

THE PROGRAM THAT SHOULD BE WORKING

A Postsecondary CTE Systems Leadership Case Study

Leading Postsecondary CTE in an Era of Workforce Transformation

YOUR CHALLENGE: Diagnose the system before you prescribe the solution.

Case Study: Riverbend Community College

Riverbend Community College serves approximately 9,000 students across a growing metropolitan region. Many students are working adults, first-generation college students, and learners seeking credentials that lead quickly to family-sustaining employment. Over the past five years, advanced manufacturing, health care, information technology, and skilled trades have grown significantly in the region. Employers regularly tell Riverbend that they cannot find enough qualified workers.

The college has responded aggressively. Riverbend has launched new CTE certificates, expanded dual enrollment with local high schools, created an advanced manufacturing lab, developed employer partnerships, and secured a three-year workforce grant to launch paid work-based learning opportunities. On paper, Riverbend appears to be doing everything right. And yet, the president is frustrated.

THE PROBLEM

Enrollment in several CTE programs is strong, but completion varies considerably. Students sometimes accumulate credits that do not apply when they move from one credential to another. Some dual-enrollment students discover that courses they completed do not count toward the CTE program they expected to enter.

Faculty report that students enter programs without fully understanding academic expectations or career options. Advisors struggle to keep up with changing program requirements and employer opportunities. Career services maintains one list of internships and employer contacts, while individual faculty members maintain their own relationships.

Employers want more work-based learning opportunities, but some want internships, others apprenticeships or customized training. Several report approaching different offices at Riverbend and receiving different answers.

The Opportunity

A major regional employer approaches Riverbend about creating an apprenticeship pathway in advanced manufacturing. The employer is willing to hire 40 students over the next three years and contribute toward training costs. Everyone is excited.

But questions emerge immediately: Who owns the partnership? Academic Affairs wants to ensure curricular quality. Workforce Development wants to manage the employer relationship. Student Affairs argues that advising and student support must be built into the model. Financial Aid raises questions about how different funding sources will interact. Faculty want assurance that workplace learning will meet academic standards. The college foundation sees an opportunity for donor investment.

The president asks: "Do we need another program - or do we have a systems problem?"

Table Discussion: Diagnose Before You Solve

Work with your team or table. Resist the urge to solve every issue. Your task is to identify the patterns underneath the visible problems.

1. What is the problem at Riverbend?

Identify the 2-3 most important problems - not every problem mentioned in the case.

2. Why haven't Riverbend's investments produced the outcomes leaders expected?

Where do you see evidence that otherwise strong programs are being undermined by the larger system?

3. Should Riverbend create a new Apprenticeship Program Office?

What might another office solve? What might it leave untouched - or make more complicated?

4. If you were on the president's cabinet, where would you intervene first?

Identify one or two changes with the greatest potential impact. What would you intentionally NOT try to solve yet?

BE READY TO SHARE: One pattern you see + one place you would intervene first.

Debrief Tool: The Systems Alignment Diagnostic

Now revisit Riverbend through a systems lens. A strong program cannot consistently overcome a misaligned system. Use the questions below to locate where the system may be helping - or hindering - outcomes.

SYSTEM AREA	DIAGNOSTIC QUESTION	EVIDENCE FROM RIVERBEND
POLICY	What rules, procedures, governance structures, or requirements help or hinder the pathway?	
FUNDING	Are resources and incentives aligned with what the institution is trying to accomplish?	
PATHWAYS	Can learners move through programs and credentials without unnecessary friction, duplication, or dead ends?	
PEOPLE & SUPPORTS	Do students and employees know where to go, what to do, and who is responsible?	
PARTNERSHIPS	Are internal units and external partners working toward shared outcomes with clear roles?	
DATA & OUTCOMES	Can leaders see where the system is working, where it breaks down, and for whom?	

What changed when you looked at the case as a system?

- Which problem looked different after using the diagnostic?

- Where do you see the strongest leverage point?

- What is the risk of treating a systems problem as a program problem?

BRIDGE TO YOUR INSTITUTION: Where does a version of Riverbend show up in your own CTE ecosystem?