

SOUTHEAST REGION FOCUSES ON BUILDING INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY

During CCPI-STEM Southeast Region's 360° Fireside Chat webinar a former college president, a former STEM dean, and a current community college faculty member explained how [Advanced Technological Education \(ATE\)](#) grants transformed their colleges. They also offered tips for building institutional capacity to obtain and manage grants at community colleges.

"Securing an ATE grant makes it easier to attract funds from other agencies, and it certainly adds prestige when you are seeking to attract donors and philanthropic-minded individuals," said Dr. Christina Hart, who moderated the March 2026 webinar. She is [CCPI-STEM](#) Southeast Regional Coordinator and Vice President Emeritus of [Indian River State College \(IRSC\)](#). ATE proposals are due this year on October 1 this year.

Outstanding Outcomes at Indian River State College

Dr. Ed Massey, president emeritus of Indian River State College (IRSC), acknowledged that a decade into his presidency his college had developed a good strategic plan to bring more high tech companies into the area, but that the college lacked money, equipment, and facilities.

He was also bored and wanted changes that lifted the whole community. "Ten years into my presidency, I was bored—same curriculum, same program, same faces, same people," he said, adding that he wondered, "What can we do to be sure that we remain relevant as a workforce?" Massey asked his vice presidents, deans, and department chairs to do research on grants that fit the college's strategic goals. They all came back to him with the recommendation to apply to the ATE program.

The [U.S. National Science Foundation \(NSF\) Advanced Technological Education \(ATE\)](#) program, which currently has a \$74 million annual budget, uses a competitive review process to award grants to test ideas for improving the education of skilled technical workers at the undergraduate and secondary school levels. Two-year college educators have leadership roles in most ATE grants. Grant awards cover program development, equipment and instrumentation, faculty professional development, and indirect costs.

Massey described how one ATE grant award led to more ATE grants and then to other external funding at IRSC where the combined results were transformational. At its peak, IRSC had six ATE grants running simultaneously. During Massey's tenure the college received a total of \$30 million in ATE grant awards and attracted \$60 million from other sources. With the additional resources the college added eight buildings with 480,000 square feet of space for STEM instruction.

Tips for Identifying Potential ATE Principal Investigators

Casey Lunceford, former STEM dean and campus president at IRSC, said he found that faculty who had backgrounds in research or industry did well leading grants.

"As the dean, I was always, always looking for somebody who went beyond the classroom, somebody who enjoyed spending time with the students in research besides the labs and besides the classroom—they wanted to take it to another level," Lunceford said, noting that grants led to partnerships with industry that led to internships and other benefits for students.

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This material is based upon work supported by The National Science Foundation under ATE grant #2132510. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.



Lunceford also suggested that administrators encourage new faculty to apply for ATE grants to enhance their visibility, boost their resumes, and connect them with college personnel beyond their disciplines.

ATE Principal Investigator Shares Her Motivation & Team Building Strategy

Dr. Sheela Vemu, associate professor of biology at [Waubonsee Community College](#), explained that the [Waubonsee Water Ways](#) project she leads strengthens students' critical thinking, responds to an industry-based regional need, and prepares students to operate municipal water treatment and distribution facilities. "As we built a little bit of capacity, we were able to get 20 students down in a cohort with a paid internship in nine months out the door with an opportunity to go to a national conference, not just as an observer, but as a contributor and as someone who is an emerging professional," she said.

To build a team or "tribe" for the project, she and a chemistry professor who became the co-principal investigator began by discussing regional workforce needs. Then they asked other faculty and employers, "What can we build for our students that is employable and overarching?" These discussions led to several people joining the project team.

"The tribe is a mixture of folks, but all of them having a mission that was seminally aligned in the beginning towards students and their employability," she said.

Administrator Advises Support for Grant Recipients, Not Micromanagement

Lunceford urged administrators to support faculty who lead grants without micromanaging them. "I would say the most important thing is to be engaged and be supportive. Grant writing and grant management is not an individual sport," he said.

At IRSC he helped faculty members with grants "stay on top of the paperwork and [with] the behind-the-scenes things that are required in order to be successful." He and other administrators and staff helped with logistics, budgets, invoices, and human resource issues.

He recommended that administrators bring grants and the work students are doing because of grants to the attention of trustees, other faculty, and external advisory councils.

Tips for Writing a Competitive ATE Grant Proposal

To Vemu the hardest part of grant proposal is not the writing, but the translation of data-centric observations into an innovation that NSF reviewers will agree can make a broader impact.

She encouraged community college educators to access the mentoring and free grant development resources available within the ATE community. These include [Mentor-Connect's Resource Library](#), [Mentor Up](#) proposal development coaching, and [MentorLinks](#) mentoring for community colleges to start new technician education programs or revamp existing programs.

Vemu suggested faculty start their work on an ATE proposal by reading the [ATE program solicitation](#) carefully, studying the employment outlook for their region, and using a backward design model to build curriculum back from where the proposed program's graduates will be employed.