



## **2026 ACI Breakfast Forum**

### **Partners in Progress: Connecting Institutions and Industry for Impact Panel Takeaways for Next-Step Planning**

#### **1. Make career readiness part of the student experience from day one**

Career preparation cannot sit on the sidelines. It should be embedded into coursework, faculty engagement, and campus culture so every student graduates with direction, experience, and confidence.

#### **2. Build partnerships that go beyond transactions**

Strong partnerships, like those modeled by Braven and CME Group Foundation, are rooted in trust, shared ownership, and long-term outcomes. The focus should shift from “programs” **to systems that work together.**

#### **3. Expand and align wraparound supports**

Student success improves when financial aid, mental health services, mentoring, and career exposure are coordinated. The most effective models “surround” students with support at multiple points through their journey.

#### **4. Close the gap between education and employer expectations**

Employers consistently pointed to gaps in **social skills, communication, professional behavior, and confidence.** These “durable skills” must be intentionally taught and practiced, not assumed.

#### **5. Bring employers into the learning environment**

Traditional career fairs are not enough. Deeper engagement requires guest speakers, embedded projects, internships, and faculty partnerships to help students better understand real career pathways.

#### **6. Respond to AI by doubling down on human skills**

AI is reshaping entry-level work, but it also reinforces the need for critical thinking, relationship-building, and adaptability. Students need both technical awareness and strong human capabilities.

#### **7. Center student voice and lived experience**

Designing programs with students, not just for them, leads to better outcomes. Listening to their goals, barriers, and aspirations should guide program and partnership decisions.

## **8. Use ACI's role to scale what works**

There is an opportunity to leverage ACI as a convener to **share best practices, align partners, and expand proven models** across member institutions.

Associated Colleges of Illinois partnerships play a critical role in convening and working to scale efforts, shifting the focus from isolated programs to systems that work together through a consortium.