



Application Guide

Catalyze Pittsburgh Challenge

August 2026

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Catalyze Challenge Overview

[Catalyze](#) is a collaborative funding initiative to accelerate innovation in career-connected learning (CCL), helping young people explore, prepare for, and pursue meaningful careers. Catalyze advances CCL through agile grantmaking, research and insights, and storytelling. Through the national Catalyze Challenge, competitive grant funding is awarded to forward-looking organizations with groundbreaking solutions to specific CCL challenges. The Catalyze Community of Practice, composed of Catalyze grantee practitioners, brings together a broad spectrum of leaders to ensure that CCL opportunities are accessible to all learners.

Since 2021, Catalyze has awarded over \$19 million through the Catalyze Challenge and has built a community of practice to support more than 100 organizations, positively impacting over 100,000 learners nationwide.

What is Career-Connected Learning?

CCL bridges the gap between student interests and industry needs, introducing young people to fulfilling pathways that connect passions to career success. CCL integrates real-world experiences, skill-building, and reflective practice so learners can explore a wide range of career pathways early, even in middle school. At Catalyze, we believe CCL is a journey where young people discover more about who they are, what they care about, and how they want to shape their future. It's not just about jobs—it's about building learner agency as they discover what matters to them, make informed decisions, and build confidence in their ability to chart their own path.

The Catalyze Pittsburgh Challenge

The Catalyze Pittsburgh Challenge is a funding and learning initiative that leverages the region's economic strengths and brings together youth-serving organizations, employers, educators, and workforce partners to develop innovative CCL opportunities for young people.

Advancing Career-Connected Learning for Emerging Industries and Occupations

The Pittsburgh region is a national leader in the development of **emerging industries and occupations (EIO)**. **Emerging industries** are new or rapidly growing sectors driven by technological innovation, such as biotechnology, aerospace, robotics, and artificial intelligence. **Emerging occupations** are new roles, or existing roles that are changing significantly, as these innovations reshape how work is performed and the skills employers require. For example, advances in technology have created entirely new career pathways while also transforming many traditional occupations across manufacturing, healthcare, transportation, and other industries. As a result, employers increasingly need workers who can adapt to new tools, technologies, and ways of working.

The region's young people entering today's workforce face a labor market where career pathways, job requirements, and in-demand skills are evolving rapidly. To make informed decisions about education and employment, **young people need opportunities to explore emerging industries and occupations, understand how their interests connect to future careers, and build the skills and confidence to navigate change**. Many young people are familiar with traditional career pathways but have limited exposure to newer careers being created by technological innovation. Without opportunities to explore these fields, they may overlook options that align with their strengths and interests.

Preparing young people for EIOs is not simply about training them for specific jobs. It is about helping them develop awareness, adaptability, and transferable skills that will enable them to succeed in a fast-paced labor market. Yet many CCL models were designed for a labor market that changed more gradually. Traditional CCL often struggles to keep pace with emerging opportunities and skill demands.

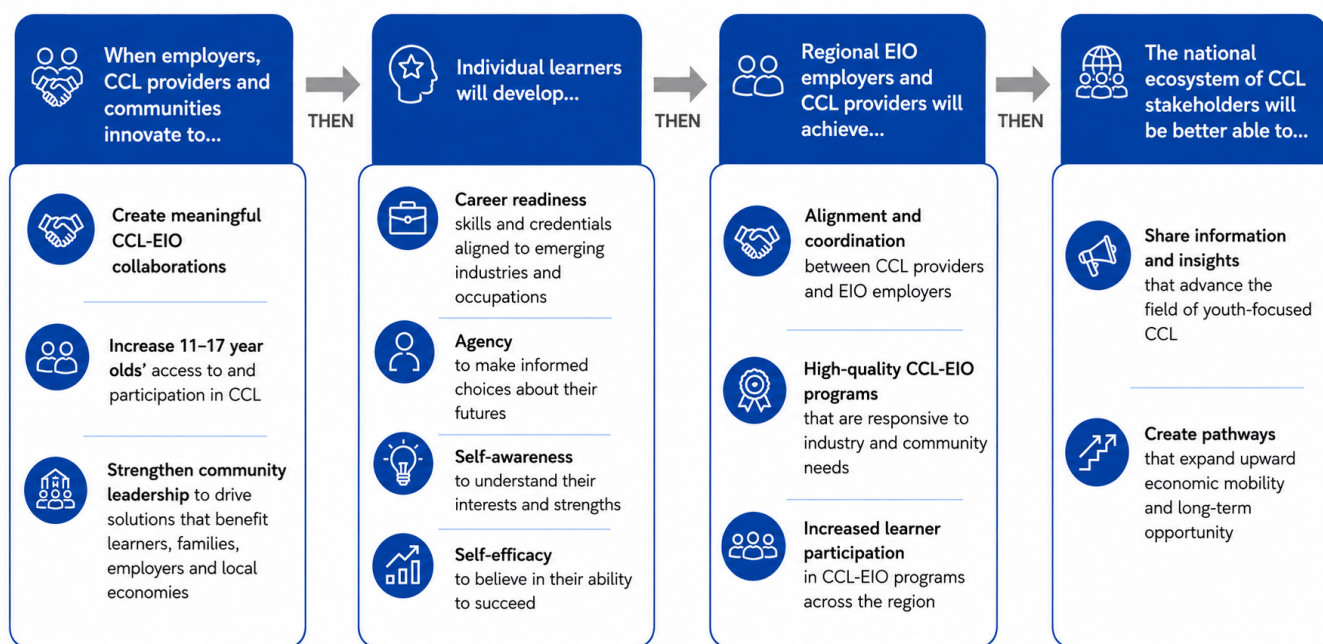
The Pittsburgh region is uniquely positioned to develop models and solutions that prepare young people for employment in EIOs. As a nationally recognized hub for innovation, Pittsburgh offers an early view of how emerging industries are creating new career opportunities and changing workforce needs. The region's strong network of employers, educators, workforce organizations, and youth-serving partners provides an ideal environment for developing and testing new approaches to CCL. Through the Catalyze Pittsburgh Challenge, the region can

generate practical models, partnerships, and lessons that help communities across the country prepare young people for careers in EIOs and for a future of work defined by continual change.

The outcomes for this Pittsburgh Challenge must be specific and clear, with proposals directly impacting the career opportunities and potential success of local youth through career-connected learning. Partner4Work will operate the Challenge, and with support from regional and national funders, it will engage, source, evaluate, and fund high-potential innovative ideas. This challenge funds creativity and change; it is not intended to fund operating support or implementation of programs in their current form. Eligible organizations must serve youth in one or more of the following counties: Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Butler, Washington, and Westmoreland.

Theory of Innovation

Catalyze Pittsburgh's Theory of Innovation describes how new approaches to CCL can help young people explore EIOs, build the skills and confidence to navigate their career journeys, and create lessons that can benefit communities across the country.



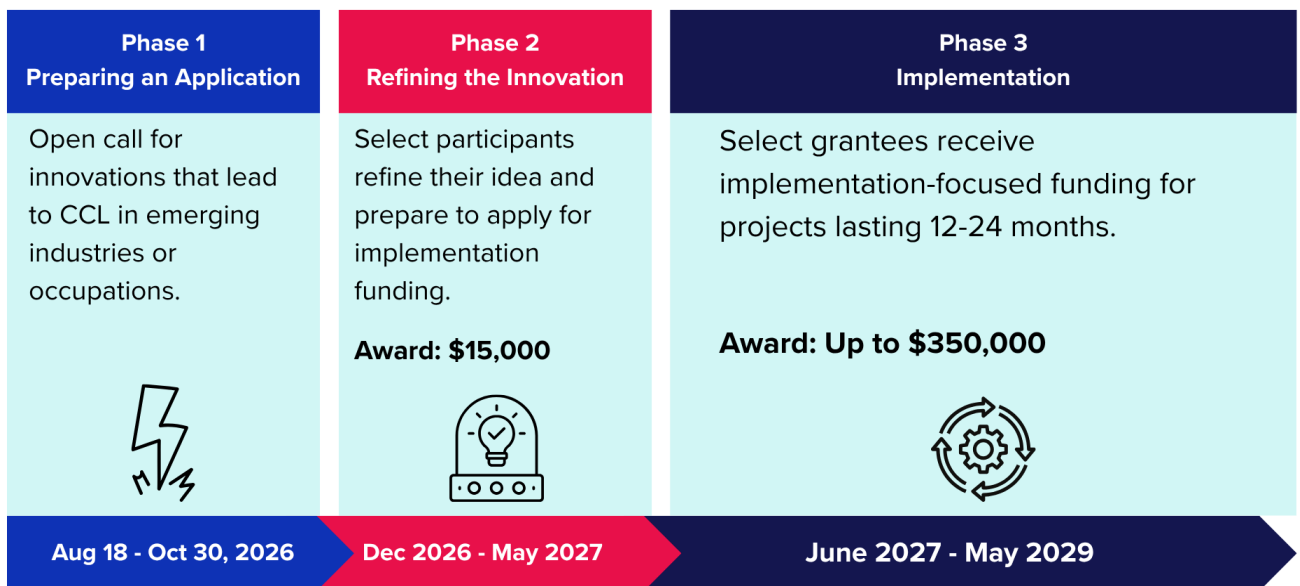
Innovation is core to the Catalyze Pittsburgh Challenge. For the purposes of this challenge, **we define innovation as:**

- a novel approach developed within the Pittsburgh Region
- a new application of an existing approach
- a new business or delivery model with the potential to achieve better outcomes for than the solutions available locally to date

Timeline for the Catalyze Pittsburgh Challenge

The Catalyze Pittsburgh Challenge will occur over three phases.

- Phase 1, “Preparing an Application,” August 18, 2026 - October 30, 2026
 - Interested organizations can visit [Catalyze Pittsburgh](#) to learn more and sign-up for workshops (coming soon).
 - The application portal will be open from September 22, 2026 - October 30, 2026. Organizations can submit an application describing their concept for innovations that lead to CCL in emerging industries or occupations.
- Phase 2, “Refining the Innovation.” December 2026 - May 2027
 - Select organizations from Phase 1 will be awarded funding of up to \$15,000 to refine their idea and prepare a competitive application for implementation funding.
 - Phase 2 concludes with organizations submitting a refined application to provide CCL in emerging industries and occupations.
- Phase 3, Implementation
 - Organizations selected from the Phase 2 applications will be awarded implementation-focused funding of up to \$350,000 for projects lasting 12-24 months.



Organization Eligibility Requirements

Please use the following checklist to determine if you meet eligibility requirements for the Catalyze Pittsburgh Challenge. Nonprofits, public agencies, and for-profit companies may submit applications.

Does your organization qualify to accept Catalyze Pittsburgh funds?

- ☐ Applicants must be legally incorporated into entities that have been in continuous operation for a minimum of three (3) years.
- ☐ All applicants must be in good standing with the federal government, possess a current Unique Entity Identifier (UEI) (formerly known as a DUNS number) and carry [insurance coverage](#) meeting Partner4Work's requirements.
- ☐ Entities that are currently barred, suspended, proposed for debarment, declared ineligible, or voluntarily excluded from participation in transactions by any Federal, State, City, or County agency—including Partner4Work or any quasi-governmental body—are ineligible to apply.

Will your organization be able to gather and provide the following data?

- ☐ Number of youth served over the course of the project
- ☐ Of the youth served, the number who successfully complete the CCL experiences provided by the project
- ☐ The number/ hours of CCL experiences provided (e.g. 5 trainings per semester totaling 10 hours)
- ☐ Number of organizations or leaders from emerging industries or emerging occupations participating in the project's design and implementation
- ☐ Names of organizations, industry associations, and other collaborating entities participating in the project's design and implementation
- ☐ Changes in learner agency, self-awareness, self-efficacy, and career readiness skills
- ☐ Amount of additional external funding secured for the project from the time of the Phase 2 award
- ☐ If applicable, the industry credentials, training certificates, or other credentials attained by participants during the project and the number of participants who achieve each credential

Preparing to Apply

Applications must address all elements of the Catalyze Pittsburgh Challenge. These elements are summarized in the table below, and the following pages provide additional detail.

Elements of the Catalyze Pittsburgh Challenge	
Innovation	Describe an innovation in the design and delivery of CCL.
Alignment with Emerging Industries or Emerging Occupations	Align the CCL with knowledge and skills in emerging industries or emerging occupations. Employers or industry leaders must be involved in shaping the program and engaged with implementation in a way that gives young people access to skills, experiences, and networks that employers and industry leaders recognize and value.
Youth Population	Engage youth who: • Are 11-18 years old • Reside in Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Butler, Washington, or Westmoreland County • Are from low-income families. They may additionally be experiencing other challenging circumstances.
Positive Youth Development Practices	Incorporate positive youth development practices to bolster a young person's strengths and help them to achieve their greatest potential.
Impact	Collect and analyze data during the project to understand what progress is being made toward intended outcomes, and at the end of the project to determine if the proposed outcomes are achieved.
Collaboration	Establish and maintain a clearly defined collaboration with local partners and targeted industry employers to acquire skills and experience that directly lead to employment
Leadership and Implementation Team	Create a team comprised of people with experience, relationships, and knowledge of the Pittsburgh community and regional economy

Feasibility	Align the budget with project activities, and describe how the activities will result in impact
Learning to Advance the Field	Complete interim and final grant reporting, participate in select evaluation activities (e.g., surveys, focus groups), and attend convenings. These Catalyze Pittsburgh activities contribute to Catalyze’s work as a national learning engine to address critical questions and expand the evidence base for CCL.

Innovation

An innovation is:

- a novel approach developed within the Pittsburgh region
- a new application of an existing approach
- a new business or delivery model with the potential to achieve better outcomes than the solutions available to date

Overall, innovations should focus on early-stage solutions (operating less than three years) that are testing bold new approaches in career-connected learning.

Alignment with Emerging Industries or Occupations

Emerging industries are new or rapidly growing sectors driven by technological innovation, such as biotechnology, aerospace, robotics, and artificial intelligence. **Emerging occupations** are new roles, or existing roles that are changing significantly, as technological innovations reshape how work is performed and the skills employers require.

The most effective programs for learners are connected to current and future job markets. This connection can only be achieved if employers or industry leaders are genuinely involved in shaping the program as it is built. **Co-designing with employers or industry leaders** ensures that programs give young people access to skills, experiences, and networks that employers recognize and value. A thoughtfully implemented co-designing process contributes to employers’ capacity and commitment to engage with youth over time.

The table below provides examples of activities that organizations might conduct to ensure that employers and industry leaders are engaged during all phases of the Catalyze Pittsburgh Challenge. Applicants are encouraged to expand beyond these examples.

Examples of Activities to Engage Employers or Industry Leaders

Phase 1: Preparing to Apply	Phase 2: Refining the Idea	Phase 3: Implementing
• Attend Catalyze Pittsburgh Challenge hosted workshops to learn more about emerging industries or occupations. • Obtain a letter of support for the application from a local employer or industry association, describing their intent to stay engaged in this work and why it matters to them.	• Host design sessions with employers or industry leaders to generate ideas and receive feedback. • Establish an MOU with employers or industry associations with roles, responsibilities, and success metrics to guide implementation. • Provide employer or industry-focused workshops or experiences for CCL staff.	• Ensure that employers or industry associations are meaningfully part of the delivery of CCL, including providing site visits, feedback on youth projects, mentorship. • Deliver 2-3 program sprints, with employer feedback and incorporated in each successive delivery.

Youth Population

The Catalyze Pittsburgh Challenge aims to serve young people who face barriers as they strive to achieve economic mobility. The proposal should engage youth who:

- Are 11-18 years old
- Reside in Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Butler, Washington, or Westmoreland County
- Are from low-income families

These youth from low-income families may also be experiencing one or more of these challenging situations:

- basic skills deficient
- English language learners
- justice system involvement
- has or is currently experiencing homelessness
- in foster care or who have been in foster care
- pregnant or parenting
- has a disability
- require additional assistance to complete an education program or secure employment
- dropped out of high school

Positive Youth Development Practices

Positive youth development (PYD) practices bolster a young person's strengths so that they can reach their greatest potential. Some examples of PYD practices include:

- providing young people with opportunities for skill-mastery, contribution, and recognition.¹
- facilitating safe, caring relationships with adults.
- providing the consistent message that youth are able to meet and exceed high expectations.²

Well-implemented PYD practices are mutually reinforcing. For example, researchers Peter Witt and Linda Caldwell observe that “in order for these high expectations to be absorbed by youth, they must be coupled with the warmth and responsiveness found in caring relationships.”³ PYD practices also should account for the broad developmental range within the 11-18 population rather than treating it as a uniform group.

The table below provides **examples of activities** that organizations might conduct to ensure that PYD is embedded in all phases of the Catalyze Pittsburgh Challenge. Applicants are encouraged to expand beyond these examples.

Examples of Activities to Embed Positive Youth Development

Phase 1: Preparing to Apply	Phase 2: Refining the Idea	Phase 3: Implementing
• Informally survey or conduct brief interviews with youth to inquire about their interests, aspirations, and concerns. • Review research or articles that gives insight into the barriers limiting youth access and participation.	• Start a Youth Advisory Board for the project so that youth can practice their employment-related skills while aligning the project with youth perspectives.	• Implement a youth-centered communications strategy to provide reliable information about emerging industries and occupations in the platforms where youth seek this information (e.g. social media). • Deliver programming that increases youth agency, self-awareness, and industry or employment skills and credentials.

¹ Witt, Peter, and Linda Caldwell. Youth Development Principles and Practices in Out-Of-School-Time Settings, Sagamore Publishing, L.L.C., 2019, 182

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Impact

Learners are at the center of the Catalyze Pittsburgh Challenge’s mission. Applications should describe how youths’ career-readiness, self-awareness, self-efficacy, and agency will increase as a result of participating in CCL. Applications should also describe how these changes would be identified and measured.

- **Career readiness** is the development of skills for learners that will prepare them for the working world and ease their transition from learner to worker. Career readiness includes career exposure as well as externally validated, hands-on experiences such as internships, earn-to-learn experiences, and credential attainment that will support a learner’s career.
- **Agency** is the feeling of being in control of your own actions.⁴ Agency is the core of Catalyze’s learner outcomes. We posit that through CCL experiences that build self-awareness, career readiness, and self-efficacy, learners will build agency to navigate their education and career opportunities.
- **Self-awareness** is self-focused attention or knowledge.⁵ In the context of Catalyze, self-awareness is when learners are cognizant of their strengths and career options due to their clarity of their own purpose/identity and career awareness.
- **Self-efficacy** refers to an individual’s belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments.⁶ Self-efficacy reflects confidence in the ability to exert control over one’s own motivation, behavior, and social environment. In the context of Catalyze, innovations that build self-efficacy may pertain to social capital development, social and emotional learning, and engaging in education and/or career pathway programs, among other outcomes.⁷

Collaboration

Proposals should engage with organizations across sectors. Strong, stable relationships between and among collaborating organizations with clear roles and responsibilities are vital for successfully implementing CCL and ensuring youth safety. Employer and industry leader partnerships are active engagements between an organization and an industry partner that connect learners to the world of work and create pathways to employment for engaged learners.

⁴ James W. Moore, “[What Is the Sense of Agency and Why Does It Matter?](#)”, *Frontiers in Psychology*

⁵ Virginia Morell, “[What Do Mirror Tests Test?](#)”, *Aeon*

⁶ Albert Bandura, “[Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change.](#)” *Psychological Review*

⁷ American Psychological Association, “[Teaching Tip Sheet: Self-Efficacy](#)”

Leadership and Implementation Team

Proposals should include the names of key leaders and implementation team members, and briefly summarize the team's experience, relationships, and knowledge of the community and regional economy.

Learning to Advance the Field

In addition to its grantmaking, Catalyze acts as a learning engine for the field, working with its grantees to address critical questions that will ultimately expand the evidence base for CCL.

In order to capture the data required to evaluate impact and enhance the field, Catalyze Pittsburgh funding recipients will engage in a variety of activities throughout the grant period. These will include interim and final grant reporting, and select evaluation activities (e.g., surveys, focus groups), and group convenings. More information on these activities will be shared with funding recipients. Data collection expectations will also be included in grant agreements for applicants who are awarded funding.

The following questions are at the core of our learning strategy for Catalyze Pittsburgh. All applicants are asked to express how they will advance the field through one or more of these questions.

- What innovations are we surfacing to enhance access to and participation quality CCL opportunities for low-income youth?
- How do Catalyze-funded programs impact learners' career awareness and readiness?
- How are grantees leveraging funding to sustain high-quality career connected learning opportunities?
- What strategies are most effective in fostering and deepening meaningful partnerships with employers?
- How can promising CCL models be adapted to reflect the unique assets, needs, and opportunities within the Pittsburgh region?
- How do cross-sector partnerships strengthen career-connected learning opportunities in the Pittsburgh region?



Submitting an Application and FAQs

The Catalyze Pittsburgh website and this guide serve as applicants' primary resources for the challenge.

The Catalyze Pittsburgh application will open on the Catalyze Pittsburgh website on September 22, 2026.

Organizations may submit questions about the application on the website or via email to CatalyzePittsburgh@partner4work.org. Questions and answers will be consolidated and regularly updated until October 30, 2026.

Be sure to check back for the most up-to-date information.



Appendix: About Catalyze

What is Catalyze?

Catalyze is a collaborative funding initiative that accelerates innovation in career-connected learning (CCL).

Having built one of the nation's largest communities of practice focused on CCL, Catalyze is an innovation engine that moves the field forward — funding organizations that are changing the ways students are introduced to and interact with potential career pathways throughout their educational experience.

By investing in and expanding early access to hands-on career experiences, Catalyze and our community lays the groundwork for brighter, more successful futures for learners of all ages.

What is the Catalyze Challenge?

The Catalyze Challenge exists to support the emergence and development of innovations that will help learners on their journeys toward rewarding careers.

Open to innovators across the United States, the national Catalyze Challenge has awarded nearly \$19 million since 2021.

Who is involved in Catalyze?

Catalyze supporters include Arnold Ventures, Britebound, the Beth and Ravenel Curry Foundation, the Gates Foundation, the Charles Koch Foundation, Charter School Growth Fund, the Joyce Foundation, the Schultz Family Foundation, and the Walton Family Foundation.

Catalyze Birmingham launched in 2023 as the first regional challenge. Prosper serves as the fiscal agent and convener of Catalyze Birmingham. It receives support from the Caring Foundation of Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Alabama, the Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham, the Mike & Gillian Goodrich Foundation, Protective Life Corporation, Alabama Power Foundation and the Regions Foundation; along with the Walton Family Foundation.



Catalyze Pittsburgh is the second regional initiative of its kind. Partner4Work is the fiscal agent and convener of Catalyze Birmingham. It is supported locally by the Richard King Mellon Foundation.

Nationally, Catalyze has developed a thriving community of practice that includes more than 100 funded organizations. A list of current Catalyze grantees can be found [here](#).

Why is Catalyze focused on career-connected learning specifically?

CCL plays a critical role in improving the connection between education and employment. A high school degree offers 50% fewer family-sustaining career opportunities than it did 30 years ago, and only a fraction of the students who participate in any type of higher education actually complete it ([TribLive](#)). Meanwhile, only 33% of high school students and 58% of employers believe students are career-ready after graduation ([Kauffman](#)).

This has particularly affected communities of color: 72% of Black Americans and 79% of Hispanic Americans over the age of 25 do not have a bachelor's degree. Non-degreed workers have traditionally been shut out of professions that require college credentials, resulting in lower wealth accumulation for these communities ([Washington Post](#)).

While some type of postsecondary education is critical to long-term career success, there is a need for viable career-training options beyond the college degree. Our country needs a rethinking of how it prepares learners for career success and unlocks access to economic mobility.

Driven by a commitment to support innovations that prepare young people for career and lifelong success, Catalyze's co-funders launched the Catalyze Challenge to source CCL innovations that are more responsive to the needs of learners and employers.

Glossary

Agency

Agency is the feeling of being in control of your own actions.⁸ Agency is the core of Catalyze’s learner outcomes. We posit that through CCL experiences that build self-awareness, career readiness, and self-efficacy, learners will build agency to navigate their education and career opportunities.

Career-Connected Learning

Career-connected learning (CCL) is a learning style and methodology that introduces learners to career paths and opportunities through a variety of channels such as earn-to-learn programs, skill development, connections to industry professionals, and more.

Career Readiness

Career readiness is the development of skills for learners that will prepare them for the working world and ease their transition from learner to worker. Career readiness includes externally validated, hands-on experiences such as internships, earn-to-learn experiences, and credential attainment that will support a learner’s career.

Employer Partnerships

Employer partnerships are active engagements between an organization and an industry partner that connect learners to the world of work that create pathways to employment for engaged learners.

Innovation

A novel approach, a new application of an existing approach, or a new business or delivery model that yields significantly better outcomes for end users than the current solutions available.

Insurance Requirements

Grantees will need to maintain insurance appropriate to the work being funded, including general liability and workers’ compensation, as applicable. Depending on the project, Partner4Work may also require other coverage, such as auto, cyber, or professional liability insurance, with levels appropriate to the work. Specific coverage and limits may vary based on the activities and risks involved.

Intermediary

An intermediary is an organization that supports grantees and initiatives, manages funds, and more.⁹

Model/Solution

A model/solution is a student-facing intervention, innovation, or offering including programs, technologies, or tools. Policy changes and system realignments are not considered models/solutions by themselves, but may be a part of a solution or model that also includes a student-facing offering.

⁸ James W. Moore, “[What Is the Sense of Agency and Why Does It Matter?](#)”, *Frontiers in Psychology*

⁹ MacArthur Foundation, “[Using Intermediaries for Impact](#)”

Pilot

A pilot is a “leading effort to attempt to determine viability.”¹⁰ In the context of Catalyze, a pilot is a plan for a new innovation that will ultimately impact learners according to one of the two themes.

Scalability

Scalability is when an innovation features core elements that allow for growth within its current system and are replicable to other systems and places, as a function of being well-defined and not solely the product of a unique set of relationships or local circumstances.

Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is self-focused attention or knowledge.¹¹ In the context of Catalyze, self-awareness is when learners are cognizant of their strengths and career options due to their clarity of their own purpose/identity and career awareness.

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to an individual’s belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments.¹² Self-efficacy reflects confidence in the ability to exert control over one’s own motivation, behavior, and social environment. In the context of Catalyze, innovations that build self-efficacy may pertain to social capital development, social and emotional learning, and engaging in education and/or career pathway programs, among other outcomes.¹³

¹⁰ Shane Zobrodoff, “[Pilot Projects--Making Innovations and New Concepts Fly](#),” Project Management Institute

¹¹ Virginia Morell, “[What Do Mirror Tests Test?](#),” *Aeon*

¹² Albert Bandura, “[Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change](#),” *Psychological Review*

¹³ American Psychological Association, “[Teaching Tip Sheet: Self-Efficacy](#)”

