

I-WIN

Illinois Work-Based Learning
Innovation Network

High-Quality Work-Based Learning Fundamentals

September 16, 2026



Our Vision

Clear, unambiguous paths to college and career opportunities that equip students for meaningful participation in the global economy.

Pillars of Work

- Policy: Shaping systems for equitable college and career access
- Practices: Improving learner experiences and outcomes
- Impact: Driving systemic change through data and networks

Areas of Practice

- College and career pathways
- Career-connected and work-based learning
- Transitional instruction
- Early college coursework
- Flexible learning
- Longitudinal data
- Collective impact networks



Explore the [I-WIN Resource Hub](#)
and [subscribe to the newsletter](#)



Highlight and explore
innovative models for
work-based learning



Engage in conversations
on creating sustainable,
high-quality models
and increasing access



Build connections
among communities to
share best practices,
learnings and resources



Identify needs for state
policy changes or
support systems

Work-Based Learning & Host Continuum



Definitions: [Illinois Career Pathways Dictionary](#)

Introduce yourself!

Please share in the chat your:

- Name
- Role
- Organization
- Any top-of-mind questions about work-based learning

Today's discussion:

Work-Based Learning Across the Continuum

- Shared Illinois Definitions and Frameworks

Essential Design Elements of High-Quality WBL

- Ensuring Developmentally Appropriate and Equitable Experiences

Practical Considerations for Implementation

**Think about your own career journey.
What person or experience had the
greatest influence on where you are today?**

Why Work-Based Learning Matters

1

Connects students with supportive adults who help them develop skills, explore future pathways, and access valuable insights and opportunities

2

Creates an opportunity for students to explore interests firsthand and discover what they do and do not enjoy to inform decisions about courses, or careers

3

Engages students in hands-on learning that exposes them to workplace expectations and environments they may not otherwise encounter



Work-Based Learning Across the Continuum

Shared Illinois Definitions and Frameworks

Work-Based Learning Continuum

Work-Based Learning & Host Engagement Continuums



Managing
Organization
Role

Host / Employer
Role

Illinois College and Career Pathway Models

Career Pathway

A combination of rigorous and high-quality education, training, and other services that aligns both vertically and horizontally across secondary education, adult education, workforce training and development, career and technical education, and postsecondary education systems, pathways, and programs.

Program of Study

A coordinated, non-duplicative sequence of academic and technical content at the secondary and postsecondary level.

Career & Technical Education (CTE)

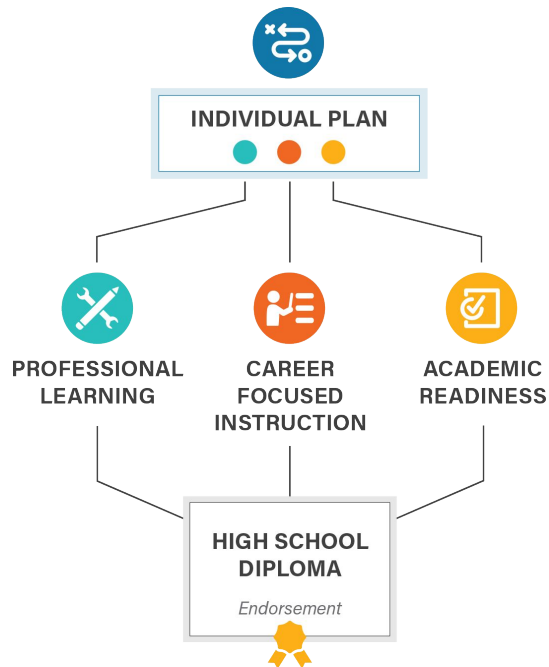
Career and Technical Education (CTE) prepares individuals for high-skill, high-wage, in-demand employment and provides learners with the skills, knowledge, and confidence they need to thrive in college and careers. All students benefit from career-connected learning that emphasizes real-world skills within a selected career focus.

College and Career Pathway Endorsement

A College and Career Pathway Endorsement is awarded on Illinois high school diplomas/transcripts to simultaneously demonstrate students' readiness for postsecondary programs and entry-level professional learning experiences in a selected career interest area. ([110 ILCS 148/ Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness Act](#))



College and Career Pathway Endorsements Framework



INDIVIDUAL PLAN

Each student completing an endorsement must have an individualized plan, which includes college planning linked to early understanding of career goals, financial aid, resume, and personal statement.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Awareness, exploration, and preparation activities that provide opportunities for students to interact with adults in their workplace and gain essential employability and technical competencies.

9th	10th	11th	12th
At least 2 career exploration activities or 1 intensive experience		60 cumulative hours of paid or for credit, supervised career development experience(s) with a professional skills assessment r	
At least 2 team-based challenges with adult mentoring			

CAREER-FOCUSED INSTRUCTIONAL SEQUENCE

2 years of secondary coursework or equivalent that include essential employability and technical competencies, at least 6 hours of early college credit, and articulation to a postsecondary credential with labor market value.

9th	10th	11th	12th
Orientation / Introduction Courses			
		Skill Development Courses	
		Capstone / Advanced Courses	

ACADEMIC READINESS

Ready for non-remedial coursework in reading and math by high school graduation through criteria defined by the school district and local community college.



Illinois PaCE Postsecondary and Career Expectations

Each student should have an individualized learning plan to help make decisions about career and post-secondary (PS) education or training, to plan a course of study, and to make financial aid assessments with family members.



By the end of 9th grade

A student should be supported to:

- complete a career cluster survey
- complete a career interest survey
- attend a PS options workshop
- select course work for PS/career plans aligned with the ISBE College and Career Readiness Indicators
- enroll as appropriate in early college credit courses
- outline a plan for community service and extracurricular activities related to PS plans
- attend a basic financial aid presentation with a trusted adult

A student should know:

- one or two careers for further exploration
- the relationship between HS coursework, attendance, and grades to PS plans
- importance of community service and extracurricular activities to PS and career plans
- general cost ranges of various PS options

By the end of 10th grade

A student should be supported to:

- visit at least one workplace aligned with career interests
- participate in activities related to their career cluster of interest
- select a career area of interest: enroll in career pathway (CP) as available
- explore opportunities along the Work Based Learning Continuum.
- connect and build relationships with 2-3 adults to support the PS and career selection process
- review coursework, and PS/career plans in relation to the ISBE College and Career Readiness Indicators (every year)
- attend a basic financial aid presentation with a family member

A student should know:

- educational requirements, cost, expected entry level, and midpoint salary for occupations in selected CP
- skills related to career interests
- different types of PS credentials and institutions
- general timing of PS entrance exams and applications
- benefit of early college credit opportunities to PS access and completion

By the end of 11th grade

A student should be supported to:

- revisit the career interest survey
- participate in a mock job interview
- create a resume and personal statement
- complete an experience within the Work Based Learning Continuum.
- determine readiness for college-level coursework in math/ELA and enrollment in either "catch up" or "speed up" course
- complete at least one early college credit opportunity
- attend a college fair
- visit at least 3 PS institutions
- take at least one college entrance exam
- complete a Postsecondary Plan Workshop

A student should know:

- application deadlines, test timing, cost, and preparation for industry-based certification for CP
- entrance requirements, including application deadlines, for expected PS programs of study
- 3-5 match schools, one safety, one reach school for PS program of study
- negative impact of remediation on PS goals
- financial aid deadlines for chosen PS options

By the end of 12th grade

By the end of 12th grade a student should be supported to:

- complete at least two team based challenges.
- obtain an internship opportunity related to the CP if applicable
- if applicable, receive industry-based certification(s) related to the CP
- address any remedial needs in math/ELA
- complete a financial aid offer workshop

A student should know:

- how CP courses and experiences articulate to degree programs at PS options
- estimated cost of chosen PS options
- affordability of PS options in relation to expected entry-level career salary and anticipated debt
- terms and conditions of any scholarship or loan

By 12/31 of 12th grade a student should have:

- completed 3 or more admissions applications to PS institutions
- ensure all steps in the PS admissions process are completed on time
- attended a Financial Aid Application completion workshop
- completed a financial aid application



Career awareness, the first stage of the [work-based learning](#) continuum, is the process by which students explore possible career clusters and specific jobs that are available and gain a deeper understanding of the different paths they can take toward a fulfilling future. Career awareness is a valuable opportunity to connect an individual's own abilities and interests to related college and career opportunities.

Career exploration is an activity such as a job shadow, attendance at a career exposition, or employer site visit that provides an individual with the ability to engage directly with employers for the purpose of gaining knowledge of one or more industry sectors or occupations.

Career Awareness vs. Exploration

	Career Awareness	Career Exploration
Student Engagement	Gain general knowledge about industry sectors and their occupations Explore personal abilities and interests	Direct contact with employers or other industry professionals Deepen knowledge of a career area and related occupations
Examples include:	- Career interest survey - Interactive or video presentation tools - Self-reflection activities	- Worksite tour - Job shadow - Mentoring - Guest speaker - Career fair



Team-based challenges are group problem-based learning projects relating to an individual's career area of interest that involve a problem relating to employers within that area, including mentoring from adults with expertise in that area, and require the individual to present the outcomes of the project.

Team-based challenges may be incorporated into the instructional sequence or designated as separate activities. Team-based challenges must include the following components:

1. An authentic problem or challenge that is identified from or in collaboration with a community or business partner.
2. Meaningful interaction with an adult mentor who has related industry expertise and who is not an assigned classroom teacher.
3. Demonstration of at least one career pathway-specific technical competency as identified in the College and Career Pathway Endorsements framework.
4. Demonstration of at least one cross-sector essential employability competency skill.
5. Collaboration with groups to solve a problem.
6. A final product or presentation.



Team-based challenges can take many forms:

- Embedded into a course
- Part of a regional competition
- Engagement in a Career and Technical Student Organization event

The team-based challenge is centered on the process of students engaging in essential employability and technical skills through their engagement with an authentic problem, not the solution that students design.



Career development experiences are supervised work experiences relating to an individual's career area of interest that include:

1. A course transcription and corresponding school credit for the experience, compensation of the student's work hours for the career development experience, or both.
2. A workplace with authentic working conditions and tasks that include, but are not limited to, timekeeping, evaluation of work, responsibility to adhere to safety protocols, or adherence to the organization's standard operating procedures. The workplace experience must reinforce the relevant technical and essential employability competencies.
3. Collaboration between the school district and the community or business partners in developing and monitoring the experiences.
4. Feedback is given to the student.
5. At least 60 hours of participation completed by the student through a single experience or across two experiences; however, no individual experience may be less than 20 hours.



High School Interns at BJC Healthcare

Career development experiences:

- 60 hours of supervised work experience relating to an individual's career area of interest in an authentic work environment.
- Can take place across two experiences.
 - No one experience can be less than 20 hours (20/40 or 30/30).
- Can be an internship, micro-internship, workplace experience course, youth/pre-apprenticeship, etc.



Essential Design Elements of High-Quality Work-Based Learning

Ensuring Developmentally Appropriate and Equitable
Experiences

Across the Continuum, High-Quality WBL Includes:

Preparation

- Clear goals and intentional planning
- Student and partner readiness
- Connection to coursework and interests

Reflection & Growth

- Structured reflection and feedback
- Awareness of what was learned
- Connection to next steps

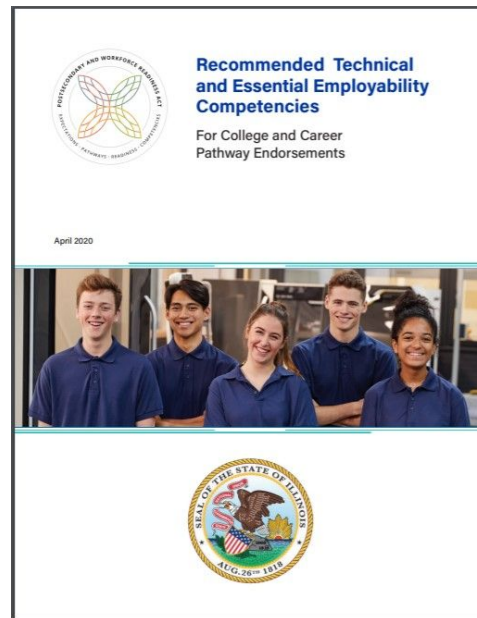
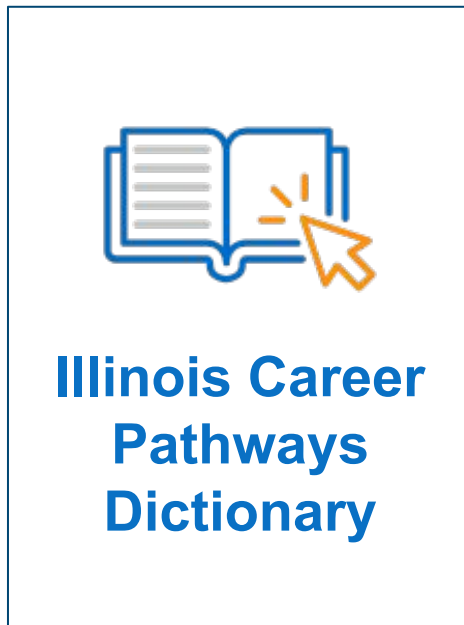
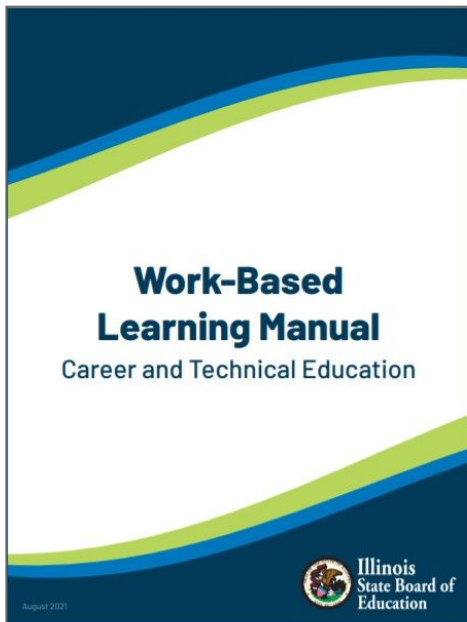
Authentic Engagement

- Real-world, hands-on experiences
- Meaningful interaction with industry professionals
- Development of technical and essential skills

Equity & Access

- Removal of barriers to participation
- Representation and belonging
- Support for diverse learner needs

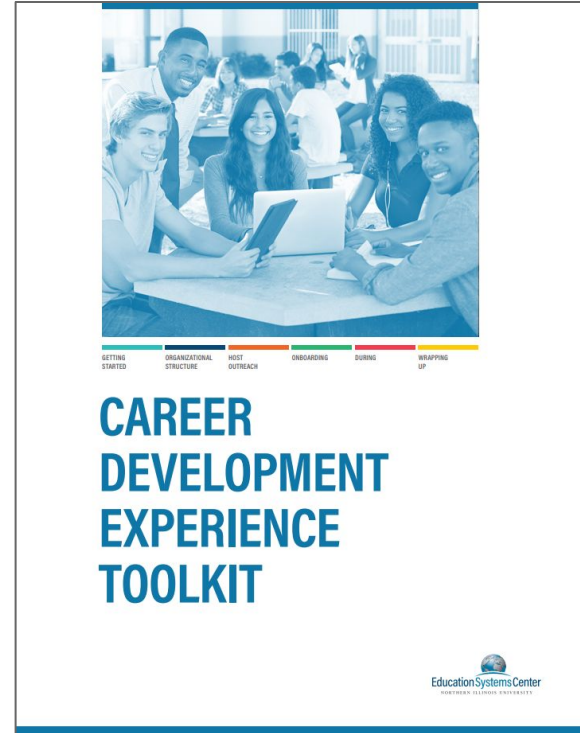
Work-Based Learning Resources



Career Development Experience Toolkit

- Establish expectations for implementing high-quality, rigorous work-based learning experiences
- Provide guidance, tools, and frameworks to offer a Career Development Experience
- Highlight best practice examples of how organizations are accomplishing this on-the-ground and spark thinking for other communities on how these examples might be modified to fit into their own unique context

[Access the toolkit](#)



Scaling Work-Based Learning: Quality Criteria for Continuous Improvement and Equity

Career Awareness Criteria

As defined in the Illinois Career Pathways Dictionary, "career awareness" is the process by which students explore possible career clusters and specific jobs that are available and gain a deeper understanding of the different paths they can take toward a fulfilling future. Career awareness is a valuable opportunity to connect an individual's own abilities and interests to related college and career opportunities.

Career
Awareness

	High-Quality Criteria	Student "I Can" Statements
Aligning Coursework	- Classroom connects content and skills to pathways of interest. - Students understand how aptitudes align to career areas and the academic application to career fields.	I can understand how aptitudes align with career areas. I can understand how my education applies to career fields.
Understanding Pathways	- Students are made aware of work-based learning opportunities available to them in high school and postsecondary education aligned to their career area of interest. - Career interest inventories inform high school career and technical education engagement as well as college and career planning.	I can understand what work-based learning means, and what opportunities are available for me in high school and postsecondary for each career area of interest.
Student Reflection	- Self-reflection activities are provided to make meaning and connect student knowledge, interests, values and skills with essential employability competencies and authentic workplace problems and experiences. - Students are provided opportunities to reflect on career interest inventory results and identify the activities and aspects of work that align to their career goals.	- I can reflect on how to connect my knowledge, interests, values, and skills to authentic job experiences. - I can identify the activities and aspects of my job that align with my career goals, to connect these preferences to future careers I envision myself in.
Engaging Stakeholders	- Industry is engaged in the design of career awareness activities and local employers, organizations, and people are prioritized to be highlighted in videos, posters, materials, etc. - Students are made aware of successful individuals in a career field of interest that they identify with in race, gender, and other characteristics to learn about their career journey.	I can identify successful individuals in career fields that we share identity in race, gender, and other similar characteristics to learn about their career journey.

[Learn more about the process and access the resource](#)



Practical Considerations for Implementation

Start Small, Build Momentum

Start with what you have, learn from the experience, and build from there. Every high-quality work-based learning program started somewhere.

Pilot an Idea: Launch with 1-5 students, one classroom, or one employer partner. Focus on quality and learning rather than scale.

Leverage Existing Resources: Use AI and team brainstorming to generate ideas and identify opportunities. Explore examples and promising practices from other communities.

Adapt, Don't Adopt: Share community models with local employers and partners to customize experiences that fit your learners, community, and capacity.

Learn and Improve: Gather feedback from students and partners to refine the experience before expanding participation.



Shared Ownership, Shared Impact

High-quality work-based learning is a team effort!

Invest in Coordination

Whether it is a dedicated WBL coordinator, counselor, pathway lead, administrator, or team of staff, someone must help coordinate relationships, communicate expectations, support students, and connect experiences across the continuum. Dedicated coordination creates consistency, quality, and sustainability.

Leverage Community Assets

Effective systems build on local capacity, existing relationships, and the partners willing to invest in young people. The goal is not to do everything yourself, but to coordinate the strengths of the broader community.

Equity as a Design Principle

As you review existing WBL opportunities, consider:

- Who participates?
- Who does not?
- What barriers exist?
- How can opportunities be expanded or improved?

As you design new opportunities,

- Ensure experiences help students explore a range of career possibilities, build skills, and make informed decisions
- Connect experiences to meaningful opportunities in the local economy
- Consider transportation, scheduling, location, technology, etc.
- Ensure students can see themselves in the industry mentors and careers being highlighted

Measure Access, Quality, and Impact

Use data and feedback to improve program quality, expand access, and address equity gaps.

Participation & Access

- Review participation by grade level, pathway, race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and other student groups.

Student and Partner Voice

- Understand what is working well and what supports are needed to identify strengths, barriers, and opportunities for improvement.



Next Steps

I-WIN Resource Hub

LIBRARY

Work-Based Learning Resources

Search and filter a collated selection of guides, templates, models, videos, and more. Sort by type (resource or model) and topic (work-based learning continuum stages, industry sectors, and/or employer engagement).

Type:

- ☐ WBL Community Model
- ☐ WBL Resource

Topic:

- ☐ Agriculture/Food/Natural Resources
- ☐ Arts and Communications
- ☐ Career Awareness
- ☐ Career Development Experiences
- ☐ Career Exploration



A Micro-Internship Model for Engaging High School Students: A Pilot of the Illinois Math Badging Initiative

The Illinois Math Badging Initiative (IMBI) aims to develop an Illinois high school math badging system. Aligned with IMBI's goals, EdSystems conducted a 6-week, 30-hour, paid virtual micro-internship for high school students to explore real-world math applications, develop recommendations for integrating math into various activities, and connect their findings to career interests and classroom learning. This document details the micro-internship process, including the generated resources, lessons learned, and guidance on applying the model to additional contexts. It is intended for work-based learning coordinators, internship coordinators, employers, and other facilitators interested in implementing micro-internships.

Career Development Experience Design Template

Aligned to the Illinois Career Pathways Dictionary, this template can help spark thinking and document the design for a career development experience.



Career Development Experience Toolkit

The Career Development Experience Toolkit, initially released in

Coming Up with I-WIN...



October 9: Roundtable Discussion

Join this interactive roundtable to explore practical strategies for designing and strengthening meaningful career exploration experiences for middle school students.

[>> Register now](#)



November 9: Braided Funding Strategies

Hear from a leading school district on how it leverages multiple funding streams to strengthen career pathways and work-based learning.

[>> Register now](#)

Quick Feedback

Please complete our exit slip to provide feedback on this session and input for future opportunities with I-WIN.

Thank you for your time and thoughts!





EdSystems

EDUCATION SYSTEMS CENTER *at*
NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Thank you!

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