A Framework for Sector Initiatives

By Jim Caldwell

CCCO Visiting Dean, Key Talent Development

Energy Construction & Utilities
California Community Colleges
Workforce & Economic Development


In partnership with:
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The Vision for Success calls for a strategic approach to the way colleges optimize benefits to their students. Sector strategies are by definition strategic, requiring design and execution that assures students reliable pathways into family-wage careers and a foundation for lifelong learning.

This framework describes one approach to developing a strategic sector initiative based on the experiences and lessons learned by the Energy Construction & Utilities (ECU) sector team when designing and executing the Facility Management certificate and degree programs pilot project.

Elements of a sector initiative include the following, which are divided further into four key phases in this section:

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
4. Defining a pilot initiative through collaboration with industry and a supportive college
5. Developing and approving a curriculum that matches industry requirements
6. Launching the pilot initiative as a test bed for success and refinement
7. Assessing the impact of the pilot program to inform statewide scaling
8. Planning for statewide scaling and replication of the initiative
9. Launching the initiative statewide
10. Analyzing statewide outcomes and refining the initiative for continuous improvement

Cultivating relationships with colleges, major employers and industry associations are key in every phase of a strategic sector initiative. A shared vision should be developed early and evolve as lessons are learned and best practices are identified.
Phase 1: Develop the 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, as noted in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Phase 1 – Develop the Strategy**

### Identify the Opportunity

Effective sector teams are vigilant in 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.

Verifying the opportunity 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 enables a sector team to evaluate 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.

Once it’s decided that the sector team will invest more time and energy 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. The dean may or may not appoint a faculty champion, usually waiting for more evidence before introducing the initiative to faculty. Working with the colleges, the sector team identifies a “coalition of the willing” that will engage in further developing the opportunity.

Develop Market Intelligence

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

Update the Sector Strategy

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.

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.

Crossing these hurdles leads to sector team members taking on responsibilities for the new initiative, a work load that has to fit within the team’s capacity.

Once determined, the position of the proposed initiative within the sector portfolio becomes a guide for investing time and resources, as well as driving the need for additional funding as required.

At this point, the initiative is just a project. Completing the pilot project and developing a plan for replicating and scaling are required steps before the project can be considered an initiative.
Phase 2: Create the Initiative

This phase of a sector initiative defines more structure for the pilot through collaboration with industry and a supportive college that creates the curriculum. It also defines the roles of partners, key metrics and an engagement plan for students and key stakeholders to launch, as noted below in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Phase 2 – Creating the Initiative

Defining the Pilot Project

Evidence developed in Phase 1 forms the basis for discussion with prospective pilot colleges. Deans are the point of entry into the college through which this evidence is presented, enabling the college to make a strategic evaluation of the project.

Selecting a pilot college in most cases determines success, with Phase 1 providing significant input into the criteria by which the college is selected. Broad criteria include:

- Does the college have strong programs that will form the basis for the project?
- Is the college in a labor market that will provide completers with living-wage jobs?
- What are the primary pools of potential students from which enrollment should occur?
- Is industry support sufficient to assist in project development and student recruitment?
- How will the project be supported by Guided Pathways?
- Will an appropriate faculty member agree to champion the project?
- What support services can the college provide to help drive enrollment?
Project outcomes drive the work at the pilot college, assuring alignment with the Vision for Success. Discussions with the dean, administrators and the faculty champion translate the overall strategy into specific actions to adapt value propositions for success at the college.

Clarity in the form of a white paper is recommended to facilitate agreement on student outcomes and associated metrics. Accompanying the white paper is a plan with project outcomes, tasks and timelines, funding and responsibilities among those involved. Multiple iterations may be required to reach full agreement among the parties. An implementation checklist is necessary to guide the project.

Communication with the dean is crucial throughout the project definition process. It is recommended that the sector team member engage with the chief instructional officer, supported by the dean, to make sure the project has appropriate college leadership support.

Good project design meets the industry need while delivering a positive impact on the college’s Vision for Success metrics. For example, enrollment, persistence and completion can be enhanced by student clarity about their career choice, the educational pathway into that career and benefits derived from working in that career field. Industry partnerships should be integral to project design, delivering compelling information about job openings, compensation and willingness to hire from the college’s program.

Optimally, the project fits within a Guided Pathway or supports development of a meta-major at the pilot college. It may be that the project establishes new learning tracks or student support services within an existing Guided Pathway, or the project could become foundational to a new Guided Pathway.

Funding sources need to be explored and tapped for development and implementation of the project, student outreach and enrollment and engagement of employers with job opportunities. Significant funds may be required for faculty release time, external curriculum consultants, lab equipment, marketing and other support elements.

The sector team is expected to play a significant role in securing funds and performing project management functions.

**Developing Curriculum**

The faculty champion drives curriculum with the assistance of a regional industry advisory committee through which subject-matter experts participate in development of the project and inform curriculum development. Building and facilitating regional industry advisories is the responsibility of the sector team.

Multiple convenings of the industry advisory augment faculty research and provide ongoing validation of curriculum as meeting the needs of regional employers. Faculty are encouraged to
engage in separate meetings with subject-matter experts during the curriculum development cycle, drilling down into the best ways to achieve requisite student learning outcomes.

Projects designed to meet the industry need also impact the college’s ability to meet Vision for Success metrics. For example, industry advisory inputs into program structure are essential to creating a talent pipeline that will be timely, work-ready and perceived as producing strong job candidates. Linking program structure to pipeline design involves decisions about program length and course sequencing, as well as whether an associate degree, associate degree for transfer or a certificate program would best meet metrics within the Vision for Success. Curriculum approval is managed by faculty according to college, region and Chancellor’s Office guidelines. The sector team facilitates ongoing support throughout the approval cycle, if requested.

Launching the Pilot Project

Beginning with the end in mind is essential to a successful launch, starting with a plan for the initial course offerings on a specific date. For example, a fall semester launch typically involves curriculum approval in the spring, so everything gets sequenced from that milestone. Relationships built with the colleges and industry come into full focus during launch planning and execution. A common vision and understanding of each other’s contributions are essential to a successful launch.

The project team should have been defined early in Phase 2 and a project plan created shortly thereafter. Continually testing the project plan for intentional linkages to the Vision for Success builds confidence that the project’s outcomes will be achieved. Weak links can be identified and strengthened throughout the process.

The pilot launch should reinforce optimum course scheduling and development of cohorts as primary objectives for partnering with faculty, employers and community-based organizations from which students will be recruited. If well-established before the launch, these partnerships can motivate not only enrollment but persistence and completion. Ideally, the course offerings would fall under the umbrella of a Guided Pathway or meta-major program.

Effective student outreach and enrollment activities begin well before the start of enrollment for the next semester. Partnerships and promotional materials are focused on target audiences and developed well in advance to help streamline recruiting efforts at launch.

Launch events introducing prospective students to faculty and employers has proven to be an effective strategy to drive enrollment. Significant planning is required, and of course, the event must enable interested students to enroll shortly afterward.
Colleges typically are not equipped for broad outreach to launch a new certificate or degree program, which means the sector team needs to provide leadership and project management if the launch is to succeed.

The sector team facilitates multiple industry advisory meetings with faculty to plan the launch, and check-in calls during the pilot period. This level of engagement is necessary to maintain focus and address any barriers to success that may arise.

Assessing Pilot Impact

Lessons learned from the pilot will inform evolution of the program at the college, plus set the foundation for replication across the state.

Student success is the primary measure by which the pilot should be evaluated. Working with faculty and administrators, the sector team can determine student outcomes at any point during the pilot, but especially at its conclusion. Equally critical to long-term success and sustainability is the perception by industry as to how well the pilot met its needs; its support will be required in Phase 3 of moving from pilot project to initiative. The strength of relationships between the college, industry stakeholder and sector team is a primary determinant in sustainability of the program.

The sector team usually convenes a review panel of college and industry stakeholders to identify lessons learned and refinements that can be made. This panel also evaluates the effectiveness of the launch and various elements of the project plan. Recommendations are documented to guide future program iterations at the college and beyond.

A sustainability analysis assures ongoing program success; this typically involves questions such as:

- How can enrollment be sustained and increased?
- How can persistence and completion rates be increased?
- What measures will improve transfer rates or student employment in a related field of study?
- How will the program be funded on an ongoing basis?
- What steps are necessary for long-term employer engagement?

The pilot determines whether sufficient potential exists to replicate the project at other colleges. Assessment supports this decision process and provides the basis for moving forward.
Phase 3: Replication and Scaling

This phase involves planning and launching a replication of the pilot with the appropriate course corrections, as noted in Figure 3.

*Figure 3: Phase 3 – Replication & Scaling*

**Planning for Scale**

Planning for scale requires a shift from pilot project focus to perspectives that are necessary for a successful initiative. An infrastructure to support the initiative is built by the sector team, reflecting a systematic approach to scaling the program statewide. The industry association and/or statewide employers contribute heavily to building this infrastructure, activating a network of employers and association chapters to support scaling.

Key elements of the infrastructure are:

- Market intelligence and LaunchBoard analysis that identifies opportunities statewide
- Broad industry engagement, organized at the state and regional levels
- A formula for engaging administrators at target colleges
- Structured communications plans and related materials
- A plan for training key talent in replicating success, accompanied by specific action plans

Transitioning from a pilot project to an initiative requires an update to the sector strategy, establishing a clear priority for the initiative and allocating bandwidth and funds for its support.
The speed at which scaling can occur is gated by the scope of industry support and significance of the initiative within each college’s approach to the Vision for Success. It’s useful to focus on early adopters among the colleges to quickly build momentum for taking the initiative to scale.

Just as faculty champions are needed at the colleges, industry champions are important in rallying employer support on a regional basis. A major factor in forming the initiative is developing qualification criteria by which opportunities can be evaluated. Examples include the following on a college-by-college basis: (1) a robust enrollment pool; (2) a responsive regional employer base; (3) good relative “fit” with the college and (4) available funding and bandwidth. The scaling plan needs to be rooted in the above realities before launch. Sector team scans of the regions prior to launch provide important feedback that informs planning. A sequence of actions can then be laid out to optimize resources and increase the chances of early success.

**Launching the Initiative**

Adopting a common approach among sector team members creates a solid basis for statewide launch. This usually involves developing new knowledge related to the initiative and skills in using tools and methods that evolved from the pilot. Elements for success include key talent training in:

- Communicating the value proposition and other key messages
- Leveraging success factors from the pilot
- Regional prioritization
- College engagement
- Industry engagement
- Communications strategy and planning

The launch itself can be college by college, or through a convening that engages industry with priority colleges at the regional or state levels. Each college will launch individually, according to the timeline and methods that work best for them.

A regional industry advisory facilitated by the sector team can serve all participating colleges in the region, creating an environment for sharing best practices and cultivating student connections to employers. Once again, the strength of these relationships will be primary determinants in success of the program.

Implementation steps for the initiative at a college are essentially the same as those that worked for the pilot, refined for adoption specifically within the local college environment. Metrics may vary by college but must align with the Vision for Success and with task-level metrics that worked for the pilot.

Communications is best managed at the initiative level, with materials and events managed centrally by the sector team’s marketing specialists. Each college will need its own branding
applied to the launch campaign while adhering to Chancellor’s Office brand guidelines, which can be facilitated by dialog between the college’s marketing director and the sector team’s marketing specialist.

The sector team needs to assist the college in developing tangible commitments from industry for student work-based learning and employment. Commitments can take many forms but are strongest when individual employers make them. Sometimes it’s necessary to engage with employers’ Human Resources department to gain support for internships and hiring. In other situations, individual employers are unable to commit but are willing to support an aggregate number of internships or hires as a group. However, the commitment process works, it’s vital to the Vision for Success that industry support be developed for students’ employment in a related field of study.
Phase 4: Deliver Lasting Impact

Phase 4 pertains to analyzing statewide outcomes and refining the initiative for continuous improvement, as noted in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Phase 4 – Delivering Lasting Impact

Continuous Improvement

Sustainable success at all participating colleges is the primary goal of the initiative, which is enabled by a sector team approach to continuous improvement statewide. At least four levels of activity can assist in sustainability and continuous improvement including: 1) regional advisory council meetings with faculty; 2) college-level review of metrics and opportunities for refinement; 3) faculty communities of practice that advance andragogy and improve student outcomes and 4) student engagement with industry via local association chapters, work-based learning, and project-based learning.

Metrics and tracking enable continuous improvement, especially those based on industry goals for student placements in work-based learning and employment. Self-sustaining programs rely on funding streams, such as apportionment – the stream of state funding colleges districts receive based on enrollment. The funding formula supporting the Vision for Success provides a roadmap for long-term program sustainability.

The sector team continues to facilitate regional and statewide advisory meetings to make sure advances in each region are made available statewide. Updates to the sector strategy reflect successful strategies in all the above areas, creating a platform for the sector team’s contributions to continuous improvement. For application of this framework, read the ECU case study.
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