

# Increasing Knowledge and Skills in this Digital, Global Era with Scott McLeod



## Real projects. Real responsibility. Real contributions.

In 2009, the Blue Valley Schools in Kansas launched their Center for Advanced Professional Studies. Unlike traditional trade or vocational schools that historically have prepared students for ‘blue collar’ jobs, the CAPS model immerses students in ‘white collar’ professional settings. Looking for ways to provide high school students with authentic professional experiences, districts in other states soon joined Blue Valley’s CAPS network ([bit.ly/capsnetwork](http://bit.ly/capsnetwork)), including Waukee APEX here in Iowa ([waukeeeapex.org](http://waukeeeapex.org)).

The APEX model is powerful because students do genuine interdisciplinary work within real institutions. Their hosts — and clients — are corporations, nonprofits, government agencies, and other community organizations such as hospitals and small businesses. Instead of engaging in contrived simulations in classrooms, students immediately make authentic contributions to their local communities and gain both valuable professional experience and college credit while still in high school.

Waukee APEX has several strands, thus allowing students to tap into different interests or skill sets. For example, in the Business, Technology, and Communications strand, students have developed marketing, copywriting, photography, videography, and graphic design skills by working on advertising and informational campaigns and planning special events for Des Moines businesses and government agencies. In the BioScience and Value-Added Agriculture strand, students have learned about global agriculture, life science systems, and food policy while working with the Blank Park Zoo and the World Food Prize. In the Engineering strand, students have partnered with On With Life, a nonprofit that specializes in brain damage rehabilitation, and Iowa State University to create a ‘sensory garden’ for patients and worked with Hy-Vee to redesign its corporate headquarters and store parking lots and to make its stores more energy efficient.

Students in other APEX strands are learning different workplace skills. In the Finance and Insurance strand, students have worked with industry professionals to index and analyze key metrics for ranking nursing home facilities, raised money for and marketed a school district’s slip-trip-fall risk mitigation project, and developed analytical models that help consumers know when to buy indexed or term life insurance. In the Information Management Design strand, students have set up servers, built databases, and designed apps for strength and conditioning coaches and athletic departments. And in the Exploration of Health Sciences and Medicine strand, students have designed lab protocols to mimic various types of pulmonary pathologies for Drake University pharmacy students, created a recruitment video for the Mercy College of Health Sciences surgical technology program, worked with a Veterans Affairs psychologist to design memory books that assist veterans with traumatic brain injuries, researched high school students’ understandings of the dangers of tanning, and conducted an observational analysis to help increase the task efficiency of UnityPoint Health nurse navigators.

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In all of these settings, APEX students are expected to act like working professionals, not teenagers. They’re expected to take on real tasks and assume adult workplace responsibility. In the process they stretch and grow and gain new skills that can’t be learned in traditional classrooms. The CAPS model illustrates the tremendous untapped potential of our own communities. What could your school do to tap into the expertise, mentorship, and authenticity of the professionals around you?

### Upcoming events

- StuCamp is a powerful event that gives voice to Iowa students and turns that voice into action. Are your students participating on January 30? More info at [stucamp.org](http://stucamp.org).
- The nation’s largest EdCamp event is right here in Iowa! Please share with your educators and join us at one of our five EdCampIowa locations on February 13 for the most powerful professional learning you may ever experience. More info at [edcampiowa.org](http://edcampiowa.org).
- The annual Iowa 1:1 Institute will be in Des Moines on April 5 and 6. More info at [iowaltol.com](http://iowaltol.com).

As always, stay in touch at [dr.scott.mcleod@gmail.com](mailto:dr.scott.mcleod@gmail.com), 707-722-7853, or [@mcleod](https://twitter.com/mcleod)!

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