Employer Engagement

Case Study Report

Arizona Sun Corridor Get Into Energy Consortium
Estrella Mountain Community College
Avondale, Arizona

June 2014
Program Overview:
The Arizona Sun Corridor Get Into Energy Consortium (ASC-GIEC) initiative strengthens and broadens the region’s talent pipeline to meet the growing needs of the energy and mining industries in and around the state. ASC-GIEC employs a variety of innovative and proven workforce preparedness strategies to train trade impacted workers and other adults for high skill, high wage employment, and career advancement in energy and mining industries.

The centerpiece of this initiative is the industry-recognized Get Into Energy (GIE) Competency model that defines basic competencies (knowledge, skills and abilities), industry fundamentals, industry technical competencies and job specific competencies in eight stackable tiers. This model ensures strong employer engagement in all phases of workforce development and provides a pathways system of competencies and industry-recognized credentials that are directly linked to employment opportunities and advancement. The ASC-GIEC expands and enhances the GIE Competency model by: developing industry-endorsed common curriculum and education requirements across consortium colleges; creating a new, credit-bearing GIE Foundations Course that bundles multiple industry-recognized credentials; establishing energy-to-mining pathways; and developing a new articulation agreement between consortium colleges and Arizona State University to broaden participation of trade impacted workers and other adults in high-demand STEM engineering fields.

Consortium Members:
Estrella Mountain Community College, Arizona; Chandler-Gilbert Community College, Arizona; Northland Pioneer College, Arizona; Pima Community College and Arizona and Yavapai College

Key Partners:

Public Workforce System Partners: Maricopa Workforce Connections, Pima County Workforce Board, Yavapai County Workforce Board, and Apache-Navajo County Workforce Consortium

Type of Grant: TAACCCT Grant
Industry Focus: Electrical Utility (Fossil & Nuclear Generation, Distribution & Maintenance Technicians), IT and Mining
Period of Performance: 10/1/2012 - 09/30/2016
Total Funding Level Requested: $13,477,799
Leveraged Resources: College resources, Employee Partner resources, Workforce resources
Identifying and Overcoming Challenges

Initial Challenge: Managing Expectations and Tempering Enthusiasm
The grant resources generated statewide excitement among industry and college leadership. It was important to keep everyone focused on the big picture – instilling the necessary skills and characteristics to create successful, employable students.

Overcoming the Challenge:
Proactive communication was the key to success. Employee partners were engaged early and often to help create a strong three year plan. The team needed to be encouraged to work systematically to make sure that all the dots were being progressively connected and no details were being overlooked.

Initial Challenge: Underestimating the time necessary to get started
Because all five colleges in the consortium had experience working with at least one of the employer partners at the outset of this initiative, it was assumed that start-up would be quick and easy. However, each industry partner’s unique employee training needs, each college’s existing curriculum, and the differences between college and corporate policies and practices had to be managed and integrated before progress could be made.

Overcoming the Challenge:
The leadership took an additional nine months to address all concerns and details. This was particularly important to developing the industry-endorsed common curriculum and education requirements across the consortium colleges. The robust common curriculum gives the students exposure to the diverse career possibilities available amongst the various industry partners before they are required to specialize.

Initial Challenge: Creating a Common Nomenclature across Industry
It was important to get the industry partners “talking the same language” in order to create realistic intra-industry workforce projections.

Overcoming the Challenge:
The workforce planning committee took on the task of developing four common job families that align with the college programs offered. The next phase of this process is to have the companies revisit the job titles for more statewide consistency among jobs and categorize them into one of the four buckets.

Other Key Partners: Rio Salado College, Center for Energy Workforce Development, Nuclear Energy Institute, and Science Foundation Arizona
goal was to get all companies to refer to similar jobs consistently for better accuracy in hiring projections and forecasting.

Activity Analysis: How activities can impact the outcomes and deliverables of your grant program.

Activity: Engage Industry in an Advisory Capacity to Ensure Program Completeness & Current Curriculum

The industry employers engaged dynamically in the “supply and demand” model, outreach activities and daily conversation related to progress on the grant. The employers are readily available to participate in grant activities and support the programs 100%.

Additionally, the industry partners are actively engaged in leadership roles on the consortium’s three committees: Communication and Outreach, Curriculum and Instruction, and Workforce Planning. Each are assigned tasks from the grant deliverables. Committees release a monthly report, and committee chairs coordinate for any overlap. Since the implementation of these committees, significant progress has been made on the grant deliverables.

Activity: Develop Curriculum to Close Already Identified Gaps in the Job-specific Program Areas

The colleges in the consortium were able to work effectively with industry partners to close the gaps in the knowledge and skills needed to be successful in Arizona energy careers and increase the relevance of the training programs. Industry partners are directly involved in defining the skill-sets required for future job placement and help to keep innovation and technology at the forefront of the curriculum. They provide subject matter expertise and constant feedback.

Activity: Expand & Enhance the Industry Recognized Model of Stacked & Latticed Credentials

A stackable credentials model was implemented that gives every participant the opportunity to receive industry-recognized credentials that are embedded in the degree pathway. The success of this practice is demonstrated in the fact that the industry partners have begun to alter their hiring practices to favor ASC-GIE.

Q: Was there a need to hire additional assistance, outside of the college, to meet the needs and/or goals of the program?

A: ASC-GIE partnered with the Center for Energy Workforce Development (CEWD) to assist with the development of training guides, a core competency/ stackable credentials model and employer engagement. CEWD was provided a list of deliverables and is distributing the new tools developed by the consortium nationally.

Q: How will you continue to maximize program success?

A: With a consistent message to industry and community. We are building a solid base for AZ economy to grow. Energy drives industry. AZ is the #1 producer of copper in the United States. Electricity utilizes copper and nothing runs without electricity. Additionally, exporting power brings money into the state. ASC-GIE and its partners are training skilled workers to meet the highly specialized needs of the energy industry, be they nuclear, mining, technological, etc. This initiative is a win-win for the people of our state.
students who have completed the consortium’s common core, which consists of two entry-level courses and three national certifications. Curriculum has been developed to help prepare students for certification required for employment.

**Key Lessons Learned:**

- Engage employee partners early and often
- Create a model that is in-sync with the needs of industry
- Leverage industry and workforce resources
- Consult with industry personnel on all aspects of curriculum, training and industry information technology.
- Partner with employers to maintain the balance between qualified student and career opportunities.
- Solicit dynamic projections of the types of jobs that will become available to students in the immediate future.
- Develop a relationship that promotes two-way communication with the workforce development offices. If both parties are committed to the success of the students, the relationship will naturally foster a two-way referral system in which the agencies can refer students to the college programs, and the college can refer to students who require additional support back to the agency. This will promote a mutually beneficial partnership.

**Strategies for Sustainability:**

**Strategy 1: Long-term Investments**

The resources made available through the grant were invested into curriculum, training, technology and subject matter expertise. ASC-GIEC, industry, and other collaborative partners built online and technology-enabled learning environments to increase access to education and training programs. They accelerated progress for trade impacted workers and other non-traditional students throughout the region. Most other activities can be easily subsumed by the colleges’ operating budgets when the grant money goes away.

**Strategy 2: Supply & Demand Model of Career Pathways**

The “One Job: One Student” philosophy was developed with the industry partners to allow the program to sustain in the long run. It provides an accurate hiring prediction in each job category, allowing the colleges to funnel students down pathways that promote employability. The goal is for students to know what specific job opportunities will be, to then make an informed decision about specialization after completing the common curriculum. The ASC-GIE consortium colleges have agreed to limit the programs offered at each school to avoid over-supplying qualified workers in one craft or trade.

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Strategy 3: Partner Development in Industries Outside of Energy

The consortium has made efforts to connect with companies closely related to the energy industry, such as construction, mining, and manufacturing, in order to provide multiple options for students and to establish relationships with other industries also facing employment crises. This includes partnering with workforce development agencies, which will continue to provide resource support to students beyond the grant.

Keys to Replication:

ASC-GIEC advances sustainable solutions to meeting the critical demands of the energy and mining industries, while improving the content and delivery of education and training programs in the Arizona Sun Corridor. The initiative was developed with pre-existing knowledge of the education and training needs of these critical statewide industries. In other words, the consortium did not create an effective program that had to be “sold” to industry. Employee partners were an integral part of the process from the beginning. It is important to work closely with industry partners to understand employment projections and create a training program that prepares students to fill those jobs.

ASC-GIEC has a wide variety of partners who interface with the community and other potential partners. From a marketing and recruitment perspective, it is important to tell a consistent story. One strategy is to produce a quarterly newsletter that keeps all leadership and the general public apprised of initiative progress and success. This enables the programs to sell themselves to new partners and job-seeking students alike. Similarly, it invites employers to be active in recruiting and outreach events. This promotes consistent communication, credibility for the programs, and will improve the quality and quantity of candidates for the employer.

Industry partners must all have a common nomenclature for job families, categories and/or titles. If this is done successfully, it makes it easier for the employers to make accurate regional hiring projections. This allows the colleges to make appropriate supply decisions when advising students into programs that will allow them to be employable upon completion. It also helps current and prospective students understand the diversity of career options available upon completion. Encourage changes in employer’s hiring strategy that promotes your
graduates as the preferred hiring pool.

Finally, make a strong effort to integrate program practices and staff support into campus life so that students of the program are connected with resources both on and off campus. It will also help colleges consider the grant programs in yearly growth evaluations,