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Project Exploration awarded National Science Foundation grant to lead STEM ecosystem development in Chicago's Austin neighborhood.

*Project SYSTEMIC: A Systems-Thinking Approach to STEM Ecosystem Development in Chicago designed to change the face of science.*

**Chicago, IL, May 09, 2018** - [Project Exploration](#) has been awarded a National Science Foundation (NSF) INCLUDES grant to support its grassroots STEM ecosystem development in Chicago's Austin neighborhood. The two-year grant will support an initiative called [Project SYSTEMIC](#) (A Systems-Thinking Approach to STEM Ecosystem Development in Chicago), which engages community members and stakeholders in thinking systemically about the neighborhood's STEM learning ecosystem. The work will build on Project Exploration's expertise in community engagement to promote STEM learning for underrepresented youth. The work is led by Natasha Smith-Walker, Executive Director of Project Exploration, and Dr. Liz Lehman from the [University of Chicago STEM Education](#).

Project SYSTEMIC frames the challenge to broadening participation as a "wicked problem," a term used in social sciences to describe a complex social planning problem with many stakeholders and numerous interdependencies, and that is highly difficult to solve.

Working with the former Director of Argonne National Laboratory Systems Science Center, Pam Sydelko, Project SYSTEMIC will apply systems thinking as an innovative approach to build local capacity, expertise, and organizing ability around expanding STEM learning opportunities for youth. According to Sydelko, "Wicked problems, like improving STEM education for underrepresented youth, require systemic understanding of the problem informed by the perspectives of different valueholders in the community. As an approach, systems thinking allows us to name interdependencies that impact broadening participation such as funding allocation to STEM programs, and safe spaces to emotional safety."

"This award has given us the opportunity to connect with different stakeholders in Austin, hear their voices, and ensure that their perspectives are informing the kinds of STEM learning opportunities offered to youth. We are looking forward to working in partnership with the community to build upon the existing assets, partnerships, and programs on the West Side," says Smith-Walker.

"We are delighted that NSF recognizes the importance of giving community members an active voice in determining how we build on existing STEM education assets, rather than just bringing in another program and trying to get kids to participate," says Lehman.

[The National Science Foundation's INCLUDES \(Inclusion across the Nation of Communities of Learners of Underrepresented Discoverers in Engineering and Science\)](#) is a comprehensive initiative to enhance U.S. leadership in science and engineering discovery and innovation by proactively seeking and effectively developing STEM talent from all sectors and groups in our society. By facilitating



partnerships, communication and cooperation, NSF aims to build on and scale up what works in broadening participation programs to reach underserved populations nationwide.

*Project Exploration creates transformative learning opportunities for youth underrepresented in the sciences – particularly students of color and girls – by equipping them with the skills, practices, and mindset needed for a lifelong pursuit of learning.*

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If you would like more information about this topic, please call Natasha Smith-Walker at 773-307-4419, or email [nwalker@projectexploration.org](mailto:nwalker@projectexploration.org).