Innovative Strategies to Close Postsecondary Attainment Gaps: Building Collaborative Partnerships through the Stakeholder Engagement Process

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In today's dynamic economy, employers need a skilled, educated workforce to fill jobs. It is estimated that by 2020, 65 percent of jobs will require some postsecondary education.[1] However, employers are currently faced with an insufficient number of adults with the necessary postsecondary preparation to fill those positions successfully, given that fewer than half of Americans ages 25-64 hold a credential beyond high school.[2] This disparity is more alarming when disaggregated by race and ethnicity as educational attainment remains unequal across racial and ethnic groups.[3] This challenge exists in many communities across the United States.

An increasing number of those communities, however, are creating effective public/private coalitions to tackle the challenge of an underprepared workforce. Coalitions that successfully bring together diverse community stakeholders, businesses, and educators—all with their own individual missions and interests—in pursuit of the common goal to improve postsecondary attainment, are a true exercise in civic engagement and collaboration. When diverse stakeholders work together to create intentional education-to-career pathways for all students in the community, their efforts can yield transformative outcomes for the community-at-large by cultivating a genuine talent pool for regional prosperity.

This guidebook takes a deep dive into one such community—the southeast Indiana region—to examine efforts by the Community Education Coalition (CEC) to connect regional leaders across sectors through a framework known as the Stakeholder Engagement Process. By intentionally engaging a diverse set of community stakeholders, CEC ensures that the collaboration pursues strategies and interventions that lead to educational and economic growth for all populations, including those who have been historically underserved. Following the interview portion of the guidebook, we provide a Stakeholder Equity Assessment Tool [on page 12] to enable other communities interested in forming similarly effective collaborations to apply an equity lens when identifying and engaging diverse community partners to collectively implement strategies to increase attainment in their region.

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[1] Carnevale, A.P., Smith, N., & Strohl, J. *Recovery: Job growth and education requirements through 2020*. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2013.

[2] Author's calculation using data from U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table S1501.

[3] Ibid.

Southeast Indiana

- John Burnett – President & CEO, Community Education Coalition (CEC)
- Jack Hess – Executive Director, CivicLab
- Kathy Huffman – EcO Attainment Network Manager, EcO Network
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In 2010, several of the counties in southeast Indiana grappled with low high school and postsecondary attainment rates, particularly among Latinx and low-income adults. At the time, only 27 percent of local adults ages 25-64 had earned at least an associate degree,[4] compared to nearly 42 percent of the national population,[5] and local unemployment was over 10 percent.[6] Over the last decade, however, southeast Indiana has moved the needle significantly on educational attainment, Latinx enrollment within the adult educational system, and unemployment. Thirty-three percent of adults now have an associate degree, and Latinx enrollment in adult education programs increased by 22 percent between 2016 and 2017. Between 2007 and 2018, the equity gap in high school graduation between Latinx students and all students also dropped from 16.6 to 3.5 percent.[7] Similarly, Latinx students are enrolling in college at a higher rate. In 2011, only 39 percent of Latinx students enrolled in college 12 months after graduation, and that percentage increased to 69 percent in 2016.[8] Finally, regional unemployment fell to 2.5 percent in 2019, with 93 percent of credential earners employed in the discipline in which they received training.[9]

How has southeast Indiana made such significant gains? Researchers from the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) spoke with leaders from the Talent Hub effort in southeast Indiana to learn precisely how they engaged diverse stakeholders to further the common goal of increasing their community attainment rates and what this improved engagement led to, in terms of practical strategies and interventions that led to better outcomes. To engage stakeholders in addressing complex social problems, partners use a unique framework called the **Stakeholder Engagement Process** to first cultivate relationships among the people who shape those systems. Using such a process allows for the genuine co-creation of concrete strategies that move the needle on key metrics and outcomes while simultaneously building the region's sustainable, collective capacity to address other problems that may arise.

LATINX Language is important, particularly when we discuss identity. In promoting equity, IHEP engages with and reports on a wide variety of historically underrepresented and underserved communities. In all of our work, particularly as it relates to these communities, we endeavor to be inclusive, accurate, and respectful. As researchers, we also aim, where possible and appropriate, to use language that is consistent across data sets and in research conversations. Throughout this guidebook, we use the term "Latinx" as a gender-inclusive term in reference to people with Latin American and/or Hispanic cultural or racial identities, including Latinos and Latinas but also individuals with non-binary or gender-expansive identities. This term also encompasses the federal definition of "Hispanic" in U.S census data and we use the term "Hispanic" interchangeably when discussing federal data and/or source materials that use this terminology.

This process provides a common language and a common approach for dissolving complex social problems; it is a way of thinking and working together to identify the root causes of inequities and consequently redesign social systems to eliminate barriers. Community partners in southeast Indiana are united by a shared belief that all parties are willingly coming together to be part of something larger than themselves. This governance model relies on an ethic of stewardship—a willingness to be held accountable for the well-being of the larger system by operating in the spirit of service, rather than control.

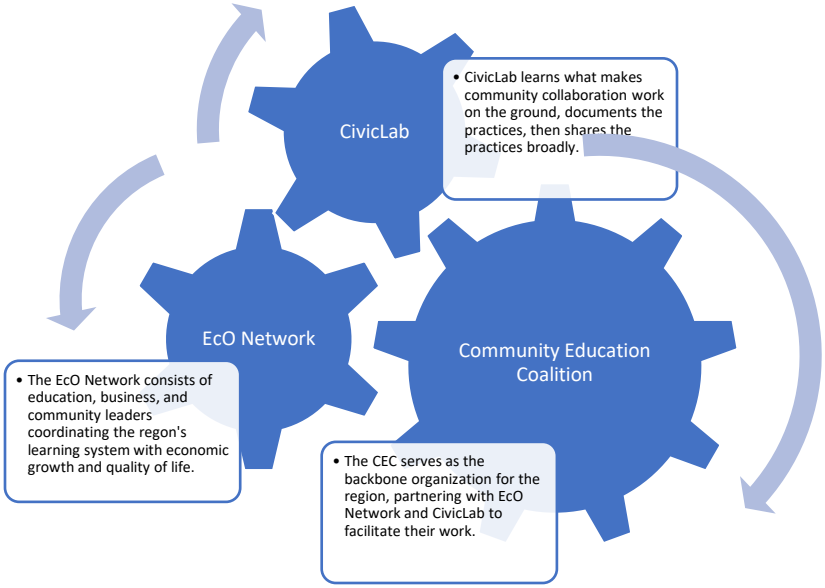
The Stakeholder Engagement Process is primarily led by three main partnerships in the region: the **Community Education Coalition (CEC)**; the **Economic Opportunities through Education (EcO) Network**; and **CivicLab [see Figure 1]**. **The CEC** was born of the ideas of one of the region's most revered residents: J. Irwin Miller. Miller believed that companies should be responsible to their shareholders and communities and that the power of community collaboration can solve social problems spanning the public, private, and social sectors. Today, the CEC represents a partnership of education, business, and community leaders focused on aligning and integrating the southeast Indiana region's community learning system with economic growth and an improved quality of life for its residents.

The **EcO Network** is CEC's largest and most comprehensive initiative, consisting of education, business, and community leaders working in partnership to address education and economic challenges. The EcO Network focuses on increasing educational attainment by creating a regional system of life-long learning linked to the most well-paying industries in southeast Indiana: advanced manufacturing and healthcare.

CivicLab, also an initiative of CEC, is a non-profit institute dedicated to advancing the practice of civic collaboration. CivicLab creates tools and frameworks that form the foundation for practicing effective community collaboration.

The following sections provide an in-depth look at the goals, implementation, and impact of this collaborative community partnership and offer insights for those interested in building a similar effort in their region. To jump-start the process, IHEP's **Stakeholder Equity Assessment Tool** enables users to apply an equity lens when identifying target stakeholders to include in such a partnership.

Figure 1: Southeastern Indiana's Partners Anchoring the Community Collaboration

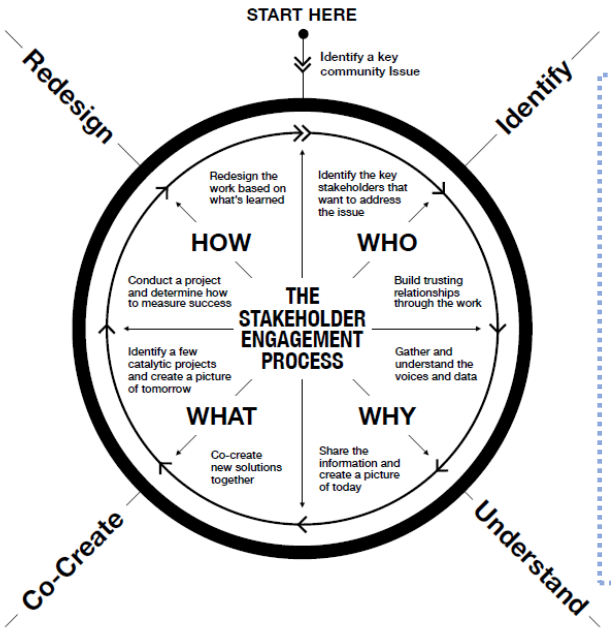


GOALS

IHEP: How does the Stakeholder Engagement Process work?

CivicLab: The process begins with identifying a key community issue, then proceeding through the steps to identify stakeholders (the "who"), understand the problem (the "why"), co-create a solution (the "what"), and redesign a way to move forward (the "how"). We use a graphic to illustrate how we think about these steps and the guiding questions we recommend asking along the way [see Figure 2].

Figure 2: The Stakeholder Engagement Process



Guiding Questions

Who: Whose relationships most shape the challenge or system that interests us? Keep in mind the system is the way we work together.

Why: Why is the current context creating the outcomes that we are experiencing? How are we ourselves contributing to the current reality? Try to make the invisible, visible. If it remains invisible, it will be unsolvable.

What: What can we co-create together that no one can do on their own? Remember creation and design are not problem-solving.

How: How will we redesign our work together? How might we rewire our relationships?

CivicLab
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IHEP: How do you think the Stakeholder Engagement Process helps communities address complex social problems?

CivicLab: The Process is a way of thinking and working that creates a paradigm shift in how communities address complex social problems. We think of it as a kind of "community operating system," a common language and disciplined approach to transforming social systems by cultivating relationships among the people who shape those systems. It's a true participatory democracy.

The process is modeled on a system-building, relationship-based approach as opposed to a problem solving, resource-based approach. Those two things are fundamentally different. The resource-based approach is always a deficit-based approach and is almost always based on a scarcity model. When you use resources, they're forever expended, but a relationship-based approach is just the opposite. The latter is like a muscle. The more you engage the relationship and the more you use it, the stronger it becomes.

Community Education Coalition: An important aspect of the Stakeholder Engagement Process is recognizing the difference between to, for, and with. **To** sounds like "Something is being done **to** me." For instance, a group that has been focusing on community data says "our postsecondary education attainment rates are not high enough. Let's go find others **to** hold accountable for improving the success of the postsecondary education outcomes." This is where collaboration gets stuck. We don't subscribe to that at all.

Most of us spend too much time thinking about how we're going to do things **for** people. While that's a worthy and noble thing to do, efforts often focus on what they can do **for** students of color, **for** low-income students, **for** our society.

The questions we should be asking are: how might we work together **with** students of color, **with** low-income students, **with** our society?

The **to-for-with** distinction is critical to successful implementation of the process. We move completely away from **to**, focus on the **for** and, over time, **with**.

EcO Network: To provide a more concrete example, our data showed that the Latinx population in southeast Indiana was growing in four specific counties. We knew this growth was critical in not only helping to meet workforce demand in terms of providing a pool of potential workers, but also because this population had unique barriers to educational attainment. We have a huge opportunity to prepare our rapidly growing Latinx population through education and working ***with*** the right community partners could help devise the most appropriate and effective strategies to increase attainment rates.

IMPLEMENTATION

IHEP: Can you share an example of how you've used the Stakeholder Engagement Process in your community?

Community Education Coalition: For instance, we try to answer, "How might we better serve Latinx students to connect to postsecondary opportunities while they're still in high school?" by using the Stakeholder Engagement Process. If we take that question through the four quadrants of the Stakeholder Engagement Process, we can start identifying solutions. In the first quadrant labeled **who**, we identify who we will bring together to address that question. In the second quadrant, or the **why**, we identify what we know and what we don't know about the community we are trying to impact. In the third quadrant, we ask the group of stakeholders to consider **what** are the most vital things we could do together that none of us could do alone? The fourth quadrant is **how** - how do we activate the response to that question through time, talent, treasure, and make something go?

IHEP: How do you decide which stakeholders should be involved?

EcO Network: We often say that "we go where the energy is;" we identify the partners possessing energy around the common challenge we want to address. As time passes and the partnership progresses, the partners ebb and flow based on the challenge we've agreed we want to address.

CivicLab: We start with the "coalition of the willing," those folks that have already identified a problem but might be struggling with how to address the problem. At that point, after the stakeholders themselves have already identified the challenge, the Stakeholder Engagement Process begins. The strength of the process is that it creates and sustains conditions for an ongoing dialogue in a very systematic, disciplined way. Under these circumstances, the stakeholders themselves can address and solve their own problems.

IHEP: How do you empower stakeholders and get them to buy into the process?

CivicLab: Imagine two different approaches: transactional versus relational. The transactional mindset is an attempt to sell things and create buy-in; convincing people in a transactional way that "if you do this, then you'll receive these kinds of benefits." A relational approach, on the other hand, produces social capital that can be used to approach any number of community challenges in the future. When it comes

to community collaboration, the process is the product. We take the latter approach as we believe relationships are the foundation to effective community partnerships.

The stakeholders closest to the work must be empowered to solve their own problems because they are most likely able to identify the root causes correctly. The further you get from the beneficiary, the further you get from the work of stakeholders who are already committed. We've found that what's usually missing is a process or a way of working together at the stakeholder level. We just go where the energy is and support those who are trying to make positive change.

IHEP: What strategies work to connect with partners in a meaningful way?

EcO Network: It sounds so simple, but most of the time a meaningful connection is a phone call or a visit. Our approach is one-on-one and focuses on the relationship, not something that starts from the top down. Stakeholders join us at the table long before we have any solution. We come together around a challenge and we look at the data—what does it tell us about how things are working right now? We decide together as a group how we want to make things better, describe the future we want, and then prioritize projects. By inviting the stakeholders to join us early in the process, we develop trust and, through that, we'll often get a recommendation from a current partner about who else should be involved.

IMPACT

IHEP: Why do you think the Stakeholder Engagement Process has been so successful?

Community Education Coalition: This process has been part of our community for decades and we may have just been the ones who proactively documented it. Our community was extraordinarily lucky to have an influential leader, J. Irwin Miller, who exercised a stakeholder model of leadership as opposed to a shareholder model. While shareholders see a business or a community only as a profit generator, stakeholders are impacted by the day-to-day challenges facing the community. Miller believed relationships were the foundational element to create value, not just resources, and because of that, the stakeholder engagement model is different. In other words, he knew that a complex system, be it an organization or a community, is a set of relationships.

CivicLab: We're successful because we practice "targeted universalism." Through the Stakeholder Engagement Process in southeast Indiana, we set large, universal, population-level goals. Then we pick a targeted population and use the process to build out a pathway for that group. A comparative business practice would be customer-experience or customer-journey mapping. As a team, our goal is to map out the journey for the specific population. Instead of being institution-specific or the stakeholders focusing internally, this forces the view outward on the targeted population as the primary way of designing the approach. The Stakeholder Engagement Process is very much a population-centric approach as opposed to an institutional or programmatic approach.

IHEP: What specific strategies have been developed using the Stakeholder Engagement Process that contributed to growth in postsecondary attainment?

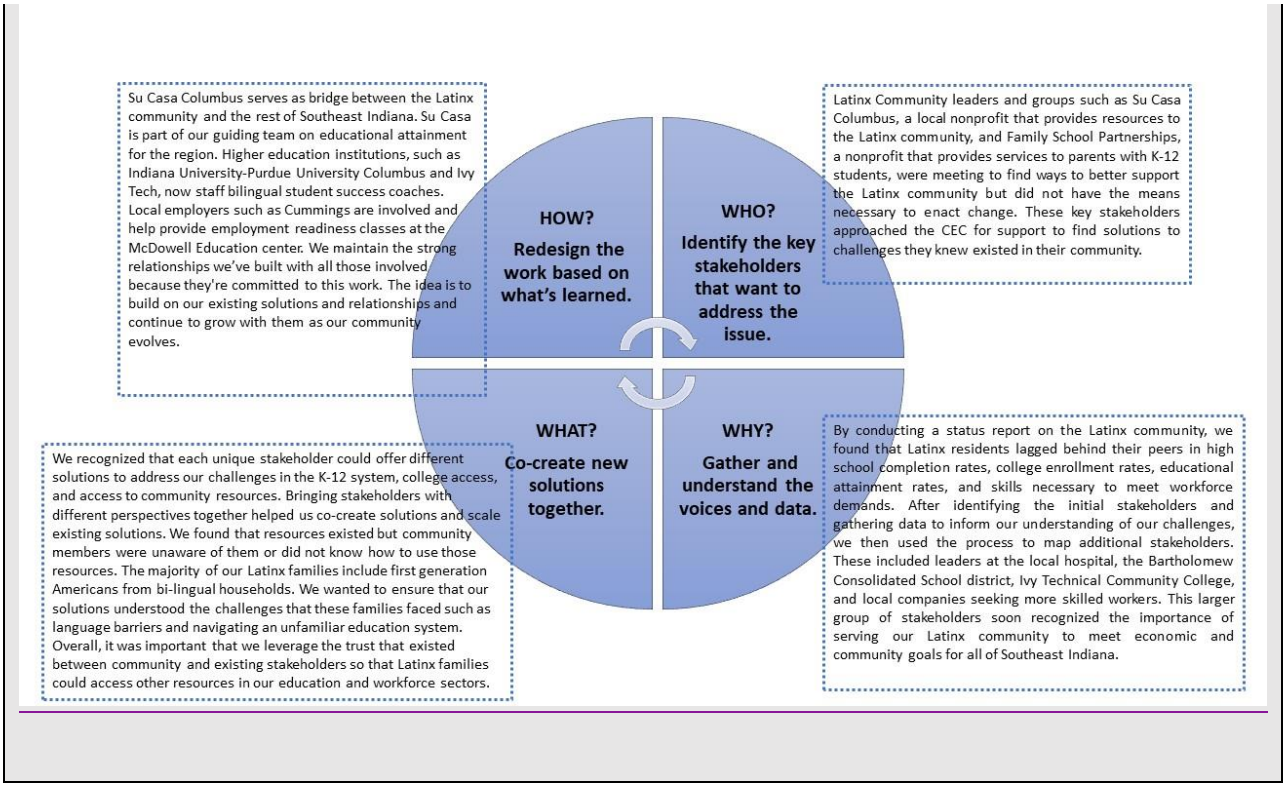
Community Education Coalition: We focus on connecting the learning system to economic opportunity. For instance, our Latinx community needs to be educated and skilled because as data show, they are our future workers and will enter our workforce in some capacity. But this part of our community faces specific challenges and needs more support to navigate the educational system. We believed working with partners such as Su Casa and other Latinx community groups could help raise attainment rates in our region. Through this partnership we were more confident in the collaboration's efforts to create sustainable community outreach strategies that would be more successful in meeting this population's distinct needs.

For instance, as a key result of the Stakeholder Engagement Process (and to maintain resource alignment and continue to facilitate partnerships in the community), the CEC created the Latino Education and Outreach program to bring together stakeholders and sustain authentic relationships to improve educational outcomes for Latinx residents and meet our regional attainment goals. Rather than create new programming, this effort leverages the resources of existing organizations and brings them to scale. Examples of concrete strategies that emerged from the Stakeholder Engagement Process and improved Latinx community outcomes are outlined in Figure 3 [on page 9].

Figure 3: Engaging Latinx Families in Southeast Indiana

Southeast Indiana has experienced rapid growth in its Latinx population and, in turn, has seen an increased need for Latinx programming and outreach. By using the Stakeholder Engagement Process, community leaders recognized the importance of intentionally including their growing Latinx population in their larger efforts to identify and overcome barriers to postsecondary attainment. Through recognition, inclusion, and relationship-building, southeast Indiana ensures its community grows together.

We asked leaders in the region to demonstrate how they used the Stakeholder Engagement Process to better engage their Latinx community and what outcomes this process led to. The following figure demonstrates how the Stakeholder Engagement Process was employed and the conclusions reached at each step in the process.



EcO Network: The high demand for talent and an elevated skill set means that folks are looking to reach new target populations. Our adult education efforts are another great example of this, where we used the Stakeholder Engagement Process to scope out pathways for our adult education programs. Previously, information for adult learners was siloed. We wanted to improve how an individual could access information on which credentials were needed for regionally in-demand jobs. Through this process we were able to gather higher education institutions and regional workforce representatives to develop a comprehensive tool we named the Powerhouse Credential Crosswalk. This tool created streamlined pathways linking educational attainment to workforce needs and broke down those previous siloes.

LOOKING FORWARD

IHEP: How can the Stakeholder Engagement Process accommodate a community's changing needs?

Community Education Coalition: We try to help groups focus on changing economic opportunities related to occupations and skills in different sectors. Identifying what skillsets are required to work now and in the future is a helpful starting place to engage folks through the Stakeholder Engagement Process. When groups engage through the process, we ask them to define their community challenge as a question instead of a statement.

CivicLab: Our ground rule when first introducing the stakeholder engagement process is no new programs. We want to examine what types of programs currently exist. When we get to answering the question of "how?" or "what are we going to do?," "a new program" can't be the first answer. Our intention is to change the way we relate to each other and redesign how we approach our collective work. With an emphasis on relationships, we transcend external programs that are usually owned by a sole organization and, by nature, omit the opportunity to consider community relationships. The Stakeholder Engagement Process can be flexible, but it performs best within a community where folks can understand and appreciate the various viewpoints involved.

We have found that by focusing on process rather than program, it's easier to work across diverse communities. The approach of the process might have to be modified when dealing with different cultural, racial, and ethnic communities. Working with our Latinx population is a good example of this. For instance, we learned through our work that a systemic approach may work when talking about systemic population change, but that approach may not work in a community with little trust in systems. In those communities, the process is very different and takes more community involvement, community engagement, and community building in order to get to the same ends of educational attainment. In this sense it was important for us to bring in existing stakeholders and organizations from the Latinx community.

IHEP: What should other communities think about before implementing this type of strategy?

EcO Network: Think about your community operating system - How are you going to work together? Do you share a common language to develop solutions? Many of our early conversations with partners involve articulating common definitions. The next challenge is remaining in a constant collaborative mindset. Maintaining a razor-sharp focus on a common goal through partnership is what has gotten us this far and continues to energize all of us involved in the work.

IHEP: How do you suggest other communities collaborate using the Stakeholder Engagement Process?

EcO Network: A backbone support organization that acts as the neutral convener is critical in the success of how the network moves forward. The neutral convener does not have an agenda but is knowledgeable about competing priorities, brings the group together around a common challenge, and identifies the pilot projects the group will work on. Each community has its own personality and may need information presented in a different way, so partners understand the backbone organization is there to support them.

Community Education Coalition: Start by convening organizations that serve the target population to facilitate relationship-building. When you work with partners that have an existing presence in the community, you can build on those relationships.

It is important to recognize the challenges the target population faces and share those challenges with the rest of your lead organizations. This group of stakeholders can act as a guiding team to identify opportunities to collaborate and leverage resources to implement strategies that lead to improved

outcomes for the intended population and the community as a whole. The group of leaders and stakeholders should ask themselves, “What can we do together, that none of us can do alone?”

Stakeholder Equity Assessment Tool

This tool enables users to apply an equity lens when identifying community partners to include in the Stakeholder Engagement Process. Completing the template will help you assess the stakeholders in your community and the solutions they offer to the challenges your community seeks to address.

This exercise can serve as a precursor to your collaborative process to examine the equity-mindedness of existing practices. Completing this exercise will help you identify what solutions exist, who is providing a solution, and whether this existing solution can/should be modified to become more equitable.

Instructions:

• Step 1: List the specific community challenge being addressed in the top line of the chart.
• Step 2: Identify the partners involved in your current problem-solving efforts and list one per column, noting the sector each occupies in the second row. Add the existing solutions they provide in the third row.
• Step 3: Work your way down each column in the chart to determine if stakeholder solutions should be re-examined through CivicLabs’ Stakeholder Engagement Process.

Note: *This template has space for three stakeholders. Add columns to include all of your community’s existing and potential stakeholders, including those that may not currently work with you. By identifying those not directly within your partnership, you can begin to consider additional stakeholders to include in your process.*

Equity Assessment for Stakeholders Addressing: _____			
Stakeholder			
Sector (Social, Private, Public, or other)			
Solutions stakeholder provides related to the community challenge			
Does stakeholder focus on specific underserved populations? (Yes or No; If yes – list specific population)			

List the specific services provided to this population			
Is the stakeholder part of your planning process? (Yes or No)			
Are there policies or actions from this stakeholder that exacerbate inequities related to this challenge? (Yes or No – if yes, provide an explanation)			
Can changes be made to these practices to alleviate inequities? (Yes or No – if yes, how? If no, why)			
Are data from the stakeholder's efforts available showing impact made since their solutions have been enacted? (Yes or No)			
Do data from the current solutions reveal gaps in achievement? (Yes or No)			
If you answered yes above, should these specific efforts be re-examined through the stakeholder engagement process? (yes or no)			

CONCLUSION

States across the country have developed master plans for higher education, set postsecondary attainment goals, and stressed the importance of meeting demands for a skilled labor force. Communities may tackle these challenges in siloed approaches, by treating education, workforce, and community as separate entities, but these solutions are unlikely to lead to sustainable efforts that transform systems in a way that truly removes systemic barriers.

Alternately, communities can employ the Stakeholder Engagement Process as demonstrated in southeast Indiana to inclusively collaborate across sectors, accurately identify pressing regional concerns, include impacted communities in problem-solving, and positively impact their community outcomes.

The Stakeholder Engagement Process is a valuable tool for community partnerships to find creative solutions grounded in relationships.

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EcO Attainment Network Manager
EcO Network

LUZ ELENA MICHEL
Latino Program & Outreach Coordinator
Community Education Coalition

Talent Hubs are communities that have shown the ability and commitment to significantly increase college-level learning among residents of all backgrounds. Talent Hubs are officially designated as such by Lumina Foundation, with support from the Kresge Foundation.

To earn a designation as a Talent Hub, each of these sites truly work as a community, meaning businesses, education leaders, and civic organizations work as a unit to attract, cultivate, and retain skilled and knowledgeable workers. Aligned and organized around this shared goal, they create multiple ways for individuals to earn college degrees, certificates and other quality credentials beyond a high school diploma.

Each Talent Hub has a backbone organization, a nonprofit entity that organizes and coordinates the work of the various local stakeholders. The hubs span the country, from New York City to Shasta County, California, from St. Louis to the Rio Grande Valley, and from Boston to Albuquerque.

They serve various populations. Some focus on African American residents, some on Latinxs, others on American Indians. Some Talent Hubs are targeting traditional college students, while others are zeroing in on older students who left school before finishing degrees. All share a commitment to eliminating disparities in educational outcomes among students of color.

As part of IHEP's role in the Talent Hubs effort, IHEP documents the implementation of innovate policies and practices within the Talent Hubs and develops tools to create and/or assess postsecondary policy with an emphasis on equity.

For more about the Talent Hubs effort, visit: https://www.luminafoundation.org/talent-hubs