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DELIVERING REAL-WORLD EXPERIENCES THROUGH WORK-BASED LEARNING

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Comprehensive, high-quality career development includes work-based learning experiences such as workplace tours, job shadowing, school-based enterprises, internships, and apprenticeships. In addition to the activities themselves, WBL is often best defined by a strong partnership between an education program, an employer, and a motivated student.

While many work experiences from previous years allowed students release time from school to go to work, these opportunities were often limited and did not provide for a robust career-exploring opportunity required to build essential skills. Today's WBL is different since it is purposeful and includes the following characteristics:

- Aligns learning with the CTE program of study outcomes
- Serves the student's interests and goals for developing specific skills and career exploration
- Meets a need for an employer who also understands the program's purpose because they recognize the value for the student

Foundations

The purpose of WBL experiences for students is to “learn specific types of knowledge and skills, as well as expectations of the workplace (Knepler & Zapata-Gietl 2019, p, 23).” According to employers who are engaged with these programs, real-world experiences should provide students authentic opportunities to develop technical skills, professionalism, and customer service. In fact, “a 2008 study found that graduates of applied occupational programs reported applied learning experiences such as WBL as the most helpful in developing work skills (Mean & Gonzalez, 2019, para. 3).” Students understand the relevancy and purposes of WBL and are seeking these opportunities to better understand how to apply their classroom learning in a “real-world” setting.

The U.S. Department of Education's [Work-based Learning Toolkit](#) (2017) identifies three key components of Work-based Learning:

- alignment of classroom and workplace learning
- application of academic, technical, and employability skills in a work setting
- support from classroom or workplace mentors

The toolkit includes a series of guidelines and resources that local administrators can use to engage employers, scale effective programs, build data collection and ultimately connect learning to the workplace through an instructional strategy.

ACTE's [Quality CTE Program of Study Framework](#) (2018) outlines the need for “sustained, meaningful interactions with industry or community professionals that foster in-depth, firsthand engagement with the tasks required in a given career field,” (p. 5) and provides a set of criteria for a quality WBL program:

- 1 A full continuum of WBL experiences, progressing in intensity, is accessible to every student at some point during the program of study
- 2 WBL experiences are aligned with relevant national, state and/or local standards
- 3 WBL experiences develop and reinforce relevant technical, academic and employability knowledge and skills
- 4 WBL experiences are intentionally aligned with each student's education and career goals
- 5 WBL experiences are provided through delivery methods that maximize meaningful interaction with business professionals
- 6 Requirements and procedures for WBL experiences that address access, selection, liability, supervision, rights and responsibilities, safety, transportation, learning objectives and evaluations are formalized and shared in advance of WBL experiences with employers, students and parents/guardians (as appropriate)
- 7 WBL experiences comply with relevant federal, state and local laws and regulations
- 8 WBL experiences are supervised by CTE staff with clearly defined roles
- 9 Students engage in reflection and document learning resulting from WBL experiences, such as through a portfolio or presentation

Promising Practices

Quality WBL programs contain a variety of intersections for the student to interact with business professionals. These programs work via a continuum model with activities arranged in levels.

[Poudre School District](#) in northern Colorado provides an excellent example that also aligns with ACTE's WBL criteria. Poudre uses Colorado's [WBL Continuum and Readiness Assessment](#) as its foundation, which segments WBL into progressive parts: (1) Learning about work, (2) Learning through work, and (3) Learning at work. After career exploration in the middle grades and upon reaching grade 8, students identify a career cluster of interest and learn about CTE programs available. In high school, CTE pathways culminate with an opportunity for students to participate in a minimum 30-hour WBL course. The District has developed a rubric that every employer completes for student WBL participation, and 50% of a student's grade comes from this rubric which ties WBL to the student's CTE program area. “We want students to be enrolled in a CTE course when they participate in WBL, so there is a close connection,” says CTE Coordinator, Tanya Alcaraz. Through the rubric and use of the State's Individualized Career and Academic Plan, an online portfolio known as “ICAP,” students, employers and the CTE program annually keep tabs on progress through an online digital portfolio that each student can access and add to. The District markets and connects students and families to CTE and every comprehensive Poudre high school has a WBL coordinator. A separate district-level coordinator is in contact with businesses to engage employers and pursue experiences of interest to students. Every student has access to the WBL opportunities of interest as a result.

The [Iowa Clearinghouse for WBL](#) offers a repository of virtual projects, internships, and apprenticeships along with other valuable resources. The Clearinghouse is a state-wide initiative that brings together business professionals, educators, and students with authentic projects that have been posted by businesses. One Clearinghouse example includes [Griswold High School's](#) partnership with the local historical site, Hitchcock House, to develop a virtual tour. The Communications Arts students in this program took video footage, 3D images and drone flyover video to design an experience of the Hitchcock House that was accessible to all visitors, which more thoroughly explained the history of the former Underground Railroad stop. Students were able to develop relevant technical knowledge and skills that were aligned to their career interest area.

Another good example of local programming is the [General Construction program at West-MEC's Southwest Campus](#), which has established an innovative WBL partnership with Sutter Masonry. This industry partner supplies professionals to help instruct the students on masonry techniques, dedicating eight weeks of support and all needed supplies. After the initial instruction, Sutter sponsors students each year to compete in the State's “Fastest Trowel in the West” Competition. West-MEC students

typically take several of the top awards and Sutter Masonry sponsors the program's competitors to compete in the National Masonry Competition. Along with this integrated curriculum model and sponsorship, the company allows students to job shadow at various job sites. Several students have been offered apprenticeships in the masonry industry, either with Sutter or other entities. These student opportunities in the General Construction program were aligned with the students' college and career interests and offered meaningful interactions with professionals in the field.

In the Washington County School District, Utah, the WBL coordinator has successfully built "no pressure" partnerships with businesses. When developing the employer pool, businesses were asked to give students a "preferred interview" with no obligation to take a student. This no-pressure strategy has led to positive outcomes in shifting the employers from feeling like they *must* commit to a student to *wanting* to commit to a student.

Fresno Unified School District's WBL Resource Guide and Toolkit provides an excellent resource. At Fresno Unified School District, potential business partners are supplied with an easy checklist of opportunities for involvement with the WBL program. This sets a solid foundation for meaningful interactions for students with business professionals.

A public relations promotion is easy when you share the program's value through stories of student successes and business accolades. Georgia's WBL/Youth Apprenticeship Program includes a set of Student Success Stories as well as Employer Testimonials which are posted on the Georgia WBL website.

Getting Started

In addition to the WBL element criteria in ACTE's Quality CTE Framework and the other foundational elements referenced in this publication, leaders will need to think about successful relationship-building with employers and a range of other issues important to the success of the program. Following are six recommendations to get you started:

Network – Have an elevator speech ready at any time to clearly explain the program to potential partners. Network at the Chamber of Commerce and economic development-related meetings, nonprofit organizations, and community events to obtain valuable engagement opportunities. Interact with friends, neighbors, school staff, and parents to open doors to engage employers with work-based learning activities.

Target Orientation – Ensure messages are appropriate for the targeted audience. For example, a general orientation would describe the program and the roles for the business, student, and school. However, an orientation with the onsite supervisor who serves as a mentor to the student should consist of helpful hints on working with high school students, specifics for collaborating on the training plan learning outcomes, and the evaluation processes.

Provide Involvement Opportunities – Communicate the value of business engagement at all levels of the WBL continuum. A potential business partner may shy away from an internship commitment but be very willing to host a tour or sponsor a speaker for a class. A coordinator works to build developmentally appropriate experiences for all grade levels and curriculum areas, so students have a continuum of opportunities to explore.

Align Academic and Career Planning – Not only is it essential for school counselors to understand the benefits of your program, but you also need to be connected to the students' career and academic planning process and understand their rationale for participating in the program. Working with school counselors on the career and academic planning process will give you the knowledge of upcoming students' career interests.

Be the Program Expert – The WBL coordinator or other leader must be the expert for questions that arise about the program and students. Businesses need to know that they have a knowledgeable person in charge. The coordinator should have a repository of reliable sources to stay informed about all issues impacting the program. Also, the WBL program must have clear expectations and guidelines for all.

Share Celebrations – Be purposeful in celebrating your partners and especially your program's champions, both the individuals and companies that have gone above and beyond to promote and support your program.

Establishing relevant and engaging WBL experiences does not happen by chance; it requires thoughtful leadership and perseverance, strong business partnerships, alignment between education and workplace learning, and much more. But the rewards can be impactful, providing students a "real world" experience that better prepare them to make a transition from the classroom to a career. More WBL is needed so that all students can benefit from these meaningful opportunities.

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