



2021 EVALUATION REPORT

Lessons for Advancing Postsecondary Outcomes with Community & State Partnerships

A Developmental Evaluation of Two Partnerships' Efforts to Improve State-Level Postsecondary Outcomes

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project was supported by Lumina Foundation, an independent private foundation in Indianapolis that is committed to making opportunities for learning beyond high school available to all. We are grateful to our partners at the foundation, especially Wendy Sedlak; Dakota Pawlicki; who now leads the Talent Hubs work for CivicLab; and Jasmine Haywood. They served as reviewers of this report and provided key insight and expertise throughout the duration of the evaluation.

This report and the lessons it provides to other community and state partnerships would not be possible without the work and contributions of the backbone teams in Alabama and Indiana. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to Chandra Scott and the Mobile Area Education Foundation in Alabama; and Amber Fischvogt, Blair Milo, Jack Hess, Jeanna Berdel, John Burnett, and Rachel Zajac in Indiana; who invited us into meetings, shared historical and current documents, provided critical insights and perspectives, and reviewed our evaluation reports. The time and input from public and private postsecondary stakeholders across both states also provided important context and details that helped shape findings presented in the subsequent pages. We appreciate the time and candor extended to us.

The viewpoints presented in this document are those of the authors and based on our analysis of interviews and documents provided by the two backbone teams. They do not represent the position of Lumina Foundation or its staff.

ABOUT EQUIVOLVE CONSULTING

Equivolve Consulting is a black-owned, Baltimore-based strategy firm that uses innovative research and evaluation approaches to help leaders and organizations to drive equitable results in the United States and around the world. Equivolve believes in the abundance of human potential existing around the globe, and we understand that everyone does not have access to the resources and opportunities to fully activate this potential. Research, evaluation, and strategy are tools for building systems and structures that facilitate access to these important resources and opportunities. For more information about Equivolve, visit equivolveconsulting.com.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A Little Bit of Background

In 2019, Lumina Foundation supported two state partnerships' efforts in Alabama and Indiana in their effort to impact state-level postsecondary education using regional and local models. Lumina Foundation also engaged [Equivolve Consulting](#) to conduct a developmental evaluation to document the efforts in each state. The evaluation also offers examples of how the context in which a partnership operates, as well as the partnership-building process itself, can influence partnership structure/activities and stakeholder engagement.

The evaluation findings outlined in this report are intended to serve as a guide for: 1) states that may be beginning to build their postsecondary networks, or 2) states that are trying to expand postsecondary efforts and need to better understand how their state goals and contexts may be leveraged to create successful and sustainable systems.

Some Important Context



Who are the state partnerships and what were they working to achieve?

The **Alabama** partnership's primary actors include the Mobile Area Education Foundation (MAEF), Alabama Possible, and regional postsecondary leaders that support the Mobile Talent Hub. Their main effort has been focused on working to redefine narratives, demonstrate the importance of postsecondary credentials and facilitate access to them, and connect various state offices working on postsecondary issues. Their work focuses on the following outcomes:

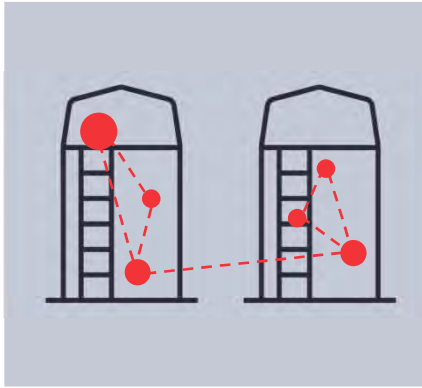
- Redefine the conversation around poor and working-class Americans to one of skills and knowledge
- Demonstrate the impact of postsecondary credentials, especially non-degree credentials, on alleviating poverty
- Reduce barriers to participation in postsecondary education by adults with no recognized training
- Connect state offices of education, workforce, and unemployment to regional and/or community-led partnerships

The **Indiana** partnership's primary actors include the Indiana Talent Network (ITN), Indiana's Office of Career Connects and Talent (CCT), and CivicLab. They came together to support the state-sponsored initiative, 21st Century Talent Regions (21CTR). Together, the partnership sought to scale affordable pathways and first credentials for adults. This has included work to redefine narratives, implement supports to help students with completion, reduce barriers to postsecondary credentials and demonstrate their impact on alleviating poverty, and improve postsecondary data. Their work focuses on the following outcomes:

- Implementing targeted academic, social, and financial supports to help students complete educational goals
- Reducing local, state, and federal barriers that prevent timely progression to credentials
- Redefining conversations around poor and working-class Americans to one of skills and knowledge
- Demonstrating the impact of postsecondary credentials on alleviating poverty and reducing barriers to participating in postsecondary education by adults with no recognized training
- Improving data across the postsecondary landscape and creating data systems for counting non-degree credentials

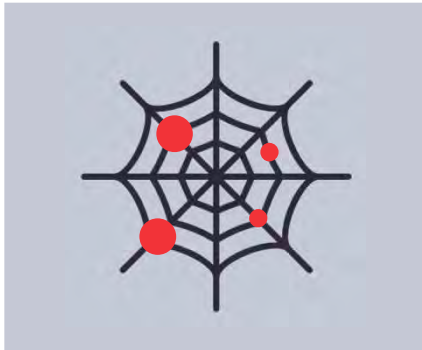


How were the partnerships structured?



Alabama's statewide partnership structure is **siloed**.

Stakeholders in the state shared that there are individual regional partnerships across the state that may occasionally collaborate on initiatives or partner with one another to meet any similar needs of their populations. More often, however, they compete for the limited resources available. Regional partnerships are distinct from a larger statewide partnership of organizations and entities that focus on statewide goals rather than the specific needs of individual regions.



Indiana's statewide partnership structure is a **web** that continues to connect state and regional stakeholders consistently. Indiana Talent Network (ITN) members include stakeholders working to address postsecondary education needs across the state, such as Ivy Technical Community College and government agencies, as well as regional stakeholders, which include 21st Century Talent Region (21CTR) backbone organizations and other community partners.

7 Lessons From Alabama & Indiana If You're Also Building or Maintaining a Postsecondary Statewide Partnership

1

There are distinct roles that have contributed or could contribute to partnership success for Alabama and Indiana: Connector, Connected State Partner, Equity Champion, Technical Assistance Provider, and Funder.

Partnership Roles

The **Connector** works to keep stakeholders connected to networks and other resources.

The **Connected State Partner** helps keep regions and other state partners on the same page.

The **Equity Champion** serves as a thought partner on how to better incorporate equity into partnership work.

Support Roles

The **Technical Assistance Provider** offers guidance and support where regional and state partners need it the most.

The **Funder** makes sure that resources are accessible to stakeholders.

2

Organizational supports help regional organizations continue to push work forward despite potential barriers. The Connector role also aids in building the capacity of organizations to conduct work and in trust-building among involved stakeholders.

3

Stakeholder resilience and commitment to a shared goal allow for work to be successful. In both Alabama and Indiana, stakeholders shared that at the center of their partnership success is the dedication that partners have to improving postsecondary education in their states.

4

Geographic and cultural barriers can prevent collaboration and continued partnership. The physical size of the state limits interactions between stakeholders from different regions. In addition, the location of larger or more involved organizations and government offices can shift perceived power to one geographic location, leaving other parts of the states disconnected.

5

When funding or grants cannot be used to help stakeholders cover the cost of engaging in partnership activities, smaller organizations can be prevented from engaging with partnerships or communicating with other stakeholders who may be trying to address similar issues around postsecondary attainment.

6

A lack of shared language and a system-building approach hindered cross-sector and regional collaboration, especially when trying to connect stakeholders from different systems and industries. Developing a shared language and systematic approach to addressing postsecondary goals is crucial for fostering partnership, establishing shared goals, and consistently engaging stakeholders.

7

Shared decision-making is an important aspect of both partnerships, but sometimes the structure of the partnership hinders this from happening. Though unintentional, the Connector role may sometimes present challenges for making shared decisions. Concentrated decision-making among the Connectors is a consequence of having a team member whose role is both important for building relationships between regional and state stakeholders, and for establishing postsecondary priorities.

““

“People with power . . . will sometimes surface-level engage the people who are directly impacted, and I find that it's often in a placating or an appeasing way, like they try to say, ‘Hey, we are listening to you,’ but substantially they're not listening. And my fear is that . . . the people with the real decision-making power are drafting policies and not taking seriously the feedback that they're getting from the people being impacted, and then in the implementation stage, the people who are being directly impacted are overburdened, overwhelmed, don't have any support or investment.” — ALABAMA STAKEHOLDER

Recommendations for Other Postsecondary Statewide Partnerships

Lessons from the Alabama and Indiana partnership efforts can provide insight into potential challenges and solutions for other states across the country that are working on advancing postsecondary attainment through regional partnerships. Below, we provide recommendations for states seeking to embark on similar work, gleaned both from advice provided directly from the Alabama and Indiana backbone teams, as well as our observations of their work.



“Don’t drag your feet forever.”

While the work of improving postsecondary attainment for all residents of a state can seem overbearing or insurmountable, several members of the state partnerships emphasized the importance of just getting started. Planning is important, but partnerships should not get stuck here.



Let data be your “flashlight.”

Data on postsecondary education, credentialing, and employment are helpful when developing plans, gaining buy-in from new stakeholders — especially those who may not immediately see the value of implementing a statewide postsecondary attainment strategy, and deciding on any changes to the focus of the work.



“Leverage your relationship builders and your networkers.”

Including someone in the partnership who has extensive historical knowledge of postsecondary work in the state will be important for states seeking to conduct similar work as Alabama and Indiana. These team members usually have established an extensive number of relationships across the state and are aware of work that has been tried in various regions, as well as statewide initiatives that have been implemented.



Build it, and the state will come.

In cases where the relationships between regions and state do not exist or where there are no state-level postsecondary champions or leadership, it should not be a deterrent to building or strengthening the postsecondary ecosystem. This was also the case for both Alabama and Indiana at some point in their work, but it was important that the partnerships were prepared once the state priorities aligned with partnership priorities.



Listen to and center community voices.

Developing postsecondary attainment strategies that are informed by those who will be directly affected by them helps to ensure that those strategies align with current needs and build on community assets.

A MESSAGE FROM OUR LEADERSHIP

Postsecondary systems are facing a pivotal moment in history. For the last year and a half, we've all weathered a global pandemic and the necessary adaptations that have come with it: shelter-in-place orders, virtual work and learning, and social distancing, to name a few. Educational and employment organizations especially suffered. The U.S. saw some of the highest unemployment rates in history, with the service industry taking a tremendous hit. And postsecondary educational institutions quickly shored up their systems and pivoted to virtual learning, requiring students to do the same.

In light of all of this, the work of the postsecondary partnerships in Alabama and Indiana have given me hope. I'm excited to share this field-building evaluation report with you, documenting the processes and outcomes of the two partnerships and sharing stories from leaders in each state spearheading these efforts while working alongside community. The Alabama and Indiana partnerships developed a strong foundation prior to the pandemic. The two teams built relationships among regional leaders in their respective states who were working to advance equitable postsecondary outcomes for all residents, collaboratively leaned into the tough work of addressing existing inequities that were further illuminated by the pandemic and did all of this while keeping their eye on long-term strategy to ensure sustainability of their current efforts.

This report presents a learning opportunity for other collaborative, multi-regional, cross-system partnerships. As many states across the country are working to close education and employment gaps, evidence of successful strategies implemented in Alabama and Indiana and stories from the field can deepen your hope and resolve as much as it has mine.

Our intent is that this report will provide you with interesting insights; help you to consider the structure of postsecondary work in your state, region, or city; and help you to reflect on your own role in that work. Most of all, we hope this report provides you with information that encourages you to take action. As one of our colleagues from the state partnerships encouraged others, "Don't drag your feet forever."



With anticipation,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Glenn R. Love".

Glenn R. Love

FOUNDER & CEO, EQUIVOLVE

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The appendices for this report can be found in a separate document linked here:

<https://bit.ly/EQEvalReportAppendix>

SECTION ONE

Background

About the Project

In 2019, Lumina Foundation supported partnerships' efforts in Alabama and Indiana to impact state-level postsecondary education using regional and local models. Lumina Foundation also commissioned a developmental evaluation to document the efforts in each state and generate learnings that could help potential partnerships in other states better understand ways to build partnerships between regional and state-level stakeholders hoping to improve postsecondary education. The evaluation was also intended to offer examples of how the context in which a partnership operates, as well as the partnership-building process itself, can influence partnership structure/activities and stakeholder engagement.

To conduct the evaluation, Lumina Foundation partnered with [Equivolve Consulting](#), a Baltimore-based strategy firm that uses innovative research and evaluation approaches to help leaders and organizations drive equitable results. The developmental evaluation took place from November 2019 through June 2021, with statewide partnerships in Alabama and Indiana, and was guided by four main research questions:

- How do regional partnerships in Alabama and Indiana implement efforts to achieve state-level postsecondary education outcomes?
- What facilitates progress toward postsecondary education outcomes?
- To what extent does the relationship between regional leaders and state-level leaders catalyze systemic change at the state level?
- How do regional efforts impact state-level policy change?

This report aims to serve as a guide to states that may be beginning to build their postsecondary networks or are trying to expand postsecondary efforts and need to better understand how their state goals and contexts may be leveraged to create successful and sustainable systems.

Below, we summarize the history and goals of partnerships in Alabama and Indiana, the impetus for starting each partnership, the structure of each partnership, important facilitators of and challenges to creating and sustaining a statewide partnership, and vignettes aimed at offering advice to similar states.

Initial Partnership Goals

The initial context for each partnership's development is important for understanding key takeaways in this report. This section uses primary data collected by Equivolve to describe how and why the partnerships developed and what they aimed to accomplish. While the context in which both partnerships developed differs significantly, it should be noted that group efforts to improve postsecondary education in both Alabama and Indiana predate any involvement from Lumina. Grants awarded by Lumina Foundation helped formalize and fund existing efforts. For more context on events in the state that, as reported by respondents, have been or could be influencing the partnerships' work, please see the associated appendices linked here:

<https://bit.ly/EQEvalReportAppendix>.

ALABAMA PARTNERSHIP

Lumina's role as a funder and thought partner in Alabama initially started in August 2014 when the Mobile Area Education Foundation (MAEF) received a Community Partnership for Attainment (CPA) grant from Lumina Foundation. The CPA grants were aimed at "deepening the impact of cross-sector, place-based efforts to increase higher education attainment" across specific cities throughout the United States ([Lumina, 2015](#)), with grantees receiving technical assistance and guidance from the organization CivicLab, which at the time largely led the CPA work across the country.

In an effort to bring more intentional coordination across the state, MAEF received a grant from Lumina Foundation in the fall of 2019 to expand the Mobile Area Talent Hub to a total of 16 counties by including 7 additional counties in Alabama's Region 2, located in the northeast region of the state, thereby increasing their impact at a state level. Talent Hub designation is given by Lumina Foundation to a community that has shown the capacity and capability to significantly increase the numbers of residents with college degrees, certificates, or other credentials beyond a high school diploma ([Lumina, 2021](#)). This collaboration between MAEF and the Mobile Area Talent Hub led to partnering with organizations in different regions of the state to scale, adapt, and implement initiatives that have been successful in the Mobile area. With this expansion, the regional partnership sought the following outcomes:

- Redefine the conversation around poor and working-class Americans to one of skills and knowledge
- Demonstrate the impact of postsecondary credentials, especially non-degree credentials, on alleviating poverty
- Reduce barriers to participation in postsecondary education by adults with no recognized training
- Connect state offices of education, workforce, and unemployment

At the onset of the evaluation, the Alabama partnership was working to create a new organizational model to allow for better collaboration between state and regional stakeholders who normally operated in silos. This work sought to address existing power dynamics, which have the potential to reduce the value and impact of efforts at both the state and regional levels.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has slowed down efforts to expand programs and projects to counties in Region 2, the Alabama state partnership is still working to improve the connectivity of stakeholders across the state, pushing forward policies to improve access to quality education for all Alabamians.

“Each region has different regional needs based on workforce, so they [state government] try to be very sensitive to their specific needs, but I think there still needs to be a way for them to be sensitive to individual needs, but still create a system of collaborative spirit. And I think that’s the hard balancing act right now, of giving attention to the individual needs of each region based on their workforce, yet creating this platform that allows them to really share and cross-learn with each other and be... In a collaborative spirit and not a competitive spirit.”

- ALABAMA STAKEHOLDER

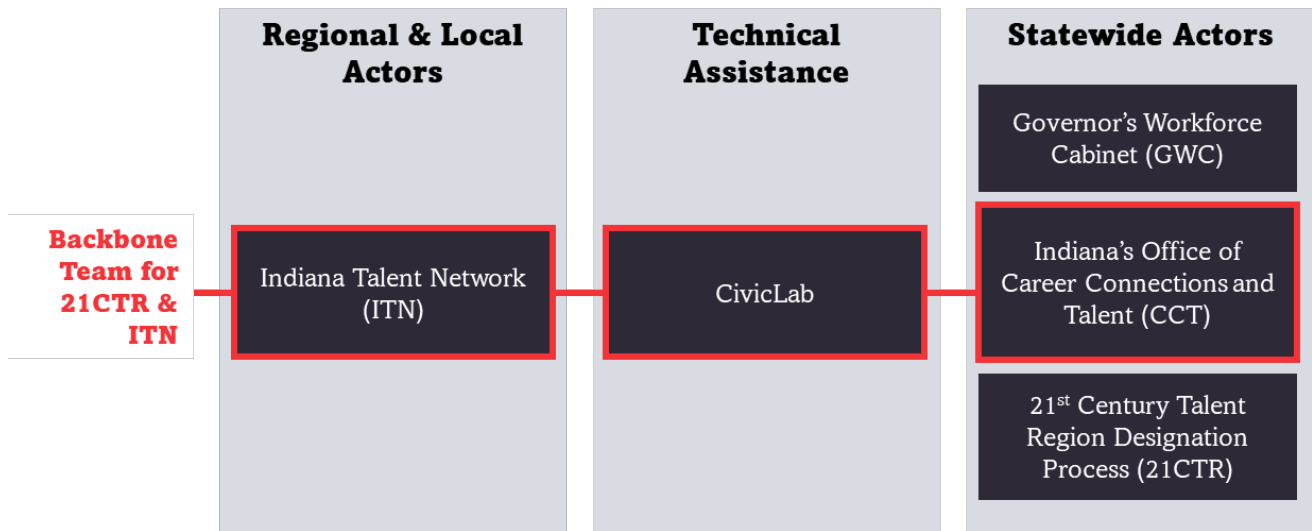
INDIANA PARTNERSHIP

Indiana has a long history of regional partnerships focused on improving postsecondary education across the state, many of which were included during Lumina’s previous CPA initiative. After a couple iterations, the Indiana partnership evolved into the Indiana Talent Network (ITN), a “network of networks” connecting statewide stakeholders and regional collaborations to support equitable talent policies and strategies ([Community Education Coalition, 2021](#)).

ITN and 21st Century Talent Regions (21CTR) partnered to better integrate state and local efforts that seek to improve postsecondary outcomes for Indiana residents. 21CTR is a state-sponsored regional designation for self-defined regions to come together through a shared commitment to “a systems approach to attract, develop, and connect Hoosier talent” ([IN.gov, 2021](#)). Together, the two entities sought to scale affordable pathways and first credentials for adults. Specifically, the connection between 21CTR and ITN worked to effect change on postsecondary outcomes, including:

- Implementing targeted academic, social, and financial supports to help students complete educational goals
- Reducing local, state, and federal barriers that prevent timely progression to credentials
- Redefining conversations around poor and working-class Americans to one of skills and knowledge
- Demonstrating the impact of postsecondary credentials on alleviating poverty and reducing barriers to participating in postsecondary education by adults with no recognized training
- Improving data across the postsecondary landscape and creating data systems for counting non-degree credentials

This work required a new organizational model that allowed for better collaboration between stakeholders while also addressing existing power dynamics that could reduce the value and impact of efforts at both the state and regional levels. Indiana’s model (see below) includes regional actors who lead and support a network of individuals working on postsecondary issues at the local level (ITN) and state actors from Indiana’s Office of Career Connections and Talent (CCT) as the connector to the Governor’s Workforce Cabinet (GWC). The GWC guides postsecondary career and education initiatives, workforce initiatives, and talent initiatives across the state (21CTR). The backbone team for 21CTR and ITN is composed of regional and state leaders representing ITN, CCT, and CivicLab.



The partnership planned to make progress on chosen outcomes by:

- Expanding coverage of talent regions to encompass the entire state and engage more counties
- Improving quality of and access to relevant data
- Improving postsecondary education systems

SECTION TWO

Partnership Structures

There are a number of notable differences between Alabama and Indiana, including the histories of both states, the makeup of their populations, and the barriers that prevent individuals from achieving postsecondary success; all of this constitutes the context in which both states created partnerships to address postsecondary education. A high-level overview of both partnerships helps bring into focus structural similarities and shared barriers to and facilitators of success. Each partnership is able to boast a number of successes with respect to improving the postsecondary education landscape, illustrating how no one partnership structure is better than another. These successes instead suggest that structure should be dependent on the context in which each partnership is formed and the stakeholders who are present and engaged. Analyzing similarities, however, can help other states hoping to create statewide partnerships better understand critical components to include in their models. This section outlines a high-level overview of each state partnership structure, pivotal roles found in each partnership, and facilitators of and barriers to success in each state.

Alabama Partnership Structure

The structure of Alabama's statewide partnership is siloed. Stakeholders in the state shared that individual regional partnerships across the state may occasionally collaborate on initiatives or partner with one another to meet any similar needs of their populations. More often, however, they compete for the limited resources available.

"You have seven children, and every child wants the attention of mom, and so mom is the state, and so I always wanna do something that's gonna be the shiny new penny that gets the attention of mom, at the state. So instead of collaboratively really working together to really build this ecosystem in the state, I find that it's much more competitive between the workforce regions versus collaborative."

Regional partnerships are distinct from a larger statewide partnership of organizations and entities that focus on statewide goals rather than the specific needs of individual regions. Regions such as the Mobile Area Talent Hub often work independently from one another. The statewide partnership consists of organizations working across the state, such as Alabama Possible, foundations like the Alabama Power Foundation, and government offices. State-level stakeholders may communicate with regional partnerships when pushing forward initiatives or policies, such as the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) Completion Policy that was passed by the Alabama State Board of Education, but collaboration between state and regional partners is limited. Despite a lack of formal connections between state and regional stakeholders, individual organizations are known to successfully partner with one another on a smaller scale to implement initiatives and activities. While there are currently efforts underway to better connect state and regional partners, operations generally remain siloed yet productive.

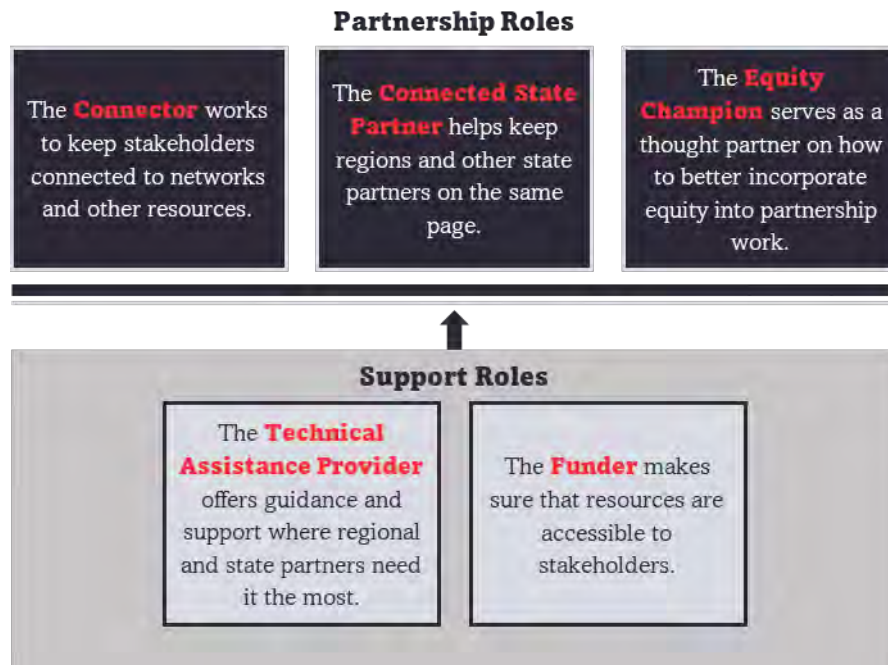
Indiana Partnership Structure

Due in large part to the formation of ITN, Indiana's statewide partnership continues to connect state and regional stakeholders consistently. ITN members include stakeholders working to address postsecondary education needs across the state, such as Ivy Technical Community College and government agencies, as well as regional stakeholders, which include 21CTR backbone organizations and other community partners. ITN meetings take place throughout the year, focusing on different topics based on regional needs.

ITN meetings offer space for state partners to share upcoming initiatives and opportunities for regional partners, as well as facilitate relationships among all members. Regional partners shared that one of the most valuable parts of ITN was the opportunity to hear from state partners sooner than they otherwise would. As one regional stakeholder shared, **“The word is connections. It's kind of a safe place or a trusted environment to reach out to people that maybe we wouldn't have before this opportunity.”** Regional partners also shared that those connections formed during ITN meetings often foster the exchange of ideas and resources to support regional needs. It should be noted that while ITN acts as a forum for stakeholders to convene, share ideas, and collaborate, it is not an advocacy organization. While individual members may meet and collaborate on policy issues and can meet state government partners, ITN itself does not lobby for specific policies or programs.

Individual Roles to Note

It should be noted that while each state supports a different partnership structure, there are distinct roles found in both states that contribute to partnership success. Should another state wish to create partnerships similar to those found in Alabama and Indiana, the inclusion of individuals that occupy the roles outlined below could lead to more successful collaboration.



The **Connector** works to keep stakeholders connected to networks and other resources.

Possibly the most important role in both state partnerships, the Connector links people with other people or resources, and it aids in building the capacity of organizations to conduct work and create relationships among involved stakeholders. Whether due to their previous work or individual personality or characteristics, the Connector is often well known by stakeholders throughout the state and is trusted to help with initiatives and activities when called upon by other members of the partnership. In Alabama, this role is most notably held by Chandra Scott, executive director of Alabama Possible.

“Chandra [Scott] helped us connect with them [a Technical Assistance Provider], so that was helpful and about building relationships. She helped connect us to get them here for professional development, and they did such a good job of sharing with faculty what we had been talking about. . . . They would bring the data to the table. And then the faculty got interested . . . that it wasn't a forced effort . . . and that helped compel the work.”

As someone with a position at an organization that has ties to both regional partners and state entities, Scott has the additional benefit of previously being part of the backbone organization for the Mobile Area Talent Hub, where she built relationships with individuals and organizations in the region.

In Indiana, the major Connector can be identified as Jeanna Berdel, who serves as ITN’s network strategist. As one Indiana stakeholder shared, **“Jeanna is a really helpful resource. She is our glue.”** Berdel is especially well positioned to act as a connector in Indiana due to her previous role with Lumina Foundation, where she fostered relationships with postsecondary education stakeholders across the state.

The Connected State Partner helps keep regions and other state partners on the same page.

Similar to the Connector, the Connected State Partner is an individual who is well known within the network and can be relied upon to share information about statewide initiatives and opportunities with more regional stakeholders. In both states, the person who fills this role is employed by an organization, whether that be a nonprofit or a state entity, working to improve postsecondary education at a state level.

“The connections to the state agencies are really helpful; instead of us having to track someone down to figure out how we learn about this new initiative coming out of the state, the information is coming to us in a consistent manner.”

The Connected State Partner could also generally serve as a Connector but would primarily be a valuable addition to any partnership because of their position overlooking the entire postsecondary landscape in a state.

The Equity Champion provides necessary guidance and direction for implementing equitable strategies.

While the role does not currently exist in Alabama or Indiana, another key function that a partnership member could serve is as a thought partner on how to better incorporate equity into partnership work. While prioritizing equity should be a role of all partners and stakeholders, some partnerships may benefit from an additional Equity Champion to help prevent equity from becoming a secondary concern or buzzword. We also heard from many stakeholders that translating equity from concept into practice can be challenging and can seem amorphous. Support to help partners apply equity to their strategies and practices could significantly strengthen work and accelerate progress toward equitable postsecondary outcomes in the state.

The Technical Assistance Provider offers guidance and support where regional partners need it the most.

Whether funded by a partner foundation, nonprofit, or other entity, both partnerships in Alabama and Indiana agree that having someone to help push work forward is a major facilitator of partnership success. The Technical Assistance Provider is someone with specialized expertise who provides or supports organizational needs.

In Alabama, technical assistance has come from Strategy Labs, a Lumina initiative that offers nonpartisan research, data, peer advice, and technical support ([Lumina Foundation, 2020](#)). Strategy Labs has helped Alabama partners assess the postsecondary landscape, track data, and develop a statewide attainment goal. Several stakeholders noted the importance of this role and underlined

how important the statewide attainment goal has been for guiding partnership work. Without the Technical Assistance Provider, regions would have been more siloed, working toward goals that were not unified under the state's goal.

As a lead facilitator and national Technical Assistance Provider for Lumina's CPA and Talent Hub sites, CivicLab facilitated a process to bring all the voices to the table to co-design the collaborative work. In Indiana, this organization has also served as co-designer and the primary Technical Assistance Provider for 21CTR, initially helping to guide regions as they applied for designation, and then connecting designated regions to the ITN network for further support.

"[21CTR designation] is time-consuming to do, and initially, it was clear that it's a good thing to do. . . . We had just done a regional economic development plan, and how do we make sure that the things that we're putting in there are congruent with what we have in the original plan. . . . We really liked the goal-setting and the benchmarking component of it. . . . We didn't specifically set out targets of what the impact was that we wanted to see. So, the [CivicLab approach], we felt took it a step further than where we'd been originally. So that was exciting."

In this case, the Technical Assistance Provider, CivicLab, was able to guide regional partners through the designation process, which may have been otherwise difficult to do on their own. Having a Technical Assistance Provider available to work with regions allowed regions to move at their own pace and provided further connection between regional work.

The Funder makes sure that resources are accessible to stakeholders.

The Funder is someone who provides monetary support, and sometimes, thought partnership. Several stakeholders described the role that Lumina, in particular, has played in catalyzing postsecondary efforts in Alabama and Indiana. Lumina has been described as an important thought partner for Alabama's postsecondary work, helping identify technical assistance needs and developing a state postsecondary attainment goal. These roles of Funder and thought partner come with some influence, which one stakeholder recommended Lumina leverage for diversifying the state's postsecondary ecosystem:

"I think they need to hire some folks who look like the populations they're seeking to serve. . . . Even in a place that only has a handful of Native populations or Latinx populations, you still find that the biggest gaps at those institutions fall across those particular social identities. Lumina funds this work, they decide who they hire to assist in supporting these different sites. I would say Lumina needs to be more thoughtful in who those individuals are and at least have that as an expectation."

In one case, a small award provided by Lumina at a CPA conference helped re-energize Alabama stakeholders around postsecondary goals while also gaining Lumina more recognition for its postsecondary efforts. While Lumina serves as an example of a Funder for states, creating partnerships working to improve postsecondary education, another notable Funder that partnerships should consider engaging is state government. For example, in Indiana, this is most noticeably seen through the funding of 21CTR and through other grants. Additional private Funders, such as Alabama Power Foundation in Alabama, are also recommended.

SECTION THREE

Facilitators & Barriers to Success

While working with both state partnerships, Equivolve identified common facilitators of and barriers to advancing postsecondary education in each partnership's state. Other states hoping to create similar partnerships may benefit from a better understanding of what these facilitators and barriers are in order to navigate them in future work. It should also be noted that due to the varying contexts in which both states work, certain facilitators and barriers are unique to each state. These differences may also serve as a guide to other states to help better understand their unique environments.

Common Facilitators

Facilitators are those factors that aid in building partnerships, designing and implementing initiatives, and moving toward the state's postsecondary attainment goals. The following facilitators can be found in both Alabama and Indiana.

Organizational support helps regional organizations continue to push work forward despite potential barriers.

Stakeholders who were a part of ITN and those who were part of the Mobile Area Talent Hub both shared how having a recognized network or partnership helped them gain more support within their individual organizations. Having a recognizable benefit from being part of an existing network enabled organizations to become more involved and find more resources to help their organizational goals.

In Alabama, for example, Mobile Area Talent Hub has helped build a support system for member education institutions. University and college-based stakeholders shared that after joining the talent hub, they are better able to work together to focus on supporting students regardless of institutional or organizational incentives. While college-based stakeholders may often be tasked with promoting their individual institutions as the best choice for potential students, those involved with the Mobile Area Talent Hub shared that, through the partnership, they have recognized the value of prioritizing

helping individual students understand their options and choose a program that best suits their needs. A stakeholder from one of the Mobile Area Talent Hub education institutions described the relationship between their partner organizations:

“The language of ‘we are they’ became the driving force. It was a way of eliminating conversations that created a competitive environment. The value of increasing a seamless two-year to four-year IHE pipeline for students became more clear.”

While each individual college or university has an incentive to keep students at their institution, college-based talent hub members often prioritize community success over immediate institutional success and are able to better support one another and students, relying on trust previously built through work in the talent hub.

Connectors foster collaboration and spread innovation.

As described in the section on individual roles, the Connector is someone who is able to link organizations to resources or to each other. They aid in building the capacity of organizations to conduct work and in trust-building among involved stakeholders.

Stakeholders at both the state and regional levels in both states shared the importance of having this Connector role to help organizations become allied with one another. Those same stakeholders also emphasized the importance of the Connector role in helping engage organizations that do not take part in the partnership on a consistent basis — something that partnerships struggle to do otherwise. Once connected to other organizations working toward similar goals, stakeholders with whom we spoke were able to build relationships and work together on initiatives more successfully. However, the initial introduction and laying of a foundational relationship is key to creating sustainable partnership and collaboration between stakeholders. The stakeholder engagement process is a way of thinking that is noticeable across Lumina CPA and Talent Hub sites, as it is a main tool used by CivicLab, the organization charged with leading CPA and Talent Hub work across the country and providing sites with needed technical assistance.

Stakeholder resilience and commitment allow for work to be successful despite common barriers.

In both Alabama and Indiana, stakeholders shared that at the center of their partnership success is the dedication that partners have to improving postsecondary education in their states. Stakeholders also shared that, when faced with challenges, partners persevered. In Indiana, partnership commitment was often attributed to a “coalition of the willing,” or having a partnership composed of people who wanted to be involved in the work rather than people who felt forced to participate.

In Alabama, stakeholder resilience is seen in the face of the common perception that Alabama is a difficult place to work on postsecondary issues. The passion that stakeholders show for improving postsecondary outcomes is a major driver of change in the state. Despite sizable barriers, including but not limited to a lack of funding and resources, and institutionalized and overt racism and sexism, stakeholders in Alabama show a willingness to go above and beyond to improve

postsecondary outcomes. One stakeholder described that working at least 50 to 60 hours per week was necessary, but their passion for the work and commitment to helping others kept them engaged. During interviews, many stakeholders exhibited a commitment to improving the lives of Alabamians and a strong belief in the value of their work, even when the results are not immediately identifiable. One stakeholder explained, **“You won’t see the fruits of that labor always until later. And so, you just gotta keep plugging away at it.”** At the end of the day, stakeholders are driven to help individuals succeed while also building a sustainable education system.

Common Barriers

A barrier is defined here as any factor that slows partnership progress or acts as an obstacle to partnership-building between stakeholders. The following barriers can be found in both Alabama and Indiana.

Geographic and cultural barriers can prevent collaboration and continued partnership.

A challenge to any state hoping to create a statewide partnership is both perceived and physical geographic barriers. Stakeholders in Alabama and Indiana shared how the varying needs of different regions in their states — and sometimes, cultural differences — made it difficult to sustain a statewide partnership.

In Alabama, stakeholders relayed that geographic distance between major metropolitan areas was a challenge to overcome and caused a disconnect between regional and state-level stakeholders. As one stakeholder who works on statewide initiatives noted:

“In some cases, it limits the number of hours that you’re able to work, or it means that expenses increase because somebody has to be reimbursed for gas, or for mileage, as well as hotel and so on and so forth. So that adds up really quickly. When you deal with Mobile or any other city, you can have a 9:00 – 5:00 meeting without too many problems. But for someone from Montgomery, they need to either come in the night before, or they get home pretty late, if it ends at 5:00. So those are the things that working in one city, I think, make things a little bit easier with that aspect.”

The physical size of the state limits interactions between stakeholders from different regions. In addition, the location of larger or more involved organizations and government offices can shift perceived power to one geographic location, leaving other parts of the states disconnected. Some regional stakeholders in both Alabama and Indiana shared that they felt isolated from work being done at the state level, which was often housed in the state’s capital. Not only are regions physically far from each other, their needs and cultural norms vary. While state-level stakeholders and the regional partnership aim to unify all parts of Alabama under one state model, the needs of different regions do not always align.

COVID-19 has forced stakeholders in both Alabama and Indiana to conduct business online, which has helped improve communication and bring geographically distant stakeholders together, at least partially. Indiana, however, has seen some benefit from moving to a virtual setting.

“[Jeanna] asked if I wanted to be a part of it, and it's been so great because there are so many smart people on this call and who participate, and we learn so much. I've learned so much from each other. It's been a great experience to be a part of this organization. And it really helped me.”

As the regional stakeholder shared, the pandemic has actually brought regional partners who normally would have to travel far distances closer, fostering more collaboration than when ITN meetings were held in person.

Funding and resources can be hard to come by in certain areas.

Time and resource allocation are barriers to creating and maintaining a partnership structure. Smaller organizations in both states are often underfunded or understaffed. When funding or grants cannot be used to help stakeholders cover the cost of engaging in partnership activities, they can be prevented from engaging with partnerships or communicating with other stakeholders who may be trying to address similar issues around postsecondary attainment. For some, engaging with the partnership becomes an extra responsibility on top of their existing work.

“The hard part is always gonna be for most of us, this is an elective. It's part of our job, but this is the day we take from our office, doing our work, to come here, and it's super beneficial but when I go back tomorrow, it's really challenging to be like, OK now, let's implement all of these things 'cause there's so much work to be done.”

While funding for postsecondary programs is available, funding and resources needed to support organizational staff at smaller organizations to engage in partnership activities may not be. Funding that can be used to support smaller organizations to join partnerships is critical to continuing their engagement. Positions that include engaging in partnership activities as part of their duties are also likelier to be more involved. While Lumina Foundation has previously provided funding to support certain aspects of partnership work, funding from other national organizations is limited, especially in Alabama. This may be due to the perception that Alabama is not “good” at education, or is a difficult state to work in.

Lack of shared language and a system-building approach hinders cross-sector and regional collaboration.

When trying to engage stakeholders from different industries or with different perspectives on postsecondary education, partnership leaders face the challenge of establishing a shared framework and vocabulary. These groups may not share a common understanding of work and goals, and competing frameworks can cause friction between stakeholders and prevent issues from being addressed. One Indiana partner provided an example of how this friction has manifested.

“There are a few people who I would talk to who I don't use the word ‘college’ with. I use ‘education beyond high school’ because they think that the Commission for Higher Education advocates for bachelor's degrees for everybody. No matter how many times and how many ways we say, ‘We're talking about quality credentials that give people an opportunity to have economic advancement in their life.’”

Developing a shared language and systematic approach to addressing postsecondary goals is crucial for fostering partnership, establishing shared goals, and consistently engaging stakeholders. Although it can be challenging to develop a systems framework, the benefit is a sustainable network and a statewide postsecondary system whereby students learn skills that are actually applicable to the industry in which they want to work. Bringing partners with a different understanding of education and workforce needs is a challenge in both states. One Alabama stakeholder summed up the problem and what their vision for the future may look like:

“If I have a college that’s located in this county, but for five counties out, there’s nothing . . . how do we get the industry to say, ‘OK, well, here is a small part of our industry that may require some small piece of manufacturing, but we can put that plant in this region.’ And then it’s sent to the main plant or whatever the next process is. How do we as a state begin those conversations where we move beyond where we only give focus to the corporate rich areas because they dominate the conversation? How do we get them to say, ‘Well, if we’re going to lift the entire state, you cannot ignore big populations of people. . .’? How do we create this system that really speaks to each other, where everything is connected and transferable?”

Unique Facilitators

State-level stakeholder buy-in in Indiana allows for a better flow of information between state and regional partners.

The history of education systems–building that has long been a part of work in the state has often been mentioned by Indiana stakeholders. Since the Community Education Coalition Creation was started in Columbus, Indiana, in 1997, formal partnerships and organizations have been working to improve postsecondary education in the state. Lumina, which is headquartered in Indianapolis, has supported work across the state long before the start of CPA grants and Talent Hub work. CivicLab, the organization leading CPA and Talent Hub work across the country, is also located in Indiana and has also offered support to regions across the state as ITN’s backbone organization, working to better connect regions to state government and to each other through ITN.

“Those legislative updates are huge because it’s good to know what’s going on with the Next Level jobs, or Next Level tourism or whatever, all the Next Level things now that are happening here in Indiana. So, I think there are in many ways a lot of direct benefits and resources from state partners, for sure.”

Having organizations located in Indiana that are trusted by both state government entities and regional stakeholders is an important feature of the Indiana partnership. The Indiana partnership greatly benefits from having well-connected state-level stakeholders’ involvement and continues to help regions stay informed about statewide initiatives and policies. While Alabama’s regions are largely siloed and lack a consistent state-level stakeholder presence, Indiana regions are reliably connected to partners working in the Indiana state government and partners such as CivicLab who have a statewide, and even nationwide, focus.

Unique Barriers

A deep history of racial oppression in Alabama presents a barrier to black and brown leaders seeking to advance postsecondary efforts across the state.

While a history of racism is not unique to Alabama, between the stakeholders with whom we spoke in the two states featured in this report, those in Alabama more often cited that structurally racist systems previously developed in the state continue to have a negative impact on current efforts to improve the postsecondary education landscape. It is, however, important to note that we interviewed more people of color in Alabama than in Indiana, which may be part of the reason racial oppression was not cited as a barrier in Indiana. Structural racism was discussed by interviewees when they were asked about missing voices and ways the partnerships addressed equity.

Black leaders in Alabama reported instances of being tokenized and not engaged in meaningful collaborations. One stakeholder shared how standard practices and systems in the state continue to contribute to inequalities, especially racial inequalities, in the state:

“People with power [when making decisions] will sometimes surface-level engage the people who are directly impacted, and I find that it’s often in a placating or an appeasing way, like they try to say, ‘Hey, we are listening to you,’ but substantially they’re not listening. And my fear is that with policies like this, the people with the real decision-making power are drafting policies and not taking seriously the feedback that they’re getting from the people being impacted, and then in the implementation stage, the people who are being directly impacted are overburdened, overwhelmed, don’t have any support or investment.”

As initiatives and programs in Alabama continue to focus on improving postsecondary attainment in the state, stakeholders across the state recognize a need to address and eliminate racial disparities in postsecondary outcomes, particularly for black Alabamians. The value of black leaders in advancing this work, however, is not always recognized. As one stakeholder of color explained, **“Rarely are there content experts [included in initiatives] who come with that lived experience that connects with the audience that they’re seeking to serve.”** While some leaders of color are engaged, there tend to be limited efforts to engage a diversity of perspectives beyond those individuals who are normally asked to be involved. One Alabama stakeholder described who is often excluded from “the table” and what might be contributing to this exclusion:

“There’s the same five people of color I see everywhere. . . . I think as a state . . . we need to do a better job of growing and nurturing talent, diverse talent, and inviting those people to the table, giving them space at the table and not just inviting them.”

While there is emphasis placed on improving outcomes in regions with large black populations in Alabama, such as the Black Belt region, black stakeholders continue to experience barriers to advancing the work. When starting new partnership efforts in other states, we strongly recommend that stakeholders take into consideration the history of racism and oppression, and how best to support black and brown stakeholders in their state. Equitable postsecondary systems outcomes

cannot be achieved unless black and brown voices are present and engaged in partnership work, regardless of location, in intentional and authentic ways.

Advancing equity in Indiana, where most regions are largely white, requires greater support among those leading the work.

Indiana faces a different challenge to Alabama in addressing equity. In Alabama, the need to improve outcomes for populations of color is largely agreed upon and a history of racial segregation and oppression is well documented, while most regions of Indiana are largely white, leading some in the state to struggle with how to understand equity in the context of their work. As is the case across the U.S., Indiana has its fair share of racial tensions and structures with embedded structural racism. Yet, both regional and state-level stakeholders shared how difficult it can be to talk about equity when many assume that racism does not exist, is a thing of the past, or is irrelevant to areas with populations that are overwhelmingly white.

“How do we define equity? Are we only looking at, for example, racial disparities in educational attainment, or what does it look like and then how are we measuring it? . . . I think the ITN has not yet [decided]. . . . I think right now, we’re just kind of making sure that we keep that conversation going because we know that it’s important, but we’re not exactly sure how to approach it.”

To combat the ambiguity around equity, ITN has begun to emphasize equity more often during meetings. For example, ITN developed its equity statement and a set of actions as championed by their Learning Support Team. In 2021, ITN formed a sub-team to focus exclusively on equity implementation and offered several opportunities for members to discuss equity topics, including hosting a book club featuring Indiana authors writing about racial equity, and developing an Indiana State Equity Dashboard and resource page of equity-related materials. This Equity Implementation Team continues to push for regions to collect disaggregated race data on their populations. State-level stakeholders also push regions to consider equity beyond racial equity, bringing to light populations in each region who may need extra support. For example, one stakeholder described how gender equity is an important area to focus on, in addition to racial and ethnic equity.

“More and more, there’s a higher percentage of [women] going to college than [men] now. And so, how do we get [men] into higher-education credentials in a better way in Indiana? . . . If you’ve looked at the demographics of the state, we have pockets of African American in Central Indiana; you’ll find a pretty significant Latino or Latinx population in Northwest Indiana. . . . So, we’re trying to make sure we’re tracking that for starters, just using that data to look at what we’re doing there. . . . I gotta say we haven’t done a terrific job of that.”

Multiple stakeholders across the state shared that while there is a push to improve equity in initiatives, it is still a work in progress. Some individuals from racial minority groups are part of the Equity Implementation team; however, ITN as a whole struggles with diversity among its members. As ITN continues to advance equitable postsecondary outcomes, it is imperative that the ongoing push continues to engage diverse voices, particularly black and brown leaders in the space.



SECTION FOUR

Partnerships in Action

Despite having unique goals (Box 1), three sets of activities remain consistent across the two states. Each of the state teams continues to build partnerships across regions, establish or maintain a statewide network, and push forward initiatives to improve postsecondary education outcomes across the state. However, the tactics and decision-making approaches that are used to achieve the goals vary.

Members of each partnership, as well as their connected stakeholders, identified several strategies used to carry out the work. In this section, we provide an overview of how the partnerships work together to achieve goals. Looking at specific workflows and tools, or frameworks used to accomplish work, can identify a number of factors that influence both a state's current work and potential future work. This section outlines facilitating factors in building and continuing a postsecondary ecosystem in Alabama and Indiana. In some cases, specific team members playing essential functions and roles are the key resource in advancing work processes; in other cases, specific frameworks have been essential to advancing work. We provide common themes that the stakeholders we interviewed deemed important to their everyday work and long-term goals.

Box 1. State Partnership Goals

ALABAMA

- Reduce barriers to participation in postsecondary education by adults with some college but no degree
- Reshape the postsecondary enrollment process by creating a seamless transfer pipeline between two- and four-year institutions of higher education
- Connect state offices of education, workforce, and unemployment

INDIANA

- Implement targeted academic, social, and financial support to help students complete educational goals
- Reduce local, state, and federal barriers that prevent timely progression to credentials
- Improve data across the postsecondary landscape and create data systems for counting non-degree credentials

SHARED GOALS

- Redefine the conversation around poor and working-class Americans to one of skills and knowledge
- Demonstrate the impact of postsecondary credentials on alleviating poverty and reducing barriers to participating in postsecondary education by adults with no recognized training

Working Together Toward Common Goals

Shared decision-making is an important aspect of both partnerships, but sometimes the structure of the partnership hinders this from happening.

Each of the statewide partnerships has a core team that helps drive work forward. Indiana includes a more formalized guiding team that is part of the Indiana Talent Network and composed of state and regional representatives selected by the backbone team, while Alabama includes a group of regional individuals that are largely connected to each other via the Mobile Area Talent Hub, and to state stakeholders via Alabama Possible. While this partnership does collaborate on policies and initiatives, like the FAFSA Completion Policy, in advancing work, they are not necessarily a formal body. Though the degree of formalization appears to vary between each state, the ways in which the backbones interact with those guiding teams are similar. When there are decisions to be made about the direction of statewide work — for example, advancing statewide policy related to financial aid in Alabama or the process for supporting new talent regions in Indiana — backbone members consult the guiding team for advice. Backbone members rely on the guiding team’s knowledge of regional context and knowledge of their individual institutions, all of which influences postsecondary outcomes.

As noted above, the role of a Connector is key for both state partnerships. This role, however, may sometimes present challenges in making shared decisions, as keen attention must be given to the power and influence this role possesses. Often, the Connector also serves as a convener, bringing state and regional organizations together to learn from one another and advance specific issues or policies. Concentrated decision-making among the Connectors does not appear to be intentional; rather, it is a consequence of having a team member whose role is both important for building relationships between regional and state stakeholders, and for establishing postsecondary priorities. Because the Connector convenes and facilitates relationships, they also have some power over *who* should be invited to convenings, *who* should be connected to whom, and *what* resources appear to address gaps in the postsecondary ecosystem (as they help to connect various organizations to those resources). For example, one Alabama Connector shared, **“If they are wanting to launch something and wanting to know who I should talk to at the state to help . . . well, [it] is my role to be that Connector for them.”** This is quite a bit of power for one stakeholder to hold over a partnership and brings up concerns around equity and representation in partnerships. Guiding teams, as utilized in the Indiana model, can help spread the burden of the Connector to help shape partnership direction, but must constitute diverse stakeholder voices in order to effectively contribute. Other states hoping to start similar partnerships should consider how to disperse Connector responsibilities across stakeholders, and how to ensure that stakeholders engaged in partnership work are recruited from diverse channels.

The Stakeholder Engagement Process provides a common approach for making strategic decisions about postsecondary work across the state.

The Indiana team utilizes the Stakeholder Engagement Process discovered by CivicLab to advance its work goals. This is a relationship-based, systems-building approach rooted in the idea that addressing complex social problems requires a system or a group of individuals and organizations from a specific community who fulfill diverse roles and have agreed to work together to achieve a common goal ([CivicLab, 2020](#)).

The Stakeholder Engagement Process provides a method by which the state partnership can identify gaps within the postsecondary landscape and determine which stakeholders are needed at the table to address those gaps. As new stakeholders are identified, effort is required by the backbone team to orient them to the framework.

Use of the Stakeholder Engagement Process also requires intentional effort to engage those groups who may be part of historically marginalized groups, including small and community-led organizations; grassroots organizers; and organizations led by people of color, which are historically excluded from decision-making. While initial members of the Indiana partnership drew from their networks to invite stakeholders to the table, identifying who is missing was particularly challenging.

“[It] would take a lot of reorienting the way they think about working together and that changing the relationships is really the work, and so a lot of these [stakeholders] maybe do not necessarily have the tolerance for the amount of conversation, relationship-building, learning, and the adaptation it takes to work at the systems level.”

To address this concern, the partnership has named equity as a priority, creating a 2021 Equity Statement to help guide future work (see [Appendix B](#)). Prioritizing equity in ITN’s work has helped identify missing stakeholders from underrepresented groups and potential gaps in proposed work that could expand inequities. This statement includes the following definition of equity to guide future work:

“ITN defines equity as both a process and an outcome in which each person has what is needed to reach one’s full potential — financially, in community and civil society — regardless of who the person is, where the person is, and what the person wants to achieve in life.”

Partnerships in both states use data to inform decisions, but this requires trust, tough conversations, and an ability to see negative results as an opportunity for growth. The partnerships from both states often referred to either having data “lead” them or, specifically, using data to help inform decisions about their postsecondary work across the state. As some described it, data should be used to inform if and how programs or initiatives are developed, rather than relying on personal perspectives to make decisions about the design of programs and initiatives. Yet, feeling empowered to identify gaps in work and then addressing them requires an understanding of how data can be interpreted and used to make strategic changes. Data interpretation and use can be an amorphous task if not given practical guidance on how to approach it.

“Data is meant to be a flashlight. It’s not meant to bludgeon people, and we have made children, educators, and the whole education system feel like that data’s there to beat the ever-loving shit out of people. And I’m like, no, it should be saying [for example], ‘Ooh, if we had a better early childhood, kids would succeed better in kindergarten.’”

Part of allowing data to lead is an openness to learning from data. This may become especially challenging and equally as important when data reveal a potentially negatively perceived statistic or outcome. Several Alabama-based stakeholders described how negatively perceived results often lead to a belief that someone has not “done a good job” in their efforts to advance postsecondary outcomes. When data do not present information that shows regions favorably, there is sometimes an effort to keep those data from being shared publicly. Here, messaging becomes important. Another Alabama stakeholder suggested reframing these moments as an opportunity for growth and collaboration: **“This is the baseline where we are now, but if you’re engaged and involved in this project, we can move it to the next level to where we should be.”** In addition to messaging, another recommended strategy to help partners learn from data was comparing Alabama postsecondary data to national data and data from other states.

“[We can do this by pointing toward] what’s going on in the country. These are the things that we see in terms of students not completing, not achieving enough credit hours . . . to graduate in a timely manner. [Then], let me show you the data that we have at a national level, in similar states, in similar institutions. . . ideally bringing the baseline data as well so we can . . . not shame them, but just making sure that [it’s clear that] this is where it could be, this [is] where you guys are right now.”

Still, framing potentially negatively perceived data as a baseline and an opportunity for growth remains important. In order to learn from data, develop stronger programs and initiatives, and promote positive postsecondary outcomes, a strong culture of learning from data is needed. Continuing to build trust among partners is also critical. Without trust, partners may feel uncomfortable with openly discussing negative results, which limits partners’ ability to learn with one another and develop a shared postsecondary strategy. Often, a deficit focus is used to identify and address gaps; instead, framing strategies and initiatives using a strengths-based approach can help push forward conversations with partners and highlight what is working well and can be replicated elsewhere.



ALABAMA

A leader's journey promoting greater state-regional collaboration where there had historically been a disconnect.

Chandra Scott initially acted as a backbone member with MAEF for the Mobile Area Talent Hub, working to help regional stakeholders partner with each other and foster collaboration that would benefit the larger population. As initiatives in the region proved to be successful, Scott began reaching out to stakeholders at the state level who were largely disconnected from the regional work. Scott also struggled to gain recognition for the Talent Hub's achievements, sharing that state leaders often failed to recognize the relevance of regional work to larger state goals. In addition, as a black woman in a state where many leaders did not look like her and that has a relatively recent history of racial segregation, Scott experienced additional barriers to promoting successful initiatives and gaining recognition for the region's work. In the excerpt below, Scott shares how, despite substantial barriers, the Mobile area was able to prove the value of their work and become a leader in the state.

"We had our goals set before the governor had begun this postsecondary attainment work, but the good thing about it . . . [was that] it validated what we were doing. So, when she did her due diligence with her research and data team [, she was] able to determine the number of attainment credentials that needed to happen in each of the seven regions, workforce regions, [and] across our state. When the numbers fanned out, [the target number we identified in the] 75,000 degrees {work} was the same number she got. So, it really validated that the work, and the process that we had undertaken was right and in alignment with what she was doing. I think [that] really validated our work and I think got the attention of more people to say, 'OK, so this is something that's really legit that they were doing and it's right in alignment with how we process it as well . . . ' I think it really increased the, I guess I would say, respect of how [the] process the work[ed]. So, they knew I wasn't someone that just talked the talk. . . . They saw from my results in Mobile that I do . . . [my] due diligence [to] understand the data and wrap the work around the data. [It is] not just some anecdotal conversation."

Progress Journey:



ALABAMA | Partner Story Continued

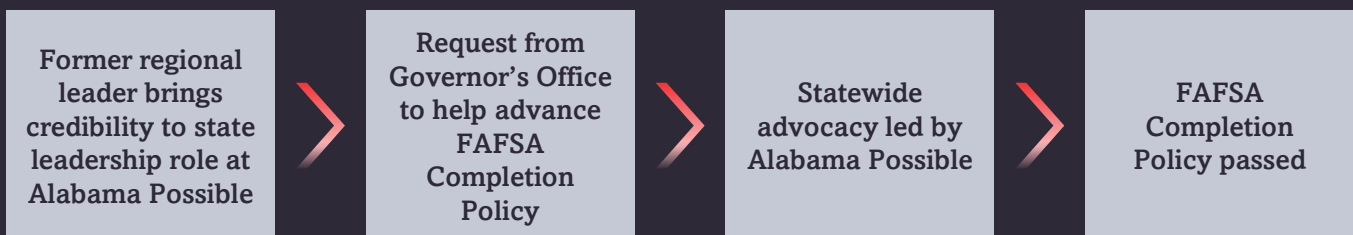
After transitioning to a new role at Alabama Possible, an organization dedicated to improving postsecondary education outcomes across Alabama, the state Governor's Office reached out to Scott and Alabama Possible to help advocate for a FAFSA Completion Policy. This FAFSA opt-out model would require students to complete a FAFSA form in order to graduate from high school, which would support post secondary attainment goals by removing a critical barrier for many students to enroll and persist in higher education. In the excerpt below, Scott shares how regional and state partnerships were leveraged to push forward a policy that would affect postsecondary education across the state. Both regional and state-level stakeholders banded together to advocate for the policy, which was successfully passed by the Alabama Board of Education during the spring of 2021.

"In my transition to Alabama Possible, that was, I would say probably the first act in which I found myself in the middle of this at the request of the Governor's Office, which I had not done much work with at the regional level. And so, that gave me the first opportunity to really kind of work hand-in-hand with the governor's office on a project or an initiative that was gonna impact everyone in the state, so this took months of advocating, which they asked us to lead out of Alabama Possible.

And so, we were able to work with individual partners and organizations across the state from various regions to help us increase the awareness and the importance of making FAFSA a high-school graduation requirement, as well as dispelling any myths that they thought about or had heard about this particular policy. We also shared this policy beyond the state to those who were in D.C., because we felt like our Congress members in the House and Senate had constituents that they needed to stay in touch with. We made sure we informed them about what was happening in the state, and how they can help us share the information. We had fact sheets that we had circulating and requested for them to help us get those out.

We drove everyone to our website, so if you supported the FAFSA policy, with a few clicks a letter was sent to your State Board of Education member in your district. So, we just flooded the desks of all of these Board of Education members in our state through that process, which led to us having conversations with those board members. They wanted to know what is happening. All of a sudden, I'm getting all these letters, and they're coming through you guys, and so they wanted to learn more about the policy and what we thought it meant and the implications of it."

Progress Journey:



KEY TAKEAWAY

GAINING BUY-IN FROM THE STATE GOVERNMENT may take a substantial amount of time and effort. Sometimes, regional work influences state priorities and pushes the state to prioritize postsecondary attainment; sometimes, state buy-in may happen seemingly serendipitously. For either case, it is key to have regional leaders who are ready to collaborate with state leaders, and vice versa, to advance the work. Once state leaders do join, **IT'S IMPORTANT THAT STATE MEMBERS DEMONSTRATE A GENUINE INTEREST IN REGIONAL WORK**. This interest helped regional members in Alabama and Indiana build trust and lasting relationships between regions and the state.

INDIANA

A “coalition of the willing” coming together with passion and essential supports to cultivate collaboration and relationships.

When the COVID-19 pandemic started, regions shifted focus to help their communities deal with the pandemic effects. ITN meetings were no longer able to be held in person, but regional stakeholders needed a way to remain connected to state-level partners and share resources with each other. Earlier trust-building work was critical to help ITN quickly adapt to a virtual setting in which regions could rely on the relationships they had with each other and share local challenges to which they could offer ideas and solutions.

In the midst of adapting ITN to serve regional needs during the COVID-19 pandemic, stakeholders were unsure how the work would shift and change. At this point, 21CTR designations were still in progress, and regional stakeholders had to be more deliberate about how they would use their resources and what initiatives to prioritize. In the excerpt below, a member of a region’s backbone team explains the decisions that their region had to make regarding their engagement with ITN and working toward 21CTR designation. In particular, she stresses the importance of going where the energy is to form coalitions, and what it means to create a coalition of the willing.

“You know, we’re in the middle of a pandemic — we’ve never been here before. So, trying to think what the world will look like on the outside, on the back side of that, and project what the future will be, it’s just very difficult, and that was a bit overwhelming to a lot of the counties. And I think, to be quite honest, I think we would have stalled and maybe even failed if we hadn’t had the support of the George and Frances Ball Foundation and a staff member on my team, who continue to say, ‘What can we do to help?’

And then we set a deadline date, and we said, ‘We’re gonna do it on this date. We’re gonna submit the paperwork. And if you have your dashboard and your ecosystem completed by that point, you’ll be part of the initial team that gets the designation. Everyone’s welcome to join later, but we’re gonna move forward on this date,’ and we picked the date.

And people didn’t wanna be left behind. So, they worked hard, and they made phone calls, and they were willing to continue to convene to try to complete what we considered to be the requirements. And we weren’t moving forward until we had dashboards, and stakeholder maps, and a group of people who were willing to work together in that county that we could count on being in place for us so that we had the beginnings of communication networks set up throughout the region. So those were the stipulations before they could be included. And then, from that, we held a series of meetings. So, we had individual county maps, dashboards, and then we had conversations that we rolled that information up into what we consider then our regional targets and strategies. So, I think that we’re unique in the state. I understand we’re the first ones to start with the county information, and then convene meetings to collaborate and figure out what our metrics would be from a regional standpoint. . . .

INDIANA | Partner Story Continued

. . . . So, as we started to have information-sharing sessions, we counted a lot on the Local Economic Development Organizations to help us make contact. But we also guided that a little bit in that we would say, ‘You need to have your community foundation person as a part of these conversations. You need to have industry representatives [as] a part of the conversation.’ So, we guided a little bit on who we thought should come to the initial meetings. And then we used what CivicLab termed the *coalition of the willing*. So, we didn't force anyone.

And we encouraged the counties not to force anyone, either. That what we want to do is work with people who are willing to work together to put all . . . your own personal preferences and things aside for the good of the region. So, that became our coalition of the willing. So, each of our county coalitions, the makeup is a little different because you don't always have . . . people in those positions in those counties, but you also don't always have people who are . . . who will identify this as a priority that they can spend time working on. So, each one is a little bit different, even though we tried to . . . we encouraged some consistency. We are not forcing anyone. . . . Through all of this, it's been the coalition of the willing.”

KEY TAKEAWAY

Engaging a coalition of the willing may mean that those who are deeply interested and invested in the work are the ones driving it forward. The coalition, however, also should see the value of their contribution, as well as the value of participating in a collaborative network. In Indiana, regions receive **RECOGNITION** when designated as a 21st Century Talent Region, **TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE**, and **ACCESS TO DATA** and other resources, all of which help them advance postsecondary work.





SECTION FIVE

Conclusion

Summary

Each of the statewide partnerships has grown and adapted throughout their journeys. States and regions hoping to establish partnerships to create sustainable changes to postsecondary ecosystems in their states can learn much from studying the partnerships in Alabama and Indiana. Below are some high-level takeaways that Equivolve believes are particularly important for new partnerships to keep in mind:

- The contexts in which states develop partnerships will heavily influence how partnerships are structured, which individuals or organizations are included in the partnership, and the priorities that any partnership may decide upon. However, **engaging stakeholders in a process reliant on trust-building will help create sustainable partnerships that are collaborative rather than competitive.**
- Partnerships benefit from being a “coalition of the willing.” **Theoretically, any individual or organization that wants to be part of a partnership should have the opportunity to become involved.** Whether due to a lack of time, resources, interest, or other circumstances, there may be individuals or organizations who will not see the benefit of joining a statewide partnership focused on improving postsecondary education systems. Instead of using time and resources to convince the unwilling, the Alabama and Indiana partnerships prioritized removing barriers for interested parties to join, whether those barriers be a history of racism and systemic oppression, geographic distance, financial needs, or another barrier.
- While the day-to-day activities and work of individuals and organizations may vary, **including individuals or organizations who play the roles of Connector, Connected State Partner, Technical Assistance Provider, and Funder has been essential to the success of the Alabama and Indiana partnerships.**

Pivot points throughout the two partnerships' journeys give context to these key takeaways. In Alabama, three major events significantly impacted the future of the partnership. First, MAEF's Talent Hub application being denied in June 2017 came after the partnership had experienced great success with their 2014 CPA grant. The denial encouraged regional partners to think bigger about growth and how to engage new partners. They developed a new relationship with another community college that had greater geographical breadth across the region. The partnership resubmitted an application for Talent Hub designation in 2018, which they were awarded. This major pivot point helped the partners think bigger and more expansively in how they could grow the postsecondary ecosystem and engage more stakeholders in the region.

The second and third Alabama pivot points are both related to Chandra Scott's connection to Alabama Possible. In July 2017, she was asked to be on the board for the organization, bringing more awareness at the state level of the Mobile Area Talent Hub's work and achievements. Later, in October 2020, Scott transitioned to her new role as executive director of Alabama Possible. This solidified her leadership role at the state level and has allowed for increased connectivity across regions and between regional and state leaders. Moving forward, Alabama's partnership focus will be to move beyond the geographic hubs of influence in the state, with a focus on rural, less-resourced regions.

"I would say my aspiration for the state . . . is that we move beyond only giving attention to our cities or hubs of corporate influence. . . . How do we leverage resources to impact those who live in less [resourced] areas in our state? How do we get our higher ed and business and industry to figure out ways to create what I will call these satellite locations of success? So, if I have a college that's located in this county, but for five counties out, there's nothing, there is a desert of . . . learning and training and there's a desert of industry."

Additionally, Alabama partners are focused on "creat[ing] a system that really speaks to each other, [where] everything is connected and transferable, [and where they] can close the gaps between the learning and earning deserts." Although the partnership structure in Alabama between and across regions and the state are siloed, they have many facilitating conditions that make Alabama ripe for new structure with increased collaboration and a commitment to equitable distribution of resources.

In Indiana, there are three major events that were pivot points for the future of their partnership. First, in May 2016, four of Lumina's CPA sites in Indiana, with the encouragement of CivicLab, decided to meet and formed the beginning of what we now know as ITN. This voluntary partnership was the beginning of an important statewide structure that serves as the backbone to collaboration between and across regional and state stakeholders. The second pivot point was when the 21CTR designation process was launched at an ITN meeting in December 2018. The designation process gave regional leaders something to collaborate on and work toward together — which, for some regions, was the first time they worked together cohesively toward a common goal. The designation process also gave regions access to quality technical assistance from CivicLab and an opportunity to collaborate with statewide leaders engaged in the process. The third pivot point was in January 2021 when the 21CTR team transitioned to new roles at the state. With 14 regions designated, the backbone team, consisting of former 21CTR leaders, ITN, and

CivicLab, announced that they would no longer offer designation — and that designated and non-designated regions could continue to stay connected through their engagement in ITN. This shift in partnership structure brings a period of change and reflection on what the future of the partnership can look like.

“I think it's a period of evolution for us, to try to figure out what's next. We're looking for partners that we can continue to work with, doing what ITN does best, which is bringing people together and letting them learn. We are . . . [seeing] where [ITN] fits in with other organizations, and to try to see where our unique spaces [are to] work with people.”

ITN brings together leaders in the postsecondary education and talent retention space across the entire state of Indiana. Its meetings, book club, and other activities give regional and state leaders common ground to connect, stay engaged, and strategically think about ways to engage new partners and meet the needs of Hoosiers.

Recommendations

Lumina set a national goal that by 2025, 60 percent of adults would have high-quality postsecondary credentials, such as degrees or high-quality workforce certificates. The development of this big goal seems to have energized stakeholders in Alabama and Indiana. Although progress toward the goal may look different in the two states, the Alabama and Indiana partnerships have implemented various strategies to advance postsecondary attainment. Lessons from the Alabama and Indiana partnership efforts can provide insight into potential challenges and *solutions* for other partnerships across the country that are working on advancing postsecondary attainment through regional partnerships. Below, we provide recommendations for states seeking to embark on similar work, gleaned both from advice provided directly by the Alabama and Indiana backbone teams, as well as our observations of their work.

“Don't drag your feet forever.”

While the work of improving postsecondary attainment for all residents of a state can seem overbearing or insurmountable, several members of the statewide partnerships emphasized the importance of just getting started. This is not to suggest that planning is unnecessary, as members of the Alabama and Indiana partnerships engaged in extensive planning, including stakeholder engagement, listening tours, data analysis, and partnership development. However, partnership members encourage other states not to get stuck in the planning phase. Getting started will provide an opportunity to test out potential strategies and course-correct, as needed. It may also result in some successes, which can be helpful in building buy-in and relationships with new stakeholders.

In both states that were the focus of this evaluation, there were at least some existing relationships or an existing network in place that served as a foundation for the postsecondary attainment efforts. For other states that may be in the planning phase, it may be beneficial to leverage networks or collaborative efforts that are already in place. Working with existing efforts may reduce the amount of time needed for planning, redundancy, and potential competition for the same resources and partnerships.

Let data be your “flashlight.”

Use of data has been an important element of the work for both the Alabama and Indiana partnerships. Data on postsecondary education, credentialing, and employment were used when developing plans; gaining buy-in from new stakeholders, especially those who may not immediately see the value of implementing a statewide postsecondary attainment strategy; and deciding on any changes to the focus of the work. Data are also an important tool that helped the Indiana partnership convey the importance of an equity focus. Concrete indicators and using data disaggregated by race and ethnicity created a locus for partners to refer to when developing shared goals and processes for addressing them.

However, it is also important to develop a culture in which members of the partnership, as well as any regional stakeholders leading the efforts, are able to learn from data. Trust is at the core of a culture of learning; therefore, building trust should help facilitate learning among partners. Some ways to develop this culture of learning include celebrating successes when data do demonstrate progress, not assigning blame to any one group or organization when data do not present the desired results or progress, and having constructive conversations about how the partnership can collectively work together to course-correct.

“Leverage your relationship builders and your networkers.”

Including someone in the partnership who has extensive historical knowledge of postsecondary work in the state will be important for states seeking to conduct similar work to Alabama and Indiana. At least two regional members of the Indiana backbone team have decades of experience working on postsecondary issues in the state. Often, these team members have established an extensive number of relationships across the state and are aware of work that has been tried in various regions, as well as statewide initiatives that have been implemented. Given their historical knowledge and long-term relationships, these team members are also able to speak to the significance of having gained buy-in from the state, including having a governor-appointed Secretary of Career Connections and Talent, and a Governor’s Workforce Cabinet. Because of their awareness of the postsecondary landscape, these team members with deep historical knowledge

“You’d be hard-pressed to find anybody who is operating in good faith, who would still be against something like this after all of the facts have been laid out on the table. So don’t wring your hands for six years and let a bunch of anecdotal people get in there and churn it all up. You just do it, and I think the results will speak for themselves.”

- ALABAMA STAKEHOLDER

also played a key role in developing the backbone team, often initiating the conversations with state team members and helping to bring them on board.

The Connector, someone who is able to link organizations to resources or to each other, has also been an important role for both the Alabama and Indiana partnerships and potentially an important role for other states. This person aids in building the capacity of organizations to conduct work and in trust-building among involved stakeholders. Once relationship-building is initiated by a Connector, those relationships between stakeholders help reduce duplication of efforts, facilitate communication of ideas and initiatives across organizations, and connect stakeholders to otherwise-unknown or hard-to-access resources. Our team found multiple stakeholders who could act as Connectors in both partnerships, but usually, one person emerged most prominently and was seen as a go-to resource within the partnership and among stakeholders, such as regional leaders, connected to the partnership. The self-identification of a Connector did not rely on an individual's organizational position or job description, but rather, on being perceived as someone who has the ability and obligation to connect others to resources if a need arises. Stakeholders at both the state and regional levels shared the importance of having this Connector role to help organizations become allied with one another. The role is seen by one partnership member as so vital to this type of work that they believed **“without that support, you'll have tried something and probably not succeeded.”**

Build it, and the state will come.

There may be some cases in which a relationship between the state and regional partnerships already exists or where state-level leaders have already made postsecondary attainment a priority. However, in those cases where the relationships or state leadership do not exist, which was the case for both Alabama and Indiana at some point in their work, this should not be a deterrent to building or strengthening the postsecondary ecosystem.

As noted throughout the report, the Alabama backbone, MAEF, pushed forward initiatives at the regional level before gaining recognition from state-level leaders. This recognition helped Chandra Scott transition from a regional to a state leadership position and promote the inclusion of regional leaders to advance statewide policies, such as the FAFSA Completion Policy. The partnership team in Indiana had been working for a number of years to get the topic of postsecondary attainment on the state agenda before the Secretary of Career Connections and Talent was appointed. According to one Indiana partnership team member, **“We were ready, [and] we were looking for the right people and then [the Secretary of CCT] showed up in February of 2018 because key legislators wanted to come to Columbus to learn about how we do what we do.”** This theme of preparation aligning with opportunity was the case for both states. As other states seek to gain buy-in from state leaders, it is important to consider that the process could be an extended one and that endurance and preparation among those working regionally will be important.

Listen to and center community voices.

While the two partnerships highlighted here began incorporating community or student voices into their work in different phases of implementation, both have emphasized the significance of doing so. Developing postsecondary attainment strategies that are informed by those who will be directly affected by them helps ensure that those strategies align with current needs and build on community assets. Engaging in community listening sessions also helped one of the partnerships engage new organizations that work primarily with people of color and brought attention to issues that were exacerbated among specific populations by the COVID-19 pandemic — for example, transportation, and Internet and food access. Without including community voices when developing postsecondary strategies, the partnership risks developing programming or initiatives that are difficult to access because the intended recipients' basic needs are unmet. Although relying on (usually quantitative) data for planning and implementation has been a core element of the partnerships' work, according to one leader, **“The power of student voices and stakeholder voices [helps] to counteract some of that narrative [that postsecondary attainment does not need to be prioritized].”**



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