Youth CareerConnect and the Illinois STEM Learning Exchanges

On November 20, 2013, the U.S. Department of Labor issued a notice of funding availability and solicitation of grant applications for the Youth CareerConnect Program. This Program will provide $100 million in grant funds for approximately 25 – 40 successful grantees implementing programs to redesign high schools using models that increase high school students’ preparedness for post-secondary education and employability in high-growth industries. Eligible lead applicants include public or non-profit local workforce entities, local educational agencies, or nonprofit organizations with related program model experience. All lead applicants must organize a broader group of partners in support of the application including local workforce investment boards, school districts, employers, and institutions of higher education. Applications are due on January 27, 2014. The full notice of funding availability is available here.

Illinois Pathways was launched in 2012 in response to a growing awareness that education and job opportunities in Illinois are not adequately aligned. Illinois Pathways has launched new statewide partnerships (between schools, industry, state government, and nonprofits) known as STEM Learning Exchanges that better coordinate investments, resources, and planning in a particular career area. The STEM Learning Exchanges deliver resources for local pathway systems by increasing students’ access to real-world challenges, e-Learning opportunities, and work-based learning such as job shadows and internships. The Exchanges also support teacher professional development and community efforts to determine if education programs meet workforce needs.

Support for Core Elements of Applications

The Youth CareerConnect Program includes six “Core Elements” each application must address:

1. Integrated Academic and Career-Focused Learning
2. Employer Engagement
3. Individualized Career and Academic Counseling
4. Work-based Learning and Exposure to the World of Work
5. Program Sustainability
6. Program Performance and Outcomes

As described in more detail below, a local community should consider incorporating into its application the Learning Exchange or Exchanges relevant to a community’s career area(s) of focus. By doing so, communities can strengthen their approach to the core elements and develop partnerships that can support their local career pathway system development, regardless of whether Youth CareerConnect funding is received.

1. Integrated Academic and Career-focused Learning

- **Career-focused course sequence:** The Learning Exchanges can support communities in defining an integrated college- and career-focused curriculum organized around an industry theme, with a course sequence aligned to industry-supported career pathways.
- **Curriculum resources:** The Learning Exchanges are developing and inventorying an array of high quality, career-focused curriculum and professional development resources that can support local program implementation.
- **Selection of industry-based credentials:** The Learning Exchanges can work with communities to identify and implement industry-based credentials as part of a curriculum sequence that have the most relevance to industry partners in a particular career area.
2. **Employer Engagement**

- **Employer commitments**: The Learning Exchanges can facilitate the process to identify and obtain meaningful commitments from employer partners to support the implementation of a proposed project.
- **Ongoing employer technical assistance**: As a community moves into the implementation phase, the Learning Exchanges can support the provision of ongoing technical assistance from employers for the project.

3. **Individualized Career and Academic Counseling**

- **Identification of professionals**: The Learning Exchanges can help school districts identify industry professionals willing to serve as career coaches or mentors to support a comprehensive counseling approach.
- **Relevant career information**: The Learning Exchanges can help communities locate career exploration activities and occupational information based on local and regional labor market conditions.

4. **Work-based Learning and Exposure to the World of Work**

- **Work-based learning continuum**: The Learning Exchanges can help communities design a continuum of work-based learning activities with appropriate experiences at various grade levels, such as job shadowing, problem-based learning, mentoring, and internships. The Exchanges can also help communities access a network of employers prepared to offer various types of work-based learning experiences.
- **Participation in industry-sponsored challenges**: Each of the Learning Exchanges are involved in sponsoring and designing challenges that involve students working in collaborative teams to solve real-world, interdisciplinary problems. Learning Exchanges can involve communities in these challenges and work with business partners and communities to design and launch new challenges.

5. **Program Sustainability**

- **Supportive partnerships**: By partnering with the Learning Exchanges, communities can build partnerships that can provide ongoing support after grant funding ends.
- **State and local alignment**: The Learning Exchanges are actively working with state education and economic development agencies to align resources to career pathway system development activities. The Learning Exchanges can identify opportunities to align community programs to state-level funding streams to offset costs.

6. **Program Performance and Outcomes**

- **Designing and tracking metrics**: The Learning Exchanges can help communities design performance metrics aligned with those metrics being used by the Exchange to track progress and outcomes, as well as help communities determine sources of data available for those metrics.

Representatives of Illinois school districts, community colleges, local workforce investment boards, employers, and community organizations can find the contact information about the Learning Exchanges [here](#), or by contacting Jonathan Furr, Director of the Office of Education System Innovation at NIU ([jfurr@niu.edu](mailto:jfurr@niu.edu)).