

# GOING THE EXTRA MILE THE CHAMPIONS BEHIND THE ACTE EXCELLENCE AWARDS

By Kate Dowdy

EACH YEAR, THE ASSOCIATION FOR CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION (ACTE) HONORS 10 outstanding practitioners in and strong supporters of career and technical education (CTE). Our national award winners have gone on to speak at national events, received invitations to the White House and have been featured by other high-profile publications such as *Education Week*. Their stories, successes and innovations help us build and enrich a positive national narrative about the value of CTE.

But many of these educators' programs would still be a local secret if it were not for the efforts of their colleagues and peers to highlight and share their accomplishments. For this article, I reached out to the unsung heroes behind the massive operation that is the ACTE Excellence Awards program—the volunteers at the state, regional and national levels who make the recognition of CTE educators possible. I asked them to explain why awards matter, what it means to be involved in the awards program and what makes winning candidates stand out.

## Distinguishing the Importance of Educators

"Having been an educator for many years, I have often seen times when educators

were not appreciated at the school or institutional level nor publicly for a job well done or for innovative work," says Karen Curtis, national ACTE Awards Committee chair. "I can't help but think that when an educator is singled out to be recognized for outstanding service and/or innovative programs, the individual educator is validated that his/her work is important."

While student success is the visible outcome of exceptional CTE, educators are its beating heart. Giving them credit for successes in their programs not only showcases the hard work, innovation and creativity that go into delivering quality learning opportunities, but it also shows our community of teachers that we understand their commitment. At a time when many districts are struggling to fill teaching positions, and educators remain undervalued and underpaid, recognizing the importance of teachers is not only the right thing to do, it is also critical.

## Validating the Rigor of CTE

Too many parents, counselors, administrators and key decision-makers underestimate the value of CTE as a source of opportunity, empowerment and self-discovery for students of all ages and back-

grounds. To ensure an appropriate level of funding for CTE programs, we need to change negative and limited perceptions of CTE. "Recognition is just one of the positive aspects of the awards program," says Susan Thomison, Kentucky ACTE Awards chair. "Validation of the rigor of CTE programs is also an advantage of a state, regional and national award."

When outstanding CTE programs are showcased, we all win. "Not only do ACTE awards serve as a 'thank you' to award recipients, but they can also be used to publicize the many successes found in career and technical education," says Patrick Biggerstaff, Indiana ACTE Awards chair. Ginny Karbowski, Minnesota ACTE Awards chair, adds: "The awards program truly elevates Minnesota CTE by highlighting the rigor, innovation, creativity and relevance happening in our CTE classrooms, labs, career centers and community."

## The Encouragement of a Colleague

With the day-to-day activities that must occur to get their classrooms and institutions ready for learning, awards are the last thing on most educators' minds—unless they are preparing one of their career and technical student organization chap-

ters for an upcoming contest. "They find their rewards in the 'thanks' from their students or their business partners," says Karbowski. "Their goals, skills and passion drive them to succeed."

So to get most educators to agree to talk about their own accomplishments takes some coaxing, and often it is the candidates' colleagues who write their award nominations or push them to put themselves forward.

While writing up a nomination falls outside most individuals' job descriptions and is an added commitment for those with already busy schedules, it may not be as time-consuming as you would think.

"One might assume that an award nomination process would be burdensome," says Biggerstaff. "On the contrary, I have found that it takes little time to contribute a letter of support. Nominees typically offer a host of notable attributes and experiences, so I have found it easy to write their praises."

Thomison believes there is value in recognition for all involved, those in and outside the spotlight: "Participating in the program builds collegiality and provides great publicity for the school. It is a great method to help build community support for your CTE programs."

For many involved in the awards process, participating in a formal recognition program is a way to pay forward the praise from their own teachers, employers and colleagues that motivated them to persevere and succeed. "As far back as the first grade, I can name educators who encouraged me for a job well done, and who 'went the extra mile' to help me shine," says Curtis. "As a result, throughout my years as a student, teachers mentored me, even when they did not know it, to become an educator myself."

Awards are an expression of community, gratitude, aspiration and inspiration, and, ultimately, for all those who give freely of their time to make them possible, they are a labor of love. To the educators doing outstanding work in CTE and to the people who lift them up for recognition, thank you. Together, you are making a difference. **Tech**

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## The Qualities That Inspire Us

Our awards volunteers have a wealth of experience reviewing, soliciting and writing award nominations. What's more, they have all had national award winners recognized from their states in the last year.

In their words, here are the qualities that make award-winning candidates stand out:



"I am inspired by the dedication and creativity of CTE professionals. Award nominees are often those who serve as leaders in their schools and throughout their broader communities. They are vocal advocates for their students, and they are passionate about connecting young people to career opportunities."

—Patrick Biggerstaff, *Indiana ACTE Awards Chair, Indianapolis, Indiana*



"High-quality nominations typically stand out in three areas: innovation and creativity in their work; partnerships with community and/or state partners; involvement in ACTE ... and their state CTE affiliate organization."

—Ginny Karbowski, *Minnesota ACTE Awards Chair, St. Paul, Minnesota*



"Most of the letters of recommendation I have read will often highlight a teacher's outreach to the community through service, obtainment of grants, outstanding work with CTSOs, development of a new program, and/or uniqueness of pedagogy."

—Susan Thomison, *Kentucky ACTE Awards Chair, Bowling Green, Kentucky*



"When I see an educator who thinks outside the box and is extremely student-focused and motivated, it inspires me to want to single him or her out to be recognized. I continue to be amazed each year, not only in my state, but also across the nation, at all the excellent educators who go way beyond the call of duty to develop such exemplary and innovative programs and leadership opportunities for students at all levels of education."

—Karen Curtis, *ACTE National Awards Chair, Atlanta, Georgia*

Odds are you know someone who is at the heart of a pioneering innovation or a successful program in CTE—it might even be you! Learn more about the Excellence Awards, as well as nomination requirements and rules at [acteonline.org/awards](http://acteonline.org/awards).