



Partnerships

Gateway and Virginia Tech Partnership Named Semi-Finalist in U.S. Department of Education Career Z Challenge

By HanhLinh Ho and Matt Berkery | Published March 6, 2024

Gateway ([CareerGateway.io](https://careergateway.io)) and its partner, Virginia Tech's D.C. Area Center for Enhancement of Engineering Diversity ([CEED](https://CEED.org)) have been recognized as semi-finalists for the U.S. Department of Education Career Z Challenge for their innovative work-based learning solutions. This unique partnership has three main goals:

- 1.Help more high school and college students secure meaningful internships, externships, and mentorships by closing the durable workplace readiness skills gap;
- 2.Improve employers' ROI and willingness to create more opportunities for students;
- 3.Expand awareness of technical (STEM) careers for students of all ages.

The U.S. Department of Education's Career Z Challenge

The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE) created the Career Z Challenge to enhance work-based learning (WBL) pathways to technical jobs and careers, engaging collaborative ecosystems of educators, businesses, industries, workforce professionals, and community stakeholders to provide students with interconnected and expansive career development opportunities and experiences across grades 9 – 12. Career Z semi-finalists and finalists receive training, guidance, peer networking opportunities, and a portion of a \$2.5 million prize pool.

Employers are struggling to fill open positions. In 2022, there were more than 11 million job openings and only 6 million unemployed workers. Work-based learning increases opportunities and access for students to explore and develop skills to become contributing members of today's workforce and succeed in their future careers.

- U.S. Secretary of Education, Miguel Cardona.

Even though 74% of U.S. high school students are interested in WBL opportunities, only 2% complete internships, according to a 2020 report by American Student Assistance. One of the main reasons for the low level of participation is the lack of available opportunities, which is often because employers feel unsure about high school students' durable workplace readiness skills or essential skills (formerly called soft skills). Even for students who secured paid internships, local regional internship coordinators shared that less than half of participants complete their experience due to gaps in workplace readiness and low levels of belonging.



Gateway team shows 113 high school seniors and 10 educators the Gateway platform for workplace readiness upskilling in Alexandria, VA.

Skills Gaps, Workplace Readiness, and Collaborations with Employers and Schools

To help employers feel more confident about hiring high school students and vice versa, Gateway upskills students so that they are more prepared to seize the opportunity and perform well during their internships. By participating in Gateway's upskilling program, students report an average of 25% increase in workplace readiness skills, including communication and time management.

Virginia Tech and Gateway recognize the challenges associated with this skills gap. The partnership began when representatives of each organization were presenting in the same WBL conference room in Atlanta in May 2023, hosted by the Association of Career and Technical Education (ACTE), and discovered their base of operations was less than 5 miles apart in Northern Virginia.

Since then, Virginia Tech and Gateway have expanded their work-based learning ecosystem that engages more than 7,000 students from over 100 schools with support in career exploration and preparation, internships, externships, and mentorship support, particularly emphasizing STEM, energy, and technical careers.



STEM Career Exploration Workshop at Virginia Tech Thinkabit Lab in Falls Church, VA

Over 25 Years of Experience in Work-Based Learning

The Virginia Tech Thinkabit Lab is part of the Center for the Enhancement of Engineering Diversity (CEED), which emphasizes early exposure, recruitment, and support for students with high aptitude to pursue and complete engineering and computer science degree programs. In Northern Virginia, the Center for the Enhancement of Engineering Diversity is represented by Dr. Jim Egenrieder, Research Faculty and Director of Virginia Tech's Thinkabit Lab (Thinkabit.Tech) and the [2023 National Career and Technical Education Higher Education professional of the year](#).

Based in the Washington, D.C. area, the lab hosts over 40 student interns and over 3,000 students grades 4 to 12 annually for immersive half-day experiences in technical career and college exploration, combined with hands-on physical computing skills activities. From explorations of IoT, Smart Cities, and wireless technologies to navigating the future possibilities of AI and robotics automation, students gain new awareness of the importance of developing their technical skills, communication skills, and collaborative approaches to engineering design. Driven by a commitment to fostering a mindset that goes beyond technical adeptness, the Virginia Tech Thinkabit Lab is dedicated to instilling in students the key attributes for success in the future workforce.



High school interns shared their designs for a new robotic platform with Dr. Egenrieder.

Opportunities for Collaborations and Innovations

With only 30% of high school students feel adequately prepared for the future (Gates Foundation) and 87% of companies say they have skills gaps or expect to within a few years (McKinsey), it is crucial that employers, counties, educators, students, and non-profit organizations collaborate to be at the forefront of adopting innovations to support the ecosystem.

"We provide direct support to government-funded programs and school-based coordinators struggling to meet new goals established by state legislatures and education leaders," says HanhLinh Ho, "we also provide support directly to students and families looking for hard-to-find opportunities in specific fields, as well as the employers who host and mentor students.

Gateway continues to explore innovations in creating what this partnership calls Durable Workplace Readiness Skills through its internships and workforce development programs.

"Our partnership with Gateway over the last year has revealed the importance of strategies that enhance students' workplace readiness and my efforts to ensure employers' return on investment and continued participation. Gateway's innovations continue to expand with every new collaborator and our circles of thought leadership."

- VT Thinkabit Lab Director, Dr. Jim Egenrieder.

Partner with Us

We invite collaborators and future partners to reach out to us at Workforce@vt.edu or hanhlinh@careergateway.io to learn more and discuss opportunities in 12 categories of high-quality WBL recognized in Virginia, ranging from industry guest speakers and career exploration in classrooms to students participating in mentorships, externships, internships, and industry apprenticeships.

Use Gateway to land dream internships.

[Talk to our mentor](#) today!

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