

Make-It-Better. Expanding Postsecondary Opportunities for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

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.

Christian Zimmerman, 2025 ACTE NextLevel Postsecondary CTE Leaders Fellow | Florida Center for Students with Unique Abilities, University of Central Florida

The challenge

As Assistant Director of Programs at the Florida Center for Students with Unique Abilities, Christian saw that students with intellectual disabilities remained underrepresented in career and technical education. While comprehensive transition programs (CTPs) had expanded in Florida, few existed on technical college campuses, limiting students' access to career-focused education and employment pathways. Christian recognized the need to help institutions develop high-quality CTPs and expand these opportunities beyond Florida.

The plan

Christian's Make-It-Better plan focused on increasing the number of CTPs on career and technical education campuses in Florida and other states. Working alongside a NextLevel program mentor, Christian narrowed the scope of his project and developed strategies for building partnerships, supporting colleges through program development, and creating national resources that could be replicated across institutions. The NextLevel Fellowship provided the credibility, mentorship, and professional network Christian needed to turn this vision into lasting impact.

Christian's Make-It-Better plan included

- Identifying technical colleges with strong potential to launch or expand CTPs
- Building partnerships with institutional leaders and national organizations to grow CTPs
- Providing resources, guidance, and technical assistance to support CTP implementation
- Developing and publishing CTE-focused learning modules through Think College
- Securing ECMC Foundation funding to sustain and scale CTP expansion efforts

The impact

Florida Center for Students with **UNIQUE ABILITIES**



Institutional impact

- Expanded the number of Florida CTPs from 22 to 33
- Developed the first CTE-focused learning modules through Think College
- Helped Minnesota and South Carolina secure more than \$2 million each to launch CTPs
- Strengthened technical college capacity to serve students with intellectual disabilities

Professional impact

- Became a nationally recognized leader in CTPs
- Expanded consulting and technical assistance with colleges across the country
- Strengthened national partnerships through ACTE, Think College, and other organizations
- Increased visibility through national presentations and leadership opportunities

For Christian, the most meaningful impact has been seeing students with intellectual disabilities gain opportunities that once seemed out of reach. He often thinks about students like William, who went from experiencing homelessness to completing a culinary program and building a brighter future. Moments like these remind Christian that expanding access to CTPs can change the lives of students and their families.

Advice for future NextLevel Fellows

Christian encourages future Fellows to start with a focused idea that can grow over time. Rather than trying to solve every challenge at once, he recommends finding what works, refining it, and scaling it to reach more students and institutions.

Christian also credits the Fellowship community as one of the most valuable parts of the experience. The mentors and peer participants became trusted colleagues who continue to share ideas and support one another after the program ended. As he puts it, “Fellows become family.”

The ACTE NextLevel Fellowship helped Christian transform a focused idea into a growing national effort to expand comprehensive transition programs for students with intellectual disabilities.

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

