



CLEARING THE PATH

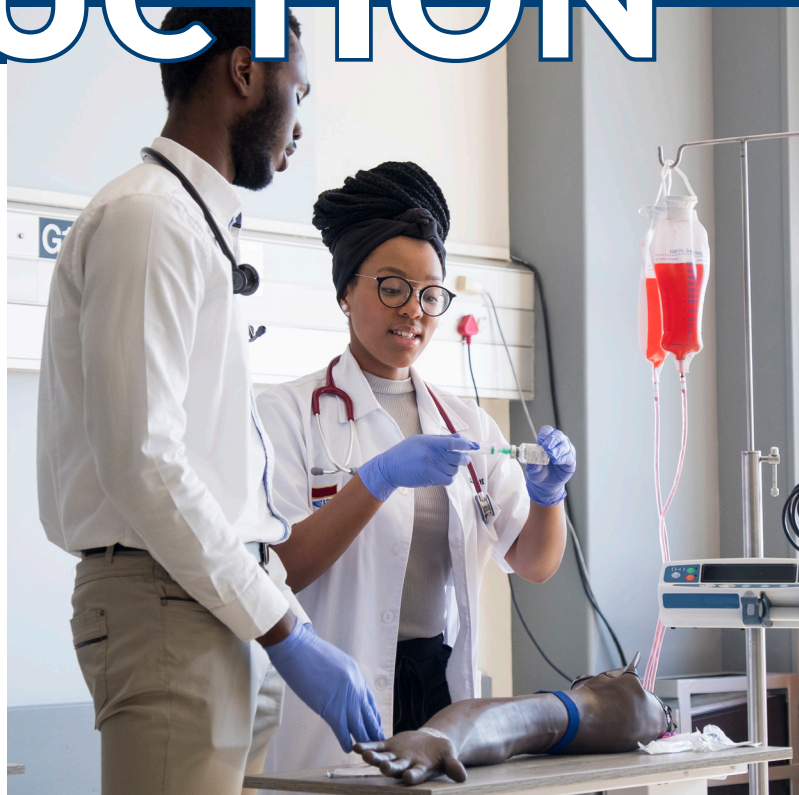
Addressing Equity Blockers to Work-Based Learning in the New Skills Ready Network

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, education, workforce, and policy leaders have intensified their efforts to build high-quality career pathways for students. Instead of considering K-12 education, postsecondary education and training, and the workforce to be three separate systems, many leaders have recognized the opportunity to align their efforts in service of expanding economic opportunity and mobility for students by offering them clear paths to family-sustaining careers. These paths must include a career-connected sequence of courses and experiences that give students the opportunity to gain knowledge, build technical skills, and get on-the-job experience leading to a postsecondary credential with labor market value.

Recognizing the importance of high-quality career pathways for the economic mobility of individuals and the vitality of our workforce, JPMorgan Chase launched the [New Skills Ready Network \(NSRN\)](#) in 2020. The NSRN bolsters the firm's efforts to support an inclusive economic recovery as part of both their [\\$350 million, five-year New Skills at Work](#) initiative to prepare people for the future of work and their new [\\$30 billion commitment to advance racial equity](#). Through the network, Education Strategy Group (ESG) and Advance CTE are working with cross-sector teams in six U.S. communities to improve student access, persistence and completion of high-quality career pathways: Boston, Massachusetts; Columbus, Ohio; Dallas, Texas; Denver, Colorado; Indianapolis, Indiana; and Nashville, Tennessee. These communities are formulating new partnerships between local school systems, higher education, employers, community leaders, and state education policy makers to develop pathways and policy recommendations that give underserved students greater access to and readiness for postsecondary education and training and real-world work experiences that lead to high-wage, in-demand jobs.

An important component of high-quality career pathways is work-based learning, which includes a range of opportunities, from career awareness and exploration activities to more rigorous experiences focused on career preparation and training, such as internships or apprenticeships. Internships offer students opportunities to gain practical knowledge, employability skills, and real-world work experience in which they observe and participate in work firsthand in their desired field



under the tutelage of trained employers. Students who participate in these experiences can also receive valuable wrap-around career development support such as career coaching, mentorship, and interview support.

These experiences are important because research has shown that students who participate in internships have better grades in college and stronger employment outcomes than those who do not.¹ Yet research also indicates that there is more work to be done to provide equitable access to opportunities. Historically underrepresented groups such as Black, low-income, and first generation students, are less likely to have participated in internships, less likely to feel that their school helped them succeed in internships², less likely to have been paid for those experiences³, and less likely to participate in a related and more intensive experience known as registered apprenticeships⁴.

To effectively expand access to work-based learning programs, school districts and community colleges must identify and address “equity blockers,” or barriers to entrance, persistence, and completion of capstone work-based learning programs—specifically internships and youth apprenticeships—for underserved student groups. Equity blockers could include individual student

barriers, institutional policies, or employer barriers that intentionally or unintentionally impede students' ability to participate in work-based learning or discourage them from doing so.

To identify and understand the equity blockers to internships and youth apprenticeships, Education Strategy Group (ESG) conducted a cross-site analysis to collect and share findings from the six communities within the NSRN, which are generalizable to communities at large. We found that developing and offering equitable work-based experiences was a focus area for each community, and that all are actively working to learn from other NSRN sites and the field. Our analysis was shared with leaders in each city to inform future investments and next steps in policy and implementation.

To gather information, we interviewed leaders of work-based learning programs at both the K-12 and community

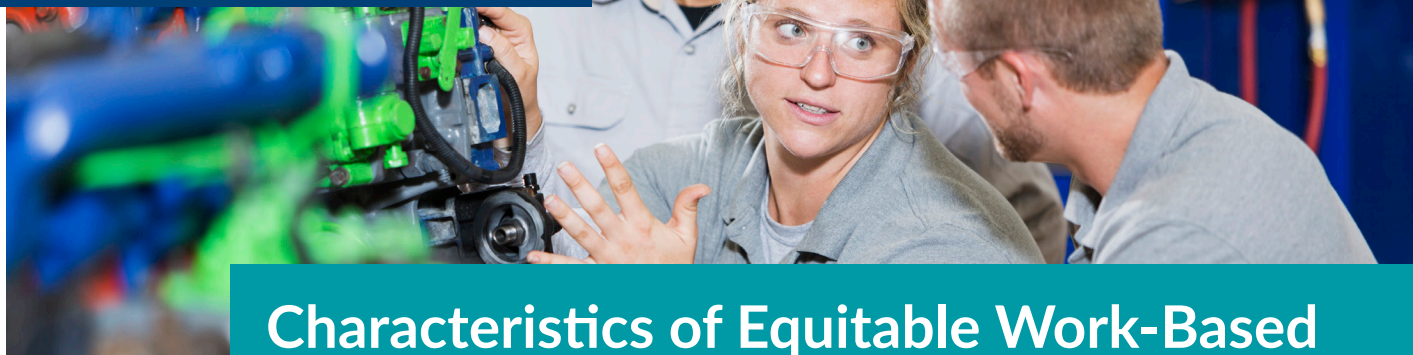
college levels within each NSRN community with a focus on three research questions:

1. What are the personal or individual circumstances that influence or limit a student's decision to participate in capstone work-based learning programs?
2. How are institutions addressing issues of equity to expand access to work-based learning?
3. What are barriers institutions face in providing equitable and meaningful work-based learning opportunities for students?

This report outlines our key learnings across NSRN sites and opportunities for institutions to expand access and equity to internships.



KEY LEARNINGS



Characteristics of Equitable Work-Based Learning Programs

To better understand the context within each community, we conducted interviews with leaders of K-12 and community college work-based learning programs covering topics that included:

- The history and goals of work-based learning within the K-12 and community college systems
- Details about student recruitment, application, selection, and placement
- Existing employer and intermediary partnerships, staff development, and training to support the implementation of work-based learning programs
- Student feedback, institutional data collection, and evaluation of the experiences to inform data and continuous improvement of the experiences.

Equity was a key focus in the design and implementation of work-based learning programs across each NSRN site. Sites clearly articulated the ways their programs were designed to mitigate some of the most common barriers students face in accessing internships. These included:

- **Wages that are competitive with the local labor market.** As the minimum wage rose in states and cities throughout the nation, educational institutions saw students choosing not to participate in work-based learning experiences aligned with their career pathway in order to accept a job that pays a higher wage. The financial needs of a student, and often their family, would discourage students from participating in a work-based learning program that provides

the experiences and social capital to support their career path. To address this, NSRN sites focused on designing programs and recruiting employers who provide competitive compensation for participation in internships.

- **Holistic career coaching and advising support.** Work-based learning experiences cannot be provided in a vacuum. NSRN sites focus on building effective work-based learning structures that provide students with professional support (e.g., development of resumes and cover letters, interview training) and resources (e.g., transportation, clothing) to support a successful experience. Ongoing career advising helps monitor the fit of a student's placement, mitigate or problem solve challenges that arise during the experience, and support students to use the placement to make educated decisions about future courses, credentials, and career paths.
- **Formalized systems of support to provide basic needs resources for students.** Students may opt out of internships due to personal barriers to entry, such as a lack of professional dress or child care. While quality advising can help students access these resources, implementing formal systems for students to report their needs, such as through a Basic Needs Assessment, increases the likelihood that issues will be surfaced and addressed. NSRN sites are using these systems to better connect students to on-campus or community resources and to inform the allocation of future staff capacity and resources.

KEY LEARNINGS



Common Equity Blockers

In recent years, many states have developed policies focused on expanding access to high-quality work-based learning experiences. In support of those policies, states have created work-based learning definitions, toolkits, and example resources with the goal of supporting districts and colleges to scale these experiences. Despite policies and resources that exist at the state level, scaling equitable experiences remains challenging for many local institutions. This analysis sought to better understand the successes and challenges to scaling equitably within NSRN sites.

While equitable access was a key area of focus for each NSRN site, each identified barriers that continue to impact a student's interest or ability to participate or successfully complete an internship. Key learnings fall into

three buckets: Individual Student Barriers, Institutional Barriers, and Employment Barriers.

1. **Individual Student Barriers:** Individual or family-based reasons for not applying to or participating in an internship
2. **Institutional Barriers:** School or district policies, requirements, or approaches that impact a student's eligibility (real or perceived) to participate in an internship
3. **Employment Barriers:** Employment policies or requirements, at the city, state, or employer levels that impact a student's eligibility (real or perceived) to participate

Student Barriers

NSRN sites identified a wide variety of student or family circumstances that prevent students from participating in internships. The most frequently cited barriers to equitable participation included:

- **Geographic proximity and transportation.** This was the most frequently mentioned equity blocker, with most districts naming it as a major barrier. For some districts, industry partners are concentrated in downtown or higher-income areas. In an effort to break down this barrier, city and school officials in all districts have provided free access to their city's public transportation system (either through transit passes or student IDs). Despite these efforts, staff have found that transit routes do not exist near some students' homes or work sites, requiring long commutes or multiple connections and impeding a student's ability to reliably utilize them. These barriers make work-based learning less accessible for those without a driver's license or access to a vehicle.
- **Part-time or time-limited employment.** Limited hours, short-term employment options, and scheduling constraints impact a student's decision to participate in work-based learning opportunities. In many New Skills cities, part-time jobs in fast food or retail are now paying competitive wages, often above \$15 an hour, and often offer students more working hours and a longer term duration than an internship. Students who are already employed may be reluctant to give up a part-time job to complete a limited-term work-based learning experience. Therefore, students

in financial need may prioritize earning higher and more consistent wages over completing a work-based learning experience that aligns with their career goals and builds their social capital. This is especially true for community college learners. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics indicates that nearly 67 percent of students enrolled in public

2-year institutions work, with 32 percent working full-time⁵. These learners may prefer to maintain steady employment, or preferential schedules, which could impact caregiving responsibilities, and benefits, such as health care coverage, for themselves or their dependents.

Institutional Barriers

Despite efforts by staff to increase access to work-based learning, institutional policies or approaches sometimes unintentionally prevent students from participating in an internship. The most frequently identified barriers included:

- **Policies regarding design and credit for internships.** Some district work-based learning programs only design, support, and recognize work-based learning experiences which occur during the school year while others primarily support summer programming. Districts find it difficult to scale internship models across both the school year and the summer, which can also impact whether students receive credit, elective or academic, for their experiences. Districts recognize that expanding the design and approach of internships opens up the opportunities to better meet student academic, family, or financial obligations.
- **Minimum requirements for participation.** Districts often use items such as GPA, attendance, and behavior as a proxy for identifying students who will be a reliable employee for industry partners. Publicizing minimum requirements for work-based learning participation may cause students to self-select out of applying for an experience. Although some districts make exceptions based on individual circumstances, this is not always clear via communication about available opportunities. Further, at many secondary and postsecondary institutions, policies regarding the participation of undocumented students and justice-involved youth in work-based learning experiences are unclear or do not exist.
- **Capacity to identify, vet, and engage industry partners.** Institutions have limited staff capacity to effectively recruit employers to offer work-based learning programs. Common challenges include: communicating the value of internships, connecting to the “right” people within an employer organization to secure internships, identifying and training supervisors to maximize student experiences, and keeping employers engaged year-over-year. To expand accessibility for students, some districts and

postsecondary institutions are seeking to identify sites and supervisors that represent the racial, cultural, income, and language diversity of their students. There is also potential to more intentionally work with small local businesses to host interns, however, districts may not pursue these opportunities due to the capacity needed to appropriately vet them.



- **Inconsistent schedules, offerings, and approaches.** For many districts, it is difficult to accommodate an internship during the school day due to graduation credit requirements or the time required to travel to and from a work site. Even within a single district, the number and percentage of students that participate in work-based learning may differ from school to school for reasons that include school leadership, culture, industry relationships, or proximity to available experiences. Districts often lack targeted approaches to address the needs of each individual school. This challenge has been exacerbated as students have

struggled academically in the wake of the pandemic, requiring more time to be allotted to academic remediation or acceleration. In postsecondary institutions, many work-based learning programs are organized and staffed at the program level, resulting in different timelines, support structures, and data collection across the institution.

- **Data collection.** At the secondary and postsecondary levels, student feedback and outcome data is not systematically collected and analyzed, within the institution or across schools, to help leadership understand the impact of work-based learning and

limitations to accessibility. Common challenges include creating a data collection system that is applicable to work-based learning across pathways; systematizing data collection and analysis across programs or schools, especially where the desired goals and outcomes differ; finding the right data collection platform; and student responsiveness in providing necessary data. Further, at the postsecondary level students do not always inform the school if they participate in an internship or work-based learning experience that was obtained outside of the institution's formal processes.

Employer Barriers

Some barriers to accessibility are a result of employer hiring requirements or perceived limitations imposed by state law or insurance carriers. The most frequently identified barriers included:

- **Eligibility criteria, such as age requirements.** This was most commonly raised in the healthcare, construction, and biotechnology industries. Common concerns included: HIPAA limitations, liability concerns, or providing access to proprietary technology.
- **Providing competitive wages aligned with the local labor market.** As wages in fast food and retail continue to rise, some employers cannot pay students a comparable wage. Districts and postsecondary institutions do not have the resources to supplement wages provided by the employer. Additionally, capstone work-based learning experiences often do not provide benefits, such as healthcare, to the participant or their family. This may impact the decision of an adult learner to participate in work-based learning aligned with their career path.
- **Background checks, query forms, and work authorization requirements.** The type and amount of employment paperwork limits participation of students, with a more significant impact on English learners, undocumented and justice-involved students.
- **Employers prioritize a bachelor's degree in job postings, decreasing the inclination to rely on community colleges as a pipeline for employment.** This perception limits access to work-based learning options for community college students and continues to falsely signal the skill sets required for job placement and fit.



BUILDING UPON EQUITABLE POLICY AND PRACTICE



Potential Next Steps

School districts and community colleges in the News Skills Ready Network are committed to increasing equitable access to internships and are actively working to address identified barriers. With a better understanding of the common equity blockers within each city, our team identified a list of policy and program areas that all districts and their community college partners can meaningfully undertake to increase equitable access and expand infrastructure to support internships, highlighting promising practices from NSRN sites.

Increasing Access

1. Formalize and publish policies and processes designed to support access for traditionally underserved students to enter and complete internship experiences, including students who have special learning needs, are undocumented, or are justice-involved.

All NSRN sites have designed internship experiences with equity in mind and are actively seeking examples and resources to continue to improve equity and success for students. For example:

- Most NSRN districts and community colleges have taken steps to eliminate or de-emphasize GPA, attendance, and behavioral eligibility requirements that limit student access to work-based learning. Sites recognized that these requirements could filter out students who would benefit from participating or lead students to self-select out of the program.
- The Denver Public Schools [Launch Internship Program](#) compensates students through fellowship grants of up to \$1,300 for internships that typically range from 100 to 120 hours, and take place over the course of a semester or the summer. Undocumented students are eligible for these grants and therefore can receive compensation for their participation in work-based learning. Grants are provided through a fund with contributions made by the district with participation from employers encouraged to ensure that student interns receive wages commensurate with the work they are performing.
- Bunker Hill Community College (BHCC) conducts [Basic Needs Assessments](#) with students enrolled in work-based learning. This assessment gives students the opportunity to report their needs and allows the institution to connect the student with resources on campus and in the community to increase the likelihood that they can participate in an internship. On its website, BHCC provides a summary of [Basic Needs Assistance resources](#) that are available to all students. The website includes resources and information from BHCC and external partners to

support student needs, including child care, financial assistance, food, health insurance, homelessness, housing, scholarships, transportation, and utilities. The site also provides clear contact information for students to reach out to ask questions about supports available.

- Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) offers wall-to-wall career academies at 12 of their comprehensive high schools and has worked to develop lasting relationships with business partners to provide access to the knowledge and skills needed for success in each career area. MNPS found that in the healthcare industry, employees must be at least 18 years of age to participate in an internship. Because of the longstanding partnerships with healthcare companies and the training students were receiving in their high school courses, their partner, HCA - Hospital Corporation of America, worked with

their corporate offices to have the age requirement waived for work-based learning students. Following the lead of HCA, Ascension also waived the 18-year-old age requirement.

While there are many strong examples of approaches or supports for traditionally underserved students, like the ones above, it is common for this information to sit with a few individuals within the institution, such as a work-based learning coordinator, school counselor, or teacher of a career pathway. There is an opportunity to formalize and publish policies to help ensure that all educators within a school or district know about the available options to help a student. Additionally, this may help the district to identify areas where there are gaps in resources, such as access to resources for transportation or clothing, or more systemic resources such as flexible scheduling or IEP support.

2. Work with employer partners and/or city officials to establish a system of reliable transportation for students or develop virtual or blended internships that allow students to receive relevant experience right on campus.

Transportation was frequently cited as the largest barrier to student participation in capstone work-based learning, especially for K-12 students. NSRN sites, including Boston Public Schools, Metro Nashville Public Schools, and Denver Public Schools, have built structures to allow students to access city transportation and train them to use it. Using public transportation breaks down some barriers to work-based learning, but does not allow students to access all employer sites. Some districts are working with city and transit officials to open more routes or implement flexible routes. Several districts also mentioned the idea of utilizing ride-share services like Uber or Lyft to help students travel to their work sites (taking appropriate precautions to ensure student safety).

Further, the Nashville team conducted a [transportation study](#) to further focus in this area.

Sites have pursued more creative approaches to this challenge too. Nashville State Community College and Tractor Supply partnered to convert a classroom to a satellite office on the NSCC campus. Through this model, students took classes during the summer and gained relevant work experience in the on-campus lab. A Tractor Supply employee comes to campus regularly to work with students, allowing students to get valuable industry feedback and mentorship, without needing to travel to corporate headquarters.

3. Expand the design of work-based learning programs and align with classroom learning within a career pathway to allow for academic credit.

Intentionally connect and integrate classroom instruction and workplace experiences. Use these connections to create a structure for students to earn academic credit, not just elective credit, for work-based learning experiences that occur both during the school day and outside of the typical school day/year schedule. NSRN sites are currently considering how to scale work-based learning that provide academic credit.



Expanding Infrastructure and Designing for Scale

1. Determine the most effective staffing structure for recruiting and supporting employers and students to successfully participate in work-based learning programs.

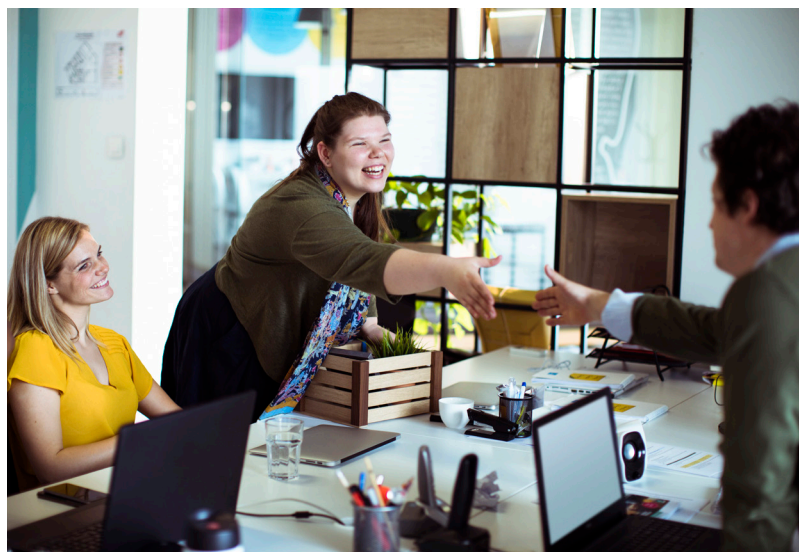
This type of structure can help sites build buy-in, develop more authentic and sustainable relationships with employers, and ensure quality control. Several NSRN sites emphasized the benefits of working with an intermediary or staffing personnel dedicated to recruiting, engaging, and managing industry relationships. Over time, NSRN sites will be better positioned to charge staff with developing a targeted employer recruitment plan to engage employers who reflect the diversity and needs of the student population, and offer inclusive work-based learning opportunities.

Boston Public Schools partners with the [Boston Private Industry Council](#), an intermediary with an Employer Engagement Team that supports industry partners by coordinating a sequence of meetings throughout the year, pairing employers in the same industry to create support networks among partners, and training partners on equity, access, cultural responsiveness, student needs, and planning a meaningful internship.

Through the work of the New Skills Ready Network, Columbus has identified a need to build a support infrastructure to build and scale work-based learning experiences. They have recently established the Work-Based Learning Regional Connector through the Columbus Partnership. They've hired an Emerging Talent

Manager to connect employers to work-based learning activities across city partners.

Further, Nashville State Community College has hired a Director of IT Partnerships with extensive experience and relationships in the industry, resulting in several long-standing internship programs with employer partners. In addition to building relationships with these industry partners, these internship programs have led to full-time employment for some NSCC students, and alumni of the program reach back to students to fill positions.



2. Develop a range of high-quality work-based learning implementation models that can be customized to meet student and employer needs.

In addition to exploring summer and school year activities, institutions can consider a range of models such as hybrid, virtual, and simulated experiences. Further, institutions can work with employers to develop multi-semester or multi-year programs that support a student's learning and growth over time.

Ivy Tech Community College has created a strong staffing model to facilitate work-based learning experiences for students. The college has career coaches, who are positioned to work directly with students to help them with resumes, mock interviews, and other application materials that can create barriers to entry. Ivy Tech also has positions focused on supporting employer participation and success. The talent connection manager

works with employers to determine their needs and make connections with students via career coaches. Additionally, employer consultants serve as liaisons with employers to address any concerns and provide customized training to employer partners.

Columbus State Community College (CSCC) partnered with Honda to create the [Modern Manufacturing Work Study program](#). The program combines classroom learning in the Associate in Applied Science in Engineering Technology program with approximately 1,800 hours of academic and on-the-job-training and work experience. It pays \$20-\$30 per hour and is designed to be a two-year program, with a minimum of 6 months of participation. To date, 85% of student apprentices are offered full-time

employment with their apprenticeship employers upon graduation. CSCC has been able to replicate this model in other fields, such as IT.

Dallas Independent School District created a [Virtual Internship Toolkit](#) to help increase the number of high-quality virtual internship experiences available to students in the district. The toolkit includes a framework

for developing successful virtual internships, sample documents, step-by-step guidance, checklists, and data collection and evaluation tools. Upon completion of the virtual tool kit and training for employers, Dallas significantly increased the number of employers willing to participate in hosting interns. They now have more internship opportunities than students to fill the spots.

3. Create clear communication strategies of the goals and value of internship programs, including success stories, with targeted messages for students, families, and industry partners. Create a communications infrastructure to maximize communication and build buy-in across key stakeholder groups.

Communicating the value of work-based learning for industry partners was identified as a significant challenge for many NSRN sites. Many employers want to see quantitative data that demonstrates the direct value to their companies from hiring students for work-based learning experiences. [“Communicating the Value of Career Technical Education to Employers”](#) from Advance CTE is a resource that can act as a starting point for institutions crafting their communications to industry partners.

The Indianapolis Private Industry Council, known as EmployIndy, also serves as a work-based learning intermediary in Marion County, Indiana. EmployIndy has a dedicated Business partnerships team focused on developing sector-specific strategies on behalf of the local high school systems and the workforce system. Employers are engaged across a continuum of experiences and time commitments, ranging from job shadowing, to mock interviews, to internships and apprenticeships. To support schools in meeting the Indiana graduation pathways requirements that include work-based learning, EmployIndy established Talent





Bound, which offers a [full menu of work-based learning activities](#). To support this work, they've developed a [work-based learning toolkit](#), aimed at supporting employer partners as they seek to offer these activities. EmployIndy also runs the Modern Apprenticeship Program for Marion County students. The website includes targeted resources, including FAQ's, for students and parents, schools, and employers. It also highlights success stories from students who have participated in the program.

Nashville State Community College (NSCC) has employed some key strategies to reach students where they are. First, they use text messaging to notify students of internship or apprenticeship opportunities and have found greater success than communicating solely via email. Secondly, NSCC has invited companies to speak about their work and open work-based learning opportunities for students during class.

4. Develop robust data collection systems to monitor work-based learning programs for equity and impact.

Data collection among students involved and uninvolved in work-based learning is crucial to understanding barriers students face in access, persistence, and completion of work-based learning opportunities. Data collection can help identify equity blockers and opportunity gaps, and guide actions to address these barriers, including providing underserved populations with additional resources or targeting specific populations with outreach. Data collection and analysis can also provide information on program quality.

This [report](#) from Advance CTE and ESG provides guidelines for creating an equity-focused data collection system and provides examples of how sites can collect and utilize data to advance equity.

Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) collects quantitative and qualitative survey data from students and employers to evaluate the impact of programming, the fit of internships, and student and employer satisfaction. For example, after every work-based learning experience, IPS sends out a brief survey to collect student feedback and learn where they would like more information or additional support. IPS also sends out a brief survey to gather the employers' feedback and determine how well-prepared they felt to support students in their work-based learning experiences. School staff revisit this data regularly to help improve the experience for both students and employers.

CONCLUSION



Equity is at the center of how New Skills Ready Network sites are focused on designing student internship experiences. Sites continue to leverage the NSRN to learn from each other, strengthen the design of their work-based learning experiences, and ensure access for traditionally underserved students. The learnings from the six cities of the NSRN offer important insights for how other communities can shape local policy and practice to drive equitable access and completion of work-based learning experiences and aligned career pathways.

Endnotes

- 1 “What do we know about the impact of internships on student outcomes? Results from a preliminary review of the scholarly and practitioner literatures.”, Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions. September 2017.
- 2 “Impressions of Internships and Experiential Learning”, Inside Higher Ed and College Pulse, September 2022
- 3 “The Power of Work-Based Learning, Strada Education Network, March 2022
- 4 The Apprenticeship Wage and Participation Gap, The Center for American Progress, July 2018
- 5 [“Work While Enrolled”](#), National Center for Education Statistics, 2015