Labor Market Alignment in Higher Education: A Framework for Examining Activities and Outcomes
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Problem Statement
Rising student debt and concerns about graduates' employment outcomes, along with changing employer expectations about graduates' skills, are prompting attention about the role of higher education in preparing students for workforce success and meeting employer needs. But, labor market alignment in higher education is not well defined or understood.

Purpose
To identify the core elements present in efforts to better align postsecondary education with the labor market in order to create a comprehensive framework for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners to discuss activities and outcomes that constitute labor market alignment (LMA) in higher education. This work builds upon frameworks for understanding the characteristics of labor market responsive community college institutions (Adams, Johnson, & State, 2013; Hamson & Mahony, 2006) by examining a wide range of literature to demonstrate common elements in alignment efforts across multiple types of higher education institutions and multiple levels of implementation and analysis. The paper identifies lessons for policy and practice and suggests areas for future research.

Methods
Literature review of scholarly research, as well as policy and practice literature. Synthesis of disparate areas of higher education and workforce development literature.

A Model for Understanding Key Features of LMA Efforts in Higher Education

Data Collection/Validation
Incorporation
Policy, Funding, and Organizational Context

Key Findings
- Labor market alignment has two goals: Job vacancy alignment + producing the correct number of graduates; skills alignment + ensuring that graduates have the correct skills.
- There is no “right” approach to labor market alignment, but rather a broad continuum of LMA goals and activities emerges as a result of a complex balance of multiple stakeholders needs. “Correct” in the definition above, therefore, is a relative norm negotiated by stakeholders.
- Alignment expands beyond curriculum and can be considered at all points in the program cycle, from program selection and curriculum development to instruction to institutional.
- Alignment can occur at multiple institutional levels. From the class, to the program, to department, to institution, to system levels.
- Drawing on organizational learning theory, these core activities promote labor market alignment in higher education: data collection/validates, incorporation, and relationship building.
- Multiple measures of alignment outcomes are possible such as credential attainment, earnings, student and employer satisfaction; but each has limitations, and are best used in combination.

Future Research
Further research is needed on the link between alignment activities and outcomes, and the unique perspectives of students, employers, institutions, and labor markets. Specifically, research should:
- Conduct comprehensive outcomes research tied to activities on both job vacancy and skills alignment
- Identify alignment approaches that balance well with other core higher education missions, particularly for liberal arts institutions
- Uncover the organizational learning processes that support alignment implementation in different settings
- Identify approaches to integrate career preparation for all students
- Improve understanding of employer perspectives in engagement and hiring practices
- Evaluate and validate several sources of demand and supply-side data for use in job vacancy and skills alignment

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