

WRITING TOMORROW'S CTE STORY:

NEXTLEVEL FELLOWS LEAD THE CHANGE

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NEXTLEVEL
POSTSECONDARY CTE LEADERS

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he narrative around career and technical education is changing, and the NextLevel Postsecondary CTE Fellowship alumni are leading that transformation. From Louisiana's rural communities to Oregon's innovation hubs, and from California's diverse campuses to North Carolina's manufacturing centers, these education leaders are challenging outdated perceptions and building dynamic pathways that connect students to meaningful careers.

This year's featured fellows represent a new generation of CTE advocates who understand that their work extends far beyond classroom instruction. They're strategic thinkers who leverage data to showcase student success, relationship builders who forge authentic industry partnerships, and visionary leaders who recognize that CTE isn't just about filling jobs. It's about restoring dignity, opening doors and empowering people to write new stories.

Matthew Nappier put it simply: "CTE is not a fallback; it's a launchpad." This sentiment echoes through every conversation with these fellows, whether they're discussing their work with incarcerated students, their efforts to recruit faculty or their strategies for keeping programs aligned with rapidly evolving industry needs.

Through monthly meetings, conferences and collaborative problem-solving, the NextLevel fellows have discovered that leadership is less about having all the answers and more about being open to learning more. Their students have been their greatest teachers. And as you'll hear from them in their own words, these fellows aren't just responding to change. They're shaping it, one student, one program, one partnership at a time.



Matthew Nappier

Director of Strategic Assessment, Planning and Initiatives, Louisiana Delta Community College

What's one misconception people have about postsecondary CTE, and how do you challenge that narrative?

One major misconception about postsecondary CTE is that it's a "lesser-than" path, and that outdated mindset couldn't be further from the truth. CTE is not a fallback; it's a launchpad. I challenge the misconception by putting students' success on display through data, outcomes and personal testimony.

CTE is a bold first choice.

At Louisiana Delta Community College, we confront that myth by consistently showcasing data and stories that illustrate how CTE produces highly skilled, highly employable graduates, often with little to no debt, who go on to make meaningful contributions in essential industries.

How has being part of the NextLevel Postsecondary CTE Fellowship enriched your work?

The NextLevel Fellowship has been transformative. It connected me with a national cohort of visionary CTE leaders who are not just responding to change but shaping it. The exposure to policy discussions, leadership training and best practices across different states has expanded my toolkit and sharpened my strategic thinking.

What have you learned from your students?

Our students at Louisiana Delta Community College have taught me the power of resilience reimagined. This year, I worked with many students in the adult education and prison education programs. Watching them pursue education with such intensity and hope, despite systemic barriers, reminded me that education is not about circumstance; it's about opportunity. This highlights the importance of our mission to provide accessible and affordable high-quality education and training to the individuals, families and communities of Northeast Louisiana to drive regional economic stability, wellness and wealth.

These students have shown me that grit and ambition can thrive in the most unlikely places. They've shown me that potential is not defined by environment. Their engagement and hunger to learn under difficult circumstances are nothing short of inspiring. They've reminded me why access matters and that with the right support, students can rise to incredible heights, no matter where they start. Sometimes the people society counts out are the ones most determined to make education count.

Is there anything else you'd like to share?

CTE is changing lives in real time, and we see that transformation every day at Louisiana Delta Community College. It's an exciting time to be in postsecondary CTE because the work we do doesn't just prepare students for jobs but also restores dignity, opens doors and empowers people to write a new story.

I'm proud to be part of that story at LDCC and honored to help shape a future where CTE is recognized for what it truly is: an engine of opportunity!

Tami Hill

Lead Project Coordinator, Lane Community College

What's one misconception people have about postsecondary CTE, and how do you challenge that narrative?

Postsecondary CTE is often viewed as a less prestigious academic route. We can challenge the misconception by emphasizing the benefits, telling stories of CTE successes, continuing to educate the community and collaborating with industry partners.

How has being part of the NextLevel Postsecondary CTE Fellowship enriched your work?

Being part of the NextLevel Postsecondary CTE Fellowship has enriched my work by providing me with a deeper understanding

of CTE and the issues it faces, as well as expanding my professional network through a platform that connects me with peers and mentors within the CTE field.

"Making connections with other CTE members has been the most valuable."

Is there anything else you'd like to share?

Being a part of the NextLevel Postsecondary CTE Fellowship has been an honor. I've met some wonderful people, and I have gained an incredible respect for what ACTE does — for not only its members but also for all the communities across the United States.

Ferdinand "Ferdie" Santos

Talent Development &
Retention Director, Fullerton College

What's one misconception people have about postsecondary CTE, and how do you challenge that narrative?

This narrative that CTE is a "lesser" alternative is outdated and overlooks the evolving landscape of education and workforce needs. In reality, postsecondary CTE programs offer rigorous, hands-on training that leads to high-demand, high-wage careers in fields like health care, advanced manufacturing, information technology and skilled trades.

To challenge this misconception, I emphasize the success stories of CTE graduates who are thriving in their careers, often with less student debt and more job security than their peers. I also highlight data showing that CTE pathways are aligned with labor market needs and are essential to closing the skills gap in today's economy.

How has being part of the NextLevel Postsecondary CTE Fellowship enriched your work?

Being part of the NextLevel Fellowship has expanded my professional network and helped me realize that leadership isn't

about having all the answers. It's about being open to learning and growth. I've gained confidence knowing I can lean on a community of experienced leaders who are eager to share their knowledge.

"Leadership isn't about having all the answers."

What have your students taught you recently?

One student stands out as a shining example of what is possible when young minds are eager to learn and driven to succeed. This remarkable student graduated high school while simultaneously earning multiple college degrees, which was an incredible testament to his focus, determination and passion for learning.

Is there anything else you'd like to share?

There are countless opportunities and pathways to build a better life. I just wish more people in our communities knew about the incredible resources available through our community colleges. These programs are not just educational. They are truly life-changing.



Marc Davis

Dean of Business Engineering and Technical Studies,
Mitchell Community College

How are you challenging the narrative that CTE is somehow “lesser than”?

I challenge that narrative by highlighting the high-level technical skills, academic rigor and economic mobility that CTE programs provide. Today's CTE graduates are launching careers in fields like advanced manufacturing, cybersecurity, engineering technology and health care, often earning industry credentials and college degrees simultaneously. I also work with employers to showcase success stories and emphasize the direct link between CTE programs and high-demand, high-wage careers.

“CTE develops strong, transferable skills, such as communication, adaptability and problem solving.”

How has being part of the NextLevel Postsecondary CTE Fellowship enriched your work?

Being part of the NextLevel Postsecondary CTE Fellowship has deeply enriched my work. It has connected me with a national network of peers and mentors who share the same goal: building stronger, more responsive CTE programs. The fellowship has provided practical tools and fresh insights that I've applied in areas such as strategic planning, program development and faculty support.

One of the most valuable components has been the monthly meetings among NextLevel fellows. I especially appreciated a session focused on recruiting and retaining CTE faculty. Not long after that conversation, I faced a real challenge, trying to fill a faculty vacancy in a high-demand field. The wage gap between industry positions and postsecondary teaching made recruitment difficult. That conversation helped me consider the structural challenges and sparked ideas for building stronger pipelines. One idea we're now pursuing is encouraging faculty to identify promising students in their classrooms who demonstrate technical ability, leadership, and communication skills, and then surrounding them with experienced adjuncts to help them develop into full-time faculty roles.

ACTE has been instrumental in helping me find the right resources to guide these efforts:

- The *ACTE Quality CTE Program of Study Framework*[®] provided a clear model for evaluating our programs and identifying improvement opportunities.
- The employer engagement and work-based learning resources offered ideas we haven't implemented yet but are now exploring, especially around deepening advisory input and expanding real-world learning.
- *Techniques* magazine and ACTE webinars continue to inform and inspire my work with timely insights and practical strategies.

What have your students taught you recently?

This year, my students have taught me that their voices are essential, not just in shaping their own learning but in guiding the future of our programs. During advisory meetings and program conversations, students shared honest feedback about course formats, outdated equipment and uncertainty around credential pathways. Their insights helped us reevaluate scheduling, prioritize equipment upgrades and strengthen our alignment with industry needs.

My students have reminded me that listening is one of the most powerful tools we have, and that building strong programs means keeping students at the center of every decision while preparing them for growth far beyond their first job.

Is there anything else you'd like to share?

Yes. One thing we must continue to emphasize is educating families about the value of postsecondary CTE. For generations, the dominant message has been that a four-year degree is the only reliable path to a successful career. However, the world of work has changed.

We need to reframe the conversation: CTE is the beginning of a dynamic, lifelong career.

Juan Fernando Pineda

Associate Dean, Emily Griffith Technical College

What's one misconception people have about postsecondary CTE, and how do you challenge that narrative?

As an education leader working closely with technical programs and industry partners, I often hear the misconception that postsecondary CTE isn't truly aligned with the workforce. Some people still think these programs are outdated or slow to adapt.

In reality, our entire CTE model is built around industry alignment. Across all programs I support, we've worked directly with employers to redesign course sequences, so they focus on the real skills students need to succeed in entry-level roles.

Additionally, as apprenticeships gain more attention nationwide, we've positioned our programs to feed naturally into these pathways. Our strong relationships with industry make it easy to connect students to apprenticeship opportunities that continue building their skills and careers.

How has being part of the NextLevel Postsecondary CTE Fellowship enriched your work?

Being part of the NextLevel Fellowship has been incredibly valuable. It's given me the opportunity to connect with peers from across the country who work in similar roles within postsecondary CTE. Sharing ideas and strategies with others who face the same challenges has been both validating and inspiring.

What's been most enriching is realizing that while we all face similar obstacles, some of my peers have already worked through challenges I'm currently experiencing. Learning how they approached those situations — and sharing insights from my own experiences in return — has helped me grow as a leader and bring new perspectives back to my team.

“During ACTE’s National Policy Seminar, we had conversations not just about policy, but about people — their motivations, values and commitment to this work. Hearing those stories helped deepen my understanding of the ‘why’ behind what we do.”

What have your students taught you recently?

This year, I was reminded of the value of simply taking time to connect with students — outside of formal settings — to hear their stories, motivations and perspectives. I made it a point to have relaxed, unstructured conversations with students from different programs, and it was one of the most rewarding experiences of the year.

I learned more about their aspirations, what drew them to their programs, what they love, and what they find challenging. It also gave us the chance to talk through topics my dean and I had been considering, and the students offered honest feedback that helped clarify how they actually experience our programs. They taught me that when we create space for open, personal dialogue, students are eager to share. And what they share can shape our work in powerful ways. ■

WEATHERING THE STORM

Strategies for maintaining program alignment amid major change

1. “Maintain active and intentional advisory councils. These aren’t just once-a-year meetings to rubber-stamp curriculum. We build real partnerships with local employers, regional workforce boards and sector specialists to ensure that our programs stay responsive and future ready.”

“When our regional manufacturing partners expressed a need for short-term, entry-level training, our workforce, adult education, and CTE teams came together to respond with agility and purpose.” —Matthew Nappier

2. “We have made infrastructure and facility investments, updated our curriculum, provided real-world experiences and industry partnerships, and offered faculty support and professional development. By doing these things, we demonstrate a proactive approach to keeping our programs relevant and aligned with industry standards.” —Tami Hill

3. “Engage with industry partners through conferences, roundtables and direct collaboration. These interactions pro-

vide valuable insights into emerging trends, evolving workforce needs, and future directions, allowing us to adapt our programs proactively and ensure they remain relevant and impactful.” —Ferdinand “Ferdie” Santos

4. “Leverage employer input to shape faculty professional development priorities. This can help ensure instructors stay current with the tools and practices being used in the field.”

“Employers are looking for more than just technical know-how; they want graduates who bring strong transferable skills to the table. By incorporating industry input into our program improvement cycle as a regular, structured part of our process, not just an annual check-in, we remain agile and responsive to the rapid pace of change in today’s workforce.” —Marc Davis

5. “We hold formal meetings with industry partners twice a year to share program updates and gather group feedback, but just as important are the informal, ongoing conversations we have with individual employers throughout the year. These relationships help us stay attuned to shifts in technology, emerging skills and challenges.”

“This two-way dialogue allows us to adapt quickly to keep our students on the leading edge.” —Juan Fernando Pineda