

Make-It-Better. Building Inclusive Career Pathways Through CTE

ACTE NextLevel Fellows are changing the future of postsecondary career and technical education. Through the yearlong program, Fellows develop their professional and leadership skills while creating a plan to solve a real challenge at their institution. Below is the story of one Fellow whose Make-It-Better plan led to transformative change.

Tonia Shook, 2024 ACTE NextLevel Postsecondary CTE Leaders Fellow | Fred K. Marchman Technical College

The challenge

As Director of Fred K. Marchman Technical College, Tonia saw a significant gap in postsecondary opportunities for adults with intellectual disabilities in her community. Although the college offered more than a dozen high-quality career certificate programs, students with intellectual disabilities had few opportunities to prepare for careers or transition into career and technical education. Tonia envisioned a more inclusive pathway that would help students build skills, earn industry credentials, and access career and technical education and competitive employment.

The plan

Tonia's Make-It-Better plan focused on developing an inclusive postsecondary transition program that would prepare students with intellectual disabilities for career certificate programs and competitive employment. The plan emphasized career exploration, employability skills, industry credentials, and strong partnerships with employers and community organizations. Tonia strengthened her plan with resources and support from the NextLevel Fellowship, including structured assignments, peer feedback, and guidance from a program mentor. Together, these experiences strengthened her grant proposal and created a clear road map for implementation.

Tonia's Make-It-Better plan included

- Developing a postsecondary transition program for students with intellectual disabilities
- Designing career exploration, employability skills, and industry credential opportunities
- Building partnerships with employers, community agencies, and college programs
- Creating pathways into existing career certificate programs
- Developing a competitive grant proposal to support program implementation

The impact



Institutional impact

- Secured nearly \$1 million in grant funding to launch Phoenix RISE (Remarkable Individuals Seeking Employment)
- Enrolled the first cohort of five students
- Expanded participation from five career programs, with plans to grow collegewide
- Created new CTE pathways for students with intellectual disabilities



Professional impact

- Strengthened grant writing and strategic planning skills
- Expanded education, workforce, and community partnerships
- Increased statewide visibility through presentations and outreach
- Grew as a leader in inclusive postsecondary CTE

For Tonia, the most meaningful impact has been watching students begin to see new possibilities for their futures. Seeing the first Phoenix RISE students earn certifications, explore career programs, and take steps toward meaningful employment has reinforced her belief that every student deserves access to postsecondary opportunities.

Advice for future NextLevel Fellows

Tonia encourages future Fellows to embrace feedback and be open to refining their ideas. The conversations, peer reviews, and mentorship she experienced through the Fellowship strengthened her project and challenged her to think more strategically about building partnerships and creating lasting change.

She encourages Fellows to fully engage with the relationships they build during the Fellowship. The support, ideas, and encouragement from mentors and peer participants continued well beyond the program and played an important role in turning her vision into reality.

The ACTE NextLevel Fellowship helped Tonia turn her vision into new pathways for students with intellectual disabilities to earn credentials and pursue meaningful careers.

To learn more about the NextLevel Postsecondary CTE Leaders Fellowship, visit www.nextlevelcte.org

