A WCET Closer Look at...

"higher ed and industry partnerships

The goal of this Closer Look is to provide deeper practical tips for assessing, developing, and growing business partnerships at your institution.

This piece build on two January 2023 blog posts:

- Accountability for Higher Education is in Creating a Vital Economic Future for America
- We Can't Go It Alone - Forging Business and Industry Partnerships to Transform Higher Education[1]

While this document can stand on its own, your work with it will be enhanced if you read those two posts.
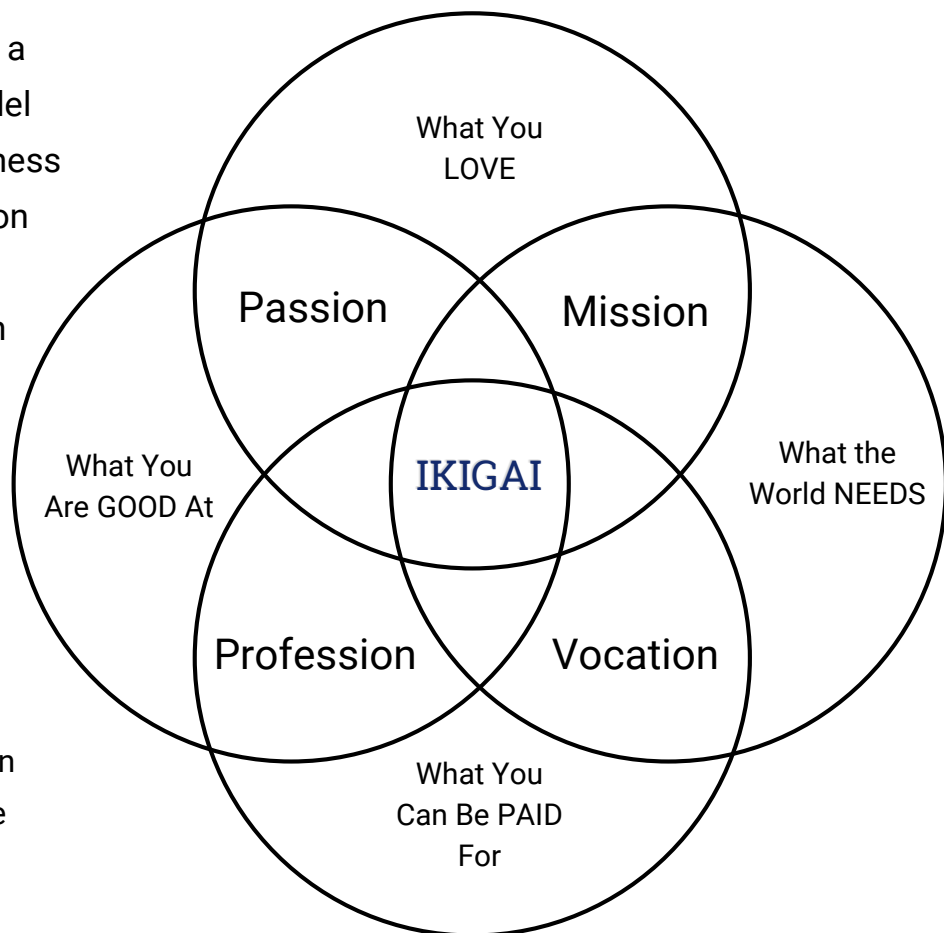
IKIGAI

In Japanese culture, there is a phrase - ikigai - which has no literal English translation. It is sometimes analogized to finding your life purpose or meaning.

The concept is often illustrated with a diagram similar to the one shown here.

While identifying and cultivating ikigai is a deeply personal process, I think the model is useful for institutions in building business partnerships that are sustainable, mission driven, and deeply rooted in meeting the needs of the communities the institution serves.

- Institutional partnerships must be grounded in what the world we serve needs.
- Institutional partnerships must be sustainable and must be something we can survive doing.
- Institutional partnerships should build on our strengths (what we're good at) while also helping us develop new skills that enhance the communities we serve (which I'd argue is a standing for what we love).

In this way, we could find a shared sense of Ikigai - a deeply purposeful sense of service and duty.

Begin Where You Are

Planning & Budgeting

When your institution decides to engage in business partnerships on a serious level, there should be a direct link between this activity and both the institution's mission and its budgeting processes. If this is not the case at your institution and you wish to begin serving businesses in a more partnership oriented manner, then take the necessary time to gain buy in and ensure this is reflected in your mission and strategic plan and your budget.
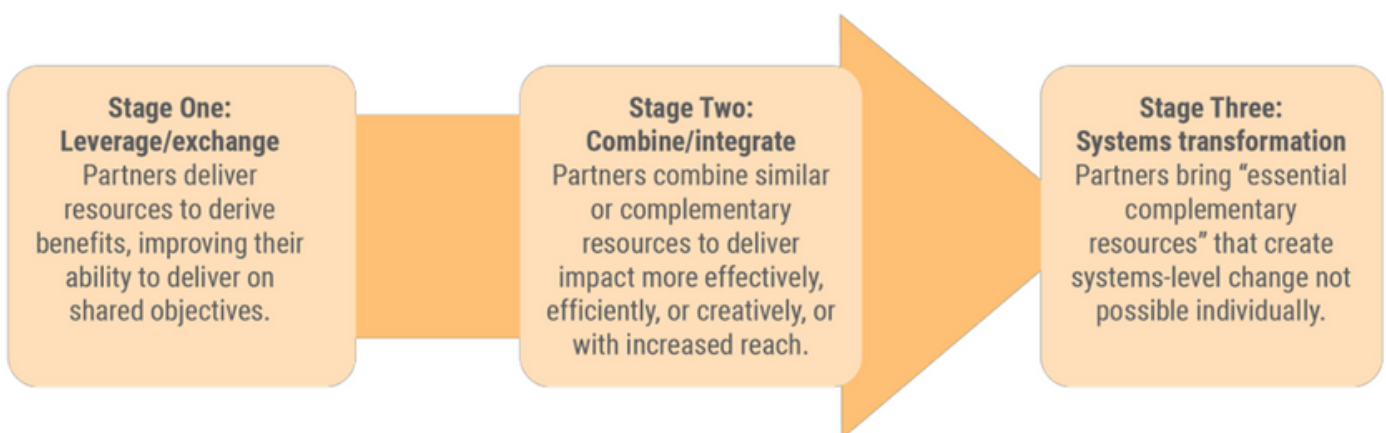
Relationship Assessment

A good place to ground your work is an annual relationship assessment. This is a simple form or spreadsheet that each person at the organization - from housekeeping and janitorial to the C-Suite completes. It recognizes the different relationships that individuals have across the communities you serve. This will be done with suspicion and concern if buy-in isn't gained first. However, once this work is grounded in a culture of trust that recognizes that personal relationships are important in helping the organization grow, people will complete the assessment easily.

Current Partnership Assessment

At this point, it may be a stretch to call your relationships with businesses true partnerships. If they aren't sustainable, formalized, mutually beneficial, and widely recognized then they aren't true partnerships. However, in starting where you are, you acknowledge the foundations you do have and honestly assess where they are. Give each a rating. If you have no other scale to use, I recommend the USAID Momentum Report's three stage system (see image).

FIGURE 1. PARTNERSHIP SPECTRUM[31]

Stage One: Leverage/exchange	Stage Two: Combine/integrate	Stage Three: Systems transformation
Partners deliver resources to derive benefits, improving their ability to deliver on shared objectives.	Partners combine similar or complementary resources to deliver impact more effectively, efficiently, or creatively, or with increased reach.	Partners bring "essential complementary resources" that create systems-level change not possible individually.

Stop to Start

A race car driver can't finish a 500 mile race without stopping a few times in the pits to get gas and fresh tires. The driver may also need nutrition and hydration. In professional sports teams, players switch out and get some time on the bench to refresh tired legs and get clear headed through conversations with a coach.

At the highest levels of performance we often have to stop in order to start again. However, in higher education, all too often we fail to stop and simply keep starting over and over again.
You have to decide what you'll give up in order to get what you want. This is a sobering exercise and it is one with political, financial, and human ramifications for organizations.

Programs that no longer serve the needs of the communities you serve must be updated where possible and ended when necessary. This must be done thoughtfully and professionally.

In this stage of your partnership work you must get good at stopping. There is no one size fits all model here. Instead, here are some suggestions for ways you may want to engage your community to develop the tools for good stopping in order to start that meet your needs:

- Develop program health criteria that are completed annually. Less formal than a traditional program review these criteria should focus on outcomes for students and graduates and monitor enrollment. This assessment should help you target where you need to improve or support a program - or begin to phase out a program that no longer serves the communities you serve.

- Develop service health criteria. Your support staff will be called on to work in new ways when you serve industry well. They need to have the option to stop in order to start new activities.
- Start a rigorous "stop doing this" campaign within your institution that encourages folks to identify innovative ways to do work in new ways. This may help bring new software, new processes, and new ways of doing things to life.
- Stop buying software that doesn't fully meet your needs. Buying software that makes things a little better - but in truth only masks bigger process problems - is not helping higher education. Start doing full needs analysis before investing in any piece of software.

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  - Develop and follow through on buy-in and implementation plans that engage the community rather than springing a new piece of software - that no one even asked for - on them two weeks before the start of a semester.
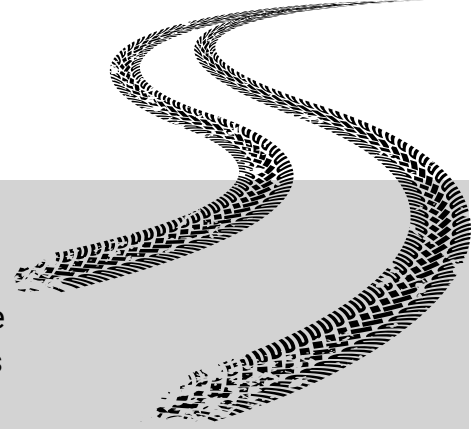
Create Successful Partnerships

Give and Take

Strong partnerships are not business as usual. Partnerships involve compromises, innovations, and capitalizing on opportunities while also overcoming obstacles. You cannot expect a company that runs three shifts around the clock to do business on a traditional daytime college schedule. Realize that for the gains you see in enrollment and service you will need to be flexible to meet the demands of the businesses you serve. Additionally, you'll need to be flexible with your employees who do the work.

Formalize & Celebrate

So many partnerships at institutions rest on the shoulders of one or two people. When those people leave, no one really knows what was going on. Take the time to formalize partnerships through MOUs, contracts, or other appropriate agreements. Develop process documentation and exceptions to policy documents where appropriate.

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