INCAP

INDIANA CAREER APPRENTICESHIP PATHWAY

Industry Talent Associations: Empowering Employers To Lead Education and Training

SECTION ONE

Industry Talent Associations: **Key to Enabling Employers to Lead**

To create new work-based learning that prepares high schoolers and adults for careers and meets rapidly evolving workforce demand, a coalition of Hoosier leaders called CEMETS iLab Indiana has created a new type of entity to help industries speak with one voice about talent needs and build programs led by employers. These entities — called Industry Talent Associations, or ITAs for short — are the most critical component of the Indiana Career Apprenticeship Pathway (INCAP), a new way for Hoosiers to access education and training that is a complement to the existing high school-to-college pathway.

INCAP differs from other U.S. education and training pathways in several ways. Most importantly, INCAP is led by employers with input from educators, an approach that is fundamentally different from work-based learning pathways led by education or intermediary organizations with input from employers.

To equip employers to play the leading role, ITAs bring employers together to speak as one voice about the talent needs in their industry. They are also responsible for creating INCAP programs at both the high school and adult levels. Another notable feature is that INCAP programs are designed to prepare participants for occupations, not jobs. This means INCAP programs apply industry-wide and are not employer-specific, preparing graduates for an array of careers within an industry while also growing a talent pipeline of well-rounded employees.

WHAT IS CEMETS iLAB INDIANA?

CEMETS iLab Indiana is a coalition of over 300 Hoosier leaders that joined forces in December 2023 to create a new statewide professional education and training system as a bold and promising solution to Indiana's education and workforce challenges.

Established by the Richard M. Fairbanks Foundation, iLab Indiana represents a variety of sectors, including business, K-12 education, higher education, government, non-profit, and philanthropy. Many of the iLab's first members were a part of an Indy Chamber Leadership Exchange trip to Switzerland in September 2023, where more than 100 delegates voiced their support for designing a professional education and training system in a similar way.

WHAT IS INCAP?

INCAP is a new option for Hoosiers to access education and training that prepares them for in-demand careers and for Indiana businesses to build a skilled workforce. INCAP combines classroom learning with on-the-job training in two ways: the INCAP Apprenticeship Program for high schoolers and the INCAP Career Program for adults. Both programs offer degrees and credentials that employers value in hiring and promotion and that colleges accept for credit or advanced standing. In other words, INCAP credentials count in the workplace and can also count toward further education. INCAP's structure allows students to move between INCAP and the college pathway without losing progress, because prior learning and training can be recognized in either pathway.

Learn more at IndianaCAP.org.

Why Do We Need an Employer-Led Education and Training Pathway?

For decades, education in the U.S. has been organized around college as the primary pathway for education and training after high school. Public funding, accountability measures, career counseling and advising, and cultural expectations have all reinforced college as the default next step after high school, even as many students do not complete a degree, and many well-paying jobs do not require one.

In many states including Indiana, existing work-based learning programs designed for students who do not attend college are fragmented across state agencies, various intermediaries, and higher education and K-12 institutions, leading to limited visibility and inconsistent quality. Employers are often asked to participate in multiple disconnected initiatives, while students are asked to select from programs of varying quality that often do not reliably lead to well-paying careers.

Further complicating this is the limited role employers have historically played in creating these education and training options, leading to misalignment between the skills taught and the skills employers need to fill open jobs.

Modeling INCAP After the Gold-Standard Swiss System

INCAP draws on lessons from Switzerland's highly successful Vocational and Professional Education and Training (VPET) system, the biggest of which is the critical role of employers. Within VPET, employers and industry associations define occupational standards, design training content, and provide most of the learning through paid on-the-job training, ensuring education and training is tightly aligned with labor market demand. The public sector also plays a critical role by defining and maintaining quality standards, coordinating across regions, and funding school-based education and robust career advising centers that serve students as well as adults.

In the Swiss VPET system, employers assume primary responsibility for training the next generation of workers and upskilling adults. They see it as a core business function and a shared investment in their industry's broader talent pipeline, and they also recognize this approach leads to positive societal benefits. Importantly, they recognize a financial return on investment by the time the student completes their training program, which encourages ongoing investment in the system and mitigates the downside of competitor poaching.



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SECTION TWO

The Role of an Industry Talent Association

Industry Talent Associations are the core of INCAP, leading statewide employer engagement within their industry so employers can speak as one voice about their talent needs. Unlike informal employer advisory groups, ITAs are formal entities governed by employers, with established leadership structures and fee-based membership models.

Because ITAs are responsible for the quality and relevance of their industry's INCAP programs, they focus on long-term talent development for in-demand careers rather than short-term hiring needs.

For example, while students participating in a Retail Banker apprenticeship are trained and primarily work as tellers/customer service representatives, they also learn about and contribute to other bank operations, such as credit analysis and loan operations. They are also exposed to middle- and upper-level banking roles, such as organizational and/or branch management. This structure allows students who complete the program to step into a variety of full-time banking roles, ensuring the programs remain relevant as industries evolve and that INCAP credentials carry value across the industry.

To design, launch, and scale INCAP programs that lead to in-demand careers, ITAs convene employers to identify talent needs, choose occupations for INCAP programs, define required knowledge and skills, and collaborate with educators to develop education and training materials. They are also charged with sharing available INCAP opportunities. In the case of the INCAP Apprenticeship Program for high schoolers, ITAs provide information to regionally based organizations called INCAP Connectors, which are described in more detail in the box to the right. In the case of the INCAP Career Program for adults, ITAs recruit potential students and work directly with employers as they interview and hire trainees.

ITAs also provide ongoing support to employers hosting INCAP students, including recruitment assistance and supervisor training. These responsibilities help ensure INCAP programs offer consistent experiences for both the student and the employer.

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WHAT IS AN INCAP CONNECTOR?

INCAP Connectors are regionally located organizations that serve as bridges between ITAs and participating schools and students. ITAs provide information about INCAP Apprenticeship Program opportunities to INCAP Connectors, which share this information with schools and students in their area. In addition to helping with recruitment efforts, INCAP Connectors support student success and provide other assistance as needed.

SWISS TRIPS CRITICAL TO BUILDING SUPPORT

Because INCAP is based upon the principles of Switzerland's renowned Vocational and Professional Education and Training (VPET) system — which operates quite differently from anything in the U.S. — it became clear early on that Hoosier stakeholders needed to see it for themselves to be able to visualize something similar for Indiana.

To do this, the Fairbanks Foundation fully funded three trips focused on five industries in spring 2024 for those indicating early interest in the model. Each trip included approximately 30 participants, primarily employers, along with up to four representatives from K–12 and higher education. Agendas typically featured two or more industry specific employer site visits, meetings with the Swiss professional association for that industry, and a visit to a career advising center.

Each trip concluded with an employers-only discussion focused on aligning next steps and identifying an organization well suited to serve as the industry's ITA. This approach ensured employers trusted the selected organization and were eager to work with them, making it more likely the ITA would be able to raise the employer funding needed to support start-up activities. Because philanthropy and tax dollars are not appropriate for funding ITA operations at scale, the Fairbanks Foundation's grants required the ITAs to secure matching funds from employers.

The person hired to lead a new ITA is required to take a similar trip to Switzerland within the first three months of starting their job. These trips, funded by technical assistance grants from the Fairbanks Foundation, help the ITA leaders understand what is being built and shows them Swiss VPET programs at scale with peer companies.



During their trip to Switzerland in March 2024, delegates from the healthcare and life sciences industries learned about the apprenticeship program at University Hospital Zurich.

Moving From Employer Interest to ITA Launch

After iLab Indiana aligned in late 2023 on the need for a professional education and training system that includes a new employer-led pathway, the first order of business was to identify industries with workforce shortages and organize industry-focused learning trips to Switzerland. Early on, employers in several industries showed interest and attended the trips. These visits offered insight into the Swiss system and helped build consensus around the need to develop a similar model in Indiana.

Employers in four of those industries — advanced manufacturing and logistics, banking, healthcare, and life sciences — indicated their interest in establishing an ITA and were asked to identify an organization well-suited to serve in the role. Once an organization was identified and demonstrated interest in serving in the ITA role, the Fairbanks Foundation invited proposals from those organizations to launch ITAs.

In November 2024, each of the first four organizations received an initial two-year grant. In July 2025, the Foundation announced three-year grants to two new ITAs along with additional funding and one-year grant extensions for the first four ITAs after the realization that two years was not enough time to go from ITA launch to initial implementation. In March 2026, the Fairbanks Foundation awarded a three-year grant to the newest ITA, for a total of seven ITAs:

- **Advanced Manufacturing and Logistics** (coordinated by Conexus Indiana)
- **Banking and Insurance** (coordinated by Financial Services Academy/Indiana Bankers Association)
- **Construction** (coordinated by Indiana Construction Roundtable Foundation)
- **Healthcare** (coordinated by BioCrossroads)
- **Hospitality and Culinary** (incubated by the Indiana Chamber of Commerce Foundation in partnership with Hospitality Indiana)
- **IT/Technology** (coordinated by TechIndiana)
- **Life Sciences** (coordinated by BioCrossroads)

In addition to supporting their core responsibilities as an ITA, the grant funding has allowed many of them to hire additional staff to support a variety of functions, such as curriculum development and marketing.

Further, each grant also included funding for Swiss learning trips and technical assistance from the Swiss professional associations that are the equivalent to INCAP's ITAs. In addition, the Fairbanks Foundation's grant funding to ETH Zurich provided ITA leaders with access to education system experts at the Center on the Economics and Management of Education and Training Systems (CEMETS) at the Chair of Education Systems, ETH Zurich. CEMETS provided ITA leaders with guidance on engaging employers, demonstrating ROI, and adapting proven strategies to meet the unique needs of Hoosiers.



Translating Employer Needs Into INCAP Programs

Each ITA's first project was to convene industry employers — mainly executives and leaders from HR or training departments — to select priority occupations for INCAP programs. This was followed by developing a business plan informed by employer members that established clear goals and objectives, defined tasks and timelines, allocated appropriate staffing and resources, and developed a budget to guide effective implementation.

With occupations identified, the ITAs then convened subject-matter experts from their employer members and direct training providers to create training plans that outlined the essential competencies for each occupation, the education and training materials required for students to master those competencies, and the tools needed to assess a student's progress. For example, for the Healthcare Assistant occupation, the training plan was created by employer representatives who were current or former nurses.

With a nearly final training plan in hand, each ITA convened a committee of educators to review and provide feedback. Education partners varied by ITA, with some engaging off site instructional providers such as Career and Technical Education (CTE) Centers and Ivy Tech, Indiana's statewide community college system, while others included representatives from both K–12 and higher education.

With initial occupations and training plans set, the ITAs began soliciting employer commitments to host students, with some beginning as early as the 2026-2027 school year.

WHAT MAKES AN ORGANIZATION THE RIGHT FIT TO LAUNCH AN ITA?

To be successful in the role of ITA, organizations should have:

- Credibility among employers with a reputation as an industry expert
- Experience with work-based learning
- Existing employer relationships
- A structure funded in part as a 501(c)(3)
- A strong understanding of the Swiss VPET system and the value proposition of an Industry Talent Association

The Fairbanks Foundation only awarded start-up funding to launch an ITA when a representative sample of Indiana employers in each respective industry agreed that implementing INCAP programs was critical to their talent pipeline needs. As noted above, the employers selected the appropriate entity to serve as the ITA, not the Foundation.

Providing Additional Support to ITAs

In addition to funding individual Industry Talent Associations, the Fairbanks Foundation also launched and funded the ITA Community of Practice (COP). The ITA COP, which is managed by the Financial Services Academy (the Banking and Insurance ITA) provides a structured forum for ITA leaders and staff to share insights, align on common challenges, and continuously improve how ITAs function in practice. The COP helps reduce duplication of effort and surfaces effective approaches to employer engagement, occupation identification, and training development. Just as importantly, it reinforces consistency and quality across ITAs while still allowing for industry-specific innovation.

The Fairbanks Foundation has also funded robust marketing and communications efforts to increase awareness of and engagement in INCAP. Many materials, including PowerPoint decks, fact sheets, and messaging documents, were created for the ITAs to use during their efforts to recruit employers.

SECTION THREE

Funding Industry Talent Associations

At scale, INCAP ITAs will be funded by employers via a combination of membership dues and a per-student fee for each person participating in an INCAP program. For each high school student who participates, ITAs will also allocate a portion of these funds to INCAP Connectors to support the Connector's work to engage high schools and recruit students.

However, until INCAP shows proof of concept, the ITAs — and the INCAP Connectors — are currently funded via grants from the Fairbanks Foundation.

The goal for establishing sustainable employer funding is the three-year anniversary of the ITA's launch.

Total ITA Start-up Costs to Date

The Fairbanks Foundation has invested a total of $6,394,470 to launch and support the seven current ITAs:

- **Industry trips to Switzerland:** $7,500 per person for three trips with approximately 30 attendees each
- **Start-up grants to launch seven ITAs:** $4,443,500
- **Consulting grants to ETH Zurich:** $675,970, which includes participation fees for ITA leaders to attend CEMETS Institute (8,000 CHF/person)
- **Travel to CEMETS Institute in Zurich for first five ITA leaders:** $20,000
- **ITA Community of Practice grant to the Financial Services Academy:** $220,000
- **Institute for Workforce Excellence to conduct supervisor training with INCAP employers:** $140,000
- **Marketing and communications:** $220,000

Note: The figures above represent estimated costs to launch an ITA and fund initial start-up activities specific to an ITA. Costs not listed include grants to fund overall INCAP strategy and implementation, grants to INCAP Connectors, and overarching marketing and communications support, among other items.

WHY FUND THE LAUNCH OF INDUSTRY TALENT ASSOCIATIONS?

The ITA model offers funders interested in developing new education and training opportunities a chance to invest in systems-level change rather than stand-alone programs. As the backbone of any employer-led education and training pathway, ITAs play a critical role in supporting scalable paid work-based learning that leads to degrees and credentials recognized by both employers and higher education. They also strengthen alignment between education and employment while building a long-term infrastructure that can adapt as industries evolve.

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SECTION FOUR

INCAP Industry Talent Associations: **Lessons Learned**

This section shares practical lessons learned from the leaders of INCAP's ITAs for the banking and insurance industries and the healthcare industry. Drawing directly from early design and launch experiences, the lessons reflect on what worked, what took longer than expected, and where early decisions mattered most. Together, they offer real-world guidance for building an employer-led education and training pathway.



Chris Fisher

"PLAN FOR TWO YEARS! When we first launched, we thought we could host our first cohort of students the following year because of the infrastructure we already had in place. We quickly learned that creating an industry training program within an entirely new pathway was more complex than we thought. My advice? Use the first year to plan and the second year to build out your program and recruit employers to host students."

"FOCUS ON CEO BUY-IN. The key to fast adoption was engaging top-level leadership to identify workforce needs and pledge support — both financially and operationally — for a new type of education and training program."

Banking/Insurance ITA

CHRIS FISHER

President & CEO

Financial Services Academy



Cassie Squillace

"LEAN INTO THE EMPLOYER-LED NATURE OF THE PATHWAY. This doesn't mean you shut all other stakeholders out, it just means you're making an intentional decision to ensure employers are the ones to make the decisions."

"ADDRESS THE LIKELY DISCOMFORT SOME MAY FEEL ABOUT THE NEW MODEL. By openly talking about the fact that the structure of INCAP may be uncomfortable for some because of the lead role of employers, the age of participants, or any one of a number of other items, you're getting in front of potential issues."

Healthcare ITA

CASSIE SQUILLACE

Senior Director of Workforce Development-Healthcare

BioCrossroads