

FROM WAITING TO ENGAGING

Ivy Tech, Employers Rewriting Workforce Playbook

By Rebecca Patrick

In Indiana – and across much of the country – a profound shift is underway: Employers are no longer waiting on talent pipelines to deliver; they are helping to design them. This comes as technology, demographics and industry demands are rapidly transforming workforce needs.

At the center of that shift in Indiana is Ivy Tech Community College, the state's largest public postsecondary institution. According to Dr. Martin Pollio, who became Ivy Tech's president last July, the pivot is essential for the state's economy.

"I think it's clear the jobs that Indiana needs – the workforce development now and in the future – most of those are going to require some type of postsecondary work," Pollio affirms. "It may not be a bachelor's degree, but it's going to (be something)."

Pollio points to a mismatch between what is currently required and the pace at which traditional avenues have responded.

"(As indicated in Ivy Tech's 2025 report, *Indiana's Workforce Transformation*), 82,000 Hoosiers are going to need to be upskilled or reskilled in the next 10 years in order to really maintain the effectiveness at their job in many areas," he relays. "And right now, I don't think the state is on track for that."

Those needs span industries critical to Indiana's economy – logistics, IT, business, healthcare, nursing and advanced manufacturing – fields where skill requirements can evolve faster than traditional degree pathways can adapt.

Meeting learners where they are

Ivy Tech serves three primary groups: high school students earning dual credit, traditional college students and a fast-growing population of working adults seeking to reskill or upskill.

"For those who are trying to be reskilled or upskilled, we know we have to be extremely flexible," Pollio stresses. "Many of our students may be full-time workers and have children



Ivy Tech works together with employers so training is built into academic programs. By the time learners – such as those in healthcare – earn their certification, they're fully prepared to step straight into the workforce partner's operation.

and (are) trying to upskill at the same time."

That flexibility has become a defining feature of Ivy Tech's employer-aligned approach. Instead of relying solely on traditional semester-long pathways, the college has increasingly focused on "short, high-quality stackable credentials," Pollio explains.

These are credentials that deliver immediate labor market value while allowing students to continue building toward longer-term degrees.

The new blueprint

Pollio shares what truly distinguishes an employer's role today is how deeply they are involved.

In healthcare, for example, Ivy Tech works with hospital systems to have training mirror the real-world environments students will enter after certification.

"If we know most of our certified surg tech (surgical technologists) are going to go next door to this hospital system, then why not have our simulation labs where the students are learning look just like that," Pollio maintains.

The payoff for employers is immediate: Graduates arrive not only credentialed but already familiar with the tools and settings of their future workplaces.

While the Ivy Tech partnership model is

expanding across sectors, healthcare employers have been among the most aggressive adopters, Pollio says, driven by widespread workforce shortages.

Hospital systems – including Ascension, Baptist Health (serving Louisville and southern Indiana), IU Health and Reid Health – have partnered with Ivy Tech to help the system expand program capacity, build simulation labs and rethink clinical schedules (to include nights and weekends).

Ivy Tech's partnership with Eli Lilly and Co. is another dynamic example of talent building in action. Backed by a \$15 million, five-year investment, the collaboration fuels two cutting-edge labs and scholarships that remove financial barriers for students.

Through Lilly Scholars, learners in biotechnology, smart manufacturing, digital integration and industrial technology can complete up to eight semesters tuition free. And with Lilly Pathfinders, high schoolers can earn a biopharmaceutical certificate that makes them job ready the moment they graduate and launches them straight into high-demand careers.

Ivy Tech's efforts also focus on work-based learning, particularly apprenticeships. Pollio sees them not as a niche solution, but as "the way of the future."

Fits all sizes

Pollio points out it's a misconception that deep partnerships are only feasible for large corporations. In reality, many of Ivy Tech's approximately 2,500 workforce partners are midsize or even small employers.

"(It's) everything from a company that may only have 10 or 12 employees ... to I think most of them are actually midsize companies," he offers. "Every one of our 19 campuses have local partners that are midsize. It's important because I think those relationships are more nimble than with the very large corporations.

"We can move quickly with them. We can get the students on the floors of those companies working right away."

Because many employers already have established connections in their community, one of Ivy Tech's local campuses often becomes a company's first point of entry. Local teams can help employers start a partnership and then connect them to the right people and resources to bring it to life.

"Every campus has what we call career link individuals, which are those that work with companies to help place students there and make those partnerships," Pollio describes.

"(So, companies) can actually work with their local Ivy Tech campus and the folks there to develop those relationships and get it moving quickly."

Scaling what works

Customization for partners, however, does not mean fragmentation. Pollio emphasizes that Ivy Tech's programs are designed to meet both regional needs and statewide – and national – standards.

"What's really important is that we have experts in the field and employer partners who are part of our planning, whether that be (via) labs or curriculum," he says.

Accreditation plays a central role in ensuring portability.

"Each of our program areas has to be accredited by an expert in that field," Pollio reiterates. "So, if it's advanced manufacturing, we have to be accredited to that across all our campuses. There is a standard that we have to produce. ... (so) we are teaching what is needed (in Indiana and) really nationally."

Call to business leaders

For employers still on the sidelines, Pollio's message is direct: Waiting for the labor market to fix itself is no longer an option.

"First and foremost, it's (about) taking ownership in the development of your own talent," he urges. "It's looking internally and saying, 'How can we partner to upskill or reskill our employees?' What we are seeing is the technology is moving so fast that there is going to have to be a commitment to re-skilling, because if someone was (last) trained on something five years ago, (innovations are) going to pass them by pretty quickly."

That means investing in current employees, being open to apprenticeships for entry-level positions and partnering intentionally with educators.

Pollio surmises, "It's a CEO's or president's commitment to saying, 'Let's invest in our own employees and invest in our own workforce in the company.' And we are the partner that can do that. ... If we partner with employers, we become their training vessel."

RESOURCE: Dr. Martin Pollio, Ivy Tech Community College, at www.ivytech.edu



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