titusville; the Pioneer Accelerator at Point Park University; and the Future of Work Initiative at Carnegie Mellon University.

Having spoken with the presidents at each of these institutions, I know that each started by building relationships and asking employers and communities what they need. What do these have in common? Economic development for Pennsylvania.

## Closing the disconnect

Colleges and universities and their communities around the country can adopt this approach. There are a few simple steps to close the disconnect between industry and higher education, particularly for liberal arts institutions. Ask each other what you need and be open to collaboration and innovation. Challenge assumptions. Build relationships.

Regional businesses can look internally to assess problems and opportunities that they are not currently outfitted to address and identify higher education institutions for partnership. At the same time, liberal arts institutions can think differently about who we're serving to determine which areas of expertise we can offer to our region and new ways to deliver it.

It's building relationships between unlikely partners that will be the ideal way to close the disconnect between higher education and economic development in our Commonwealth.

*Ron Cole is president of Allegheny College.*

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