



## 2026 ACI Breakfast Forum

### Partners in Progress: Connecting Institutions and Industry for Impact Roundtable Conversations Summary

#### **Question 1: What Defines Strong Education–Industry Partnerships**

Participants consistently agreed that high-impact partnerships are mission-aligned, mutually beneficial, and sustained over time. Effective collaborations demonstrate:

- **Shared goals, values, and accountability**, with both parties contributing resources and sharing risk.
- **Consistency, transparency, two-way communication**, including feedback loops and follow-through.
- **Trust and long-term engagement**, moving beyond transactional or sponsorship-only models.
- **Demonstrated impact**, particularly on student preparation, career readiness, and hiring outcomes.
- **Ecosystem thinking**, where institutions and employers collaborate rather than compete.

Less effective partnerships were described as one-sided, episodic, siloed, or resistant to change.

#### **Question 2: Key Barriers to Partnership Growth**

Across sectors, participants identified recurring challenges:

- **Enrollment pressures and competition**, which reduce collaboration across institutions.
- **Time and resource constraints**, with staff stretched across multiple responsibilities.
- **Siloed communication** within and between education and industry.
- **Cultural and structural misalignment**, including curriculum inflexibility, tenure incentives, and unclear ROI for partnership efforts.

- **Economic volatility**, limiting employer capacity to sustain internships and programs.

These barriers disproportionately affect students' access to internships, mentorship, and clear career pipelines.

### **Question 3: Priority Actions for the Next 6–12 Months**

Participants highlighted several practical, near-term actions they can take:

#### **For Higher Education Leaders**

- Embed employer connection more deeply into **curriculum, career pathways, and early-year student exposure**.
- Leverage **alumni networks** to expand internships, mentorship, and job opportunities.
- Clarify institutional **career outcome values** and align incentives to support partnership activity.
- Improve **centralized, student-centered communication** about opportunities.

#### **For Employers**

- Treat internships and partnerships as **talent pipelines**, not shorter programs.
- Expand engagement beyond a single campus contact to ensure continuity.
- Participate in **coaching, mentorship, and skill-building**, especially for early-career talent.
- Commit to **ongoing dialogue**, even outside formal ACI events.

#### **For ACI Collectively with its Partners and Members**

- Support **small-group, post-forum convenings** to sustain momentum.
- Promote **resource sharing and collaboration** across institutions and employers with aligned goals.
- Help members identify overlaps in missions to reduce duplication and competition.

These actions were viewed as achievable steps to strengthen partnerships, improve student outcomes, and deliver measurable value to both education and industry partners.