

Strengthening Community Colleges Training Grants
Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)
U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration
Updated September 1, 2020¹

1) What is the timeline of the Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA)?

Applicants will have 90 days to respond to this FOA from publication. The closing date for receipt of applications under this Announcement is October 8, 2020. We must receive applications no later than 4:00:00 p.m. Eastern Time on the closing date, or they will not be considered for funding

2) What is the purpose of the *Strengthening Community Colleges Training Grants* program?

The Strengthening Community Colleges Training Grants program (referred to as Strengthening Community Colleges or SCC) will build the capacity of community colleges to collaborate with employers and the public workforce development system to meet local and regional labor market demand for a skilled workforce. The purpose of this grant is (1) to increase the capacity and responsiveness of community colleges to address the skill development needs of employers and dislocated and unemployed workers, incumbent workers, and new entrants to the workforce; (2) to offer this spectrum of workers and other individuals accelerated career pathways that enable them to gain skills and transition from unemployment to (re)employment quickly; and (3) to address the new challenges associated with the COVID-19 health crisis that necessitate social distancing practices and expanding online and technology-enabled learning and migrating services to a virtual environment.

3) Who can apply?

The eligible lead applicant must be a community college that is a public institution of higher education as defined in Section 101(a) of the Higher Education Act and whose most common degree awarded is an associate degree.

The lead applicant must apply as a single institution lead or as a consortium lead representing a consortium of Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs).

Grants will be awarded to the lead applicant of an SCC Partnership, which will serve as the grantee and have overall fiscal and administrative responsibility for the grant.

¹ The previous version was dated July 27, 2020. Questions 20-21 in this version are new.

4) What are the differences in the SCC FOA for single institutions and consortium applicants?

Some but not all of the differences are summarized in this table. Note that there are two versions of the Project Narrative in Section IV.B.3, one for Single Institutions (starting on page 41) and one for Consortium Applicants (starting on page 51). You should use only the version that applies to your application.

FOA Category	Single Institution Applicants	Consortium Applicants
Funding Range	\$1 million to \$2 million	\$1 million to \$5 million
Project Focus	Capacity building at one institution	Capacity building and systems change within one state, or across one/more community college districts within a state
Eligible Lead Applicant	Single institution lead community college	Lead community college representing a consortium of Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs)
Required Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workforce development system partner(s) • Employer partners <p><i>Plus any optional partners</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IHE consortium members • IHE coordinating entity(ies) • Workforce development system partner(s) • Employer partners <p><i>Plus any optional partners</i></p>
Expected Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity Building Performance Outcomes in three outcomes areas (three outcomes in total) • Tracking of eight participant outputs/outcomes for a selected cohort of students 	Capacity Building and Systems Change Performance Outcomes in four outcomes areas (eight outcomes in total)

5) What entities are required as part of the SCC Partnership?

All applicants must include the following partners in their SCC partnership:

- One or more partners from the publicly funded workforce development system; and
- An industry/trade association or a consortium of at least three employers. An industry/trade association or employer consortium must be able to demonstrate membership clearly aligned with the geographic area of the IHE consortium.

In addition, consortium applicants must include the following required partners:

- IHE consortium members; and
- At least one IHE coordinating entity, which is a state- or district-level entity that is responsible for regulating, governing, advising, and/or coordinating the institutions of higher education in the IHE consortium.

6) What qualifies as an IHE consortium? What entities are eligible to participate in the IHE consortium?

The Department is requiring consortia applicants to apply for this funding as a consortium of colleges that will undertake systems change within one state; or if community colleges are district-based, across one or more community college districts within a state. For the purposes of this FOA, a district (or equivalent entity) that includes only one or two community colleges does not, by itself, qualify as a consortium. However, districts that are geographically contiguous may form a consortium that includes a minimum of three community colleges. When a consortium is district-based, all of the colleges in the district(s) must be included.

The lead applicant community college serves as one of the consortium members. Public and private, non-profit two-year and four-year institutions of higher education, as defined in Section 101(a) of the Higher Education Act, are eligible to participate as members of the consortium.

7) The FOA states that the Department encourages consortium applicants to include all or a majority of IHE in a state. Does DOL really encourage us to include “all or a majority of colleges in a state...”?

The Department clarifies that we encourage applicants to include all or a majority of community colleges in a state, if feasible. ETA intends to issue an amendment to the FOA making this clarification.

8) How many colleges are required for an IHE consortium?

Under this FOA, applicants applying as a consortium of colleges will undertake capacity building and systems change within one state, or across one or more

community college districts within a state. For consortium applicants whose states organize community colleges by district, the requirements regarding what qualifies as a district-based consortium apply (see response to Question #6). For consortium applicants whose states do not organize the community colleges by district, the FOA does not specify a minimum number of colleges for the IHE consortium. However, as stated above, the Department encourages applicants to include all or a majority of community colleges in the state.

9) Can we include additional partners?

Yes, we strongly encourage applicants to collaborate with other partners that can support and advance the work of the SCC Partnership. These include State Apprenticeship Agencies; federally funded programs, such as Adult Education and Perkins; American Job Center operators; economic development agencies; labor-management organizations; community-based organizations that provide social support and/or wrap-around services; and foundations and philanthropic organizations.

10) Can I apply for more than one grant?

We will consider only one application from each organization. If we receive multiple applications from the same organization, we will consider only the most recently received application that met the deadline. If the most recent application is disqualified for any reason, we will not replace it with an earlier application. Eligible applicants may submit an application as the lead applicant, and also serve as an IHE consortium member in an application or applications in which they do not serve as the lead applicant.

11) How is the grant program funded?

Section 169(c) of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) authorizes this grant program. See also, Title I of Division A of Pub. L. 116-94. The Further Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2020 ([Pub. L. 116-94](#)) enacted on December 20, 2019, appropriated \$40,000,000 of Dislocated Worker National Reserve Grant funding for the SCC grant program.

12) What amount of funding is available? Is there a limit?

We expect availability of approximately \$40 million to fund approximately 8-16 grants. Single institution applicants may apply for a ceiling amount of up to \$2 million. Consortium lead applicants may apply for a ceiling amount of up to \$5 million. The minimum for both types of applicants is \$1 million. Subject to receiving sufficient applications of fundable quality, DOL intends to award at least 75 percent of grant

funds to consortia applicants and the remaining 25 percent of grant funds to single institution applicants.

13) How long are the grants active?

The period of performance is 48 months with an anticipated start date of January 1, 2021. Grantees must plan to fully expend grant funds during the period of performance. There will be no period of performance extensions under this FOA.

This performance period includes all necessary implementation and start-up activities. We expect that start-up activities such as hiring appropriate grant program staff and project design activities will begin immediately. Grantees are required to procure their required third-party evaluator by the end of month six, if possible under their institution's procurement guidelines. Written requests for prior approval to acquire grant-funded special purpose equipment and/or to renovate space (capital expenditures) must be submitted no later than 12 months after the award date of the grant; DOL strongly encourages grantees to submit them within the first 90 days. Grant Officer-approved special purpose equipment and/or renovated space must be acquired, completed, and available for use in support of the project's statement of work no later than 24 months after the award date of the grant; DOL strongly encourages grantees to begin to use such investments sooner. We strongly encourage grantees to develop their project work plans and timelines accordingly. Required outputs, including key milestones and deliverables, must be included in an attachment the project narrative; see Appendix I: Suggested Project Work Plan Format.

14) Who can be served by the grant?

The intent of this FOA is to fund projects that build capacity to ultimately provide education/training services to low- and medium-skilled and/or low- and medium-income individuals to help them pursue or advance in full-time employment within the grant period of performance.

For the purposes of this FOA, the definition of eligible participants is broad. It includes a spectrum of adult workers – dislocated workers, incumbent workers, and new entrants to the workforce – as well as older youth who are new entrants to the workforce. Section III.C.3 provides more information on eligible participants.

15) What is the geographic scope of these grant programs?

Applicants must identify the geographic scope of the proposed project. The Department is requiring community colleges to apply for this funding as either a single institution or as the lead of a consortium of colleges that will undertake system change within one state, or across one or more community college districts within a state.

Applicants that demonstrate, in their abstract, that at least one census tract within their physical service area is designated by the Secretary of Treasury as a qualified Opportunity Zone will receive two bonus points toward their overall application score. Applicants will not receive additional points for multiple Opportunity Zones within the proposed physical service area.

For more information on Opportunity Zones, go to <https://www.irs.gov/newsroom/opportunity-zones-frequently-asked-questions>.

16) Are there targeted industries and/or occupations under this FOA?

While the FOA does not target any particular industries or occupations, applicants must identify one or more industry sector(s) in which they will focus and include the required employer partners, as described in Section III.A.3. SCC Partnerships. See Section I.A.1.b) Core Element 2: Sector Strategies and Employer Engagement.

17) Is there a match requirement?

No. This program does not require cost sharing or matching funds. Including such funds is not one of the application screening criteria and applications that include any form of cost sharing or match will not receive additional consideration during the review process. Instead, the agency considers any resources contributed to the project beyond the funds provided by the agency as leveraged resources. Section IV.B.2 provides more information on leveraged resources.

18) What are expected outcomes of the grant program?

This grant program identifies different sets of outcome measures, depending on whether the applicant is a single institution or a consortium. Single institution grantees will report on capacity-building performance outcomes and track participant performance outcomes. Consortium grantees will report on capacity-building/systems change outcomes.

Single Institution Applicants

- Capacity Building Performance Outcomes. Single institution applicants will specify quantitative, grant-specific targets for outcomes in three outcomes areas:
 - Sector Strategies and Employer Engagement:
 - Enhanced Career Pathway Programs and Accelerated Learning Strategies:
 - Strategic Alignment with the Workforce Development System:
- Participant Training and Employment Tracking. Applicants also will track eight participant outputs and outcomes for a selected cohort of students throughout their grants, using DOL's Workforce Innovation Performance System (WIPS). Note that applicants are not required to provide targets for these outputs and

outcomes, nor will they be used to monitor grantee performance. See Section IV.B.3. Project Narrative for more information on these outputs and outcomes.

The three capacity-building performance outcomes targets (and the related outputs, milestones, and deliverables in the work plan) form the basis of the Department’s assessment of grantee performance for single institutions.

Consortium Applicants

Consortium applicants will specify two grant-specific targets within each of the following four outcomes areas, for a total of eight grant-specific targets:

- Sector Strategies and Employer Engagement
 - Enhanced Career Pathway Programs and Accelerated Learning Strategies
 - Strategic Alignment with the Workforce Development System
- Innovative Systems Change. Applicants will select the two outcomes under the option that they chose for the FOA:
- Accelerated Learning Pathways, OR
 - Statewide Data Integration and Use

The eight systems change performance outcomes targets (and the related outputs, milestones, and deliverables in the work plan) form the basis of the Department’s assessment of grantee performance for consortium applicants.

19) How will applications be evaluated for funding?

We have instituted procedures for assessing the technical merit of applications to provide for an objective review of applications and to assist you in understanding the standards against which your application will be judged. The evaluation criteria are based on the information required in the application as described in Sections IV.B.2. (Project Budget) and IV.B.3. (Project Narrative). Reviewers will award points based on the evaluation criteria described below.

Criterion for Applicants	Points (maximum)
1. Statement of Need (See Section IV.B.3.a. Statement of Need)	6 total
2. Expected Outcomes and Outputs (See Section IV.B.3.b. Expected Outcomes and Outputs)	36 total
3. Project Design (See Section IV.B.3.c. Project Design)	20 total
4. Organizational, Administrative, and Fiscal Capacity (See Section IV.B.3.d. Organizational, Administrative,	8 total

and Fiscal Capacity)	
5. Past Performance – Programmatic Capability (See Section IV.B.3.e. Past Performance – Programmatic Capability)	28 total
6. Budget and Budget Justification (See Section IV.B.2. Project Budget)	2 total
7. Opportunity Zones – Bonus Points (See Section I.C. Geographic Scope)	2 total
TOTAL	102

Section IV.B.3 (Project Narrative) of this FOA has several “section headers” (e.g. IV.B.3.a). Statement of Need). Each of these “section headers” of the Project Narrative may include one or more “criterion,” and each “criterion” includes one or more “rating factors,” which provide detailed specifications for the content and quality of the response to that criterion. Each of the rating factors has specific point values assigned. These point values are the number of points possible for the application to earn for the rating factor.

Note that there are two versions of the Project Narrative in Section IV.B.3, one for Single Institutions and one for Consortium Applicants. You should use only the version that applies to your application.

A technical merit review panel will carefully evaluate applications against the selection criteria to determine the merit of applications. These criteria are based on the policy goals, priorities, and emphases set forth in this FOA. Up to 102 points may be awarded to an applicant, depending on the quality of the responses provided.

The final scores (which may include the mathematical normalization of review panels) will serve as the primary basis for selection of applications for funding. The panel results are advisory in nature and not binding on the Grant Officer. The Grant Officer reserves the right to make selections based solely on the final scores or to take into consideration other relevant factors when applicable. Such factors may include the geographic distribution of funds, representation among projects for Career Pathway Systems Change and for Statewide Data Use/Integration, and other relevant factors. The Grant Officer may consider any information that comes to their attention.

20) NEW: May applicants propose to develop or enhance non-credit programs or must their proposals focus solely on developing or enhancing credit programs?

Grantees may use grant funds to adapt and/or develop both non-credit and credit programs, as long as the programs meet the requirements of the SCC Core Elements.

21) NEW: The FOA requires grantees to make information about credentials and competencies developed and delivered using grant funds publicly accessible in a “linked open data format,” and refers to “credential transparency description language (CTDL).” Can you explain what that means and what we will have to do if we are awarded a grant? Also, does this have to be reflected in our application?

Regarding the requirement to make grant-funded credentials and competencies publicly accessible, Section I.A.1.c of the SCC FOA (p. 11) states:

“In addition, the Department aims to ensure that individuals, employers, education and training providers, and others have access to the most complete, current, and beneficial information about providers, programs, credentials, and skills necessary to make more informed decisions. Access includes having such information fully operable on the semantic web and able to be used in modern applications, tools, and services to support better understanding of available pathways; and the development of improved navigation and guidance tools to help individuals make better decisions about which pathways are best for them. To this end, the Department requires that information about all credentials (including, but not limited to, badges, certificates, certifications, licenses, and degrees of all levels and types) and competencies (knowledge, skills, and abilities) developed or delivered through the use of federal funds be made publicly accessible through the use of linked open data formats that support full transparency and interoperability, such as through the use of the credential transparency description language specifications.”

To meet this requirement during the period of performance, grantees will need to describe grant-funded credentials using common structured, linked data formats, and to post this information in a publicly accessible location online. Grantees may need to seek assistance from a specialist in credential and data transparency in their SCC Partnership or an outside expert to comply with this requirement.

The Department recommends that applicants reflect their proposed efforts to meet this requirement in their work plans and budgets. Below we provide information and resources on credential transparency to help applicants better understand the grant requirement. Note that successful applicants will receive further information and additional technical assistance from DOL on this requirement.

Structured data is machine-readable and used by search engines to understand the content of web pages. Linked Data is a type of structured data that links between systems via the Web. When data is both structured and linked, it becomes a powerful tool that search engines and other systems can leverage.

For further information, you may wish to view these [slides](#) that provide more background on credential transparency. You may also wish to view resources from the following examples of open data formats for credentials:

- [Comprehensive Learner Record Specification](#)
- [Credential Engine's Services and Publishing](#)
- [Open Badge 2.0 Specification](#)
- [W3C Verifiable Credentials Data Model](#)