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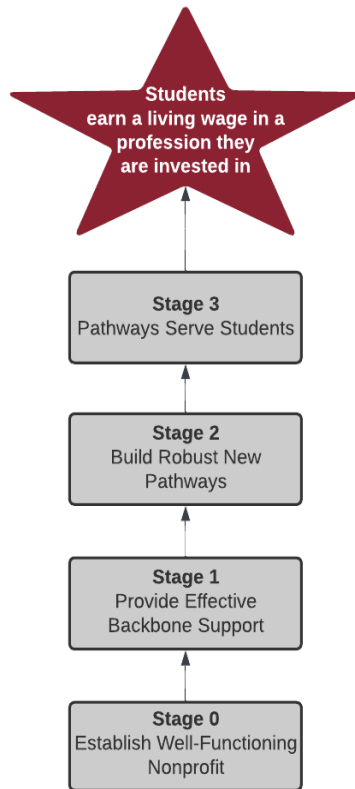
How the Nonprofit Provides Effective Backbone Support

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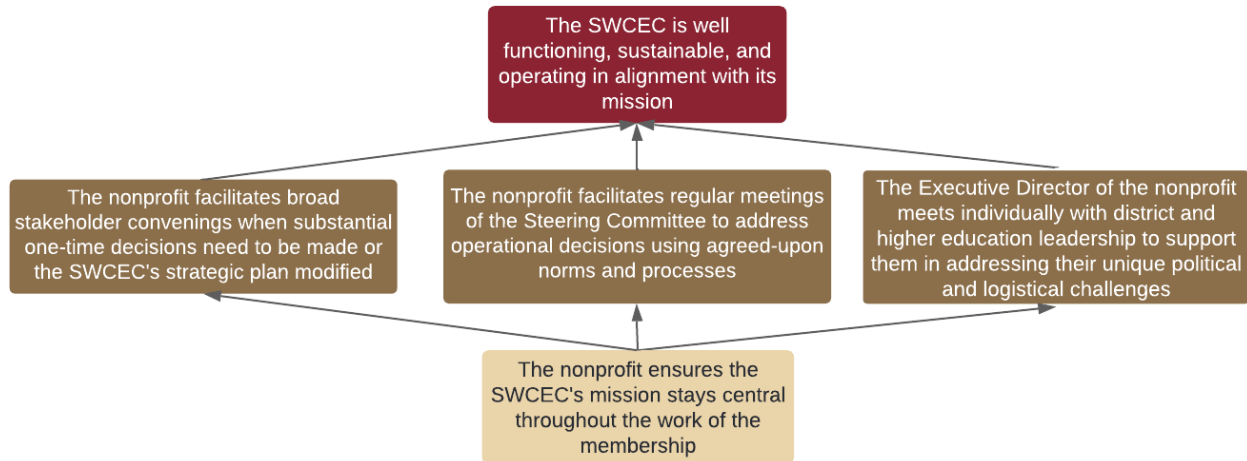
About This Document



The Southwest Colorado Education Collaborative’s (SWCEC’s) nonprofit, in partnership with the Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab (Colorado Lab), developed the [Guide to Supporting Regional Alliances Around Career Pathways](#), which provides an organizing framework for the four major stages of the SWCEC’s work (left). The red star at the top reflects the desired long-term outcome for students with each stage from 0 to 3 a necessary precursor to achieving that outcome. A supplement to the Guide, the *Components of a Well-Functioning Nonprofit*, provides a summary of how the SWCEC nonprofit is structured and conducts key activities including hiring and financial management. It is particularly useful for onboarding new members. The present document identifies places throughout Stage 1 where barriers to success are most likely to occur and makes recommendations for what data to regularly collect to monitor progress and support continuous improvement. The SWCEC nonprofit may choose to build out similar measures for Stages 2 and 3 later.

This document separately considers each of the boxes in Stage 1 below and recommends measures and methods of data collection to answer the guiding question: “How do we know we are on track for success?” The tan box at the bottom represents actions the nonprofit takes to keep the work of SWCEC’s membership aligned with its [mission](#) to “strengthen diverse communities by providing pathways in career readiness and higher education for students to build 21st- century skills and economically viable futures.” The three brown boxes in the middle represent outputs, or the result of the actions the nonprofit takes (the tan box) that are necessary to reach the red box. The red box reflects the medium-term outcome of a well-functioning SWCEC that is sustainable and operating in alignment with its mission. Achieving this medium-term outcome is necessary before moving on to Stages 2 and 3 and then to the north star outcome for students. Given how difficult cross-system work can be, if the SWCEC is well functioning, sustainable, and operating in alignment with its mission, we can be confident that the nonprofit is providing effective backbone support.

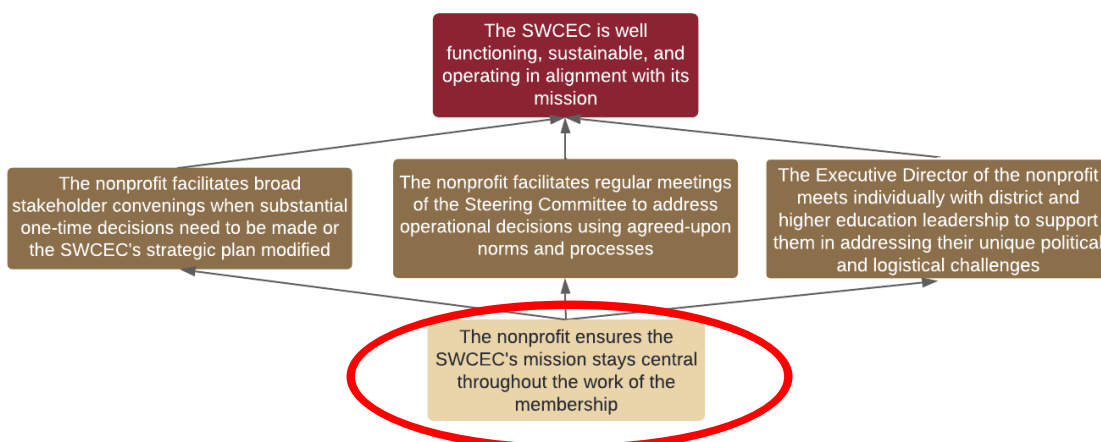
Stage 1: The Nonprofit Provides Effective Backbone Support to the SWCEC



In the discussion that follows, each recommended measure is marked with asterisks based on how and from whom data will be collected. A single asterisk (*) corresponds to data gathered from SWCEC members, either through a member survey or in conversation—most likely with the nonprofit’s Executive Director (ED). Two asterisks (**) correspond to data the nonprofit’s staff already collect as part of administrative processes or could begin collecting either through direct observation (e.g., who attended meetings, who has paid dues) or other mechanisms (e.g., social media clicks). Three asterisks (***) correspond to surveys with students, caregivers, industry partners, or other community stakeholders. The recommended measures are mere suggestions. There are undoubtedly additional or substantially revised measures that would also serve the SWCEC and its nonprofit support partner well.

The Nonprofit Ensures the SWCEC’S Mission Stays Central Throughout the Work of The Membership

Beginning at the first box in Stage 1, the following areas indicate whether the SWCEC is achieving success in keeping the mission central throughout the work of the membership.



Collectively bonded membership. Ideally, all members and their communities share a mental model of what it means to be a member of the SWCEC. For example, when members and industry partners learn about new grant opportunities, their first call would be to SWCEC to coordinate an application. This is in contrast to when members default to pursuing an opportunity individually.

- The SWCEC can measure whether there is a collectively bonded membership through the following: *Ask members: “How likely are you to involve the SWCEC when a new funding opportunity arises? Why or why not?”
- **Measure how many members are paying in. From January to June each year, when districts are building their budgets and receiving approvals from their boards, the SWCEC ED can track how many current members are continuing their financial contributions, and how many new members are paying in.
- *In one-on-one discussions with district representatives, the ED can ask about the reasons why members are or are not continuing their financial contributions:
 - Do you feel like your needs are being met as outlined by the SWCEC’s strategic plan?
 - What is the value of being a member of SWCEC?
 - What successes have you found for your district/region as part of being in SWCEC?
 - What would you like to see from SWCEC, if you don't feel it is providing enough value for the contribution we are asking for?
 - What are the competing interests within your budget (that might limit your ability to participate in the SWCEC)?
 - [If applicable] By making the decision to discontinue your contribution to SWCEC, what do you feel like your organization would be missing out on?
 - Are there any concerns I should have about your organization potentially not being part of the SWCEC in the future?
- **Monitor member participation in steering committee meetings. After each steering committee meeting, nonprofit staff track how many current members attended and make notes about known reasons for potential non-attendance, whether they are reachable and still bought in or are fully disengaged.

Caregivers are aware of and engaged in opportunities offered by SWCEC, and students identify the purpose and value of SWCEC. Ideally, caregivers understand the mission and resources available through SWCEC. Caregivers would come to SWCEC directly to learn about a new pathway offering or visit the SWCEC website and register their student directly. This prevents members from needing to direct resources on student recruitment. Caregivers would also provide suggestions for improving existing offerings or expanding opportunities. Students would also understand and identify SWCEC resources and connections. For example, students would understand when it was a SWCEC event that connected them to industry leaders and be aware that they have access to a regional collective that can help them identify additional opportunities.

- The SWCEC can measure whether caregivers are aware and engaged with SWCEC through the following: **Social media and newsletter engagement. SWCEC can report on key metrics related to community engagement in SWCEC’s social media pages, such as tracking growth in

followers/hits to the page over time, how many users have clicked into newsletters from emails, and how many/how often posts are re-posted or shared by followers.

- ****How many additional SWCEC newsletter recipients are added over time (e.g., quarterly).**
- ****Caregiver and student attendance at events.** Nonprofit staff can track how many caregivers and students attend community events, comparing the number of individuals who attended an event to the number who signed up. Nonprofit staff can also track the demographic characteristics of attendees to ensure they are reaching a representative sample of those they aim to reach through these events (e.g., how many caregivers vs students attend, and what race, gender, and region do they identify with?).
- *****Surveys on the value of events.** Nonprofit staff can distribute surveys immediately following events to all attendees. Questions might include “How valuable was this event for meeting your needs? How many events have you attended to date? What was your level of interest in [the pathway discussed at the event] before vs. after attending this event?”
- *****Perception surveys with students and caregivers.** Nonprofit staff can distribute surveys to students and caregivers in member districts to take a pulse on how well the community understands the purpose and value of SWCEC. The more the community understands the value of SWCEC, the clearer its value becomes to school districts, which helps drive membership engagement. Questions might include “How important do you feel career-connected learning is for you/your student? How familiar are you with SWCEC? Do you know what SWCEC offers to students in your district? What resources are you aware of that are available through SWCEC? Which of those resources are you currently accessing?”

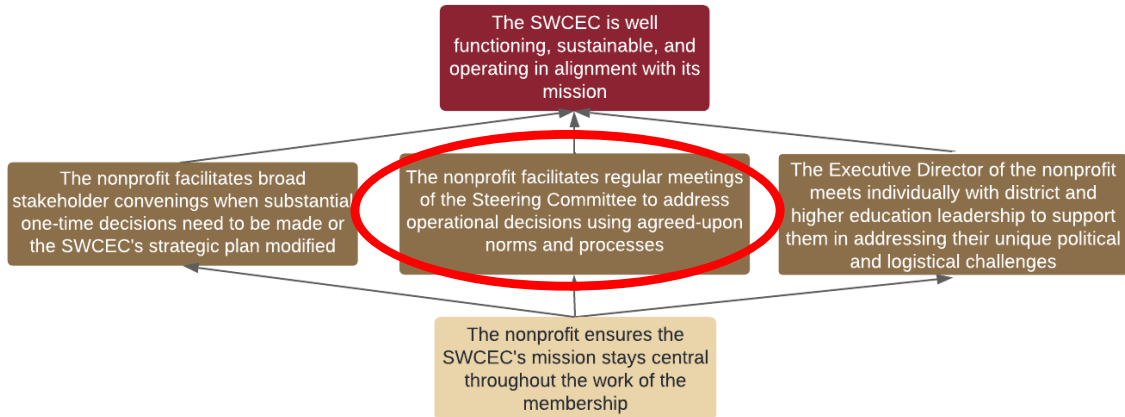
Industry partners identify the purpose and value of SWCEC. Ideally, in the same way caregivers and students can identify the value of their district participating in SWCEC, industry partners value the opportunity to work with SWCEC. These partnerships might include job shadows, projects, internships, and apprenticeship opportunities.

The SWCEC can measure whether industry partners are aware and engaged with SWCEC through the following:

- ****The number of industry partners actively engaged with SWCEC.** Utilizing the work-based learning database system, nonprofit staff can track:
 - Number of partners currently paying fees to be included in the database by district/community area and growth over time (e.g., quarter over quarter).
 - Number of student opportunities resulting from those partnerships, including by type and community (for example, how many internships are currently available across the 3 member districts in La Plata County, or how many apprenticeships are available to students only in the Durango district).
 - How many opportunities are offered by industry partners more than once (i.e., how much a partner is willing to repeat the opportunity for additional SWCEC students).
 - How many students in a given pathway are hired or placed in apprenticeship programs with industry partners, how many industry partners are paying into these programs, and how this number changes over time.

- ***Industry partner perceptions on the work-based learning database platform. The nonprofit can distribute a survey to all active industry partners to understand their experiences using the platform by asking, “Is this system meeting your needs and providing functions that are helpful to you? Do you feel confident using it? Is it cumbersome to use? What feedback do you have about the system?”
- **Number of industry leaders on the SWCEC Board. Three seats are available to industry leaders who volunteer to join the SWCEC Board. This measure can capture industry level of engagement and investment in SWCEC. At the same point(s) in time each year, nonprofit staff might track how many of those seats are filled and the reasons why or why not.
- **Number and quality of current partnerships with local business groups. Nonprofit staff record how many current partnerships exist between SWCEC and local business groups such as chambers of commerce, restaurant associations, or local business organizations. In addition to the quantity of these partnerships, nonprofit staff can track the quality of these relationships by recording how frequently nonprofit staff are invited to meetings and how many meetings nonprofit staff have attended.
- **Number of industry partners sponsoring events. Once annually, nonprofit staff can track how many SWCEC events were sponsored by industry partners, and how this number changes over time.
- ***Summarize employer feedback from surveys of industry partners after student completion of work-based learning opportunities. Nonprofit staff track employer feedback for each student who participates in a job shadow, project, and/or internship. Nonprofit staff review and summarize the feedback specific to each employer to identify any overarching themes that indicate needs or issues that can be addressed to maintain positive relationships and high engagement levels with those partners.
- ***Surveys to gather industry partner feedback from work-based learning events. After each community work-based learning event (such as Employer Seminars), nonprofit staff distribute a survey to collect information from industry partner attendees on the value of these events, how many students they feel are prepared/have the skills to be hired, as well as their potential reasons for choosing to offer new or repeat work-based learning opportunities or not (such as continuing to offer projects or job shadows after students have participated).

■ The Nonprofit Facilitates Regular Meetings of The Steering Committee to Address Operational Decisions Using Agreed-Upon Norms and Processes



The middle brown box in Stage 1 pertains to how successful the nonprofit’s facilitation of regular steering committee meetings is to address operational decisions using agreed-upon norms and processes. The following measures may be helpful in measuring success:

A culture of building together. Ideally, when steering committee members—school district superintendents and administrators from institutions of higher education—engage in any vein of the work of SWCEC (e.g., building up new pathways, collaborating on rural funding opportunities), they work together to expand access for all students. For example, when designing their new concurrent enrollment courses, a district might leverage the expertise of other SWCEC member districts to ensure those courses can be easily accessed by students in other districts.

The SWCEC might measure whether there is a culture of building together through the following:

- ****How much members use language about “building together” and discuss their collective rather than individual needs (or how quickly they get from their own individual needs to understanding similar needs at other member districts and addressing collectively).** After each steering committee meeting, nonprofit staff might use a debriefing tool internally to discuss how frequently and in what context they heard members using language or providing examples of collective action, noting any differences or concerns of members using language that diverts from a tone of “building together.”
- ****How much members communicate to the nonprofit ED about where they need support in building infrastructure or student opportunities together.** The ED meets once monthly individually with all superintendents. In these meetings, the ED records district needs and areas where they need support, particularly when solutions leverage the SWCEC’s shared resources. For example, if a small, rural district needs to fill a new position for a role such as Director of Transportation, and another small district nearby has the same need, the ED can identify and connect the opportunity to combine both needs into hiring one individual to fill the position and share their services among

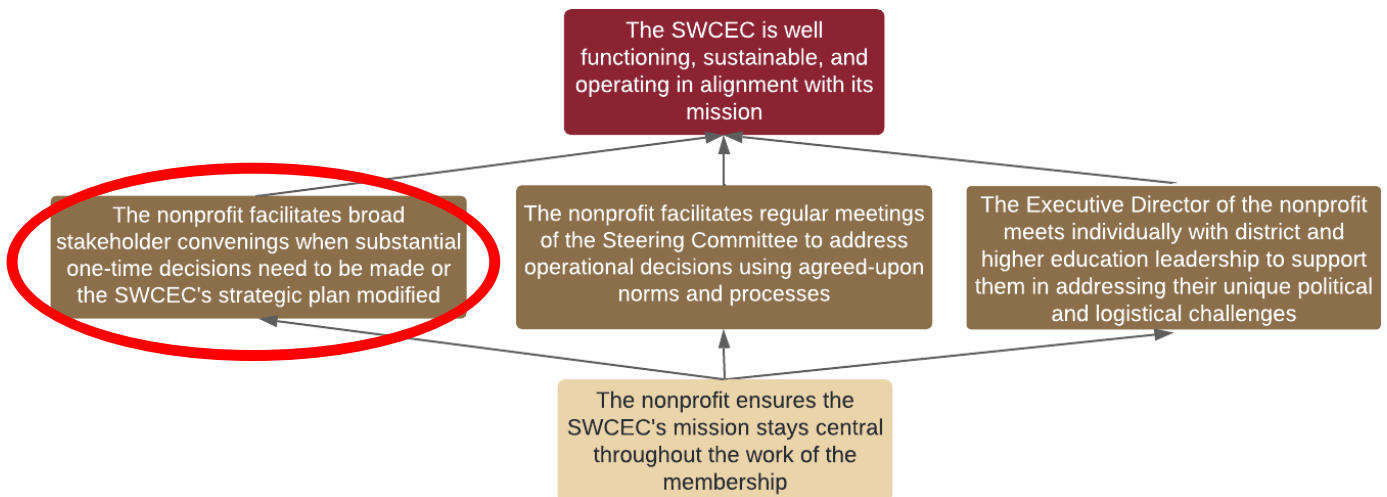
the region, to split costs. Ideally, districts eventually take on the identification of opportunities like this themselves.

- ****How much members come forth with new grant opportunities the SWCEC membership can pursue together.** After each steering committee meeting, nonprofit staff use a debrief form to record instances of any member bringing forth examples like a new grant opportunity with the intention of discussing it with the group to work on together (the discussion might include questions like “Do we think the SWCEC should apply for this opportunity now? What should we apply for or be focusing our collaboration toward?”). Nonprofit staff can also track how often they receive notification of opportunities from members with the request for the nonprofit to lead the initiative or grant application.

The Nonprofit Facilitates Broad Stakeholder Convenings When Substantial One-Time Decisions Need to Be Made or The SWCEC’s Strategic Plan Modified

In the brown box on the left in Stage 1, the following areas have the potential to indicate how successful the nonprofit’s facilitation of stakeholder convenings is when addressing substantial one-time decisions or modifications to the SWCEC’s strategic plan.

Stakeholders feel their voices are heard and reflected in decision making. After attending such a convening, all stakeholders (students, caregivers, education partners, industry partners, and community members) ideally indicate that the convening was relevant, that their voice was heard, that they felt they were part of the decision-making process, and that the convening was facilitated so that they understood how their involvement supported the SWCEC.



The SWCEC can measure how much stakeholders feel their voices are heard and reflected in decision making by distributing surveys to attendees after convenings where substantial one-time decisions are being made. Questions might include (on a scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree):

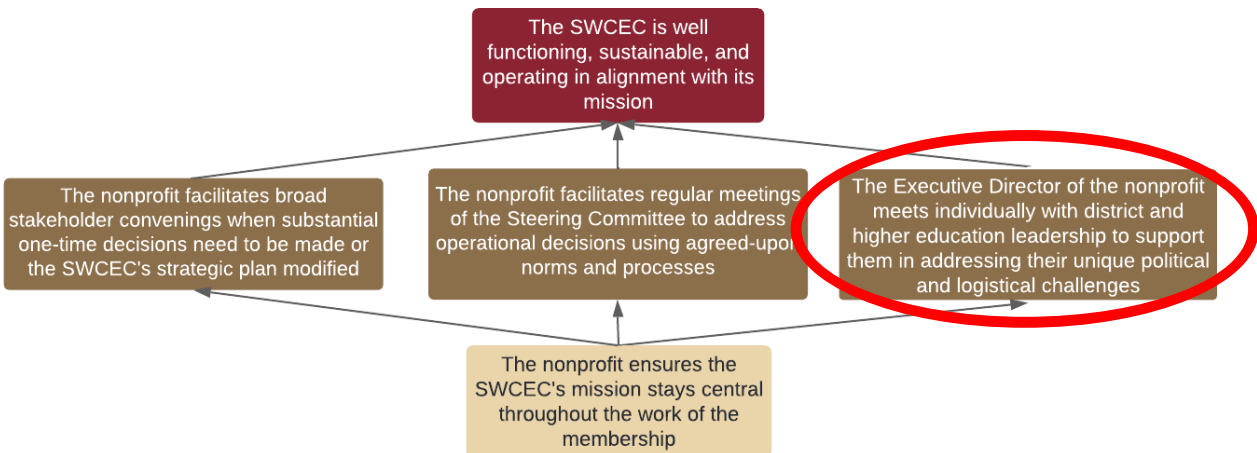
- ***I have foundational knowledge about the SWCEC and its purpose
- ***I understood my role in this meeting and why I was invited
- ***My voice was heard and valued
- ***I understand the next steps in this process and what will be asked of me
- ***I feel energized and engaged by this work

Involvement and engagement. It is one thing for stakeholders to attend a meeting, but another thing for attendees to actively provide input. A key measure of success might include that there was robust discussion even if there was contention.

The SWCEC can measure levels of involvement and engagement through the following, following up with individuals from underrepresented or lower-engagement groups:

- **Diversity of attendance across stakeholder groups (e.g., district administrators, principals, CTE directors, pathway teachers, counselors, partners from institutes of higher education, members from community organizations relevant to pathways, industry leaders relevant to pathways, etc.) relevant for the decision. Were representatives from all the key stakeholder groups in attendance? Were there any new groups in attendance who haven't come to previous meetings?
- **Number of different individuals from each stakeholder group who participated substantively (including via chat for virtual meetings). If the discussion is robust but only includes two individuals, or individuals from only one stakeholder group, other participants are unlikely to feel that their voice was heard and that they were part of the decision-making process.
- **Number of individuals attending more than one stakeholder engagement session (if there are multiple). Among all stakeholders, nonprofit staff can track how many individuals attended more than one stakeholder event and which type of stakeholders attended the most and least. Nonprofit staff can also track the differences in planned versus actual attendance to identify if there are particular partners who sign up but do not attend (and then follow up with them to understand why).
- **Checking in with support partners' (e.g., Colorado Education Initiative, Empower Schools) perceptions of member involvement and engagement. Nonprofit staff can leverage the perceptions of support partners that help plan and execute events to debrief events with them, such as asking where they felt attendees were engaged or disengaged, and whether they felt any potential contention was due to stakeholders feeling empowered to speak up versus due to negative dynamics in the conversation.

The Executive Director of The Nonprofit Meets Individually with District and Higher Education Leadership to Support Them in Addressing Their Unique Political and Logistical Challenges.



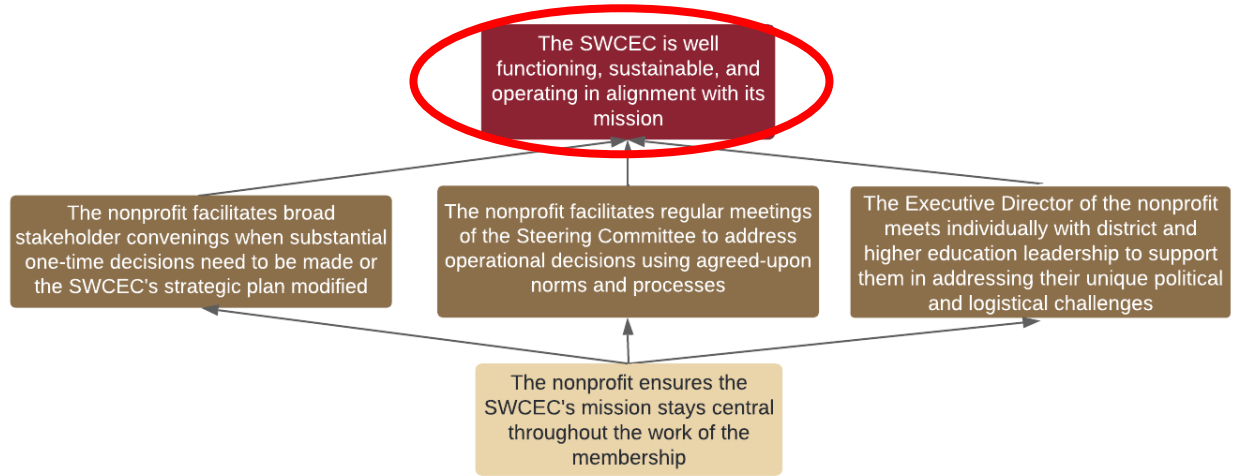
In the brown box on the right in Stage 1, the following areas were identified as having potential to indicate how successful the support from the ED is in helping member district and higher education partner leadership with their unique political and logistical challenges.

Members are bought-in to the value of the SWCEC, and both members and nonprofit leadership advocate for additional buy-in from stakeholders in local communities. Ideally, partners would ask the nonprofit ED to come speak about the work where needed (e.g., a district superintendent asks the ED to come talk to their board about the importance of the SWCEC work currently happening). Partners would want their local groups (e.g., school boards) to understand the importance of being part of the SWCEC. Additionally, partners would be willing to speak on behalf of SWCEC (e.g., partners attending CACTA conference to share about the work of SWCEC).

The SWCEC can measure how much members advocate for buy-in from stakeholders in their communities through the following:

- *How many and in what format members are advocating for SWCEC. Nonprofit staff can track the number of speaking engagements or conferences they are invited to or that other members are invited to (e.g., speaking at chambers of commerce meetings, rotary clubs, parent-teacher associations, etc.), as well as how many members are helping drive recruitment of new nonprofit staff (and in what format, such as through reposting social media posts with open positions at the nonprofit, or visiting local community organizations or industry partners to share about the work of SWCEC). The nonprofit can also track the number of introductions they receive per year from these efforts made by members, and how this number changes over time.

■ The SWCEC is Well-Functioning, Sustainable, and Operating in Alignment with Its Mission.



The final step in Stage 1, to which all the previous steps contribute, is the outcome of a well-functioning, sustainable SWCEC operating in alignment with its mission. When the SWCEC is functioning well and meeting member needs, members will be more likely to remain active financial contributors.

Retention of contributing members. Members contributing financially to the SWCEC over time is an indicator that they see value in their investment. Leveraging the data collected in the tan box (under Collectively Bonded Membership), the nonprofit can measure:

- ****the retention of contributing members by the number of years out of the last three (may move to five as the SWCEC matures) that a member has contributed financially.**

If members don't continue to contribute, the reasons for this (beyond those explicated under Step 1—value of membership and alignment with the SWCEC's mission) may be unclear. Additional constructs related to retaining paying members include trust, strong communication, and staff and student access.

Trust. A financial commitment requires trust.

The SWCEC can measure how much members trust the SWCEC through one-on-one discussions with the nonprofit ED like:

- ***Do you trust the SWCEC to make decisions in the best interest of the sector and your organization's goals? If not, why not?**
- ***Do you feel there is a fair process by which decisions are made? If not, what changes would be necessary for you to feel like there was?**
- ***Do you feel you have a voice at the table in decision-making processes? If not, what additional opportunities do you feel like you need to be engaged?**

Strong support for communication. Members need to feel like they are being heard within the SWCEC and that they have the information they need to advocate for SWCEC membership among their stakeholders.

- *Do you feel there is a formal process/outlet to express concerns and seek remediation? If not, what would you like that process to look like?
- *Do you feel you have enough information to advocate for participation in the SWCEC to your board and constituents? If not, what else do you need?

Staff and student access. Members also need to feel like they are getting their fair share of the community resources provided by the SWCEC.

- *Do you feel that your staff and students receive an appropriate amount of access to the college and career resources provided by the SWCEC? If not, what are the barriers to access for your staff? For your students?
- *Do you feel that the SWCEC is providing adequate information about how to support students progressing along the pathways they are interested in? If not, what else do you need?

Next Steps

The next step for nonprofit staff supporting the SWCEC is to determine which items to collect, using what tool, when, and how to use the resulting data. One way to organize this process is by placing items in a table similar to the following, which has some illustrative examples filled in:

Data Collection Item	Stage 1 Box	Action Step	Measurement Format
Monitor member participation in steering committee meetings	Bottom tan	Individual outreach to members who are not participating to understand why	Nonprofit administrative records
Number and quality of current partnerships with local business groups	Bottom tan	Publicly recognize (e.g., highlight in newsletter) organizations with strong partnership, one-on-one outreach to others to strengthen relationship	Nonprofit administrative records
I understood my role in this meeting and why I was invited (from strongly disagree to strongly agree)	Brown left	Explore patterns in the data by stakeholder group and revise messaging for those groups with low rates of agreement	Survey of stakeholder meeting participants
Do you trust the SWCEC to make decisions in the best interest of the sector and your organization's goals? If not, why not?	Top red	Look for trends in responses and work with support partners to prioritize common concerns	One-on-one interviews between ED and member's steering committee representative

Sorting this or a similar table by the measurement format and timing will help determine when data collection should take place and the format that will minimize burden on participants while still yielding high quality data. Prioritizing periodic internal data review conversations that lead to clear action steps with an assigned staff member in charge will ensure that the collected data do more than sit on a shelf.

Being transparent to SWCEC members by reporting publicly on how the nonprofit is measuring its own effectiveness will help build trust and, by extension, sustainability. Transparent reporting can also elevate the needs and contributions of all stakeholders, thereby contributing to collectively bonded membership. By facilitating smart use of data, the nonprofit will demonstrate the value of SWCEC members' own financial contributions and strengthen the case for additional funding from other sources, all while minimizing the burden on SWCEC members themselves.

Given the small nonprofit staff and so much to do, it is important to prioritize data collection in those areas that feel most vulnerable. It is also important that every piece of data collected have a concrete action step associated with it. Otherwise, it likely should not be collected. As the SWCEC matures, the types of questions that should be prioritized will likely change. Nonprofit staff should consider what questions related to this work remain unanswered after each internal data review meeting and revise the data collection process accordingly. The entire data collection process should be revisited at least every three years while the SWCEC continues to mature.