

To Innovate, Take Action



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By: Emily Rabbitt, CAE

To turn innovative ideas into working solutions to today's problems, association leaders need to be ready to roll up their sleeves and get to work. Here's how one organization is doing

that with help from an ASAE Research Foundation Innovation Grant.

Awardees of the ASAE Research Foundation Innovation Grants Program (IGP) are working to find innovative solutions to challenges their industries are facing. The winning proposals combine creative ideas with detailed plans to implement them.

One 2020 grantee, the Focus NJ Center for Economic Research and Workforce Solutions, received an IGP award for their “Partnerships for Effective Experiential Learning” proposal. The goal is to create a centralized information source for young people in New Jersey to learn about career paths available to them. They are using a strategic, structured innovation process to bring their concept to life.

Identify the problem. Focus NJ's project addresses an identified problem: Young people are leaving New Jersey at high rates and taking their talents and potential with them. Stakeholders across the state, including members of the public and private sectors and academic institutions, are invested in creating and promoting opportunities for young people that will persuade them to stay and contribute to New Jersey's economic growth.

Research the solution. Focus NJ's project aligns directly with the 2020 IGP theme of ASAE ForesightWorks research on workforce and workplace issues, and their concept development was informed by recommendations from a 2018 report by the New Jersey Business and Industry Association. One of the significant findings from the study was that students needed increased exposure to the career pathways available to them in the Garden State—and at earlier ages. The report also stressed the importance of increased opportunities for experiential learning, such as apprenticeships and internship programs.

Create a plan of action. Many stakeholders offer the knowledge and access that Focus NJ wants to see disseminated to young people in New Jersey, but that information is spread out

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among various entities. Focus NJ's research showed that other states had been successful in consolidating information into one platform. This led to the conclusion that New Jersey needed a central clearinghouse for various stakeholders—government, employers, industry, nonprofits, and educational institutions. This collaborative approach became the central tenet of their proposal.

The call for proposals for 2021 Innovation Grants is open until October 5. Apply [here](#).

Stay the course. Innovation takes [planning and measurement](#), just like any other organizational process. Coming up with big ideas is more exciting than collecting and evaluating data, defining goals, and establishing performance metrics. But these processes are all critical to change. Focus NJ has laid out a multipart process that involves designating an agile team, engaging stakeholders, identifying platforms, and ultimately implementing the program.

Six months into their year-long grant period, Focus NJ has made progress toward their goals, adjusted their work processes where necessary, and made efforts to sustain their funding after the current grant cycle. Their work has grown even more critical since the onset of COVID-19 and the widespread impact the pandemic has had and will continue to have on the workforce of today and tomorrow.

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