

Supporting Change in Rural Communities



Greater Twin Cities
United Way

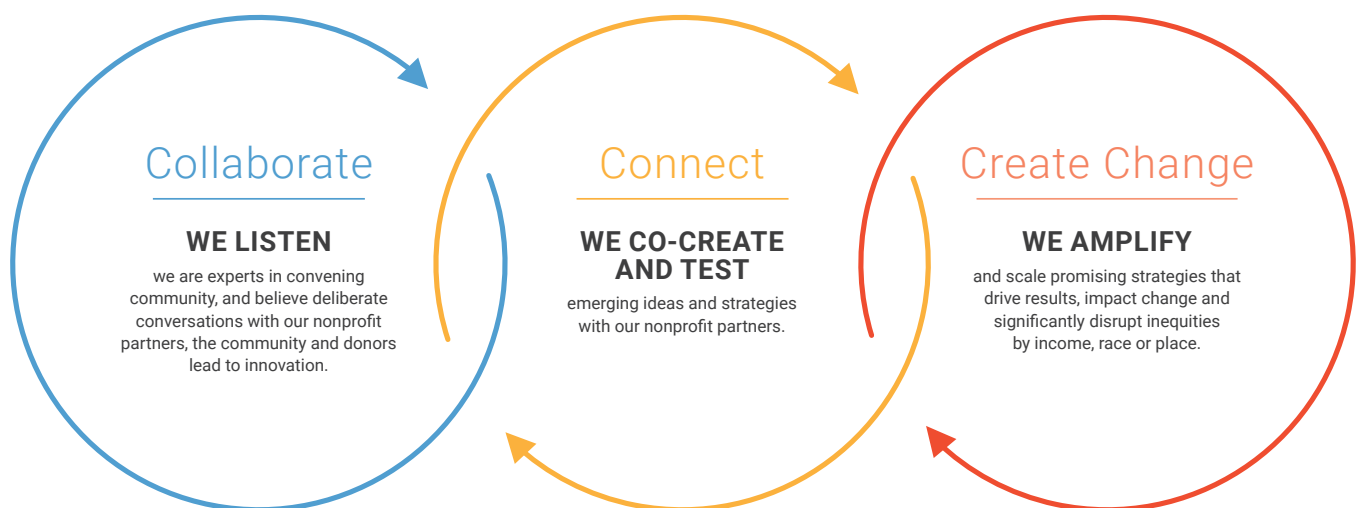
GREATER TWIN CITIES UNITED WAY INNOVATION: CAREER ACADEMIES

Greater Twin Cities United Way envisions a united community where all people realize their full potential. Through targeted investments in Household Stability, Educational Success, and Economic Opportunity, we foster a region where every person can thrive, regardless of income, race or place. GTCUW launched Career Academies in 2015 to better prepare Minnesota students for in-demand and high wage careers. Career Academies partners with 16 school districts across the state – urban and rural – to build equity-centered career pathways for grades 9-14, ensuring students have access to college credits, rigorous and relevant curriculum and meaningful and supportive work experiences. **Our work is centered on building pathways to zero college debt and \$25 per hour jobs.** In greater Minnesota, our district partners include: Jackson, Windom, Worthington, Butterfield, Le Sueur-Henderson, Madelia, Mankato, St. James, St. Peter and Tri-City districts. Career Academies is part of the United Way Innovation Team that focuses on pressing areas of unmet need, revealed through the partnerships we build in our everyday work.

Career Academies also generates **fresh approaches through listening, co-creating, testing and amplifying** strategies that drive results. We undertake innovation initiatives when we believe strategic investments – narrow in focus but wide in scale – will catalyze sustainable and systemic impact.

Through a partnership with the Bush Foundation and 10 school districts in southwestern and south central Minnesota, Career Academies has had the opportunity to engage with communities seeking support for their innovative work to fundamentally change the way their students experience education. Through this partnership with districts in greater Minnesota, GTCUW has led with an understanding of our own positionality to the project with an emphasis on humility, relationships and acknowledging the limits of our expertise.

BIG CHALLENGES REQUIRE BIG IDEAS



INNOVATION FOR IMPACT

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INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESS

1. Identifying partners with interest and enabling conditions

GTCUW takes the position that we are not interested in forcing change or fleeting reform on any community. Sustainable, successful change can only happen through true partnership and an invitation from the community. This is particularly true within the context of greater Minnesota. We seek enabling conditions such as commitment from district and community leadership, prior evidence of progress in career pathways, strong intermediary partners, and a community aligned vision for student success.

2. Listen and co-create: Lead the way with assets

Identifying strengths and changemakers within the community

The first step in the design of Career Academies district partnerships is understanding the strengths of a community and key advocates for change. Greater Minnesota has a wealth of strengths, including passionate community organizations and foundations and strong post-secondary and employer partners. We also seek to identify a changemaker who shares both the vision and time to move work in the region.

Lift up a local vision for student success

Each community we engage has a different vision for student success, guided by the context of local employers and student demographics. In Jackson, the vision for students traditionally revolved around an emphasis on a four-year degree. GTCUW supports leaders in career pathways work to inform and communicate the importance and relevance of technical degrees, certifications and career-specific education.

3. Amplify: celebrate district excellence

Encourage local influence, championing local expertise and excellence

Humility is a guiding value for how we support district work. This includes championing local expertise and excellence. At all planning sessions, we act as facilitators, rather than experts, in order to encourage

authentic dialogue led by and for community. While experts in content, GTCUW recognizes that we are not experts in local education context or community political environments.

Relationship-centered partnerships

Our central goal is to be in relationship with grantees and believe that disruptive change requires authentic partnership. GTCUW strives to give as much time as our grantee partners give to us. Centered on the belief that we learn as much as we give, most of our time is resourced to be in community, moving work forward with our partners. We deliberately host a peer-to-peer Community of Practice, recognizing partners have the knowledge, skills and joint experiences to consult on problems of practice that move work forward.

Sharing back excellence as a form of technical assistance

When districts find themselves leading change on multiple fronts, it isn't always apparent which ideas are pushing the boundaries of excellence and areas where districts need a push to overcome internal hurdles. GTCUW rallies around districts with resources, partnership and fresh perspective to get through the design cycle into implementation. While this work is complicated, we seek to act as a champion toward transformative change.

We also strive to reflect excellence back to our partners who may not immediately see themselves as leaders in this space. During a technical assistance call, a middle school principal from Jackson referenced engaging his students in J-term career exploration courses that combined student interest, hands-on learning, career exploration and engagement with local employers. We positioned the principal to take advantage of a professional development opportunity offered by a regional funder and connect with other districts to facilitate learning and growth. Across the Career Academies portfolio, our partners are increasingly representing their work at various statewide conferences and other forums for sharing best practice .



OUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF RESPONSIVE GRANTMAKING

1. Time

Change in any community takes time. GTCUW practices awareness that we may unintentionally impose a false sense of urgency on our partners at the cost of maintaining relationships and moving change in the long term. That is why we choose to create space for our partners in greater Minnesota to demonstrate progress over longer periods of time, space for reflection, and space to acknowledge when progress isn't being made at a desired pace without the fear of repercussion or loss of funding.

2. Responsive Grantmaking

Career Academies structures our grant reporting in a way that is aligned with the technical assistance and continuous improvement strategy. We only ask for information that we feel is aligned to equity, reflection and continuous improvement. For example, we don't ask for extensive data pulls from the schools for the

sake of reporting. Instead, we seek data and reporting that can act as a starting point for examination of outcomes like equitable enrollment or overall program growth.

3. Ongoing support

As formal grant terms come to a close, Career Academies consults with our partners on the progress made over the length of the grant period. When warranted, we may extend the length of our technical support for districts beyond the length of the grant. We seek to remain adaptive to the needs of each community.