



Scaling Apprenticeship

SA Lead Profile

The **SA Lead Profile** is an interview series with leaders of the Scaling Apprenticeship through Sector-Based Strategies (SA) grant. Each profile will provide you with an introduction to the SA Lead, and help you get to know your peers. It also highlights some of the successes and challenges that the SA Lead has experienced while implementing the grant. Find out who is delivering the magic behind the scenes and their approach to specific aspects of the grant. The first profile begins in the state of Arizona with **Kristen Benedict**, the Project Director for the I-RAMM at Pima Community College (Pima). Using the SA grant funding, Pima developed the local I-RAMM grant to serve businesses and apprentices in the advanced manufacturing industry.



PimaCommunityCollege

Kristen Benedict, Project Director

Industry-Recognized Apprenticeship Model in Manufacturing
(I-RAMM) Advanced Manufacturing Industry Grant

Profile Interview

■ Tell us briefly about your SA project.

The project aligns the curriculum and programming of three community college districts, known as the Sun Corridor, to better serve businesses and communities. The Sun Corridor consists of a consortium of colleges along the I-10 corridor (from Tucson to Phoenix). Within this corridor, the grant identified more than 8,500 new Arizona manufacturing jobs over the next five years (between 2019 and 2024). The grant is piloting earn-and-learn apprenticeship programs that will be scaled nationally.

The I-RAMM model has evolved since this project started; however, it started with a car manufacturer (a startup company) coming into the area with a need to hire 2,800 employees. To best serve this manufacturer, the colleges took this opportunity to align curriculum, programming, instruction, and equipment throughout the state of Arizona, allowing for easy access to students. Students received stackable certificates and [NIMS](#) training. This led to the expansion to other companies, such as Boeing, Raytheon, Lucid, and some new semiconductor factories.

■ What are you bringing to this grant?

I was previously a Department Chair at Central Arizona Community College, in Pinal County when Lucid was interested in partnering with I-RAMM on this project. I pursued job opportunities outside the state and when I returned, I was brought on as the Project Director for the I-RAMM grant. Because of my earlier work on this grant, I brought my knowledge, passion, and understanding of the program aspects, key players, and companies. I provided a fresh set of eyes on something I truly believe in.

I am a native of Arizona, raised on our family dairy farm in which we produced bottled milk and sold it straight to the consumer, so manufacturing is in my blood. In the past, I have developed partnerships in manufacturing but also in skilled trades, film, and transportation.

I am passionate about changing the lives of students and employers. I enjoy changing the trajectory for students in overcoming life's challenges.

■ What did you address first as the new Project Director?

When I first started, in March of 2021, I focused on the performance numbers and the low-hanging fruit that could be resolved quickly, as well as any other issues that needed immediate attention. Now we are at our current stage, during which we are creating replicable models in other occupations and pathways.

One of the other things I focused on in the beginning was creating and documenting processes and procedures. I worked on process mapping to help internal staff and external partners know what steps to take.

Process mapping involved documenting processes for onboarding, quarterly reports, fiscal reports, and progress reports. There were not enough details documented at the time to know where to find information, so I flushed them out for anyone to pick up and prepare the reports. This builds in sustainability and accountability by making processes and procedures a documented task and not based on a single person's knowledge.

■ What has been formative for the cohesiveness of the project?

The key is knowing the needs of your customers. Our project focuses on the needs of the manufacturing industry and individual employers. Also, involvement from local community partners, such as the city's workforce development program, is critical for overall program coordination and regional development.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the project team had time to reflect on processes, partnerships, and how best to deliver services to employers. As the pandemic eased, businesses began rebounding, as well as their interest in apprenticeship programs. There are three areas that have helped form a cohesive strategy for the project, especially after our experiences with the pandemic: 1. Employer Partners; 2. College and Community Partners; and 3. Curriculum and Apprenticeship Models.

Employer Partners: The I-RAMM team has found the most success for onboarding apprenticeship program

agreements with small- to medium-sized companies. These smaller businesses can sign paperwork in a relatively efficient timeframe. The owners know their employees and see the value of keeping employees at their business.

College and Community Partners: Since the pandemic eased, there are more grant-related meetings, both internally and externally. Partner colleges are aligning curriculum for the workforce needs that are currently in the Phoenix area with a new semiconductor company. Additionally, partner campuses are willing to share ideas and instructors across the state. Our group cares about each other and the overall project success. They are responsive to the needs of employers throughout the state. If there is a need in a different area of the state, a team will transfer to the area to fill in the gaps. They will provide onsite training to keep programs and apprenticeships moving forward.

Curriculum and Apprenticeship Models: The curriculum is being rolled out across the state. Some of the models have already been developed and employers are sharing feedback on implementing the models. We tried a lot of different strategies and noticed that pre-apprenticeships and boot camps were the strategies that have real staying power for our employers. Maricopa Community College (MCC) led the way on boot camps by taking existing models and customizing them for other employer partners. Pima is looking forward to launching their Machine Tooling Boot Camp. It is a four-day training course, and we are currently recruiting interested apprentices. When we offer training to students, we found that one hurdle was where to offer the class. We then realized that it is better to bring the school to the students, where we deliver onsite training at the employer's location and contextual examples of the equipment relevant to the student's work.

■ What were some of the project hurdles and how did you overcome them?

I noticed the biggest hurdles in three areas.

1. Definitions; 2. Paperwork; and 3. Employer Engagement.

Definitions: I noticed that everyone had different ideas about how to capture the performance numbers, even though definitions for participants and employers are

provided in the Participant Individual Record Layout (PIRL) and other performance-related guidance. I wanted to make sure everyone had the same common definitions and understanding.

We created clear guidelines and processes to help partner colleges and others understand the expectations and where to find definitions and information. We also set up regular meetings to convey information. There are consortium meetings twice a month and I hold one-on-one sessions monthly with the partner colleges. Additionally, I have been completing tours of college partner facilities. Now that we can go back to campuses, these tours allow me to see the schools in action and we can discuss challenges and ideas for easy wins, with a fresh set of eyes.

Paperwork: As we meet with new and existing employer partners, we listen to their needs and help them complete the paperwork. Employers and college partners feel the paperwork is cumbersome, so our team assists them with completing paperwork. For example, the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) has many steps to complete before it can be finalized. Some training partners feel that we have created too many processes, but it is better to be prepared so the team can respond. Additionally, the paperwork is more challenging for the larger companies to complete since there are more approval layers and departments that must review it.

Employer Engagement: The manufacturing employers are starting to hire again now that the pandemic has eased; however, there are not enough skilled and trained workers, which creates an immense need for a manufacturing talent pipeline. To assess needs, we develop a relationship with the employer and offer solutions. Employers are really the subject matter experts. We try to customize the services and deliver flexible solutions, especially if something is not working. For example, many employers do not need a three-year

apprenticeship program and would prefer a short-term program instead, so the Pima team developed an apprenticeship model to meet their needs. Specifically, they worked with a machine tool company on a Deburring Boot Camp. The company shared that it takes six months to approve a product design before the product can be built due to feedback on flaws and fixes, from different teams. Pima worked with the company to develop a boot camp that helped workers fix the design flaws without delaying the approvals.

■ What is on the Horizon for I-RAMM?

Our team will continue growing the portfolio of short-term industry-focused competency-based models, in addition to expanding the Boot Camp models.

■ What Tips and Strategies Would You Share with SA Grantees?

One of the main tips that I would recommend is to ensure that you have effective communication channels that help to build trust among your partners. It is important to have critical conversations with your partners to align the program and provide the support that is needed. You and your partners are an asset to each other. You need a leadership team that trusts you to move the project forward and support the larger objectives, even when you must take risks. The team supports each other and shares ideas and models. Partners are incredible at facilitating boot camps, developing curricula, engaging partners, and sharing information with others. It is also important to work closely with employers to build trust and find solutions. Lastly, do not give up. Opportunities are always around the corner. If you can create trust with your employers and partners, you will start hitting your goals. Everyone is in the same boat. Use the resources available to you, such as your Federal Project Officer, Coach, Peers, and team.

To learn more about Kristen Benedict and updates about the I-RAMM project, please contact Kristen at kbenedict@pima.edu.