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\$4.6 Million NSF Grant to Fund NexSTEM Program

Nov. 8, 2018

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — The National Science Foundation has awarded \$4.6 million to a consortium comprised of Illinois Wesleyan University, Illinois State University and Heartland Community College to fund NexSTEM: A Community Assets Program that Fosters the Next Generation of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) Leaders.

Over the five-year granting period, the three-school consortium will disburse nearly \$2.8 million in scholarships and receive more than \$1.8 million to involve the NexSTEM scholars in community-based research projects, to support the scholars' classroom learning, to study new strategies for retaining students in STEM majors, and to keep the consortium running smoothly.

▷ [Learn More About the NexSTEM Scholarship](#)

NexSTEM represents a collaborative effort between IWU, ISU and Heartland with local not-for-profit agencies to increase the recruitment and retention of talented, socio-economically underrepresented students in four-year STEM degree programs. NexSTEM recruitment efforts will focus on students from McLean County and the surrounding areas, but others are welcome to apply.



Illinois Wesleyan Chair and Professor of Chemistry Rebecca Roesner shares details about the \$4.6 million NexSTEM grant during an announcement event held at the McLean County Museum of History.



Illinois Wesleyan President Eric Jensen announces NexSTEM, a collaborative effort between IWU, Illinois State and Heartland to increase the recruitment and retention of talented, socio-economically underrepresented students in four-year STEM degree programs.

The program is built on the premise that its three institutions of higher education can generate a larger number of more successful STEM graduates by working together, and with community partners, than by working separately.

"The innovative and collaborative NexSTEM program will enable students to explore, pursue and complete STEM education that might otherwise seem financially out of reach," said Illinois Wesleyan University President Eric Jensen. "NexSTEM students will be supported through a cross-campus mentoring network and engaged through participation in community-based research projects. The program will also foster inter-institutional cooperation that will greatly benefit faculty, students and the community."

While the project's three institutions of higher education have a shared commitment to student-centered, undergraduate STEM education, they offer programs of study and campus environments that complement rather than duplicate each other.

"From their first days on our campuses, scholarship recipients will benefit from the unique educational and research experiences offered at our respective institutions," said Illinois State University President Larry Dietz. "By working together we can broaden students' networks of faculty and peer support, raise their awareness of different degree programs and career paths, and allow them to find academic and social groups beyond the borders of individual campuses."

Because of a national shortage of STEM professionals, employers in the U.S. often struggle to fill jobs in these fields. This shortage of STEM professionals arises, in part, because persistent socio-economic inequities have prevented equal access to these disciplines.

NexSTEM aims to counter these trends by offering substantial four-year college scholarships, research experiences, and mentoring to talented high school seniors who are interested in STEM, but for whom significant financial need and limited familiarity with STEM careers are obstacles to obtaining bachelor's degrees. In this way, the program intends to diversify and grow the pool of STEM professionals.

"Few communities enjoy such rich collaborations between a large state university, a small private liberal arts college, and a community college," said Heartland Community College President Keith Cornille. "The NextSTEM program will help bolster our shared commitment to the community and our responsibility to provide all students with a pathway to success."

An estimated 70 four-year scholarships will be offered through NexSTEM, with between 20 and 25 scholarships awarded to students at each of the three schools who matriculate in the falls of 2019 and 2020. Recipients may be awarded up to \$10,000 annually from the NexSTEM grant; however, each student's specific NexSTEM award is dependent upon financial need. NexSTEM scholars who begin their undergraduate educations at Heartland can carry their scholarships with them if they transfer to Illinois Wesleyan or Illinois State.



Heartland President Keith Cornille, Illinois Wesleyan President Eric Jensen and Illinois State President Larry Dietz speak with the media about the collaborative NexSTEM program.



NexSTEM is spearheaded by Illinois Wesleyan Chair and Professor of Chemistry, Rebecca Roesner (left), who serves as the project's Principal Investigator (PI). Co-PIs include Illinois State Director of the Center for Mathematics, Science & Technology Willy Hunter (right), and Heartland Instructional Chair of Science Lauren Denofrio-Corrales (middle).

The NexSTEM grant is an outgrowth of a meeting and discussion community leaders had with members of the STEM Team at the Department of Education during the 2016 One Voice trip. One Voice is a pro-community campaign, created by the Bloomington-Normal Economic Development Council (EDC), which brings together leaders from the City of Bloomington, the Town of Normal, McLean County, surrounding rural communities, labor, local educational institutions, and local private businesses in support of specific economic development projects and issues in McLean County.

"From the start, the combined work of these institutions was extremely impressive - not only from a regional perspective but also nationally and internationally," said Bloomington-Normal EDC Vice President and Interim CEO Mike O'Grady. "As a result of our collaborative One Voice Trip, NexSTEM will help empower local students to earn STEM degrees and, we hope, remain local to pursue employment in the STEM field. This is a victory for our local students, schools and employers."

NexSTEM is spearheaded by Illinois Wesleyan Chair and Professor of Chemistry, Rebecca Roesner, who serves as the project's Principal Investigator (PI). Co-PIs include Illinois State Director of the Center for Mathematics, Science & Technology Willy Hunter, and Heartland Instructional Chair of Science Lauren Denofrio-Corrales.

Offices of Admissions, Financial Aid, and Student Services at the three institutions will join the PI and Co-PIs in identifying the cohort pool. Students can apply now by visiting NexSTEM.org.