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Putting State Dollars to Work: How Governors' Signature Investments Drive Workforce Transformation

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About the Project on Workforce

The Project on Workforce is an interdisciplinary, collaborative project between the Harvard Kennedy School's Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Business and Government, the Harvard Business School Managing the Future of Work Project, and the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The Project produces and catalyzes basic and applied research at the intersection of education and labor markets for leaders in business, education, and policy. The Project's research aims to help shape a postsecondary system of the future that creates more and better pathways to economic mobility and forges smoother transitions between education and careers. Learn more at www.pw.hks.harvard.edu.

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The National Governors Association is the voice of the leaders of 55 states, territories, and commonwealths. Our nation's Governors are dedicated to leading bipartisan solutions that improve citizens' lives through state government. Through NGA, Governors identify priority issues and deal with matters of public policy and governance at the state, national and global levels. Learn more at www.nga.org.

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Executive Summary

Governors occupy a distinct position in the American workforce development ecosystem, yet the decisions they make to direct state strategy and influence the way money is spent remains understudied. Under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), Governors wield significant authority over federal workforce dollars, but that authority operates within a defined structure that may limit the way they can use these funds to address the challenges they face. Structural labor shortages, skills gaps, and the needs of workers that federal programs were not primarily devised to reach have led Governors to leverage **state investments** in workforce designed around state priorities.

This report examines Governors’ “signature workforce investments” in five states: North Dakota, Minnesota, Idaho, Massachusetts, and Wyoming. Drawing on interviews with over 40 stakeholders across government, higher education, workforce training, and industry, we examine how each program was designed, funded, and implemented.

Governors’ Signature Workforce Investments

North Dakota: The Regional Workforce Impact Program (RWIP), launched in 2022 and receiving \$15 million in federal funds and \$17.5 million in state funds to date, is a competitive grant program created to fund locally-defined workforce solutions, giving regional actors broad discretion to define priorities. Managed by the North Dakota Department of Commerce, RWIP’s early round funded seven broad workforce priorities—including child care, talent attraction, and training—and later evolved to a targeted sector strategy model requiring employer partnerships. The program’s early phases produced significant results, most notably the creation of 2,589 child care slots.

Minnesota: Drive for 5, established in 2023 through state appropriations totaling \$32 million, provides competitive grants to develop training-to-employment pipelines in five high-growth industries. Administered by the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED), the program was designed to address key labor market demands while providing participants with high-quality training leading to jobs with family-sustaining wages. DEED has demonstrated an adaptive implementation approach throughout the duration of the initiative, refining wage incentives and expanding employer engagement, while serving over 1,000 trainees so far.

Idaho: Student LAUNCH, introduced in 2023 and allocated \$75 million in state appropriations annually, awards scholarships to high school seniors pursuing postsecondary education and training aligned with in-demand careers. Under the purview of Idaho’s Workforce Development Council, LAUNCH was designed to address a structural misalignment between education pathways and labor market demand. Early results show increased postsecondary participation—including a 5% increase in high school-to-college go-on rate—and meaningful shifts in students’ education and career decision-making.

Massachusetts: MassReconnect, launched in 2023 and receiving \$54 million in state appropriations to date, provides last-dollar financial aid to make community college free for adults 25 and older who have not yet earned a college degree. Led by the Massachusetts Executive Office of Education, the initiative seeks to counter declining community college enrollment and strengthen workforce competitiveness. The program’s access-first philosophy, reflected in its broad eligibility requirements and open fields of study, drove strong early enrollment gains, with community college enrollment growing 39% from Fall 2022 to Fall 2025.

Wyoming: The **Wyoming Innovation Partnership (WIP)**, set up in 2021 with \$14.7 million in federal funds and \$55.6 million in state funds invested over three phases, is a competitive grant program that funds public higher education institutions across a range of workforce, research, and innovation activities. WIP was designed to spur collaboration across a historically fragmented higher education system and drive economic diversification. Housed in the Governor’s Office, program delivery matured substantially over time—leading to results such as 39 new programs, over 1,700 postsecondary enrollments, and 460 internships—while developing a structured metrics framework and deepening partnership across colleges. In pursuit of long-term sustainability, WIP has transitioned under the Wyoming Business Alliance.

Each initiative is unique in design and delivery, but together, they also surface key insights that reflect common challenges and enabling conditions across different state contexts.

Cross-state Insights

- 1. Programs navigated tradeoffs between broad eligibility and strategic targeting (across industries, geographies, and participant populations).** States that adopted broader eligibility criteria were better positioned to scale quickly with less administrative complexity and develop locally relevant projects. States that set more definitive workforce objectives were better able to articulate labor market alignment and hold grantees accountable to specific outcomes.
- 2. Programs engaged with the WIOA system while developing independent eligibility frameworks.** All five programs departed from WIOA participant eligibility criteria, enabling them to engage populations beyond the federal framework’s reach. States varied considerably, however, in how much they drew on WIOA infrastructure—from integration of workforce boards and American Job Centers (AJCs) to programs built primarily through higher education and economic development agencies.

- 3. Programs successfully tracked short-term metrics and are building toward longer-term outcomes tracking, despite operational challenges.** Enrollment counts and credential completions were captured consistently, while job placement and wage gains proved harder to track. This reflects the reality of fragmented data systems and limited interagency data-sharing that many states across the country grapple with. Longitudinal evidence remains a work in progress across all five states.
- 4. Programs evolved after launch as states adapted to implementation realities, refining design, addressing gaps, and responding to stakeholder needs.** Grantee input drove consistent adjustments to application structures, eligibility rules, and reporting systems. Programs also created the administrative and political conditions for expanded successor investments, demonstrating the critical role of well-designed pilots.
- 5. Governor-led workforce investments are building on existing systems to drive change in how stakeholders coordinate and operate.** Governance structures and performance requirements proved to be particularly powerful levers in deepening partnerships and changing organizational behavior. Coordination mandates prompted organizations that had previously competed for resources to begin operating as interdependent partners, while high performance benchmarks drove employers to restructure hiring practices and develop new training programs that extended beyond the life of the grant.

Together, these findings point to a set of policy opportunities that can help Governors and other workforce leaders shape investments in workforce development.

Policy Opportunities

Program Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use data to inform key targets (e.g., sectors, populations, regions)• Engage employers as co-designers from the outset• Define minimum quality and content standards for funded training programs• Build collaboration requirements into grant design from the start• Consider recruitment and wraparound support costs• Consider piloting before scaling• Invest in pre-launch planning and provide adequate runway to grantees before applications open
Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assess agency strengths and align implementation responsibilities to goals• Leverage workforce system infrastructure and expertise
Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide planning grants to support stronger program design, partnerships, and implementation readiness• Leverage and integrate federal funding sources• Ensure grantees have “skin in the game” (e.g., match funding, cost sharing)• Design funding structures to promote equitable access (e.g., regional allocations, reserved set-asides)• Front-load high-cost startup expenses• Aim for flexibility in fund disbursement to accommodate implementation variability
Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Define success from the outset and select metrics aligned to those definitions• Build in data collection and reporting mechanisms from launch• Tie funding disbursement to milestone completion or data submission

As Governors seek to grow their state economies, expand access to quality jobs, and build workforce ecosystems aligned with labor market needs, state investments represent a flexible and powerful tool at their disposal. The cases documented here offer insights about putting that tool to work.

Introduction

Workforce development in the United States is a shared project among federal, state, and local actors. Under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), Governors wield considerable authority over how federal dollars flow into their states—setting priorities, directing resources, and overseeing the agencies and partnerships that deliver training and employment services to workers and employers. However, this authority is only part of the workforce policy landscape. Governors also have significant influence over the direction of state workforce dollars and policies, which they can leverage to build workforce systems aligned with their states’ industries and long-term economic priorities.

This paper examines how Governors leverage state funds to drive workforce system transformation. Specifically, it focuses on significant workforce investments that are led by the executive branch and backed by state dollars, which we refer to as Governors’ “signature workforce investments.” This distinguishes the programs studied from federal pass-through funding and positions them as expressions of gubernatorial priority. Importantly, state dollars can function as a system design lever—not just a complement to federal funds. State-funded programs can serve populations that federal programs miss, including workers that fall outside of WIOA eligibility, and target regions facing structural labor shortages.

Two converging forces make this a particularly consequential moment to explore Governors’ signature workforce investments. **First, the post-pandemic labor market created both political urgency and an unusual fiscal opportunity.** Pandemic-era worker dislocations—including accelerated retirements, sectoral job losses, and a surge in adults leaving higher education—exposed gaps in existing workforce infrastructure and generated political will to address workforce challenges.¹ Federal relief funding through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) provided

Governors with a one-time infusion of discretionary resources, of which approximately \$31 billion was directed to education, workforce development, and economic development.² This funding enabled program launches that would not otherwise have been fiscally or politically feasible. Many Governors used this opportunity as seed funding to start their own initiatives.

Second, at the time of publication, a significant political transition is underway. In 2026, 39 gubernatorial elections will take place, with 21 incumbent Governors who are either term-limited or not seeking reelection.³ Incoming Governors have an opportunity to advance workforce priorities and investments, shaping their states’ workforce infrastructure for years to come. Yet there is limited evidence on the results of state workforce investments for incoming Governors to draw on.

State investment in workforce development remains a fragmented and underanalyzed landscape. State-led initiatives—varying widely in design, target population, and sector focus—are rarely documented in ways that are useful to peer states and the field at large. States often learn from one another, but this diffusion tends to be informal and relationship-dependent. This report aims to be a more structured resource for states and the broader field.

This report is organized as follows. Following a brief overview of the research methodology, we present case studies of Governors’ signature workforce investments in five states: North Dakota, Minnesota, Idaho, Massachusetts, and Wyoming. Comparing these investments then allows us to identify common challenges as well as enabling conditions for success. The report concludes with a section on policy opportunities for Governors to consider as they develop ideas for strengthening their state’s workforce systems.

Methodology

This research is part of a continued collaboration between The Project on Workforce at Harvard (HPoW) and the National Governors Association (NGA), building on prior work examining how Governors leverage authority under WIOA⁴ and industrial policies.⁵ This paper examines **Governors' signature workforce investments**. We define workforce development broadly to include activities, programs, and partnerships designed to prepare individuals for quality employment, while ensuring employers have access to skilled talent and regional economies can prosper.⁶ This definition encompasses a wide range of investments, from occupational training and business attraction to wraparound supports.

To scope and select Governor-led workforce investments for analysis in this paper, we used four primary program criteria:

1. Originated from the executive branch and publicly championed by the Governor's office;
2. Funded at least partially by state dollars;
3. Launched or significantly expanded post-2020; and
4. Demonstrated measurable results (e.g., enrollment, completion, employment outcomes).

HPoW and NGA conducted scans of state programs that met our criteria. We then narrowed the list, with attention to diversity across geography, political leadership, program type, and availability to participate in research. This led to our final selection of five states: North Dakota (Regional Workforce Impact Program), Minnesota (Drive for 5), Idaho (LAUNCH), Massachusetts (MassReconnect), and Wyoming (Wyoming Innovation Partnership).

The study utilized a **qualitative, multi-state case study approach**. In each case, we examined how initiatives were positioned relative to existing WIOA

programs and what organizational structures, governance arrangements, and coordination mechanisms enabled effective program delivery. We also investigated how states defined and tracked success—including data collection processes and metrics tied to completion and employment—and what practices showed promise for replication or long-term sustainability.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection and analysis proceeded in two stages: in-depth exploration of each Governor's signature workforce investment, followed by cross-state synthesis. Primary data was collected through semi-structured, one-hour interviews conducted between January and March 2026. Desk research on published materials—including legislation, budget documents, request for proposals (RFPs), and program reports—was conducted before, during, and after interviews to supplement and triangulate interview accounts.

A diverse set of stakeholders were sourced for interviews in each state to ensure holistic coverage of perspectives. Key stakeholders were introduced to the HPoW research team for interviews through NGA referrals and additional stakeholders were sourced through snowball sampling. Participants fell into four stakeholder groups, each intended to surface a distinct dimension of program experience:

1. **Governor's Strategic Advisors:** Senior staff or advisors involved in shaping the program's vision, setting strategic priorities, and overseeing high-level implementation.
2. **State Program Managers:** Agency staff responsible for day-to-day program implementation, grantee selection and oversight, and data management.

3. **Grantees:** Community colleges, non-profits, and private training providers, among others, who received funding to deliver training, supportive services, and other programming.
4. **Industry:** Business leaders or trade associations who were engaged in program design, advisory boards, or hiring.

Table 1. **Overview of Interview Participants**

Stakeholder Category	Participants (n=45)
Governor’s Strategic Advisors and State Program Managers	17
Grantees	19
Industry	9

Transcripts were coded using a codebook organized around our research themes, with additional codes developed inductively. Cross-state insights were identified through a structured synthesis of findings across all five states. For more details, please see **Appendix, Data Collection and Analysis**.

Limitations

Limited sample sizes and one-hour interviews meant that some program features and operational complexities may not have been fully explored. Furthermore, while we engaged multiple stakeholders in each state, we did not directly engage program beneficiaries (e.g., training participants) and feedback from employer partners was limited. Despite these constraints, we believe the research provides both useful and unique insights into how Governors’ signature workforce investments are designed, delivered, and evolve over time to serve the needs of their communities.

Overview of Governors' Signature Workforce Investments

Figure 1: **Governors' Signature Workforce Investments**



North Dakota

Governor Burgum, Governor Armstrong

State Overview	Population: 779,094 Employment Rate: 65.8% Median Household Income: \$77,871	Core Industries: Healthcare and Social Assistance; Retail Trade; Accommodation and Food Services
Program	Regional Workforce Impact Program	
Type	Competitive Grants	
Launch	2022	
Funding	\$32.5 million ARPA, State General Fund, Natural Resource Revenues	
Program Overview	Purpose: Phases 1–2: Grants to regional entities for locally defined workforce projects; Phase 3: Grants for sector strategy planning and implementation with employer partners Target Population: No predefined target population; funding allocated geographically across regions	Lead Agency: North Dakota Department of Commerce Early Results: 2,589 child care slots created; 289 new child care workers hired; 6,390 students and workers engaged across all projects



Minnesota

Governor Walz

State Overview	Population: 5,704,494 Employment Rate: 65.5% Median Household Income: \$87,117	Core Industries: Healthcare and Social Assistance; Manufacturing; Retail Trade
Program	Drive for 5	
Type	Competitive Grants	
Launch	2023	
Funding	\$32 million State General Fund	
Program Overview	Description: Two rounds of grants to training providers, Chambers of Commerce/Trade Associations to deliver training and create sector partnerships Target Population: Job seekers looking for training in one of five industry sectors	Lead Agency: Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development Early Results: Over 1,000 trainees served; nearly half completing training; over a third attaining a credential; and about a fifth exiting to unsubsidized training*

*Note: There is activity and the contracts are not completed. There are people in training and many are still being placed.



Idaho
Governor Little

State Overview	<p>Population: 1,839,106</p> <p>Employment Rate: 60.6%</p> <p>Median Household Income: \$81,166</p>	<p>Core Industries: Healthcare and Social Assistance; Retail Trade; Accommodation and Food Services</p>
Program	LAUNCH	
Type	Scholarships	
Launch	2023	
Funding	\$75 million annually In-Demand Careers Fund	
Program Overview	<p>Description: Grants of up to \$8,000 to graduating high school seniors to pursue postsecondary education and training aligned with the state’s in-demand careers</p> <p>Target Population: Idaho high school graduates</p> <p>Lead Agency: Idaho Workforce Development Council</p>	<p>Early Results: 7,015 students received awards in the Class of 2024 and 6,943 in the Class of 2025, while survey data from 9,556 students suggest the program is influencing postsecondary decision-making: 50% reported they would not have enrolled immediately after high school without LAUNCH, and 56% said the program influenced their decision to remain in Idaho for education or training</p>



Massachusetts
Governor Healey

State Overview	<p>Population: 7,029,917</p> <p>Employment Rate: 64.4%</p> <p>Median Household Income: \$104,828</p>	<p>Core Industries: Healthcare and Social Assistance; Professional, Scientific and Technical Services; Retail Trade</p>
Program	MassReconnect	
Type	Scholarships	
Launch	2023	
Funding	\$54 million Fair Share Amendment Revenue	
Program Overview	<p>Description: Last-dollar financial aid to make community college tuition—free for eligible adult learners</p> <p>Target Population: Massachusetts residents age 25 and older who have not yet earned a college degree</p> <p>Lead Agency: Massachusetts Executive Office of Education</p>	<p>Early Results: Enrollment among students age 25 and older increased 26.8% from Fall 2023 to Fall 2024 and 42.0% relative to Fall 2022; 7,835 adult students received MassReconnect grants in 2024</p>



Wyoming
Governor Gordon

State Overview	Population: 576,851 Employment Rate: 61.8% Median Household Income: \$75,532	Core Industries: Healthcare and Social Assistance; Retail Trade; Accommodation and Food Services
Program	Wyoming Innovation Partnership	
Type	Competitive Grants	
Launch	2021	
Funding	~\$70 million ARPA, State General Fund	
Program Overview	Description: Grants to public higher education institutions to drive partnerships and programming Target Population: No predefined target population; institutions determine participant focus	Lead Agency: Governor’s Office (2021-2024), Wyoming Business Alliance (2024 onwards) Early Results: 39 new programs, 1,721 post-secondary enrollments, 1,931 workforce training participants, 460 internships

Sources: State overview data from the U.S. Census Bureau⁷; program information compiled by the authors from program documents and interviews.

North Dakota: Regional Workforce Impact Program

Introduction



Highlights

- **RWIP was created to fund locally-identified workforce solutions** in a tight labor market where existing programs lacked flexible funding mechanisms.
- **The program allocated funding by region and gave local actors broad discretion** to define workforce priorities.
- **RWIP evolved across phases** from bundled regional applications to sector strategies requiring employer partnerships, reflecting implementation learning.
- **The Department of Commerce centralized program control** but relied on regional intermediaries and partners to coordinate and support projects.
- **Flexible, project-level metrics** enabled locally relevant tracking but limited cross-project comparison and program-wide evaluation.
- **Initial ARPA funding enabled large-scale investments**, especially in child care infrastructure; future funding levels will shape the program's direction and long-term sustainability.

The Regional Workforce Impact Program (RWIP) is a state-administered grant program designed to fund locally-led workforce initiatives. North Dakota launched RWIP in March 2022 in the context of a persistently tight labor market. Tied for the lowest unemployment rate in the country, North Dakota reported tens of thousands of open jobs while having the third highest labor force participation rate in the nation.⁸ At the same time, the state's workforce system was expansive but fragmented, spanning dozens of programs across multiple agencies, with challenges that extended beyond training to include talent attraction, retention, and supportive services that varied across regions.⁹ Within this context, state and regional actors lacked a flexible funding mechanism to support locally identified workforce solutions.

RWIP was created to address this gap. As an interviewee explained, regional partners were bringing forward innovative workforce solutions but the state government “*didn't have a*

mechanism” to support them. When American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds became available, Governor Doug Burgum solicited input from state agencies, and the Workforce Development Council recommended the RWIP grant model. **The program reflected strong executive and industry backing—as one interviewee noted, it was “a program that the Governor believed in” and part of both his executive budget and the Council's recommendations, which “carried a lot of weight” in the legislature** enabling a \$15 million appropriation in 2021.

The program was grounded in the premise that workforce needs differ across regions and are best defined locally. The March 2022 grant guidance emphasized that a “one size fits all approach is unrealistic.”¹⁰ Regional leaders stressed the importance of trusting those “*closest to the workforce problem*” to design solutions aligned with local labor markets.

This case study examines how RWIP translated that locally-driven philosophy into program design. Administered by the Department of Commerce (DOC), RWIP evolved across three funding rounds: from an initial \$15M in ARPA funds, to \$12.5M in state general funds, to \$5M from the Strategic Investment and Improvements Fund (SIIF). Across these phases, its core purpose remained consistent: to provide flexible funding that enabled regions to pursue workforce solutions they otherwise could not resource on their own. The sections that follow examine how that model was designed, governed, measured, and sustained over time.

Program Design and Delivery

Program Overview

RWIP provides competitive grants to regional entities including economic development organizations, cities, chambers, and regional councils. RWIP evolved across three phases (Table 2). In Phase 1, grants addressed workforce challenges across seven broad categories: training, infrastructure, child care, career coaching, talent attraction, housing, and capital investments.¹¹ In Phase 2, the scope of funding narrowed to four of the seven categories.¹² In Phase 3, now under the direction of Governor Kelly Armstrong, RWIP changed more dramatically, shifting to a targeted model focused on sector strategy development and execution.¹³

The DOC adapted the program in response to implementation challenges and grantee feedback. Early design choices, such as requiring a single, coordinated regional application, were later removed, while other shifts narrowed the scope of eligible activities and increased emphasis on employer engagement. These changes were often responsive to what the DOC was learning in real time, but they also created some uncertainty for grantees. As one regional intermediary described, partners spent months preparing for Round 3 based on prior expectations, only to find their proposed project was no longer eligible and had to be scrapped. This reflects a broader tradeoff:

iteration strengthened program design but made it more difficult for grantees to plan and develop projects in advance.

The remainder of this section examines three core dimensions of RWIP's design (1) collaboration and local discretion, (2) fairness and access, and (3) support for first-time and rural grantees, and analyzes how these elements influenced implementation across regions.

Designing for Collaboration and Local Discretion

The regional point of contact (POC) requirement was intended to foster collaboration within regions around locally-defined workforce priorities.

In Phase 1, RWIP required each of North Dakota's eight planning regions to designate a POC responsible for coordinating and submitting a bundled regional application. This structure was intended to create an environment in which stakeholders collaborated rather than competed and developed a shared understanding of regional workforce needs, while also reducing administrative burden by consolidating potential applications into eight coordinated submissions representing the most pressing regional priorities.

The DOC did not prescribe which organization should serve as the POC or how regions should organize themselves. Instead, regions were expected to identify a lead entity based on local capacity. The POC functioned primarily as a convener and individual grantees were ultimately responsible for implementation.

In practice, this process expanded regional networks beyond existing relationships; one regional coordinator noted that roughly half of the organizations that they engaged through RWIP planning were new partners. Furthermore, coordinating a single application required stakeholders to look outside their "own wheelhouse" and engage across sectors and geographies. While this coordination required

Table 2: **Evolution of RWIP Design Across Funding Rounds**

Across all three rounds, RWIP retained population-based regional funding allocations and a 25% match requirement

Round	Funding Source & Timing	Eligible Projects	Application Structure & Collaboration Requirements
Phase 1	<p>\$15M (ARPA) appropriated in November 2021;</p> <p>Initial funding distributed to grantees by November/December 2022;</p> <p>DOC requested carryover extensions from the legislature to allow grantees to use funds until the end of the next biennium (June 2025)</p>	<p>Seven categories: training, infrastructure, child care, career coaching, capital investments, talent attraction, housing</p>	<p>One bundled application per region through a regional Point of Contact (POC)</p>
Phase 2	<p>\$12.5M (General Funds) appropriated in July 2023;</p> <p>Initial funding distributed to grantees by February 2024;</p> <p>DOC requested carryover extensions from the legislature to allow grantees to use funds until the end of the next biennium (June 2027)</p>	<p>Narrowed to four categories with funding caps based on the category including: talent attraction (\$250k), talent retention (\$250k), infrastructure such as child care center expansion (\$500k), and capital investments (\$500k);</p> <p>Initially removed child care as eligible but reinstated based on feedback</p>	<p>Individual applications rather than one bundled regional application;</p> <p>DOC opened six applications windows, allowing grantees to apply until funds were expended;</p> <p>Projects now competed within regions but were encouraged to submit applications for programs that would broadly benefit the region</p>
Phase 3	<p>\$5M (SIIF) appropriated in July 2025;</p> <p>Initial Funding distributed to grantees by January 2026;</p> <p>Grantees are currently expected to use funds by the end of the biennium (June 2027)</p>	<p>Redesigned project scope to only allow for sector-strategy planning or implementation, with a \$150k funding cap per grantee</p>	<p>Similar to Phase 2 but applications now also require industry partners to serve as collaborators</p>

Source: Authors' analysis based on interviews and program documents.

substantial effort, in some regions it led to more cohesive, community-informed priority-setting and stronger regional alignment. In one region, even after the requirement to coordinate was removed, stakeholders continued to collaborate: the largest city provided grant-writing support for rural communities, the region developed a unified application that moved beyond a collection of individual projects toward a shared, strategic regional approach to workforce development,

and partners pooled match funds across jurisdictions. As one grantee noted, *“when rural agencies are strengthened, the metro region is also strengthened,”* reflecting a shift from a competitive mindset toward one that recognized their interdependence.

At the same time, the coordination requirement was a significant operational lift and did not function uniformly across regions. Convening

partners, aligning priorities, and assembling bundled applications required substantial time and capacity, and was particularly taxing in rural areas with limited staff resources. In practice, coordination often defaulted to organizations in larger cities with greater administrative capacity, raising questions about how the model functioned in regions without a clear lead entity. The structure also introduced confusion around roles and reporting responsibilities. As a result, while the POC application model succeeded in creating conditions for collaboration in some regions, it also introduced administrative complexity and uneven implementation, and the bundled regional application requirement was ultimately removed after Phase 1.

The shift to a sector strategy and industry partner requirement was intended to foster strategic collaboration with industry while preserving local discretion.

In Phase 3, RWIP required applicants to develop or implement a sector strategy in partnership with multiple employers. This shift reflected the DOC's learning from prior rounds that some grantees lacked an overarching strategy for their programs. In response, **the DOC introduced the sector strategy requirement as a way to “put industry truly in the driver's seat” and support the development of more comprehensive, employer-informed plans.** Grantees reflected that requiring employer participation meant industry partners were *“part of the plan, part of the solution.”*

At the same time, the shift introduced a steep learning curve and, in some cases, resistance from applicants and employers. For many regions, formal sector strategy planning was unfamiliar and stakeholders were hesitant to invest in planning activities without immediate implementation funding. As one interviewee noted, *“when you say the word ‘study’ to anybody in the state of North Dakota, they hate it,”* underscoring reluctance among stakeholders to invest limited resources in planning activities perceived as

delaying action; another interviewee described applicants' skepticism about hiring consultants to *“tell them what they already know.”* While the shift narrowed eligible activities, it did not eliminate local discretion: the state did not prescribe which sectors regions should prioritize, and applicants retained authority to define their focus areas based on local conditions. As one grantee noted, the state was not telling regions *“what to do”* but rather *“how to do it.”*

Providing broad discretion to regions gave them the ability to design creative workforce solutions tailored to their regional needs.

In one particularly rural region, RWIP funded the Mobile Career Exploration Classroom (MCEC), a van outfitted as a career counseling office that reaches schools with limited to no career counseling staff and helps schools better use existing state-funded career resources. In another community, RWIP supported a model that addressed both child care access and the child care workforce pipeline by placing a child care center within a career and technical school, where students work toward Child Development Associate credentials while gaining hands-on experience. This also helped the school attract and retain teachers who had struggled to find child care. RWIP also funded a manufacturing and unmanned aircraft systems talent attraction strategy with subsequent investments in housing and sector-specific career and technical education programs to support both incoming workers and the local pipeline. Such examples underscore how RWIP's broad discretion gave regions the ability to fund their unique workforce needs.

Desinging Funding to Promote Fairness, Shared Investment, and Access

Funding caps ensured resources were distributed across all regions of the state.

From its inception, RWIP reserved funding for each of North Dakota's eight planning regions based on population. These eight regions correspond to the Economic Development Districts designated by the U.S. Economic Development Administration.¹⁴ As noted in the grant guidance, this approach was intended to ensure "equitable access to [the] grant dollars"¹⁵ and prevent larger cities from absorbing a disproportionate share of funding. In Phase 2 and 3, funding caps per project further limited the size of individual awards, reinforcing distribution within regions and preventing funds from concentrating in a small number of large projects.

This approach was novel within the state and had downstream effects on program visibility.

Because projects were distributed across all regions, legislators were often already familiar with RWIP-funded initiatives in their districts, which helped build support during renewal discussions.

"RWIP was supporting [legislators'] communities, their districts...we were able to localize the project. They were seeing this—they were driving past that daycare every day on their way to work. Their students in career and technical education programs are experiencing the work that we're funding...That really helped get buy-in from the decision makers determining if and how much funding we would receive."

Interviewee

The 25% match requirement encouraged local investment and community buy-in while aiming to remain accessible.

RWIP required grantees to provide a 25% local match, a statutory requirement intended to ensure local commitment while remaining feasible for smaller or rural applicants. **While North Dakota programs typically require a 1:1 match, the reduced 1:4 ratio lowered barriers to participation**

while maintaining the expectation—important to legislators—that communities have "skin in the game." Grantee perspectives on this threshold were mixed: one interviewee expressed that the percent felt just right, noting that higher match requirements would have prevented some projects from moving forward, while others emphasized that even a 25% match was difficult for rural communities with limited fundraising capacity.

In practice, the match requirement leveraged substantial additional investment. As of August 2025, RWIP awarded approximately \$27 million in grants alongside more than \$13 million in local match, indicating that some projects attracted funding well beyond the minimum requirement.¹⁶

Milestone-based disbursement reduced upfront financial barriers to participation.

To reduce upfront financial barriers, the DOC structured RWIP as a milestone-based disbursement rather than a reimbursement model, providing initial funds at contract execution and additional payments tied to progress. This approach recognized that many rural and nonprofit entities could not absorb large upfront costs or wait for reimbursement. **In practice, it made participation more feasible for applicants with limited cash flow**—for example, child care providers that needed upfront capital to hire staff or begin construction before generating revenue.

Supporting First-Time and Rural Grantees through Program Design and Delivery Tools

Multiple funding rounds created opportunities for iterative improvement.

Beginning in Phase 2, RWIP introduced multiple application windows, allowing applicants to revise and resubmit proposals rather than treating the process as a single competitive round. **This design was particularly important for rural and first-time**

applicants with limited grant-writing experience, enabling them to improve applications over time without lowering expectations for quality. However, it increased administrative demands on the small, capacity-constrained DOC team. The process became a “constant” cycle of opening, reviewing, and awarding applications, requiring sustained staff capacity.

Application structure improved clarity and accessibility for first-time applicants.

Recognizing that many RWIP applicants were first-time grant writers, **the DOC designed the scoring system to be intentionally simple:** “*you either didn’t meet expectations, met expectations, or exceeded,*” so applicants could clearly understand how proposals were evaluated and where to focus improvements for resubmission. In practice, this clarity was reinforced through direct follow-up with applicants; an interviewee described how the DOC staff were “*just wonderful to work with*” because they so clearly communicated what additional materials were needed and how to revise submissions.

Beginning in Phase 2, RWIP also evolved from an open-ended email submission process to a structured, portal-based system with defined character limits, standardizing applications and clarifying expectations. Early Phase 1 submissions varied widely in length and detail, with some regions submitting only a few pages and others submitting more than 100 pages, creating uncertainty about expectations and effort. The newly structured system provided clearer guidance, but also increased the need for technical support for some applicants.

The DOC designed tools to support first-time and rural applicants at scale while preserving fairness in a competitive process.

The DOC developed technical assistance tools, including FAQs, IT support, and webinars, which were “*important to supporting*” first-time

applicants across a large, rural state. For example, limited access to tools like Zoom made it difficult to walk through forms or spreadsheets in real time, so the DOC created recorded webinars to visually demonstrate expectations. Together, these tools reduced administrative burden while ensuring consistent guidance across applicants.

These supports were designed to maintain the integrity of a competitive process. As one stakeholder explained, the DOC aimed to provide general guidance while avoiding project-specific direction that could advantage individual applicants. However, this emphasis on neutrality resulted in some applicants feeling that they were left to “*try and see,*” resulting in additional rounds of revision.

Governance and Coordination

RWIP within the North Dakota Workforce Ecosystem

RWIP is administered by the DOC’s Workforce Development Division, which operates within a broader workforce ecosystem that includes more than 80 programs across nine agencies and two external partners.¹⁷ As described in the state’s workforce ecosystem assessment, RWIP is situated within an ecosystem that is both extensive and relationally coordinated, but not fully integrated.¹⁸ The state offers a wide range of workforce programs, though interviewees in the workforce ecosystem assessment expressed a desire for greater alignment, clearer leadership, and improved coordination across programs.¹⁹ Within this context, RWIP governance incorporated mechanisms to ensure alignment at the program level, including a process requiring gubernatorial review and approval of recommended awards. Under this approach, projects that met scoring criteria were submitted to the Governor’s Office prior to final approval, adding an additional layer of oversight.

DOC Centralized Authority and Program Control

The DOC exercised authority not only over funding decisions but over the core design, administration, and evolution of RWIP. The DOC was responsible for developing application guidance, conducting applicant education sessions, reviewing and scoring applications, issuing awards, overseeing reporting, providing technical assistance, and monitoring project implementation. RWIP was launched and initially administered by a limited number of staff representing “*an extremely heavy lift on top of other duties.*” Ultimately, the program was implemented primarily by one staff member who, across Round 1 and 2, managed 194 applications and 115 grantees.

Within this context, application review was initially designed to include cross-agency participation. Early review processes incorporated representatives from the Workforce Development Council and Job Service North Dakota, to bring multiple perspectives into funding decisions. However, this approach proved difficult to sustain given the time demands, and application review was ultimately conducted within the DOC. This shift is consistent with broader ecosystem findings that workforce staff across agencies are stretched across multiple responsibilities and frequently participate in overlapping coordination structures,²⁰ which may limit the feasibility of sustained cross-agency coordination efforts.

Distributed Execution Through Regional and Quasi-Governmental Actors

In contrast to the clearly defined role of the DOC, RWIP relied on a set of regional and intermediary actors whose roles were not formally specified but emerged during implementation. These actors played important roles in coordinating applications, supporting applicants, and shaping how the program operated on the ground.

In Phase 1, RWIP did not define which entity should lead regional coordination; many regions relied on

existing organizations, such as regional councils or economic development organizations, to serve as coordinators. These entities were not formally designated by the state but stepped into the role based on their existing relationships and regional presence. **This resulted in regions developing their own approaches to governance and coordination.** As described in the Program Design and Delivery section, in some regions, this model facilitated meaningful collaboration and in others it introduced coordination challenges.

In addition to regional coordinators, an intermediary organization, Child Care Aware (CCA), also played a role in supporting child care applicants. Child care projects differed from many other RWIP investments in that a large share of applicants were first-time grantees operating outside of traditional state workforce systems. As a result, these applicants often required additional support to develop viable proposals and navigate regulatory requirements. CCA is North Dakota’s child care resource and referral organization, contracted by the North Dakota Department of Health and Human Services. Although not formally designated as an implementation partner, CCA served a critical role by providing technical assistance to applicants throughout the application and implementation process. This included reviewing applications before they were submitted, assisting with application revisions, supplying data, designing a survey so applicants could collect additional data, advising on licensing and budgeting requirements, and serving as a liaison between child care providers and the DOC. CCA staff even sat in during RWIP applicant interviews to help answer technical questions (e.g., licensing, zoning, fire codes, etc.).

This support had immediate effects on program implementation. It helped child care providers navigate the application and implementation process and reduced administrative burden on the DOC by filtering and responding to applicant questions through a knowledgeable intermediary. **It also raises a longer-term question about whether this type of support influences project sustainability.** By working with CCA, providers engaged in more structured planning around staffing,

licensing, financing, and data use. While long-term outcomes have not been assessed, stakeholders suggested that this level of support may contribute to stronger operational foundations for child care providers.

The role played by CCA illustrates how external partners can support the implementation of state workforce programs, particularly in areas requiring specialized knowledge. Because RWIP was designed to be locally driven, the state could not fully anticipate which project categories would generate the greatest demand. In this case, CCA was able to respond to that demand by providing targeted support to child care applicants, helping to translate state funding into implementable projects.

Metrics, Reporting, and Data Use

Locally Defined Metrics

Because RWIP funded a wide range of project types—from child care expansion to talent attraction campaigns—the DOC required grantees to define their own milestones and success metrics rather than imposing a uniform framework. Reporting requirements included financial

documentation, and narrative updates including progress toward project-specific milestones, but the content of those milestones was determined by each grantee. This approach recognized that projects varied too widely to support a single set of standardized measures and allowed grantees to define metrics aligned with their specific activities. In practice, this produced a wide range of reported outcomes. For example, as summarized in Table 3, some projects tracked engagement through trade show interactions or website traffic, while others measured capacity, such as the number of interns supported, child care slots created, or employees hired.

One grantee noted that this model increased local ownership and allowed grantees to select metrics that were feasible to track and meaningful for their projects. At the same time, it limited comparability across projects. As one interviewee reflected, **the variation in project types and metrics made it difficult to compare projects and to determine RWIP’s return on investment.** Within this context, while data was collected consistently at the project level, it was not aggregated into a centralized, public-facing view of program outcomes. Public reporting largely consists of lists of funded projects and award amounts, with limited synthesis across projects or regions.

Table 3: **Examples of Self-Selected Metrics**

Project Type	Output and Outcome Metrics
Talent attraction activities	Output Metrics: Trade show engagements; Visitor guides distributed; YouTube video views; Website visitors; Geographic distribution of visitors; Job postings; Resumes
Career exposure	Output Metrics: Students engaged in programming and mentorship Outcome Metrics: Interns hired
Workplace quality / Employee well-being	Output Metrics: Workers engaged by workplace well-being and community connection initiatives
Childcare	Output Metrics: Childcare slots created Outcome Metrics: Childcare slots filled; Families impacted; Childcare employees hired

Source: Authors’ analysis based on interviews and program documents.

Knowledge Sharing

Interviewees discussed unique and creative solutions that emerged from RWIP that were shared with others in the state. However, these insights were shared on an ad hoc basis rather than through a formalized system for cross-project learning. There was no structured mechanism for systematically sharing data, comparing approaches, or identifying best practices across regions. This pattern reflects a broader characteristic of North Dakota's workforce ecosystem; the statewide workforce assessment identified improved data and knowledge sharing across programs as an opportunity for the state.²¹

Timing of Outcomes

Measurable outcomes were often not available when funding decisions were being considered by the legislature for two primary reasons: (1) RWIP awards were distributed later than a typical grant program and (2) many projects, especially infrastructure investments, required extra time to implement and thus were not completed before the end of the biennium. Consequently, discussions on funding renewal were often focused on projected rather than realized outcomes.

Funding and Sustainability

Catalytic ARPA Funds

RWIP was initially funded with \$15 million in ARPA funds in November 2021, followed by \$12.5 million in state general funds for the 2023 biennium, and most recently a \$5 million allocation in SIF funds for the 2025 biennium.²²

The availability of flexible federal funding created a one-time opportunity to pilot a new model centered on locally driven solutions. The legislature's willingness to support the program, despite having *"never done anything like this before,"* suggests that ARPA funding helped reduce the perceived risk of launching a novel approach. RWIP's early traction then helped legitimize this model and led to continued state investment, illustrating how

flexible federal funding can catalyze state-level innovation.

Addressing Funding Gaps

At the same time, RWIP's design revealed underlying gaps in the state's workforce funding landscape. Because the program did not prescribe sectors and included a broad range of project types, regions independently identified their most pressing workforce challenges. Across regions, child care infrastructure consistently emerged as a top priority—even though it was not explicitly prioritized over other project categories in program design—indicating a statewide gap in workforce-supporting infrastructure.

This convergence was driven by both labor market conditions and program flexibility. In many communities, limited access to child care constrained workforce participation, reinforcing the idea that *"if you don't have child care, you just can't put people back into the workforce."* **RWIP's scale and flexibility enabled child care infrastructure investments that were not feasible through existing, more limited funding streams. Rather than duplicating state funded programs, RWIP filled gaps existing funding could not address.** As funding became more constrained and eligibility narrowed, the DOC also worked to ensure applicants did not interpret these changes as a lack of support. The DOC directed applicants via the grant webpage to alternative funding sources for projects that RWIP could no longer fund,²³ while focusing RWIP resources on a separate funding gap: sector strategy development and implementation.

Sustainability

Because each allocation was non-recurring, the DOC required grantees to plan for long-term sustainability from the outset. This positioned RWIP as a catalytic investment tool rather than an ongoing funding source. Among those interviewed, this appeared to work best when funds were used for upfront or capacity-building costs rather than ongoing operations. For example,

some grantees used RWIP funds to cover initial capital investments, such as equipment or facility upgrades, while relying on local partners or earned revenue to sustain ongoing operations. In other cases, RWIP funding enabled projects to reach a scale that allowed them to secure additional financing, particularly in areas like child care infrastructure where upfront capital was a barrier to expansion.

While this structure supported project-level sustainability, the program itself now faces similar pressures. As appropriations declined, from \$15 million to \$12.5 million to \$5 million, the DOC began reassessing what RWIP could realistically support. Smaller funding levels made it difficult to continue large-scale, capital-intensive projects, prompting a shift toward more targeted and strategic uses of funds, resulting in the employer-driven sector strategies framing of Phase 3.

Looking ahead, RWIP's future design remains undetermined. State leaders have indicated that while the program remains a priority, its structure may need to evolve in response to ongoing fiscal constraints. **This trajectory highlights a broader lesson for states: while flexible federal funding can catalyze new programs, sustaining those programs requires states to define the program's long-term role.** The sustainability challenge extends beyond individual grantees to the program itself, as initiatives launched with one-time funding must evolve their design to remain viable under tighter fiscal conditions.

Conclusion

RWIP's most immediate impact was increasing regions' capacity to act on locally identified workforce priorities. As one grantee reflected, *"RWIP gave us the opportunity to implement innovative ideas that we had, but could not have resourced as a region."* In many cases, these investments addressed foundational workforce constraints, particularly child care, that directly affected labor force participation. To date, RWIP funding has supported the creation of 2,589 new child care slots and 289 new child care workers across 58 facilities statewide. Overall, RWIP-funded programs have engaged 6,390 students and workers, including in areas such as child care, training, talent attraction and retention, and career navigation, among others.

Beyond individual projects, RWIP contributed to more durable shifts in how some regions coordinate and approach workforce development. In several regions, the program catalyzed new relationships that persisted beyond the grant itself, including stronger collaboration between urban and rural communities and a growing recognition of regional interdependence. The program also introduced many new stakeholders to state funding processes, potentially expanding long-term engagement with the state workforce system. While these changes were uneven across regions, they suggest that RWIP's most lasting impact may lie not only in what it funded, but in how it reshaped regional collaboration, priorities, and participation in the state's workforce ecosystem.

Minnesota: Drive for 5

Introduction



Highlights

- **Drive for 5 represents a major state investment in workforce development across five high-growth occupational categories**, building structured training-to-employment pipelines aligned with Minnesota’s labor market needs.
- **The initiative was designed to incentivize grantees to establish robust, well-defined sector partnerships**, particularly with employers, community-based organizations, and educational providers.
- **Minnesota’s Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) demonstrated an adaptive implementation approach**, refining program design in response to early implementation lessons.
- **Drive for 5 has strengthened workforce system alignment** beyond individual grants, by informing state and regional WIOA planning and connecting partners to broader DEED resources.
- **Sustaining and scaling the model** may require navigating tradeoffs between program intensity and reach.

In the summer of 2023, nearly 200,000 jobs remained unfilled in Minnesota, even as the state continued to recover jobs lost during the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁴ **To address this challenge, Governor Tim Walz and the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) launched Drive for 5 to connect jobseekers to in-demand careers that lead to family-sustaining wages in five high-growth occupational categories: the caring professions, education/professional services, manufacturing, technology, and the trades.**

Drive for 5 complements existing federal and state workforce efforts, including WIOA, the Target Populations Grant, and the Child Care Economic Development Program.²⁵ With \$20 million appropriated for the initiative during the 2023 biennium and an additional \$12 million appropriated during the 2025 biennium, Drive for 5 fully launched its first round of funding (Round 1) in 2024 and is in the process of implementing its second

round of funding (Round 2). Working alongside the Governor’s Office, the Governor’s Workforce Development Board, and numerous community-based partners, DEED developed a three-pronged model: competitive grants to training providers, competitive grants to local chambers of commerce and trade associations, and dedicated funding to a new state-managed employer engagement specialist team.

Drive for 5 has two primary goals developed in alignment with the U.S. Department of Labor’s and Department of Commerce’s Good Jobs Principles. First, it aims to enroll individuals in training programs that lead to jobs paying family-sustaining wages, originally defined as \$25 per hour (approximately \$50,000 annually). Second, it seeks to strengthen pathways from training to employment by building hiring pipelines that connect participants to jobs in their field of training.²⁶ This case study examines how the initiative was strategically designed, implemented, governed, and evaluated.

While Drive for 5 spans five occupational categories, the sector-specific analysis focuses primarily on manufacturing.

Program Design and Delivery

Engaging Employers to Support Trainees

Interviewees noted that a key distinction between Drive for 5 and other Minnesota state-funded training grants is its strong emphasis on employer engagement to support participant placement and retention. As one interviewee noted, Minnesota “can train one thousand people, but if [only] five people get a job, those trainings aren’t worth anything.” This job outcomes-driven and employer-centered theory of change is core to the program design, as evidenced by the three groups it funded and the efforts put into employer partnership recruitment.

Drive for 5 funds three groups that work closely with employers to support training and job placement.

Drive for 5 relies on three types of organizations to deliver training and support job placement: training providers, intermediaries, and employer engagement specialists at American Job Centers. Training providers and intermediaries—including chambers of commerce and trade associations—can receive training grants, while intermediaries may also receive job placement grants. Employer engagement specialists are funded separately through a non-competitive process.

Training providers serve as the primary delivery mechanism for workforce services. Eligible providers include educational institutions, community-based organizations, labor organizations, government entities, chambers of commerce, and trade associations. These organizations partner with employers to deliver workforce development services, paid work-based learning opportunities, and job placement and retention support.

Drive for 5 also funds workforce intermediaries, primarily chambers of commerce and trade associations, to leverage their existing employer networks. These organizations support employer recruitment, job opening development, candidate matching, and other activities intended to facilitate the placement of program graduates.

Finally, DEED allocates non-competitive funding to employer engagement specialists housed within WIOA American Job Centers. These specialists work directly with employers in the five target sectors to identify workforce needs, connect employers with Drive for 5 grantees, and link businesses to other workforce resources and state services.

Figure 2 shows how DEED divided Drive for 5 funds among the three groups across Rounds 1 and 2. While training providers consistently received the majority of funds, the percent of funds allocated to the employer engagement specialists and to chambers of commerce and trade associations increased in Round 2, reflecting DEED’s desire to engage employers who were not already part of a training grantee partnership.

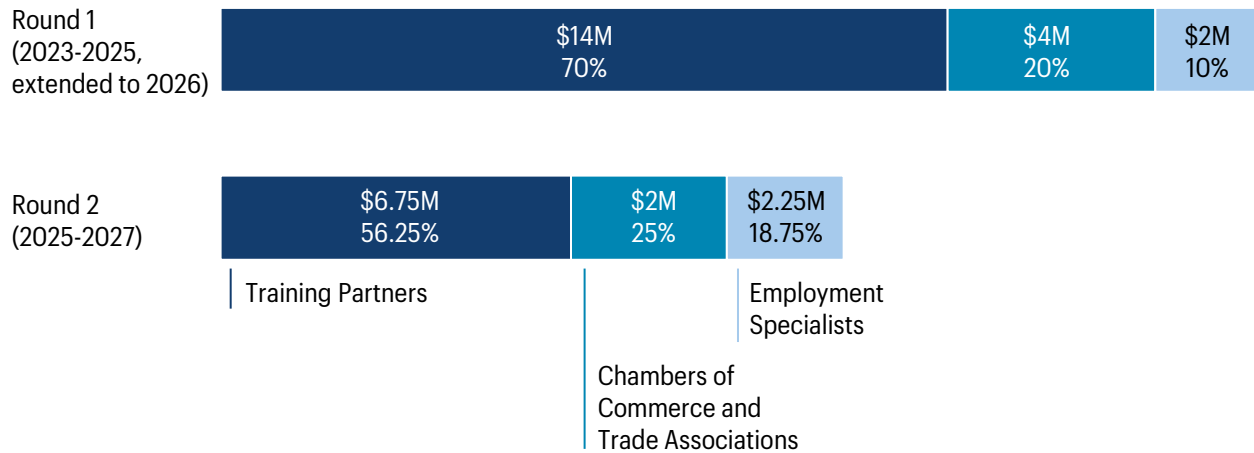
Partnership requirements facilitate employer alignment and buy-in.

In their grant applications, training and job placement grantees must submit partnership plans describing how they will collaborate with employers to deliver program services. Training grantees must also demonstrate how they will coordinate with educational institutions and workforce development organizations, such as community-based organizations and local workforce development boards. These requirements reflect the program’s core premise that successful training and placement outcomes depend on coordination across employers, training providers, and workforce organizations throughout program delivery, rather than engagement occurring only after participants complete training.

To reinforce this expectation, DEED embedded employer engagement directly into grant scoring criteria. In Round 1, the RFP established two tiers

Figure 2: **Drive for 5 Funding Allocations in Round 1 and Round 2**

Funding allocation by round (\$M and % of total)



Source: Authors’ analysis based on program documents.²⁷

of employer engagement, silver and gold, that reflected the depth of employer commitment. Silver-level partners were expected to support training activities through services such as mock interviews, facility tours, guest speakers, curriculum input, and at least one work-based learning opportunity. Gold-level partners committed to these same activities while also agreeing to hire program graduates or prioritize them for open positions. By distinguishing between levels of employer involvement, DEED encouraged partnerships that extended beyond training delivery and created clearer pathways to employment.²⁸

In practice, these requirements encouraged the development of strong employer partnerships but also tended to favor applicants with preexisting training-to-employer pipelines. Those organizations were better positioned to meet the initiative’s training, placement, and retention expectations because they had already established the trust, coordination mechanisms, and hiring pathways needed to support successful outcomes.²⁹

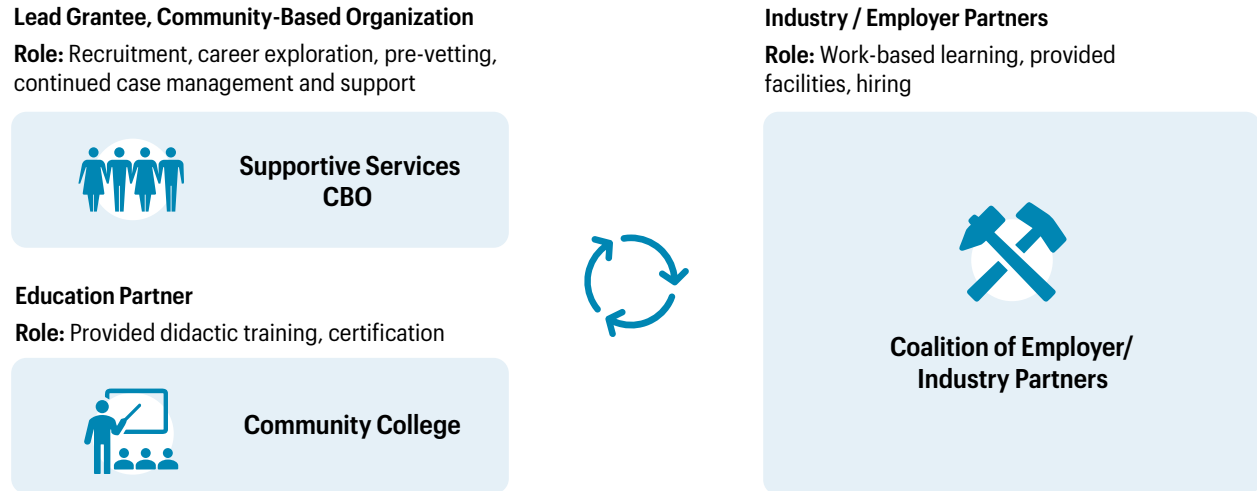
As a result, in some cases, Drive for 5 functioned as a continuation and expansion of partnerships developed through previous grant collaborations. Within the manufacturing sector, for example, a consortium of manufacturers and local organiza-

tions that had previously received CHIPS funding co-designed a Drive for 5 pre-apprenticeship program. In this partnership (Figure 3), a community-based organization served as the lead grantee and provided workforce readiness training and wraparound support, an educational institution delivered technical training culminating in an industry-recognized credential, and employer partners offered paid work-based learning opportunities and hired program graduates.

In Round 1, emphasis on employer engagement created overlapping roles across funded partners.

Some training grantees developed “closed-loop” training-to-hiring models with employer partners that successfully facilitated job placement. As a result, chambers of commerce and trade associations that received job placement grants sometimes performed functions that overlapped with activities already occurring within training partnerships. Interviewees also noted similarities between the roles of chambers of commerce and trade associations and employer engagement specialists, both of which focused on employer outreach and job placement. In response, employer engagement specialists have worked to

Figure 3: **An Example of a Drive for 5 Training Grantee Partnership**



Source: Authors' summary based on interviews.

more clearly differentiate their role by emphasizing connections between employers and the broader workforce development ecosystem.

DEED expanded eligible activities and adapted the scoring criteria to better reflect the contributions of chambers of commerce and trade associations.

Round 1 revealed that, while chambers of commerce and trade associations could support immediate hiring, their unique value-add was in supporting a wider set of workforce development activities. As a result, DEED expanded the range of permissible activities to include those focused on retention and career advancement. For example, one chamber of commerce grantee leveraged its employer network to work with healthcare systems and community colleges to offer three services focused on job retention and career advancement: professional skills development focused on communication, job-readiness, and teamwork; career exploration days focused on lateral and career advancement opportunities; and targeted upskilling through community college programming.

In Round 2, DEED also adapted the scoring criteria to better reflect the diverse contributions of chambers of commerce and trade associations.

Interviewees noted that these intermediaries played a critical role in convening employers, hosting job fairs, and facilitating professional development and industry engagement, even when those activities did not translate directly into hiring outcomes. Recognizing that these activities contribute to long-term employer engagement and system-building, DEED revised the Round 2 RFP to better reflect these activities. Whereas Round 1 scoring emphasized program services and partnership structures for both training and placement applicants, Round 2 introduced greater flexibility by assigning additional weight to broader organizational and implementation factors (Figure 4).³⁰ Those included organizational experience, program implementation workplans, community engagement strategies, and performance and evaluation capacity. This shift allowed grantees to leverage their comparative strengths while maintaining alignment with the initiative's overall workforce development objectives.

Target Population

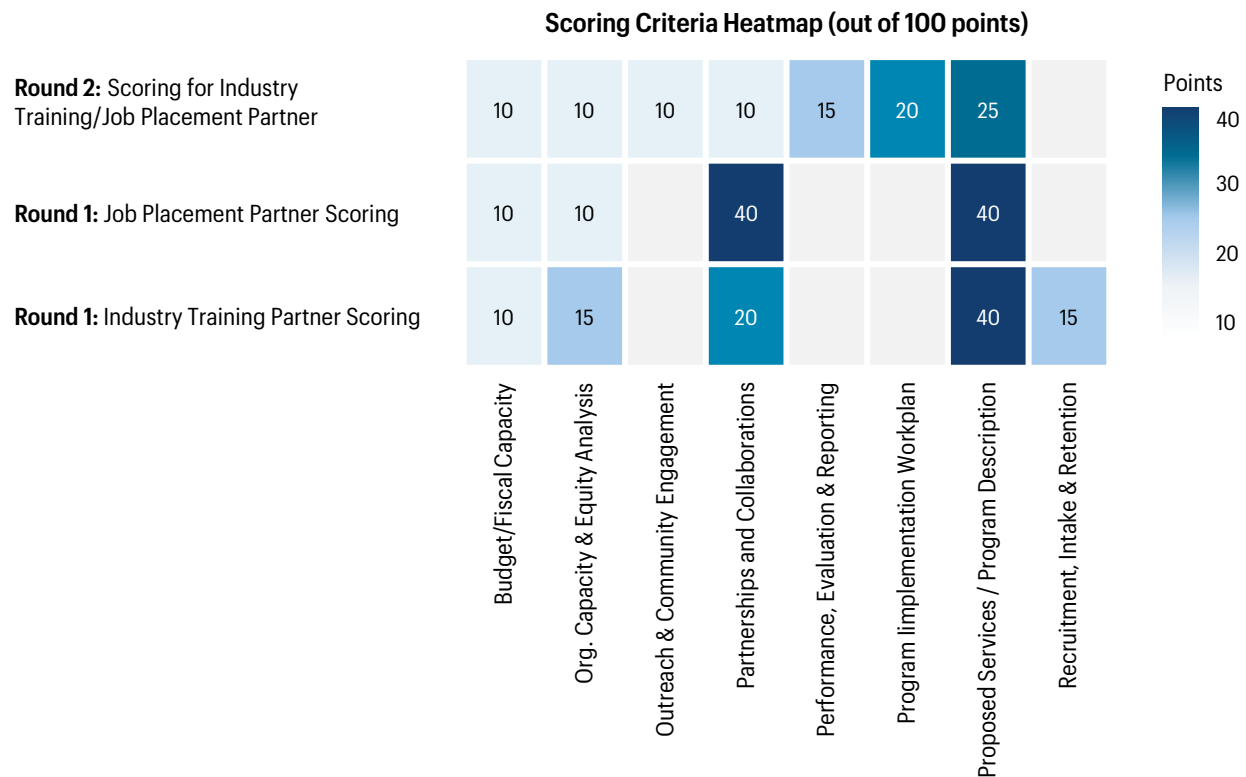
Participants who successfully completed training often entered the program with fewer barriers to employment.

One of DEED’s core priorities is “ensuring that training participants with the most significant barriers to employment have equitable access to training and employment opportunities.”³¹

Drive for 5 eligibility criteria required grantees to serve adults aged 18 and older facing at least one barrier to employment, including individuals from communities of color; those experiencing housing instability or involvement with the criminal justice system; individuals without a high school diploma; individuals with disabilities; individuals with limited English proficiency; and those earning at or below 200% of the federal poverty level.³² However, grantees reported challenges in recruiting participants who met certain eligibility criteria, particularly the income requirement. One interviewee explained that challenges in recruiting eligible populations delayed planned programming because they were “struggling to find people.”

Recruitment challenges were compounded by a broader implementation tension between serving participants with significant barriers to employment and achieving the program’s wage and placement targets. While grantees sought to serve individuals with the highest levels of need, those individuals often required additional support and faced greater challenges completing training and securing employment. As a result, interviewees observed that participants who were most successful in achieving wage and placement targets often entered the program with fewer barriers to employment. Participants with more complex needs were more likely to exit the program before completion or struggle to persist through training, despite grantees’ efforts to provide wraparound support. As a result, the participant profile for those who successfully completed Drive for 5 training more closely resembled that of dislocated worker populations commonly served through

Figure 4: Heatmap showing priority scoring for competitively procured Drive for 5 partners



Source: Authors’ summary based on DEED’s Requests for Proposals.

WIOA training programs, rather than populations typically served by more intensive WIOA services, such as adults requiring remedial education. Several participants who successfully completed their training and secured employment had prior college experience or professional licensure obtained outside the United States, further illustrating that many successful participants entered the program with existing skills, credentials, or work-related experience.

Governance and Coordination

In Minnesota, many workforce development services are centralized within DEED. For example, DEED oversees WIOA Titles I, III, and IV and DEED provides staff and support to the Governor's Workforce Development Board.³³ DEED also has substantial experience designing and administering competitive grants. One interviewee noted that the agency is responsible for managing roughly seven to eleven RFPs every two years. **Drawing on its knowledge of the workforce ecosystem and prior grantmaking experience, DEED developed and submitted the Drive for 5 proposal to Governor Walz.** To secure legislative funding, the agency needed support from community members, industry stakeholders, and legislators, which it built through extensive outreach and stakeholder engagement during the legislative session. Once the program was approved and funding was allocated, an interviewee reflected that DEED was "*obviously*" selected as the lead agency given its work in the space.

As the lead agency, DEED was responsible for the overall governance and coordination of Drive for 5, including developing the RFP, soliciting training partners, evaluating proposals, managing contracts, and providing continued project management. This end-to-end engagement allowed DEED to maintain significant control over the program design and implementation. However, it also created a large administrative burden as the program was primarily managed by two staff members.

DEED also leverages the Governor's Workforce Development Board to provide ongoing guidance in sector-based planning. The Board established subcommittees aligned with each of the five target sectors to develop industry-specific workforce strategies that identify high-demand occupations, align and expand training programs, define career pathways with embedded work-based learning, and address barriers for targeted populations. This planning informs both Drive for 5 and broader state and regional WIOA planning efforts. In addition, DEED engages external stakeholders in the application review process by assembling "*community reviewers*" and staff from partner agencies to serve on review panels, leveraging their subject matter expertise to inform grantee selection.

The use of Minnesota's standard procurement processes slowed the rollout of Drive for 5.

After funding was authorized, DEED faced a compressed timeline to spend funds within the biennial cycle. A three-person team released the RFP in October 2023, after which they engaged in extensive community outreach, marketing, informational sessions, and weekly FAQs. Round 1 awardees were subsequently announced in January 2024 (Figure 5).³⁴

The contracting phase proved more time-consuming than DEED anticipated, as several dozen grantees required individual contracts and scopes of work to be approved by the Attorney General's office. One interviewee noted that these challenges also occurred in the context of a substantial expansion in workforce funding, with DEED managing a significant increase in appropriated resources relative to prior years. Round 1 contracts were not finalized until early summer 2024, reducing the implementation period for grantees to roughly one year and creating pressure on project timelines. One interviewee explained that the delay in contract execution forced them to compress curriculum delivery, leading to the elimination of weekly tutoring sessions, a critical wraparound support for trainees. Recognizing

Figure 5: **Timeline for Round 1 of Drive for 5**



Source: Authors' summary based on interviews and program documents.

these challenges, DEED requested and secured an extension from the legislature that allowed Round 1 grantees to continue spending down funds past the end of the biennium.

Metrics, Outcomes, and Data Collection

Metrics for training and job placement were clearly defined, while industry engagement and system-building were more difficult to quantify.

For training grantees, DEED tracked core performance metrics that aligned with standard workforce development measures, including those commonly used for WIOA programs. As detailed in Table 4, metrics included the number of participants served, training completions, and placed into unsubsidized employment.

However, outcomes associated with chambers of commerce and trade association grantees were less clearly defined. While these organizations were also expected to support job placements, a substantial portion of their work focused on activities such as coalition-building, career exploration, and convening industry partners through events and outreach. These upstream workforce development activities were critical to long-term employer engagement but were not easily captured through traditional performance metrics.

Similarly, metrics for assessing the impact of the employer engagement specialists were still being defined at the time of writing. Interviewees characterized the team's primary role as providing high-touch, or "white-glove," support to grantees by connecting training providers with employers. Because the nature and intensity of these engagements varied across partnerships, their contributions were more difficult to measure through conventional workforce performance indicators.

Preliminary Round 1 outcomes provide an early snapshot of participant progress through the training pipeline.

As of February 2026, in Round 1, half of all participants completed training, more than one third attained a credential, and about one fifth exited to unsubsidized training (Table 4). These outcomes are preliminary and do not reflect the remaining months of Round 1 implementation.

Performance-based incentives were one of the main mechanisms for driving outcomes and accountability.

Drive for 5 incorporates performance-based incentives as a primary mechanism for driving outcomes and accountability. To encourage not only training completion but also successful job placement and retention, DEED structured training grants so that 20% of each grant is held in escrow

Table 4: **Round 1 Drive for 5 Aggregate Outcomes as of February 2026**

Round 1 Outcomes as of February 2026

Total Participants Served	1,073
Total Participants Completed Training	491
Total Participants Attained Industry Specific Certificate/Credential	393
Total Participants Exited Program to Unsubsidized Employment	196
Total Participants Exited Program to Employment at or Above \$15 per Hour	127
Total Participants Exited Program to Employment in Training Industry	77
Total Participants Exited Program to Post—Secondary Education	3

Source: Authors’ summary based on program documents.

and tied to performance milestones.³⁵ In Round 1, 10% of each job placement grant was similarly held and tied to performance milestones.

Under this model, training grantees can draw down \$2,500 from the escrowed funds for each participant placed in a job that pays at least \$25 per hour in the industry for which the individual was trained. An additional \$2,500 payment is available if the participant remains employed for at least 90 days. In Round 1, job placement grantees could draw down \$1,000 for each new employer relationship that it facilitated with a training provider that resulted in the hire of a program graduate. However, this 10% performance-based incentive was removed because as previously noted, DEED recognized that intermediaries like chambers of commerce and trade associations provided valuable services that do not directly translate into immediate hiring outcomes.

While these incentives were designed to align funding with outcomes, many grantees found the requirements challenging to achieve, particularly within the compressed implementation timeline.

In response, DEED increased coordination and support for grantees by hosting quarterly meetings and webinars to provide technical assistance and

clarify performance expectations. In some cases, DEED amended contracts to extend the performance period, allowing grantees an additional year to complete program activities and meet outcome requirements.

DEED also adjusted the wage target. During Round 1, grantees in rural areas and those focused on the caring professions reported challenges meeting the \$25 per hour benchmark because entry-level wages typically fell below this threshold. In response, DEED lowered the wage target to \$23 per hour for positions located outside major urban centers.

Programs that linked pre-screened and supported participants to employers with defined hiring needs achieved the strongest outcomes.

For one employee, 80% of participants completed Drive for 5 training and 100% of participants who completed training were hired and, to date, retained. For another employee, 40% of participants completed training and all participants who completed training were similarly hired and retained. By comparison, an employer noted that the retention rate of hires for the same role recruited through a temporary staffing agency was 30%. For these employers, the value was not simply access to more applicants, but access to candidates who had been screened, supported, and prepared through structured training and placement, which eliminated the need to “*spend the time and money of going through ten people to get two.*”

The model also helped jobseekers access roles that otherwise would have been difficult to obtain independently. In one case, a Drive for 5 participant’s experience in a fabrication facility helped build specialized knowledge that, combined with prior credentials, enabled the individual to secure a supervisory role that typically would not be accessible to external candidates.

These limited examples should not be interpreted as representative of all employer experiences. However, they illustrate how Drive for 5 was able to

convert training completion into employment and retention when training was aligned with employer hiring needs.

Grantees use a shared system to track outcomes, but data-driven decision-making is still developing.

The Drive for 5 team used Workforce One, a custom, in-house web-based platform to track participant training and employment outcomes. Because all grantees reported outcomes through Workforce One, the system provided a consistent and unified mechanism for data collection and reporting across the initiative.

However, while data collection was standardized, the use of this data to generate insights and inform programmatic decision-making remains less developed. Both state administrators and grantees recognized the importance of leveraging data more effectively and using it to support future funding requests. As an interviewee explained, *“if we want to go back and ask for additional funding, we need to show that there’s been progress.”*

Some grantees have also begun exploring ways to use Workforce One data for internal analysis. For example, several organizations extracted data to develop custom visualizations and dashboards, although these efforts remained largely exploratory and have not yet been systematically integrated into program planning or improvement processes.

Participant data from Workforce One is also shared with DEED’s employer engagement specialists to support connections between participants and employers. However, this occurs through grantees rather than through direct system access. One interviewee noted that this structure requires employer engagement specialists to work closely with grantees to understand participant needs and program activities. While the lack of direct system data access may limit the timeliness and scope of data-driven coordination, another interviewee felt reassured that the delineation in data access helped intentionally separate the role of the grantee as a trainee-facing case manager and the

employer engagement specialists as an employer-facing facilitator.

Employers also do not have direct access to Workforce One and therefore cannot independently report retention or advancement outcomes to help inform programming. As a result, training providers, intermediaries, and employer engagement specialists must collect that data through follow-up with employers, increasing the administrative burden associated with outcome tracking.

Funding and Sustainability

As Drive for 5 enters Round 2, questions about long-term sustainability have become more prominent. While the program is state-funded, interviewees noted that broader declines in federal funding can have ripple effects across state workforce programs. Several interviewees argued that codifying Drive for 5 in statute would help ensure the program’s continued presence over time. Although statutory authorization would not require the legislature to appropriate funding, interviewees believed it would increase the likelihood of sustained support and make the program less vulnerable to elimination.

Based on employer interviews, early feedback suggests that while Drive for 5 delivers high-quality training, its resource-intensive model may present challenges for long-term sustainability and scale.

Employers interviewed described several interconnected challenges related to funding, coordination, and scalability within the Drive for 5 model. Although grant funding supported wrap-around services and training-related expenses, employers continued to bear significant costs by paying trainee wages, which were typically around \$20 per hour.

Employers also made operational adjustments to accommodate training requirements, including customized schedules such as four 10-hour workdays. While these arrangements supported

participant learning, employers reported coordination challenges, including inconsistent supervision, and viewed them as difficult to sustain over the long term. Challenges also emerged in meeting DEED's minimum cohort size requirements. In one instance, an employer accepted more trainees than originally planned to meet those thresholds but later reported significant strain on organizational capacity.

Together, these experiences highlight a broader tension between quality and scale. Stakeholders consistently noted that high-quality workforce training, particularly in technical fields, is resource-intensive and difficult to expand. This tradeoff was reflected in DEED's approach to Round 2 funding. When overall funding for Drive for 5 was reduced, DEED chose to invest more deeply in fewer programs rather than maximize the number of grantees served. Unlike traditional WIOA individual training account models, Drive for 5 emphasizes sector partnerships with small cohorts, pre-program exploration, specialized instruction, and intensive supports—features that improve quality but also increase costs and operational complexity.

Program sustainability and future success also requires close alignment with Minnesota's regional labor market needs and sector-specific employer capacity. For example, one manufacturing employer emphasized the importance of aligning cohort sizes with actual hiring demand, noting that Minnesota's manufacturing sector often depends on collaboration among multiple smaller firms rather than a single large employer anchor. Stakeholders further noted that participant supports must reflect local conditions, including barriers such as lack of driver's licenses and limited transportation access, particularly in non-metropolitan areas. More broadly, interviewees emphasized the need for flexibility within grant structures, as employer engagement strategies varied by sector. Manufacturing employers were generally easier to convene, some skilled trades relied on internal training and hiring pipelines, and healthcare employers faced privacy and regulatory constraints that limited direct interaction with prospective trainees.

Partners used Drive for 5 as a foundation for continued training opportunities.

Stakeholders recognized that achieving the initiative's target of family-sustaining wages may require additional training and career advancement beyond initial program participation. In response, several grantees and employer partners began piloting stackable training and advancement pathways designed to support long-term wage growth.

Within one manufacturing partnership, participants who were hired following completion of Drive for 5 programming became eligible for extended, in-house apprenticeship opportunities with participating employers. These apprenticeships were paired with associate degree programs in related technical fields. Although the pathways typically require several years to complete, they were designed to support internal advancement and promotion, with potential wages exceeding \$30 per hour upon completion.

Drive for 5 also exposed partners to other workforce development funding opportunities. For example, one manufacturing company, in collaboration with a community college, began developing an incumbent worker training pathway supported by the Minnesota Job Skills Partnership Grant Program, which is also administered by DEED.³⁶

Conclusion

Overall, Drive for 5 represents a strategic reframing of how Minnesota addresses workforce needs through a sector-partnership lens. As a high-quality, high-intensity initiative, Drive for 5 not only strengthens employer relationships and advances participant outcomes—particularly job placement and access to family-sustaining wages—but also reinforces the state’s broader workforce development strategy. By deepening employer engagement and connecting partners to a wider ecosystem of resources, the model extends beyond training to support long-term system alignment, positioning Drive for 5 as both a workforce initiative and a catalyst for sustained, statewide coordination. The initiative’s long-term success will depend on maintaining employer engagement, adapting strategies to regional labor market conditions, and balancing the goals of serving individuals with significant barriers to employment while achieving placement and wage outcomes.

Idaho: LAUNCH

Introduction



Highlights

- **LAUNCH was designed to address a structural misalignment** between education pathways and labor market demand, particularly the lack of funding for short-term, workforce-aligned training outside of federal programs like WIOA.
- **Elevating the Workforce Development Council under the Governor’s Office enabled cross-agency coordination and embedded employer** input directly into program design and oversight.
- **The program reflects a deliberate “workforce-first” design**, using an in-demand careers list to direct funding, while simultaneously expanding access through low-barrier eligibility and a broad set of eligible providers.
- **Implementation required building new coordination mechanisms** across providers, systems, and stakeholders, highlighting the administrative complexity of delivering a flexible, multi-pathway program at scale.
- **Early results suggest increased postsecondary participation and shifts in student decision-making**, but long-term success will depend on sustained alignment with evolving workforce needs and measurable employment outcomes.

Idaho LAUNCH³⁷ is a state-funded program championed by Governor Brad Little that provides subsidized training for in-demand careers. It consists of two programs targeting different populations: Adult LAUNCH and Student LAUNCH. The initiative began with Adult LAUNCH in 2020, which provided funding for short-term workforce training for adult learners. **Building on that foundation, Student LAUNCH was created in 2023, providing grants of up to \$8,000 to graduating high school seniors to pursue eligible postsecondary education and training aligned with Idaho’s in-demand careers.**³⁸ Student LAUNCH, the focus of this case, represents a significant state investment in both workforce development and postsecondary access and is funded through Idaho’s In-Demand Career Fund.

Student LAUNCH was developed to address structural skills gaps and weaknesses in the state’s education-to-workforce pipeline. While those challenges existed before the program, the COVID-19

pandemic created a political and fiscal window that enabled Idaho to respond at scale.

Declining postsecondary participation and employer demand created a talent gap.

At the time the program was developed, Idaho’s postsecondary enrollment rate among high school seniors had fallen for several consecutive years and was significantly below the national average. In 2021, only 37% of Idaho high school graduates enrolled in college immediately after graduation,³⁹ compared to 61.8% nationally,⁴⁰ raising concerns among policymakers. At the same time, many of the state’s open jobs required some form of postsecondary education or training, and employer demand for credentialed workers, including credentials from community colleges and trade schools,⁴¹ remained high.

Taken together, these trends pointed not only to low labor force participation among Idaho youth but also to a deeper misalignment between Idaho's education system and labor market needs. In parallel, state leaders were increasingly concerned that many Idaho students were leaving the state for postsecondary education and not returning. The result was a growing bottleneck in the state's workforce pipeline: employers faced persistent hiring challenges in part because too few Idahoans were entering and completing pathways aligned with those opportunities.

Policymakers saw a need for earlier intervention to reshape the education-to-workforce pipeline.

In response, policymakers increasingly focused on the transition between high school and postsecondary education. Many young Idahoans were not well-positioned to pursue a traditional four-year degree after high school, yet it remained the default pathway. In practice, this left many students disconnected from both higher education and workforce-aligned training options: just 51% of Idahoans ages 18-24 participate in postsecondary education, and only 32% of adults hold a bachelor's degree or higher.⁴²

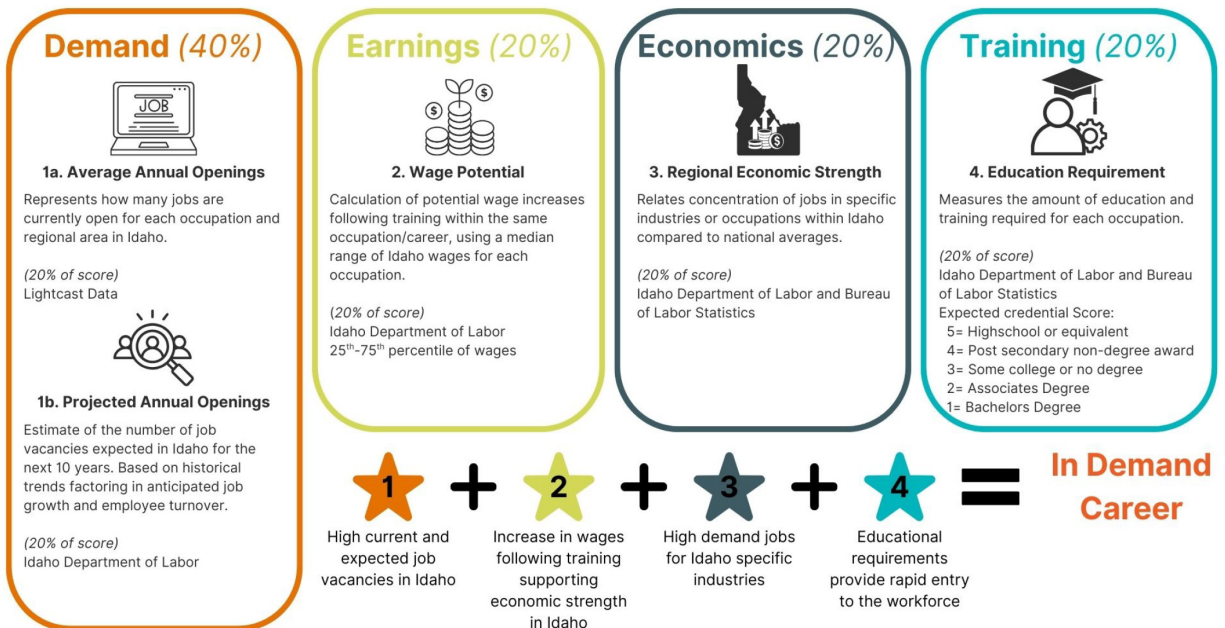
For those who did not pursue postsecondary education, the alternative was often direct entry into low-mobility jobs. Stakeholders noted that many Adult LAUNCH participants entered the workforce immediately after high school, taking seasonal or entry-level jobs that initially offered a steady paycheck but limited long-term mobility. As one interviewee explained, many had *"either dropped out of high school or barely made it out of high school"* and only later realized that *"five years later, it's not much money."* Student LAUNCH was designed in part to intervene before that point, creating clearer and more supported pathways into workforce-aligned training.

Political leadership and a favorable fiscal window enabled rapid adoption.

While the idea for LAUNCH predated the COVID-19 pandemic, its rapid implementation was enabled by motivated political leaders and favorable fiscal conditions. Before LAUNCH, Idaho had workforce training programs aligned with employer needs, but access was limited by funding constraints and the narrow reach of existing federal programs. As one interviewee explained, WIOA funding was primarily available to individuals who were already out of school, leaving few resources available to support students transitioning directly from high school into workforce-aligned training. More broadly, stakeholders emphasized that *"outside of... WIOA, there were really no funds available for short-term training."*

The Governor's Office began exploring whether the state's Workforce Development Training Fund, generated through 3% of employer-paid unemployment taxes,⁴³ could be used to support short-term training in high-demand occupations. The pandemic accelerated those discussions through federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funding, combined with the expectation that workforce investment typically expands during economic downturns. As one interviewee explained, the Workforce Development Council (WDC) had already been developing the policy, but pandemic funding *"helped us to really speed things along."* Within this context, Governor Brad Little played a decisive role in prioritizing and advancing Student LAUNCH. In a political environment where many legislators were hesitant to increase higher education spending, gubernatorial leadership was critical in framing the program as a workforce investment rather than a traditional education policy. As one interviewee noted, Idaho is *"a very conservative state"* where there has historically been much stronger support for K-12 than for higher education, making LAUNCH *"not an easy lift"* politically. Stakeholders credited Governor Little for taking on a politically difficult but necessary investment, arguing that the program was filling *"a very big hole"* in the state's training system and improving residents' ability to compete in the labor market.

Figure 6: In-Demand Career Matrix



Source: Idaho LAUNCH Annual Report.⁴⁴

Program Design

State leaders prioritized three objectives in designing LAUNCH—ensuring alignment with employer needs, expanding access to a broad range of Idaho residents, and supporting both traditional and non-traditional education and training pathways. Rather than adopting a single existing model, the state drew on elements from programs in other states, including Ohio’s Tech-Cred and initiatives in Indiana, and adapted them to Idaho’s context. As one interviewee described, “we just looked at what was out there and said, okay, these are the things we like and we’re going to put it together and do this.”

A Data-Driven In-Demand Careers List as the Core Policy Mechanism

Employer demand and labor market alignment were central to program design from the beginning, primarily through the in-demand careers list, which determines program eligibility.

LAUNCH funds training specifically tied to occupations that are in demand in the state’s labor market, determined by the WDC’s in-demand occupations list. As Figure 6 illustrates, the methodology for the list incorporates multiple factors, including average annual openings, projected annual openings, wage potential, regional economic strength, and education requirements. Then, “that matrix spits out all of the careers in a ranked format.” The goal of LAUNCH is not only to train students for jobs with high numbers of openings, but also to ensure those jobs provide sustainable wages and long-term career opportunities. As one interviewee explained, “if we only looked at job openings, we’d train everyone to work in a restaurant or at a grocery checkout. That’s not what we’re trying to do.”

Idaho’s approach also reflects a deliberate decision to move away from narrower “top jobs” models. Interviewees described an earlier approach that focused on a small number of “hot jobs” based on metrics such as job openings and wage growth, but noted that those lists were often not useful for students or policymakers making long-term decisions. As one interviewee explained,

“the more narrow you make this list... the worse off our labor market is... if you only invest in those jobs, every indirect occupation and induced occupation then will suffer.” Instead, Idaho developed a broader, more comprehensive list of around 250 occupations, spanning electricians and carpenters to physical therapists and dental hygienists.⁴⁵ This approach is intended to capture not only direct job demand but also related and supporting occupations across industries.

Crucially, the list needed to be responsive to changing labor market conditions while aligning with training provider capacity. To manage this tension, the list is updated annually, while preserving a relatively consistent set of priorities. Many occupations on the list, like truck driving, remain relatively stable over time. By contrast, occupations near the cutoff point are more likely to move on and off the list from year to year. As one interviewee explained, *“the 50 jobs between the 200 and 300 mark are the ones that are most susceptible to falling off or coming on the list... which is not helpful to a student and not helpful to an employer.”*

Because the list determines which programs are eligible for funding, it is also politically sensitive. Interviewees emphasized that maintaining an objective and transparent methodology is critical for legislative and stakeholder support. As one interviewee explained, *“everyone has an opinion about what jobs end up on this list, which is why we try to make it as objective as possible... we can come back every year and say, here are the inputs, here is where they came from, this is how it was calculated.”*

Expanding Access Through a Broad, Market-Oriented Provider Model

LAUNCH supports multiple pathways into the workforce, including both traditional college pathways and non-traditional education and training options.

The program currently funds 81 training providers,⁴⁶ including public colleges and universities, community colleges, technical programs, and private training providers offering non-credit programs. This reflects both a legislative preference for a more “free market” approach to education and workforce development and practical capacity constraints, including the fact that there are “physically not enough spots at community colleges” to meet demand. To manage this broad provider landscape, eligibility is tied not to the type of institution but to whether a program aligns with an in-demand career. Statutory language also requires providers to have an in-state presence, helping ensure that LAUNCH funding supports Idaho-based training opportunities.

In practice, however, early participation patterns suggest that most students are still choosing traditional college routes.

More than 90% of students accepting a LAUNCH scholarship report planning to attend a two- or four-year college.⁴⁷ This suggests that while the program expands the set of available training options, student preferences and existing norms around postsecondary education continue to shape how the program is used in practice.

Critically, there are also early signs that employers are beginning to engage more directly in shaping these pathways.

Some employers have started coordinating with training providers to support LAUNCH participants, including by providing additional financial support and wraparound services. For example, Chobani created an endowment covering the remaining training costs for some students, and offers additional support such as mock interviews.⁴⁸ Perpetua Resources has also supported scholarships tied to internships and workforce retention in mining-related occupations.⁴⁹ While limited in scale, such examples suggest that employer co-investment may become a larger component of the program over time, further strengthening the connection between training pathways and jobs.

Low-Barrier Eligibility Balanced with Accountability Measures

In addition to expanding the range of eligible pathways, LAUNCH was designed to reduce traditional barriers to entry. Students are not required to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or meet a minimum GPA threshold to qualify for LAUNCH, lowering both administrative and academic barriers to participation.⁵⁰ This design reflects a deliberate effort to expand access beyond students who might qualify for traditional financial aid or meet standard academic benchmarks.

At the same time, the program pairs low-barrier entry with a set of accountability mechanisms intended to ensure funds are used for meaningful workforce progression. Students must maintain satisfactory academic progress and remain in an eligible program. Students who fail to meet academic or program requirements may be required to repay funds, though repayment requirements may be waived if a student leaves the program to transition directly into an in-demand occupation.⁵¹

Governance and Coordination

LAUNCH is governed by the WDC, which serves as the program's primary policymaking and oversight body. The WDC was moved under the Governor's office in 2017 and restructured as an independent entity to coordinate workforce development efforts across the agencies. As one interviewee explained, the goal of the WDC was to *"have it be in a position to coordinate across all of the agencies that have workforce programs instead of just focusing on what [the Department of Labor] does."* This shift was intended to give the Council greater cross-agency authority and elevate workforce policy beyond the narrower scope of traditional WIOA administration. In practice, the WDC's council members are responsible for governance, strategy, and policy-setting, while a separate LAUNCH program staff housed within the broader WDC structure manages day-to-day implementation and program operations.⁵²

The Council's work is carried out through a committee structure that enables more detailed and continuous oversight of the program. While the full Council meets quarterly, several WDC committees meet more frequently to oversee specific aspects of LAUNCH. The policy committee, for example, meets regularly to develop and refine program rules, while other committees focus on grants, outreach, work-based learning, and program evaluation. This structure allows the WDC to operate as an active governing body rather than a purely advisory one. By distributing responsibilities across committees and meeting regularly, the WDC is able to respond to implementation challenges, coordinate across stakeholders, and continuously refine program design over time.

This structure reinforces the program's workforce-first orientation and embeds coordination across education, training, and economic development systems. The WDC's broad, multi-stakeholder composition, including employers, education institutions, state agencies, legislators, and workforce partners, means that employer input is built directly into governance.⁵³ Interviewees emphasized that the WDC plays a key role in aligning education and training systems with employer needs, working to *"merge them together to meet the needs of business without trying to create a whole bunch of new bureaucracy."*

Program Delivery

The WDC sets overall policy and program rules, while the LAUNCH team within the WDC manages day-to-day implementation, including applications, training provider coordination, participant compliance, and program administration. The compressed implementation timeline of six months meant that the LAUNCH team had to build administrative systems and communication processes while already operating at scale. Therefore, LAUNCH staff relied on a combination of existing systems and new infrastructure. Students applied through Scholarship Idaho, the state's existing scholarship application portal, while LAUNCH staff

contracted for a new grant management system to manage participant data, provider payments, and program administration.

Contingent award structure introduced uncertainty and follow-through challenges.

A central feature of LAUNCH's delivery model is its use of contingent awards, which are issued to students before final state budgets are confirmed. Under statute, the program is required to issue an initial round of awards by December, even though final funding levels are not yet known. As a result, students receive preliminary offers that are not guaranteed and must later be finalized.

While this approach allows the state to move quickly and provide early signals to students, it also introduces significant complexity. Many students interpret contingent awards as final, leading to confusion about next steps and expectations: between 5-10% of students do not fully understand that they need to take additional steps to receive final funding. As one interviewee explained, *"we have to make our first round of awards in December [but] you're doing that a little bit blindly, because I don't know what our budget is."*

This confusion is compounded by the structure of the application process, which requires students to move between multiple systems as they progress from initial application to final award acceptance. As a result, even students who initially engage with the program may struggle to complete the full process.

Ongoing communication and outreach were critical to program uptake.

To manage that complexity, LAUNCH staff emphasized continuous communication with students, families, and high school counselors. Outreach efforts include regional coordination, office hours, statewide presentations, and ongoing engagement with school counselors. Because the program introduced new pathways, deadlines, and eligibility requirements, consistent communication

was necessary to ensure students understood program expectations and successfully followed through on award acceptance and enrollment. This became even more important as statutory changes between program years required repeated updates to program rules and guidance.

Much of the outreach occurs through high school counselors, who serve as the primary point of contact for most students. This makes counselor capacity a key determinant of program access and introduces variation across districts depending on school-level resources. Over time, LAUNCH staff developed more structured and centralized communication strategies and infrastructure to reduce that variation, including building a state-wide network of counselors and advisors, creating regional communication channels using platforms such as Basecamp, and providing real-time updates, materials, and alerts in a centralized location. As one interviewee described, this allowed the team to *"get in front of the right people, with the right messages, and as often as possible."*

LAUNCH staff also introduced more direct support mechanisms for students and families, including office hours during key periods such as application windows and final award distribution. These efforts were particularly important given the complexity of the process, including transitions between systems and documentation requirements. Even relatively small requirements, such as uploading valid identification, proved to be barriers without clear guidance.

Despite these efforts, reaching all eligible populations remains a challenge. While traditional school-based channels have been effective, the program has faced more difficulty engaging students outside of those systems, including those in homeschool networks. As one interviewee explained, *"we have a large homeschool network in Idaho, but... it's hard to break into that,"* requiring additional outreach through alternative channels such as community organizations, parent networks, and local groups.

A broad provider network expanded access but increased administrative complexity.

LAUNCH's broad provider model expands access, but it also makes implementation more administratively complex. Because student participation is spread across multiple institutions, program types, and reporting systems, the state must coordinate data across a fragmented provider landscape to track enrollment, completion, and workforce outcomes consistently. In practice, this requires ongoing coordination across education institutions, training providers, and the Department of Labor to link participation data with employment and wage outcomes.

Funding and Sustainability

LAUNCH is funded through Idaho's In-Demand Career Fund, a dedicated state funding stream created through tax reform and supported by state revenues. The Fund represents a significant state investment in workforce development: approximately \$80 million was allocated to the fund, with \$5 million reserved for secondary career and technical education programs, leaving roughly \$75 million available for LAUNCH and other workforce training investments aligned with in-demand careers.

While the Fund provides a durable state funding base, annual appropriations still introduce uncertainty.

The legislature retains authority over how funds are allocated each year, meaning legislators can reduce the amount directed to LAUNCH or reallocate dollars to other workforce priorities. While stakeholders noted that the fund “*won't go away*,” the share directed towards LAUNCH remains politically uncertain. There is also flexibility built into the statute that allows funds to be shifted between Student LAUNCH and Adult LAUNCH depending on demand. Up to \$10 million of Student LAUNCH funding can be reallocated to Adult LAUNCH if

youth funds are underspent. While this flexibility allows the state to respond to shifting demand, stakeholders noted that it also creates operational and political complexity. Decisions about whether to reallocate funds, how much to move, and when to move them must be made quickly enough for providers to use those dollars effectively. In practice, funding transferred too late in the year may be difficult to deploy, particularly in short-term adult training programs with fixed enrollment cycles.

LAUNCH's five-year sunset creates an additional challenge for evaluating sustainability. Many of the program's intended outcomes, such as credential completion, employment, and wage gains, will take several years to materialize. As a result, decisions about continuation may occur before the program's long-term workforce effects are fully visible.

Metrics and Definition of Success

Because Idaho LAUNCH was designed as both an education and workforce policy, stakeholders define success as a combination of postsecondary pipeline improvements and long-term workforce outcomes.

In the short term, this means increasing participation in postsecondary education and training, improving the transition from high school into workforce-aligned pathways, and influencing whether students remain in Idaho for education and employment. Over the longer term, success is defined more directly through labor market outcomes, including credential completion, employment, wage gains, and in-state retention.

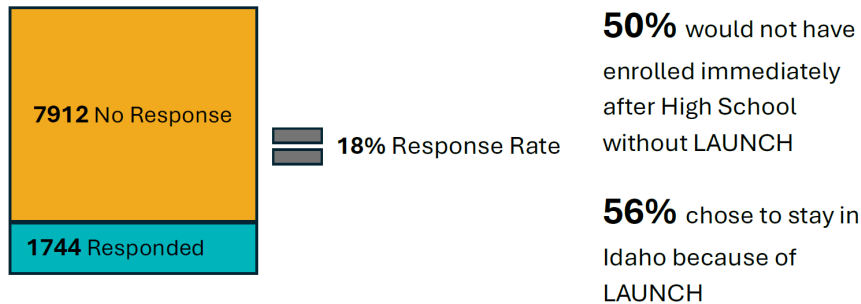
Early indicators suggest that LAUNCH is achieving its near-term goals of increasing participation in postsecondary education and training, and influencing student decision-making at key transition points. Administrative data show strong application and award volumes across cohorts.

Figure 7: **LAUNCH Enrollment Survey Results**

Idaho LAUNCH for Students Performance Report

WDC staff surveyed 9,556 current LAUNCH students, asking two questions:

1. If you had not received Idaho LAUNCH funds, would you still have enrolled in education or training after high school?
2. Did the offer of Idaho LAUNCH funds affect your decision to stay in Idaho for your education or training?



Source: Idaho LAUNCH Annual Report.⁵⁴

For example, in the Class of 2024, 9,261 students were offered LAUNCH grants and 7,015 ultimately received awards, with a similar scale observed for the Class of 2025 (9,105 offers and 6,943 awards). These figures reflect both high demand for the program and meaningful conversion from eligibility to participation.

Survey data further suggest that LAUNCH is not only supporting participation, but actively changing student behavior. As Figure 7 illustrates, according to a statewide survey of 9,556 LAUNCH students conducted by the WDC, 50% of respondents reported that they would not have enrolled in postsecondary education or training immediately after high school without LAUNCH funding, while 56% reported that the program influenced their decision to remain in Idaho for education or training.

Early enrollment trends point in the same direction. In-state college enrollment increased while out-of-state college enrollment decreased, suggesting that the program may be influencing students' decisions about where to pursue postsecondary

education.⁵⁵ For the class of 2024, there was a “5% increase in the go-on rate—the first meaningful increase in more than a decade.”

Despite strong early indicators, evaluating the program's long-term impact remains challenging. As one interviewee noted, “we can't have an outcome until these kids have enough time to get through their programs and then into a job and we measure their wage.” In addition, measuring workforce outcomes requires linking education and employment data across multiple systems, which can be particularly challenging for states. As a result, current evaluation efforts rely heavily on participation and pipeline metrics, while more robust outcome data, such as job placement, wage growth, and retention in Idaho, are still being developed.

Conclusion

LAUNCH reflects a meaningful shift in how states can use postsecondary funding to both expand access and more deliberately shape workforce outcomes. By tying funding to in-demand careers, broadening the range of eligible providers, and embedding employer input into governance, the program is able to strengthen connections between education, training, and the labor market. In doing so, it reflects a more intentional effort to connect postsecondary investment to broader economic and workforce goals.

Early evidence suggests LAUNCH is already shifting student decision-making at key points in the education-to-workforce pipeline—expanding postsecondary participation, increasing in-state enrollment, and changing how students navigate postsecondary options. Long-term data will be needed to determine whether those early gains translate into stronger credential attainment, improved labor market outcomes, and sustained in-state workforce retention. More broadly, Idaho offers a useful model for how states can build a more workforce-oriented postsecondary system by linking funding, provider incentives, and labor market demand more directly.

Massachusetts: MassReconnect

Introduction



Highlights

- **MassReconnect was designed as an access-first intervention** to address workforce skills gaps, declining community college enrollment, and credential awards, particularly among adult learners, by eliminating tuition and fee barriers.
- **A decentralized governance structure enabled rapid rollout** by leveraging existing institutional relationships, but required significant coordination across state agencies, community colleges, and intermediaries.
- **The program's last-dollar funding model** maximizes federal Pell Grant usage, allowing for rapid scale, but introduces fiscal exposure to federal policy changes and operational complexity through forward funding.
- **Strong early enrollment gains** demonstrate the effectiveness of simple, clear messaging (“free community college”), but created strain on institutional capacity and student support systems.
- **Long-term impact will depend on improvements in completion, workforce alignment, and the state's ability to coordinate** across education, labor, and economic development systems.

MassReconnect was launched in fall 2023 under Governor Maura Healey as a targeted free community college initiative for Massachusetts adults aged 25 and older without a prior college degree. The program provides last-dollar tuition and fee coverage at the state's community colleges, supporting both part-time and full-time study. MassReconnect is funded through annual state appropriations derived from Fair Share Amendment revenue, receiving \$20 million in its inaugural year and \$24 million in fiscal year 2025.⁵⁶ The program later expanded through the establishment of MassEducate in 2024, which extended free community college eligibility to all Massachusetts residents, regardless of age. While MassReconnect and MassEducate now collectively constitute Massachusetts' universal free college model, MassReconnect—the founding program—is the focus of this case study.

MassReconnect emerged from three converging pressures: workforce skills gaps, declining com-

munity college enrollment, and an opportunity created by gubernatorial transition and an influx of dedicated education revenue.

Workforce and Economic Competitiveness

Postsecondary credential shortfalls carry particular weight given Massachusetts' economic structure. The state has built its competitive advantage in innovation economy sectors that demand a continuous supply of credentialed workers at every level—including life sciences and biopharma, healthcare, and advanced manufacturing. A state stakeholder emphasized that “we rely very much on an ‘innovation’ economy,” and the ability to “keep pace with... [the] adoption of new types of equipment, technology, computer systems, certainly AI currently.” Employers in these sectors report persistent middle-skill talent shortages. For example, in healthcare, there are critical

gaps in roles such as community health workers and various technician positions, with vacancy rates exceeding 20%.⁵⁷ Overall, a state stakeholder reflected that MassReconnect was driven “probably 65% by workforce” concerns and “35% by the availability of educational resources.”

Declining Community College Enrollment and Demographic Pressures

Massachusetts community colleges had experienced declining enrollment since 2010, following a brief nationwide increase during the Great Recession.⁵⁸ Following a 2012 enrollment peak of approximately 101,000 students, community colleges saw a steady year-on-year erosion—a deterioration that the COVID-19 pandemic sharply accelerated, with enrollment falling to 67,685 by fall 2020.⁵⁹ Individual institutions reported losses of 25% or more between 2016 and 2022.⁶⁰ Declining enrollment translated directly into fewer credentials awarded, constraining the flow of qualified workers into the state’s labor market. As one state stakeholder observed, the state had been “essentially flat in the number of credentials awarded” despite improving retention rates.

Policymakers identified a large, reachable population within this context: the more than 766,000 Massachusetts residents with “some college, no credential.”⁶¹ Stakeholders viewed this population as critical for reversing enrollment decline while also strengthening the workforce. An industry interviewee reinforced this focus on stop-out reengagement, noting that in their regions “as high as 35-40% of adults have some college but never completed.” Interviewees also flagged **compounding demographic pressures on state talent pipelines: an aging population, high costs of living, and outmigration rates that erode the working-age resident base.** As one industry stakeholder put it, “we’re an older state. People are leaving at a higher percentage than other states”—making investment in the existing resident workforce a more tractable strategy.

Political Window and Policy Opportunity

What transformed those pressures into a realized program was a rare political and fiscal alignment. MassReconnect originated as a policy proposal from the Massachusetts Association of Community Colleges, developed after exploring similar initiatives in other states and brought directly to the Healey campaign before the 2022 election. “[Governor Healy] very much showed an interest as it aligned with... things she wanted to accomplish,” a college stakeholder shared. The proposal was adopted as a campaign commitment, announced in Governor Healey’s inauguration speech, and introduced in her first budget. The Governor’s budget language passed the House and Senate verbatim, with identical funding amounts and no conference committee—something an interviewee described as unprecedented for a brand new program.

Additionally, the Fair Share Amendment, approved by voters in November 2022, created a 4% surtax on incomes above \$1 million, constitutionally dedicated to education and transportation. It generated \$2.4 billion in fiscal year 2024.⁶² The amendment provided dedicated revenue that made MassReconnect fiscally credible without competing with existing budget lines. As one interviewee noted, the state “suddenly found itself with a ton of money” at precisely the moment political conditions aligned.

Program Design

Led by the Executive Office of Education (EOE), jointly with the Department of Higher Education, MassReconnect was designed as a last-dollar financial aid program for residents aged 25 or older seeking to pursue postsecondary study at a community college. Eligible participants (see Figure 8) can take any approved certificate or associate degree program offered at one of Massachusetts’ 15 public community colleges. Awards cover tuition and fees after all other non-loan aid is applied and are disbursed directly by

Figure 8: **Participant Eligibility Requirements**

Eligibility Requirements

Age	25 years or older (as of first day of classes)
Residency	Massachusetts resident for at least one year prior to enrollment
Education	No prior associate’s or bachelor’s degree
Financial Aid	Must complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or the Massachusetts Application for State Financial Aid (MASFA) and comply with financial aid verification requirements
Citizenship	U.S. citizen, lawful permanent resident or eligible non–citizen*
Enrollment	Minimum of six credits per semester
Academic Progress	Meet Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) according to postsecondary institution’s requirements and federal standards

*Eligible under Title IV of the Higher Education Act or Massachusetts Tuition Equity Law

Source: Authors’ summary based on program documents.⁶³

community colleges at enrollment. Recipients may also receive an annual allowance of up to \$1,200 for books and supplies. In addition, community colleges were each awarded \$100,000 to support implementation.⁶⁴

MassReconnect was described as part of a “broader strategy to make higher education more affordable and attainable throughout the Commonwealth.”⁶⁵ The program’s role in workforce development and educational equity is reflected in key strategy documents such as Massachusetts’ WIOA state plan and the Department of Higher Education’s strategic priorities.⁶⁶ At launch, Governor Healey described its dual ambition: “[Mass-Reconnect] will bolster the role of community colleges as economic drivers in our state and help us better meet the needs of businesses,” while also “breaking cycles of intergenerational poverty.”⁶⁷

This program design reflects a deliberately chosen philosophy: building on federal aid infrastructure and maximizing access by minimizing barriers to entry and participation.

Stretching State Dollars

MassReconnect’s last-dollar structure was as much a fiscal strategy as a design choice. A state

stakeholder noted that discussions were centered around *“very intentional thoughts about how the dollars could be leveraging federal resources.”* By applying program funds only after federal and other state aid—including Pell Grants—is calculated, the state minimizes its per-student cost while maximizing total support for eligible students. Moreover, the FAFSA completion requirement serves dual purposes: it draws down federal Pell funds that would otherwise go unclaimed and generates enrollment and income data for program monitoring.

The age threshold of 25 was chosen with the same calculus in mind. Under FAFSA rules, students are no longer dependents and qualify for aid based solely on their own income, increasing Pell eligibility. As one interviewee explained, *“[going] after older students with no credentials”* was a clear path to increasing enrollment at the least cost to the state. Beyond this, college stakeholders also noted that learners over the age of 25 tend to have a *“different level of motivation”* and that, statistically, an *“individual who does not have a college degree of any kind and is no longer a dependent is much more likely to be lower income.”*

In practice, as many community college students are already Pell-eligible, the program often fills remaining gaps rather than covering the entire cost of attendance. For example, for the 2023-24 academic year, the maximum Pell Grant was \$7,395 while the average tuition and fees at Massachusetts community colleges are \$6,846.⁶⁸ Data from the Department of Higher Education indicates that almost half (43%) of MassReconnect recipients were Pell-eligible.⁶⁹ However, it is important to note that many non-Pell-eligible students still *“come from moderate-income households and experience unmet financial need.”*⁷⁰ Overall, MassReconnect’s approach has largely tracked its intended population: approximately 70% of recipients have household incomes below \$80,000—under the state median.⁷¹

Eligibility Criteria Designed for Maximum Reach

Beyond age and prior degree status, as summarized in Figure 8, the program imposes minimal eligibility conditions. It is worth noting that MassReconnect does not require students to demonstrate financial need. Two elements of the eligibility criteria stand out in particular in maximizing access.

The six-credit enrollment threshold was a deliberate design choice.

Interviewees shared that a 12-credit full-time requirement was initially considered, with the reasoning that full-time students complete degrees faster. However, some argued that working adults are unlikely to stop working and enroll full-time, and that such a requirement would effectively restrict the program to higher-income households. A stakeholder explained that *“If you’re really trying to get to the people who need this... you got to let them do it part-time. And that 6 credits was the right floor.”* This reflects the reality that most community college students enroll part-time—over 72% in 2020–21.⁷² In fact, post-launch, a college interviewee revealed that *“I maybe would advocate even having it at three credits—the*

‘drinking from the fountain’ first time thing is huge for adult learners returning after a long gap.”

MassReconnect also imposes no restrictions by major or field of study.

This was a conscious choice, as state stakeholders concluded that sector targeting or restricting eligibility to high-demand occupational areas would have introduced administrative complexity without commensurate benefit. One state official reflected that an educated workforce, broadly defined, was the goal: *“We can prioritize, but we can’t exclude.”*

This design choice reflects one of the clearest distinctions between MassReconnect and more explicitly workforce-oriented models. Rather than directing students toward high-demand sectors or tying eligibility to labor market priorities, MassReconnect treats broad participation in postsecondary education as the primary objective. As a result, its broader eligibility weakens the state’s ability to steer students toward fields most closely aligned with labor market demand, making workforce benefits less direct and more dependent on downstream advising, institutional behavior, and student choice. This is particularly consequential in Massachusetts where community colleges serve both workforce and transfer functions and where the state has historically invested heavily in transfer pathways to four-year institutions. In practice, this means broad enrollment gains may be just as likely to flow into transfer-oriented academic pathways as directly into workforce-aligned credentials. As one stakeholder put it, *“you could enroll a whole bunch of folks... but if the economy doesn’t need that, and these folks aren’t getting employed, then what have you accomplished?”*

Governance and Coordination

MassReconnect was governed through Massachusetts’ education system, and that institutional choice shaped both how the program was implemented and what it was designed to optimize. The program’s initial design was led by the EOE, in collaboration with the Department of Higher

Education (DHE), the Massachusetts Association of Community Colleges (MACC), the Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development (EOLWD), and labor and workforce development agencies. Because the program was housed within the education system—rather than labor or workforce agencies—it was designed and operationalized primarily as an access initiative, with implementation centered on enrollment, financial aid, and student participation. This gave the state a clear administrative home and allowed it to move quickly using existing higher education infrastructure, but it also reinforced an access-first approach to delivery and performance measurement from the outset.

MassReconnect also operates within Massachusetts’ highly decentralized higher education system, where governance is distributed across multiple institutions, agencies, and stakeholders.

While the program was initiated and funded at the state level, its implementation relies on coordination across actors with distinct roles and authorities. Massachusetts was able to move quickly in part because it relied on existing relationships and institutional infrastructure rather than building new delivery systems from scratch. As one interviewee noted, this was a *“real strategic advantage... there were a lot of existing relationships in place, we weren’t having to reinvent the wheel.”*

Cross-agency coordination existed, but workforce influence was not structurally embedded.

Massachusetts did have a cross-agency coordination vehicle through the Workforce Skills Cabinet, which brought together Secretariat level leadership from education, labor and workforce development, health and human services, and economic development to coordinate around broader workforce strategy. However, while stakeholders pointed to the Cabinet as the state’s primary venue for cross-secretariat coordination, they emphasized that it functioned more as a convening mechanism than a formal governance structure. Because the Cabinet was created by executive order rather than statute, it depended

heavily on administrative priorities, relationships, and whether agencies chose to engage consistently, rather than on durable institutional requirements. As one stakeholder noted, *“there was nothing... on paper that would have forced that collaboration,”* meaning coordination often relied more on whether agencies chose to work together than on formal governance requirements. Another interviewee noted that the cabinet had *“lived on administration by administration,”* but because it was not codified in statute, its consistency, staffing, and influence could vary significantly over time.

This had practical implications for how workforce priorities shaped MassReconnect. Labor and workforce actors were involved in program design, and business voices were present in broader workforce conversations, but stakeholders consistently noted that these inputs were not incorporated through a consistently formalized statewide process. One interviewee noted that business input existed, but the initiative would have benefited from a more formal process for incorporating employer demand into education and workforce investment decisions.

A decentralized institutional structure shaped implementation authority.

Each of the state’s 15 community colleges operates under its own board of trustees, with authority over day-to-day operations, budgeting, and program delivery. The Board of Higher Education functions as a board governing organization and coordinating body rather than a direct governing one, shaping statewide policy but not directly managing institutional decisions. As one interviewee described, *“day-to-day decisions on spending and operations... [are] mostly done at the local level,”* requiring state policies to be translated into action across independent institutions.

This structure gave colleges significant local discretion in how the community engagement elements of the program were implemented, but also made coordination more complex. Unlike more centralized community college systems—such as

North Carolina's, where a single State Board serves as the system's policy-making arm and oversees budgets, capital projects, and curricula—Massachusetts had limited ability to impose a uniform top-down implementation model.⁷³ Because each institution retained control over its own staffing, enrollment operations, and student support systems, state policy had to be translated into 15 different campus operating models. In practice, this increased variation across campuses and made system-wide coordination more labor-intensive, creating a clear need for stronger cross-campus coordination and translation between state policy and institutional implementation.

MACC played a critical intermediary role in coordinating implementation.

Within this decentralized system, MACC played a critical intermediary role in translating state policy into campus-level implementation. While the DHE remained responsible for administering funding and policy, several stakeholders described limited communication and uneven clarity from the state during key points in rollout. Interviewees noted that they often relied heavily on MACC to interpret guidance, coordinate across colleges, and surface implementation challenges in real time.

MACC's role was especially important because implementation authority was distributed, but the program still required system-level coordination. It served as a bridge between the state and institutions, helping colleges interpret guidance, share practices, and surface implementation challenges in real time. Early implementation issues were also surfaced through regular cross-campus working groups, particularly among senior student affairs officers, who met monthly and increased their cadence significantly during rollout. As one interviewee noted, this group met as often as every Friday during the pandemic and early implementation period, creating a consistent channel for colleges to surface operational issues, compare approaches, and troubleshoot implementation challenges in real time.

Despite these strengths, the governance model also introduced complexity. **Decision-making required coordination across multiple entities, often resulting in slower processes and ambiguity around roles and responsibilities.** Colleges and state agencies each played a part in implementation, but accountability for key decisions, particularly around funding and program rules, was not always clearly defined. As one stakeholder noted, there was concern about *"who's going to be responsible if there's not enough money,"* highlighting the high-stakes nature of a program operating at this scale.

Program Delivery

Because MassReconnect was delivered primarily through existing higher education institutions and administrative systems, implementation centered on financial aid, enrollment, and student support. This decentralized approach enabled rapid rollout but resulted in variation in execution and uneven capacity across institutions. That same design made workforce navigation, advising, and downstream student support less central to delivery.

Rapid rollout was enabled by simplicity but limited implementation planning.

MassReconnect was announced in the summer of 2023 and launched within approximately three weeks before the start of the fall semester. This rapid rollout was made possible by strong executive and legislative alignment, as well as a program design that leveraged existing financial aid infrastructure. However, the compressed timeline left little opportunity for detailed implementation planning. One college stakeholder noted, *"the initial buildup was incredibly exciting, pretty scary, and a lot of work in a very, very short amount of time."*

As a result, community colleges were required to simultaneously update financial aid systems, develop outreach strategies, and prepare enrollment operations. While some institutions were well positioned to respond—*"ready to go... the minute that was announced"*—others experienced greater

uncertainty, particularly in the absence of clear early guidance. Stakeholders noted that this variation reflected not only differences in institutional capacity, but also differences in college leadership. As one interviewee explained, some colleges felt they needed formal guidance in hand before beginning implementation while others were explicitly told by leadership to “do what you need to do... we’ll figure it out.”

This divergence in institutional readiness created early variation in pace and execution across campuses.

Implementation teams typically included representatives from admissions, financial aid, marketing, academic advising, and enrollment management. They were responsible for coordinating recruitment efforts and ensuring that students could successfully navigate the enrollment and financial aid process. While the state provided \$100,000 in implementation funding per college, institutions used these funds differently based on local priorities and capacity, leading to variation in outreach strategies, staffing, and overall program delivery across campuses.

Financial aid systems anchored delivery but faced early operational strain.

Financial aid offices were central to program implementation, as MassReconnect funding is applied through existing aid systems rather than a standalone process. This design choice enabled rapid deployment but placed significant pressure on financial aid staff. No separate MassReconnect application is required: students apply to a community college, complete their FAFSA, and enroll in at least six credits. The college’s financial aid office automatically applies funding after all other aid sources are calculated. This approach aligns with research demonstrating that administrative complexity in financial aid processes disproportionately suppresses enrollment among the low-income and working-adult populations.⁷⁴

At the same time, this design concentrated much

of the administrative burden within financial aid offices. Because MassReconnect relied on existing aid infrastructure, financial aid staff became the primary operational engine of delivery—responsible not only for processing awards, but also for interpreting evolving rules, managing student confusion, and absorbing implementation complexity. This allowed the state to move quickly, but placed significant strain on already capacity-constrained administrative teams.

Simple public messaging drove demand but created downstream complexity.

Recruitment and outreach were critical to early program uptake. The program’s central message of “free community college” was easy to communicate, easy for students to understand, and effective in driving early demand. Colleges relied heavily on high-visibility public messaging, outreach to stop-out students, and word of mouth. State-level communication, including public announcements and media coverage, played an important role in driving initial enrollment surges. Some institutions also partnered with external vendors to conduct targeted re-enrollment campaigns, though the effectiveness of these approaches varied across colleges. According to a college stakeholder, over time, word of mouth emerged as one of the most effective recruitment channels, suggesting that student experience and peer networks became increasingly important drivers of participation.

MassReconnect’s simplicity also translated into clear operational benefits. Stakeholders noted that the program’s straightforward design made it easier to communicate, easier for students to navigate, and easier for institutions to implement quickly. Reflecting on lessons from similar programs in other states, several interviewees emphasized that more restrictive eligibility rules or more complex registration processes would likely have reduced uptake by making the program harder to explain and harder for students to access.

At the same time, that simplicity reinforced a broader limitation in the delivery model. Mass-

Reconnect was designed to reduce friction at the point of entry, making it easier for students to enroll. But stakeholders noted that the state invested far less in helping students navigate what came after enrollment. As one interviewee put it, the state was more focused on “*the front end*” of getting students into the system than on “*the back end*”—ensuring students were properly advised by colleges into programs aligned with career goals and labor market demand and ensuring that they earn credentials and secure good jobs.

Enrollment growth outpaced institutional capacity and support systems.

While the program successfully increased participation, colleges did not always experience proportional expansions in staffing, advising capacity, classroom space, or student support services. Although the state funded tuition and fees, and, in some cases, book allowances, stakeholders noted that the rapid enrollment growth created operational pressures for institutions responsible for supporting and retaining students. State officials emphasized that advising and implementation costs were intended to be incorporated within the institutional revenue generated through tuition and fees. However, some stakeholders argued that the scale of enrollment growth outpaced colleges’ ability to expand wraparound and career support infrastructure. As one stakeholder observed, providing tuition support without sufficiently strengthening advising and career navigation services may limit the program’s overall effectiveness. Another noted that while the state was willing to provide students with “\$15,000 or \$20,000 worth of value every year” in tuition support, relatively smaller investments in advising and support services could further improve students’ ability to translate enrollment into stronger labor market outcomes.

These operational challenges were further compounded by uncertainty in the funding model. Because funding allocations are based on annual appropriations that use projected enrollment and

are reconciled after the fact, colleges must often make upfront decisions about staffing and capacity without full clarity on final reimbursement levels. This represents a significant departure from more traditional financial aid models, which are typically based on fixed allocations and clearer funding certainty. In practice, this shifts some operational and financial risk onto institutions, particularly as enrollment fluctuates across semesters.

This also creates a dynamic and uncertain funding environment. As one stakeholder described, the process can resemble “*a game of whack-a-mole*,” where some institutions face shortfalls while others have excess funds, requiring ongoing reallocation across colleges. Because the system attempts to estimate need in advance rather than reimburse actual costs, mismatches are common and difficult to resolve in real time.

Funding and Sustainability

Federal funding increases exposure to risk.

The program’s funding model, designed to maximize impact while controlling state costs, is sensitive to federal policy changes. As one stakeholder explained, the program operates as “*a little bit of a Rubik’s cube*,” requiring the state to constantly adjust based on shifts in federal financial aid policy. If federal support for Pell Grants declines, “*that increases the state’s exposure for funding*,” whereas more generous federal aid can reduce state costs.

Annual appropriations and forward funding create operational complexity.

Despite its scale, the program, like all state financial aid, is funded through annual appropriations rather than a dedicated trust or multi-year funding structure. Several stakeholders identified this as a core design limitation. As one noted, “*if I had to do it all over again, we probably would have been more aggressive [in creating] some type of trust account instead of just solely annual appropriations.*”

Budget timing and fiscal constraints complicate program design.

State budgeting rules introduced an additional layer of complexity, particularly because academic calendars and fiscal calendars do not align neatly. As one stakeholder explained, while “summer spend sounds like an easy strategy,” funding programs that span fiscal years is “a real challenge” requiring specific line-item language and advance planning to ensure funds can be used across academic terms.

More broadly, Fair Share funding, while politically prioritized, is still subject to the same annual budgeting processes as other state revenues. As one stakeholder noted, it is “treated as... annual appropriations,” meaning that funding is projected each year, adjusted through the budget process, and subject to supplemental changes if needed. While the program is currently “baked into” Fair Share spending, its long-term funding remains tied to broader fiscal conditions.

The model shifts financial risk to institutions.

Taken together, these design choices shift a meaningful degree of financial risk onto community colleges. Institutions must scale enrollment, staffing, and student support services in anticipation of demand without full certainty around funding. As one stakeholder described, institutions have been encouraged to “spend, spend, spend,” with the expectation that funding will be backfilled.

This risk is unevenly distributed across institutions. Larger colleges with greater financial reserves are better positioned to absorb uncertainty, while smaller institutions may face greater constraints. As one stakeholder noted, a larger institution “has the ability to pivot and be a little bit riskier,” whereas smaller colleges may not have the same flexibility to cover gaps if funding falls short.

Funding complexity has also translated into inconsistencies in implementation. Stakeholders reported that changes in legislative language—particularly around benefits such as book

stipends—led to different interpretations across institutions. As one interviewee explained, “students ultimately suffer” when one student receives more funding than another for the same program, depending on how rules are applied locally.

Long-term sustainability depends on broader fiscal and system alignment.

Despite these challenges, stakeholders generally view the program as viable in the near term, given continued Fair Share revenue and strong political support. **However, long-term sustainability remains uncertain and depends on factors beyond the program itself.** Several stakeholders expressed concern that broader fiscal pressures, such as rising healthcare costs or reductions in federal funding, could force the state to reallocate resources, potentially placing programs like MassReconnect “on the chopping block.” At the same time, continued enrollment growth without corresponding increases in institutional funding raises questions about whether the model is sustainable at scale.

Metrics

Early evidence suggests that MassReconnect has been highly effective in increasing enrollment and expanding access to postsecondary education. Many institutions reported significant enrollment growth following implementation. These patterns are reflected in state reporting as well: enrollment among students age 25 and older increased by 26.8% from Fall 2023 to Fall 2024 and 42.0% relative to Fall 2022, pointing to strong demand for free community college.⁷⁵

At the same time, stakeholders emphasized that these gains should be interpreted in context. Enrollment had declined substantially during the COVID-19 pandemic, and some portion of the increase reflects a broader recovery attributable to not just the program alone. Even so, the scale and speed of the rebound suggest that MassReconnect has meaningfully accelerated that recovery and expanded participation among adult learners.

The program has also had broader system-level effects. Colleges report increased public awareness of community colleges and a renewed sense of momentum on campuses. As one stakeholder described, *“our campuses are alive again,”* with more adult learners—many of whom had not previously seen college as an option—now enrolling. These shifts suggest that the program is not only affecting enrollment levels, but also changing how community college is perceived and who it serves.

Defining Success: Clear Access Gains, but Outcome Measures Remain Uncertain

Tables 5 and 6 provide important context for understanding how Massachusetts has operationalized early program success. Because longer-term outcomes such as completion, transfer, and employment are not yet available, policymakers and administrators have relied on short-term indicators, including enrollment, demographic participation, FAFSA completion, and retention, to assess whether the program is expanding access and supporting continued student engagement.

Early participation data (Table 5) suggest that MassReconnect has generated substantial uptake among adult learners, particularly among women and students between the ages of 25 and 34. The demographic distribution of recipients also indicates that the program reached a racially diverse student population. In addition, the high FAFSA and MASFA completion rate reflects the program’s reliance on existing federal and state financial aid systems, which enabled Massachusetts to maximize Pell utilization while using aid application data to support program administration and monitoring.

As one stakeholder explained, *“we look at this as solely an access strategy... it’s been billed that way to legislators and others from the beginning.”* From this perspective, the program’s primary objective was to expand participation in postsecondary education, with the expectation that increasing enrollment would ultimately increase the number of degree holders in the state over time. However, as the stakeholder also noted, *“whether we convert*

Table 5: **Short-Term Program Metrics**

List of Program Metrics	
Enrollment of Adult Students and Number of Grant Recipients	7,835
Race/Ethnicity of Adult Students and Grant Recipients	
American Indian or Alaskan Native	20
Asian or Pacific Islander	299
Black or African American	1,303
Hispanic or Latino	1,941
Two or more races	312
White	3,727
Gender of Adult Students and Grant Recipients	
Female	5,139
Male	2,641
Age Group of Adult Students and Grant Recipients	
25–34	4,439
35–44	2,096
45–54	957
55 or over	343
FAFSA or MASFA Completion Rate Among Adult Students	88.3%

Source: Authors’ summary based on 2024 MassReconnect Legislative Report.⁷⁶

Table 6: **Retention Rate of MassReconnect Grant Recipients**

Fall Cohort	Enrollment Status	2023
First-Time Freshman	Full-time	59.1%
	Part-time	64.7%
Transfer	Full-time	64.7%
	Part-time	59.6%
Readmitted/ Reactivated	Full-time	56.7%
	Part-time	57.5%
Continuing	Full-time	66.4%
	Part-time	61.2%

Source: Authors’ summary based on 2024 MassReconnect Legislative Report.⁷⁷

those students at a higher rate relies on different strategies,” highlighting the distinction between expanding access and improving long-term student success outcomes.

In the near term, success has been measured primarily through access and participation indicators: adult enrollment, grant uptake, FAFSA and MASFA completion, retention, and annual unduplicated headcount. However, stakeholders expressed less agreement on what should count as success beyond enrollment and participation. As one stakeholder noted, *“the success metric is not enrollment,”* but rather what happens after students leave—whether they obtain jobs and whether those jobs align with the state’s economic needs. Several stakeholders argued that long-term success should be defined less by how many students enter the system and more by whether students *“get a job... keep a job... [or] progress in their career.”* Another put the challenge more bluntly: *“you could enroll a whole bunch of folks... and if these folks aren’t getting employed, then what have you accomplished?”*

Data limitations constrain real-time evaluation.

A central challenge in assessing the program’s success is the lack of timely and integrated data. Massachusetts does not have a unified statewide community college data system, and much of the available data is collected on a delayed schedule. As one stakeholder noted, higher education data systems are *“lagging,”* meaning that key outcomes, such as completion, employment, and earnings, are not immediately visible.

To address this, state leaders have relied on more informal and off-cycle data collection, working directly with colleges to track application trends, enrollment yield, and early indicators of student persistence. This approach depends heavily on strong relationships with institutions and requires ongoing coordination to ensure that data is reported consistently and in a timely manner. In practice, the state has also used funding mecha-

nisms to incentivize reporting. Because funding is distributed in multiple tranches, institutions must submit clean and timely data to receive subsequent payments, creating a built-in accountability mechanism for data collection.

Long-term outcomes will take time to measure.

The program’s long-term impact remains difficult to assess, in part because the most meaningful outcomes will take years to materialize. Standard measures such as graduation rates, transfer, and labor market outcomes necessarily lag enrollment gains, and meaningful completion data for Mass-Reconnect cohorts is not yet available.

Even when data becomes available, existing metrics may not fully capture outcomes for community college students, many of whom attend part-time, transfer institutions, or follow non-linear pathways. As a result, several stakeholders emphasized the need for broader measures of student success that better reflect how adult learners actually move through community college, including transfer, part-time persistence, and employment progression.

Conclusion

In a short period of time, MassReconnect has driven significant enrollment growth, brought new populations into the community college system, and shifted public perception of who college is for. These early results suggest that cost was a meaningful barrier, and that removing it can materially change participation at scale. At the same time, the program highlights the limits of access-focused policy. While MassReconnect has been successful in getting students in the door, its long-term impact will depend on what happens next: whether students persist, complete credentials, and ultimately transition into jobs aligned with the state's workforce needs. Achieving these outcomes will require stronger alignment across education, workforce, and economic development systems, as well as sustained investment in institutional capacity and student support.

One of the clearest indicators of early success is the program's influence on broader state policy. Within two years, the conversation shifted from whether MassReconnect should exist to whether it should be expanded. This led directly to the creation of a more comprehensive free community college initiative, signaling strong political and institutional buy-in. In this sense, MassReconnect is not only a program, but a catalyst, demonstrating what is possible and creating momentum for broader system-level change.

Wyoming: Wyoming Innovation Partnership

Introduction



Highlights

- **WIP was designed to address structural challenges:** a fragmented higher education system, fiscal dependence on extractive industries, and a deepening demographic crisis.
- **Program governance choices proved consequential.** Locating the Executive Director in the Governor’s Office provided the cross-cutting authority and perceived neutrality that enabled genuine buy-in from all nine colleges.
- **WIP’s program delivery, metrics, and accountability framework matured substantially across three phases,** evolving from ad hoc to structured systems.
- **Key program outputs in the first three years include:** 39 new programs, 1,721 post-secondary enrollments, 80 workforce trainings, 1,901 industry engagements, 460 internships, 635 industry credentials, 55 seminars and workshops.
- **WIP is navigating an institutional transition to the Wyoming Business Alliance.** While aided by early planning, questions about external fundraising and long-term sustainability remain open.

The Wyoming Innovation Partnership (WIP) was established by Governor Mark Gordon in spring 2021 to “modernize and focus Wyoming’s efforts to develop a resilient workforce and economy.”⁷⁸

WIP is a competitive grant program focused on strengthening key industries, primarily channeling funds to Wyoming’s public higher education institutions to build research, innovation, and workforce pipelines.⁷⁹ Over approximately four years, WIP has received over \$70 million in combined federal and state funding.

WIP has proceeded through three phases, each corresponding to a distinct funding round, and is currently navigating a pivotal transition. As WIP spends down its final state appropriation, the initiative transitioned in fall 2025 from the Governor’s Office to the Wyoming Business Alliance—a nonpartisan nonprofit—in pursuit of long-term sustainability. This case study examines WIP holistically and tracks its evolution across phases, starting with its multi-layered strategic rationale.

Strengthening Collaboration to Diversify Wyoming’s Economy and Retain Talent

Cross-institutional Collaboration

Wyoming’s postsecondary system is structurally fragmented in ways that prevent the state from harnessing its institutions of higher education (IHEs) to strategically address economic development and workforce needs at scale. Wyoming operates nine public IHEs—eight community colleges and the University of Wyoming, the state’s sole four-year public institution—without an overarching coordinating system or governing board. Each college is located in an independent taxing district with its own elected board of trustees and its own geographic service area.⁸⁰ Historically, community college funding relied on approximately 60% state support, 20% local revenue, and 20% from tuition and fees.⁸¹ Multiple interviewees described IHEs as siloed due to the locally-oriented system. A state leader explained that colleges

compete for “businesses, investments, grants, and students across the state,” with presidents and boards of trustees hired to “take care of their own taxing region.” Another shared that “the system itself, law, governance, had limited the ability for colleges to work together and [for community] colleges to work with the university”—producing a “lack of coordination and shared resources.” WIP was established, as one grantee put it, as a “big carrot to force people to work together.”

Economic Diversification

The urgency to collaborate was directly tied to Wyoming’s economic structure and vulnerabilities. Oil and gas production alone accounts for over 40% of total property taxes levied, and the industry provided more than \$11 billion to Wyoming for education, infrastructure, and government operations from 2018-2024.⁸² This concentration makes Wyoming’s public finances acutely sensitive to commodity price cycles—a dynamic highlighted when the COVID-19-related energy demand collapse spurred a fiscal crisis. As one interviewee described, WIP sought to create workforce pipelines oriented toward “other opportunities outside of just the extractive industries and those taxing areas,” building Wyoming’s capacity for long-run economic diversification.

Talent Attraction and Retention

In parallel, the state is facing a deepening demographic challenge. With a population of approximately 580,000, Wyoming is the country’s least populated state, and its working-age population is contracting as outmigration accelerates.⁸³ In fact, by the time individuals born in Wyoming reach their thirties, nearly two thirds have left the state.⁸⁴ A state stakeholder shared that “the end goal is to keep students in Wyoming and get them into high-need workforce areas.” A grantee also emphasized the importance of entrepreneurship: “No one’s coming to save us... we need people that believe in Wyoming creating their own jobs here.” This was echoed by an employer who observed that recruiting out-of-state talent “fails most of the time.” Thus, WIP aimed to address the talent challenge

from both directions through support for higher education—building local career pathways and supporting new business starts to give Wyoming residents reasons to stay, while developing the workforce and innovation ecosystem required to attract new industry investment to the state.

ARPA as a Catalyst

Conversations about addressing fragmentation in higher education had begun in 2020. For months, Governor Gordon engaged IHE presidents about whether governance and funding structures could be reshaped to enable greater coordination. The initial conception of WIP was described not to have been a new spending vehicle for higher education, but rather an administrative mechanism requiring data-backed justification for program development among IHEs based on both economic need and avoiding duplication across institutions.

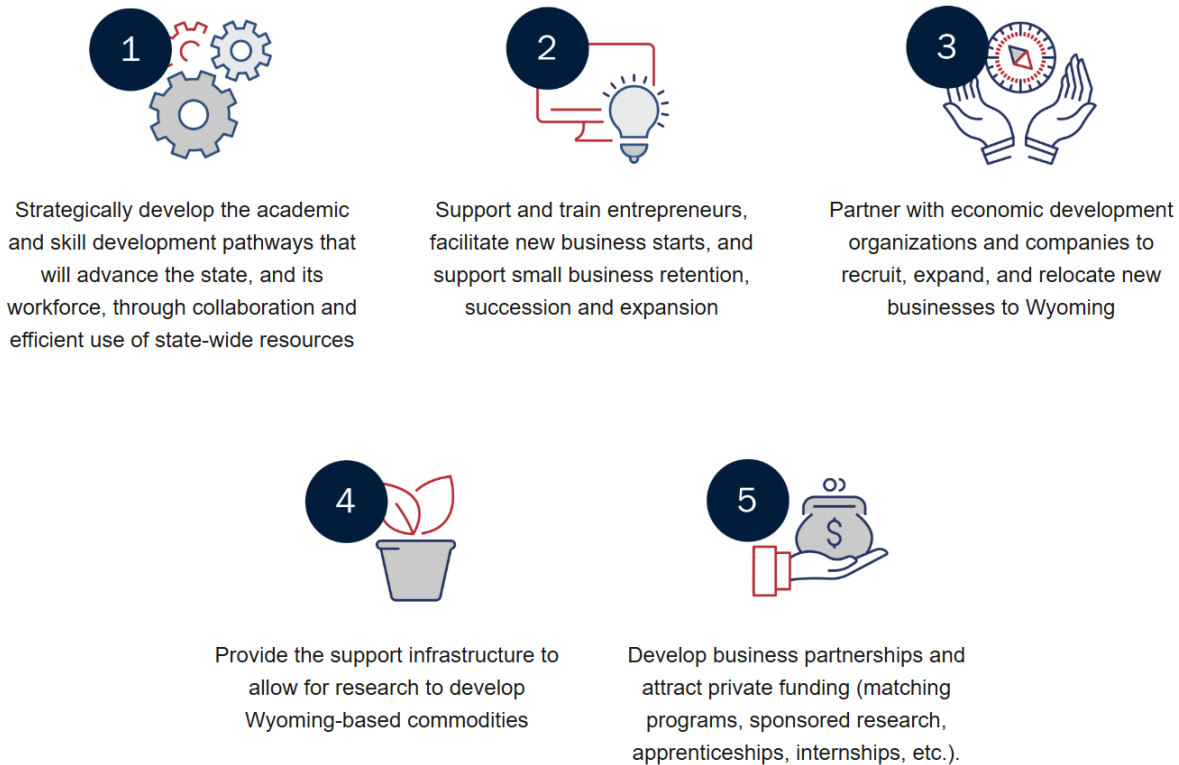
The arrival of federal ARPA funding in 2021 fundamentally changed what was possible.

Governor Gordon had the discretionary authority and resources to realize a vision, reportedly seeking to make a “longstanding impact on the state of Wyoming instead of just one-time dollars being thrown out the window.” This called for an initiative that went beyond what federal programs are well-equipped for. WIOA and Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education (Perkins) funds are both formula-driven allocations mainly designed to support individual job seekers access existing training options or to fund specific programs within single institutions. ARPA’s flexibility was critical because it allowed the Governor to design an initiative unconstrained by the statutory limitations.

Program Design

The Governor and his team created a multi-year blueprint that identified five broad areas, illustrated in Figure 9, as key objectives. To meet these objectives, a competitive grant program was selected as the instrument best suited to drive institutional behavior change and statewide coordination. WIP organized its investments

Figure 9: **WIP Key Objectives**



Source: WIP Website.⁸⁵

around nine key “program categories”:

(1) consortial infrastructure, (2) digital infrastructure and technology, (3) energy, (4) entrepreneurship, (5) healthcare, (6) tourism and hospitality, (7) agriculture, (8) manufacturing, and (9) workforce development.^{86,87} Eligible institutions—IHEs, as well as the Wyoming Departments of Education (WDE) and Workforce Services (DWS)—submitted applications to WIP, which were then reviewed and ultimately approved by the Governor. Applications required a project description, industry needs assessment, collaboration plan, sustainability plan, objectives and metrics, as well as a budget with any anticipated matching funds.

WIP’s grantee portfolio was deliberately broad.

WIP funded projects which stakeholders described to fall under two informal categories: (1) single- and multi-institution projects or (2)

“statewide” or “systemwide” initiatives. The former included, for example, Eastern Wyoming College expanding its Certified Nursing Assistant and Medical Assistant programs across multiple campuses, and launching field schools at active dig sites to develop programming in archaeology, anthropology, and education-based tourism. At Laramie County Community College, WIP seeded an echocardiography program developed at a hospital’s request and a makerspace that became a regional hub for advanced manufacturing training.

The second category is where WIP’s explicit emphasis on ecosystem-building and technological innovation was most visible. For example, WIP’s virtual reality (VR) project works to integrate VR into courses across K-12, postsecondary education, and industry while developing and deploying new applications. So far, 47 courses across a variety of disciplines have integrated VR, training over 4,000 learners and workers.⁸⁸ Moreover, the DWS is developing a digital credential wallet—a

learner and employment record (LER) system designed to give Wyoming workers portable, employer-readable, and reliably verified evidence of their skills. Interviewees expressed enthusiasm for these initiatives, with one noting that “every institution [was] at the table... working together for [these] statewide product[s].”

Industry Prioritization Grounded in State Planning, Data, and Stakeholder Engagement

WIP’s nine program categories largely consolidated strategic frameworks already embedded in Wyoming’s workforce and education planning.

Rather than a new prioritization exercise, WIP’s selected industries, such as healthcare and manufacturing, were “long-existing categories of workforce need or of job need.” Interviewees referenced the state’s WIOA and Perkins plans, the Workforce Development Council’s priorities, as well as other state-led initiatives—including Governor Matt Mead’s earlier Economically Needed Diversity Options for Wyoming (ENDOW) initiative and others launched under Governor Gordon, such as Wyoming Works and Next Generation Sector Partnerships. This approach reflects a strategy documented in research, where state-led efforts often leverage prior stakeholder alignment and political legitimacy to gain support and momentum.⁸⁹

Finalizing the list involved discussions between the Governor and IHE presidents.

A policymaker noted that selecting industries of focus was a process of “[looking] at economic data, job data, trying to distill what each community college was hearing [from industry] and what they thought was important, and then trying to identify priority areas.” Employer perspectives largely informed this deliberation indirectly, filtered through colleges, which acted as intermediaries. While one interviewee shared that industry representatives had been “at the table,” another

acknowledged in hindsight that structured employer engagement in co-design could have been stronger. Moreover, political and cultural considerations also shaped the outcome alongside labor market data—a reminder that sector prioritization may also serve a symbolic function. The inclusion of agriculture, for instance, reflected Governor Gordon’s reported view that Wyoming should not “walk away from something that’s also culturally important to us.”

No further prioritization or pre-set budget allocations were established.

WIP did not identify a higher-priority subset within its nine program categories. Notably, this gave institutions substantial freedom to consider their own mission, strengths, and regional business and economic needs. Interviewees noted that the portfolio that emerged across phases was “surprisingly even” across sectors, despite the absence of central planning. No specific population groups were targeted, focusing instead on “what jobs are needed in a community and how you train towards those.”

Collaboration, Flexibility, and Innovation as Key Design Principles

Collaboration was integrated into WIP’s application requirements, evaluation criteria, and review process.

A state leader explained that the competitive grant model was chosen in part to “leverage” the fact that colleges were “in competition with each other consistently,” encouraging them to instead compete to develop the strongest joint proposal. In WIP’s Phase III application, partnership was mandatory, with a dedicated subsection for describing existing partnerships and how they would be expanded. The evaluation criteria also weighed it heavily. Three out of seven scoring categories—namely, K-12 collaboration, college collaboration, and business partnerships—focused on cooperation, considering both quantity and quality. In practice, the application review process became

a mechanism to encourage collaboration through back-and-forth discussion. For example, a program manager shared, *“I got three grant applications from three different institutions for the same thing. You guys take this and figure it out together and come back to me with one application. And that required them to work together enough to get on the same page.”*

Based on grant awards, it appears that the extent to which collaboration was realized varied across program categories. In Phase III, four out of five digital infrastructure initiatives and two out of three agriculture projects were multi-institution collaborations, whereas healthcare and tourism predominantly saw single-institution projects.⁹⁰ Overall, the WIP team actively pushed for partnerships and saw them as a foundation to *“help with long-term sustainability.”*

Flexibility and innovation were prioritized over program type.

No specific program types were prescribed or recommended. Institutions could use funds for a wide range of activities, including new academic credentials, research initiatives, and equipment and software upgrades. An interviewee explained that policymakers prioritized *“flexibility to meet the institution needs where they were,”* employing an *“agile and innovative approach”* that could respond to real local needs. For example, a stakeholder highlighted that the smaller colleges developed programs that are *“really unique... and are very important for the region and area of the state that they serve.”* Examples include trail-building and ski lift operations programs in mountain communities. Grantees affirmed that WIP allowed them to put forward proposals for both *“shovel-ready”* as well as new, *“blue sky”* projects.

Implementation feasibility and accountability were built into program design.

Feasibility and accountability informed program design from two directions—the WIP project management team and the grantees themselves.

On the project management side, the choice

of a competitive grant model reflected their professional expertise, particularly familiarity with grantmaking from experience in local government and nonprofits. On the grantee side, the application structure was designed to surface feasibility concerns before funding was allocated by documenting their project team, articulating an implementation timeline, and identifying constraints and risks. A program manager shared that WIP actively screened out proposals that *“wouldn’t actually be feasible within the context of Wyoming”* or where applicants *“maybe didn’t have the capacity to execute.”*

Accountability was also embedded from the outset. As a state leader explained, *“I want our tax dollars to have an investment and an impact, and to be able to tell that story.”* Proposals had to provide labor market data demonstrating a genuine workforce need. Applicants were also required to align their objectives to WIP’s metrics framework and commit to regular progress reporting. How the application structure and post-award accountability framework matured across phases is discussed further in the Program Delivery and Metrics & Accountability sections below.

Governance and Coordination

Since its launch in 2021, WIP has proceeded through three phases (see Table 7). Throughout WIP’s implementation, its basic governance architecture and the role of each layer has remained consistent, summarized in Table 8 below.

In practice, this structure is enacted by a diverse set of partners. The Presidential Steering Group (PSG) convenes the presidents of all nine public IHEs, the Executive Director of the Wyoming Community College Commission (WCCC), the Wyoming Superintendent of Public Instruction, the Director of the DWS, the CEO of the Wyoming Business Council, and representatives from the Governor’s Office.⁹¹ Additionally, the project management arm is staffed by two sub-teams. The Western Interstate

Table 7: **Overview of WIP Phases**

Phase	Time Period	Description
Phase I	November 2021 – June 2023	Infrastructure support and activities to launch WIP’s collaborative, programmatic efforts
Phase II	July 2023 – June 2024	Workforce development programming, research, and innovation
Phase III	July 2024 – Beyond	Focus on data culture, outcomes, and sustainability

Source: Authors’ elaboration based on WIP website.⁹²

Table 8: **Layers of WIP Governance**

Layer	Entity	Role	Cadence
Political/ Top Authority	Governor of Wyoming	Reviews funding proposals and holds final approval over funding decisions Sets strategic priorities for WIP	Ad hoc (final review)
Steering Committee	Presidential Steering Group	Cross-institutional advisory and coordination body	Monthly
Executive Leadership	Executive Director	Translates strategy and priorities into program operations Responsibilities include: designing the RFP process, evaluating applications, managing accountability conversations with grantees	Weekly (team coordination) and ongoing oversight
Project Management	Project Management Team	Provides day-to-day operational support to Executive Director and grantees Responsibilities include: reviewing applications, building and maintaining reporting infrastructure, facilitating grantee working group meetings, one-on-one support to grantees	Weekly (team coordination) and ongoing with grantees

Source: Authors’ elaboration based on interviews and program documents.

Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), a regional organization contracted through WCCC, manages community college grantees, while the University of Wyoming (UW) Research Office manages UW grantees. The two sub-teams began with this strict division of responsibilities, but as one interviewee described, they have evolved into “*much more of a collaborative team at the project management level.*” Notably, all team members contribute to WIP part-time.

Over time, some governance elements evolved—most consequentially in where layers were housed and the nature of the Executive Director

role (see Table 9). The full-time Executive Director position was established in Phase II, and in Phase III, WIP formally transitioned to the Wyoming Business Alliance (WBA). As of September 2025, the WBA—a nonprofit affiliated with the Wyoming Heritage Foundation—was designated as WIP’s operational home and future fiscal agent for externally funded activities, having been selected through a competitive bidding process. As explained in a press release, the move aimed to “*foster greater input, engagement, and support from industry partners*” and “*push the initiative to find new sources of funding to scale up the suc-*

Table 9: **Evolution of WIP Governance**

Layer	Phase I	Phase II	Phase III
Political/Top Authority	Governor of Wyoming	Governor of Wyoming	Wyoming Business Alliance / Wyoming Heritage Foundation Board of Directors
Steering Committee	Presidential Steering Group (PSG)	Presidential Steering Group (PSG)	Presidential Steering Group (PSG)
Executive Leadership	University Wyoming-employed Coordinator (part-time)	Executive Director in Governor’s Office (full-time)	Executive Director in Wyoming Business Alliance
Project Management	University of Wyoming Research Office	University of Wyoming Research Office + WICHE	University of Wyoming Research Office + WICHE

Source: Authors’ elaboration based on interviews and program documents.

successful WIP programs.”⁹³ Several insights emerged from this multi-year organizational journey.

The creation of and repositioning of the full-time Executive Director role was a pivotal turning point .

Stakeholders consistently praised the establishment of a full-time Executive Director role in Phase II and its move from UW to the Governor’s Office. WIP initially did not anticipate having a dedicated director, in part to reduce costs. The first operational lead was a UW employee working on the initiative part-time. This arrangement generated some skepticism among community colleges around cross-institutional neutrality and government buy-in: “it just never felt like everybody bought in.”

Moving the role into the Governor’s Office provided neutrality and authority. It enabled a cross-cutting approach across education, workforce, and economic development without privileging a single agency, and provided direct access to policy advisors for sector-specific input on proposal review. One stakeholder described this shift as “a missing link” and “a pivotal moment in WIP.” The full-time Executive Director role spurred sustained relationship- and trust-building—widely seen by interviewees as critical to advising, change

management, and accountability conversations. For other states, WIP’s experience underscores the value of leadership that combines institutional neutrality, proximity to the Governor, and accessibility to stakeholders.

The Presidential Steering Group (PSG) became a platform for relationship-building and long-term commitment.

Interviewees shared that the PSG’s most important contribution was arguably not its formal guidance, but the relationships it built through years of monthly meetings. Regular convening created the familiarity and trust that enabled genuine buy-in rather than surface-level alignment. One stakeholder described the “collaboration and conversations [among IHEs]” to be “the best... in 25 years.” This was reflected in behavior: college presidents moved beyond proposal feedback to actively joining promising initiatives led by other institutions. This sustained engagement also translated into long-term commitment. At a PSG retreat approximately 18 months before the anticipated conclusion of state funding, members collectively voted to continue WIP beyond the state appropriation—prompting early action on sustainability, including WIP’s transition to WBA.

WIP's transition to Wyoming Business Alliance (WBA) has been smooth, but remains in a "hybrid" state.

From grantees' perspectives, the transition of WIP to WBA has been largely seamless, with one describing it as little more than *"a new email address."* This continuity is largely a function of personnel: the previous Governor's Policy Director now serves as WBA's president and the Executive Director moved with the initiative. As one interviewee put it, WIP *"is kind of a connect the dots, same ten people game."* Institutional memory and strong ties to the Governor's Office were preserved because the people carrying it moved together, but this reliance on key individuals presents both benefits and risks.

Nevertheless, the full effect of this transition has yet to unfold. As described by one interviewee, WIP is currently in a *"hybrid space"*: as state funds are still being spent down, funding decisions still require Governor's approval and the new governance structure has yet to be tested. The Wyoming Heritage Foundation board, WIP's future fiscal agent, has not yet assumed a substantive governance role, leaving open questions about how oversight will function once state funding ends.

Program Delivery

Alongside these changes in governance, program delivery matured across WIP's three phases: building on what worked, addressing what did not, and responding to challenges that only became visible once implementation was underway. Effective program delivery relied on both WIP's project management team as well as parallel, internal capacity-building by grantees.

Grantee institutions appeared to vary considerably in their grant management maturity at the start. One college entered WIP with a strong sponsored awards office and tight academic and grants relationships. Another described itself as a *"grant novice,"* lacking familiarity with allowable funding components and experimenting with multiple iterations of internal management

structure. Another grantee also acknowledged limited communication across WIP-funded projects at their institution and the challenge of navigating internal politics. Despite these differences, WIP participation encouraged IHEs to either develop or build on existing grant compliance systems, procurement processes, and data infrastructure.

Together, WIP exhibited a process of mutual learning: as the state strengthened program delivery, grantees simultaneously built the institutional capacity needed to execute. The following insights capture key aspects of this learning.

Application and reporting processes improved substantially across phases.

Phase I launched with limited structure, but each phase saw marked improvement. One grantee described the initial application to be *"onerous"* with *"a lot of redundancy."* In Phase I, funds were distributed without clear accountability and largely ad hoc, survey-based reporting—there were *"no metrics, no identified outcomes, no budgets."* As one interviewee reflected, *"it was sort of 'here are funds to do these things' and we're going to build the plane while we fly it."* The Executive Director's arrival in Phase II prompted an intentional shift towards systematization and formalization. By Phase II, a more rigorous, formal RFP process was designed, with expected outcomes articulated at the application stage and a subsequent quarterly reporting system using Smartsheet. Phase III saw further maturation of these processes. Applicants articulated project-specific metrics aligned to a standardized list, and the reporting cadence was well-established. As one grantee noted, WIP's metrics were built into the application from the get-go, so *"we know building the project what specifically they'll be asking for on the reporting end."*

High-touch project management across the grant cycle was valuable.

Grantees identified the accessibility and active involvement of the WIP project management team as a critical success factor. During the

application phase, the Executive Director and project management team did not function as passive reviewers—they pushed back on incomplete applications, facilitated revisions, and actively encouraged collaboration. During implementation, the team ran monthly industry-based working group calls to ensure that grantees in the same sector could share challenges and solutions, building relationships that extended beyond individual projects. As an interviewee observed, “there was a lot of hesitancy to engage across colleges four years ago.” By Phase III, these calls had evolved into a genuine cross-institutional network. The project management team also invested in one-on-one relationships with multiple contacts at each college for WIP’s portfolio of over 40 projects. Grantees valued this sustained operational and problem-solving support, with one recognizing the “accessibility to be able to call back and forth” and “reach out any time.”

Grantees appreciated state supports and see areas for improvement.

WIP provided additional support to grantees in some areas, such as marketing. A grantee highlighted Governor Gordon’s hiring of a marketing team—“[producing] high quality videos” and effectively creating “an awareness campaign so people can understand the impact of this investment...and how this investment is being mobilized [across Wyoming].” This enabled “layers of marketing” from the state- to college-level. The campaign helped address shared recruiting challenges, with grantees describing that demand for programs must sometimes be generated, not expected.

Grantees also identified areas for improvement. The application timelines—typically around one month from opening to submission—were sometimes insufficient for institutions to secure meaningful employer pre-commitments, properly scope programs, and pre-plan. This was particularly challenging for smaller colleges with fewer resources or less experience in grant application and management. A grantee suggested additional support such as a structured onboarding

process—covering reporting requirements, procurement procedures, overhead allowances, and compliance expectations—or a cohort-based training model for grantees.

Funding

WIP represents a significant state investment.

Across its three phases, WIP invested approximately \$70 million—\$14.7 million in federal ARPA⁹⁴ funds and \$13.1 million in state general funds in Phase I, \$27.5 million in Phase II, and \$15 million in Phase III.⁹⁵ Overall, this translates to roughly three times Wyoming’s WIOA allocation per year for youth, adult, and dislocated worker activities.

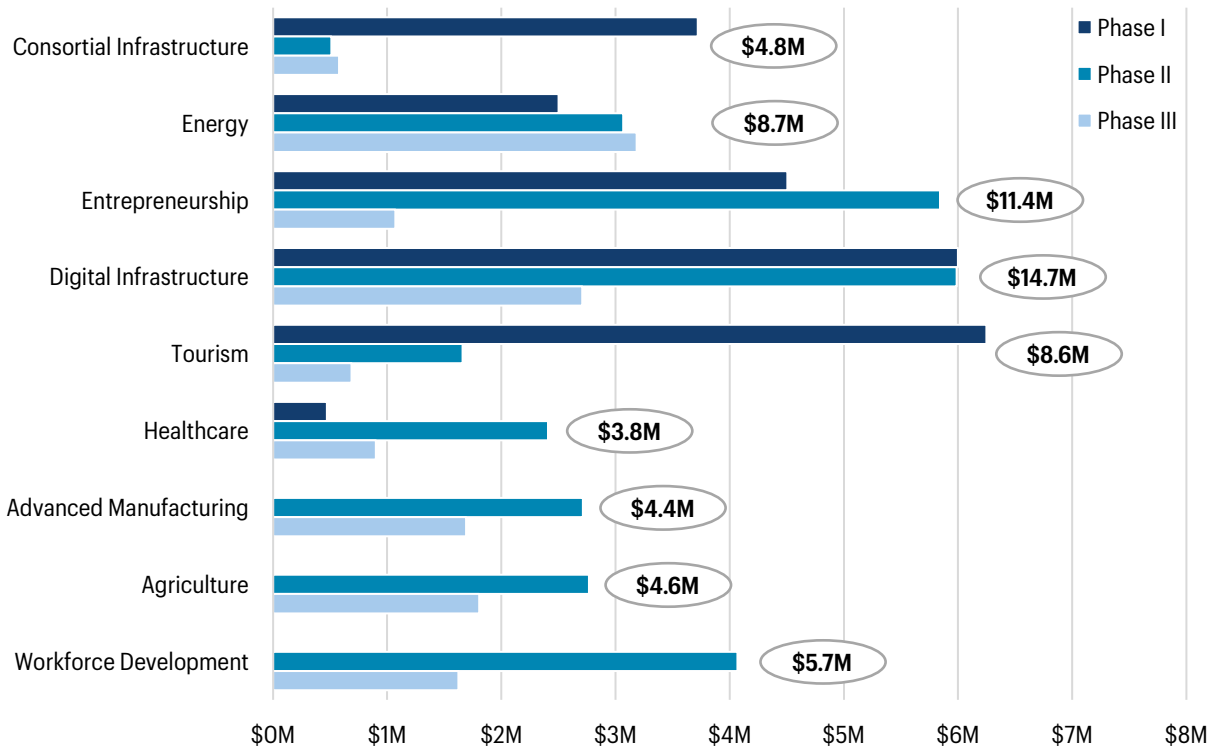
Funding by program category fluctuated across phases.

As illustrated in Figure 10, Phase I investment was heavily concentrated in consortial infrastructure and a handful of program categories. Overall, four categories received the majority of funds: (1) digital infrastructure (~\$14.7 million), (2) entrepreneurship (~\$11.4 million), (3) energy (~\$8.7 million), and (4) tourism (~\$8.6 million). Collectively, they represent 65% of total WIP investment across all phases.

Funding flowed from the state legislature to the Governor’s Office, which then executed MOUs and interagency agreements directly with grantee institutions. For multi-agency proposals, funds were split at the application stage and directed to each agency separately. For system-wide initiatives, funds were routed through the WCCC, which then sub-contracted to participating institutions. Notably, both state and grantee interviewees did not report any implementation challenges in transitioning from ARPA to state funds.

Furthermore, grantees raised \$19 million in external funds, representing over a quarter of the combined federal and state funding.⁹⁶ These funds were directly raised by the colleges and went straight to them. For example, a grantee reported that they used WIP funds as a match for a U.S. Economic Development Administration grant,

Figure 10: **WIP Funding Allocation by Key Industry**



*Some additional contracts and funds (e.g., salaries) not included

Source: Authors' analysis based on data from WIP Project Management.

while another shared that their WIP award provided credibility to secure funding from a private philanthropic foundation.

Grantees valued flexibility in funding structure.

Across grantee interviews, no institution reported difficulty in using WIP funds for intended activities. Institutions could apply funds to a wide range of cost items—personnel, equipment, software, marketing, and community outreach—and budget reclassification was permitted with approval. Carry-over of unspent funds was allowed within the biennium, reducing end-of-year pressure to spend inefficiently. As one interviewee described, “if [grantees] need to move money around, [grantees] fill out a form, [WIP] approves it, and [grantees] can adjust the funding.” This flexibility was cited by grantees as one of WIP’s most valued features, enabling programs to adapt to changing circumstances without losing momentum.

Funding delays and barriers to timely spending created challenges.

The carry-over flexibility was in part a response to funding delays. In Phase I, bottlenecks with legal approval delayed funding deployment by approximately nine months. A grantee shared how their institution relied on internal institutional resources to bridge the gap during that time: “I had to work with my dean to use a lot of internal funds.” Supply chain disruptions caused bottlenecks in timely spending, as “there is a significant amount of equipment that’s been purchased with WIP dollars.” Colleges also faced challenges in hiring program personnel, struggling to compete with industry salary levels. In some cases, phase-based annual funding made it difficult to retain program staff across cycles, undermining continuity in implementation and reporting.

WIP prioritized sustained investment in existing programs.

Rather than treating each funding phase as an opportunity to seed entirely new programs, WIP consistently prioritized sustaining and deepening investment in programs. As a policymaker described, “most projects funded in Phase II were then funded in Phase III.” One exception was nuclear technology, with a new program added at Western Wyoming College. This approach reflected

WIP’s intention to serve as “a catalyst to fund something that would ultimately be sustainable on its own.” The Phase III application form explicitly notes a “focus on the sustainability of WIP efforts” and that “all funding decisions will be made with a focus on sustainability.”⁹⁷ This expectation was well-communicated to grantees, as interviewees across the board understood that WIP was a launchpad, not a lifeline.

Table 10: Short-Term and Long-Term Metrics

Short-Term Program Metrics

- Number of new educational programs launched (by program type)
- Number of students enrolled in WIP-supported programs
- Projected number of program graduates (by program type and expected graduation date)
- Number of jobs available in Wyoming aligned with program-related degrees or credentials
- Average wage of jobs aligned with program-related degrees or credentials
- Projected workforce demand for aligned jobs (based on industry trends)
- Number of industry partnerships established
- Number of internships/apprenticeships created
- Percentage of students transitioning to higher education programs, including transfer pathways to UW
- Student retention rate (semester-to-semester and annual)
- Student dropout rate
- Number of new students recruited
- Program capacity utilization rate and waitlist size
- Number and percentage of non-traditional students enrolled (e.g., age 24+, single parents, career changers)
- Job placement rate of graduates within a defined period after graduation
- Number of courses offered in nontraditional formats (online, hybrid, night classes)
- Average financial aid received per student in WIP-supported programs (including childcare and other support services)
- Percentage of students enrolled full-time versus part-time
- Percentage of students employed while enrolled

Long-Term WIP Metrics

- Number of new business starts
- Number of business closures
- Number of business expansions and associated jobs created
- Number of business relocations to Wyoming and associated jobs
- Total number of new jobs added to Wyoming’s economy
- Average wage of WIP program graduates
- Percentage of program graduates retained in Wyoming’s workforce
- Research activity aligned with Wyoming’s economic development priorities
- Number of patents, intellectual property filings, licenses, and commercialized technologies
- Change in economic diversification indicators over a 2-5 year period
- Graduation rates at UW and graduate schools
- Job placement growth rate of program graduates (4-6%)
- Job growth in small communities (population under 10,000 and under 5,000)
- ROI – dollars invested per job created/graduate retained in Wyoming
- Additional funding leveraged through grants, philanthropy, and private-sector investment
- Number of new residential housing units constructed
- Number of new commercial development projects completed
- Housing affordability indicators (including home prices and rental rates)

Source: Authors’ summary based on New WIP Program Proposal.⁹⁸

Metrics and Accountability

Across interviews with state stakeholders, high-level conceptions of success aligned with WIP's theory of change, particularly strengthening institutional collaboration and diversifying Wyoming's economy. This alignment extended to grantees, who framed their work in similar terms—for example, highlighting the imperative to “collaborate, don't duplicate.”

However, translating these goals into a measurable framework was initially left open-ended. Governor Gordon did not set specific numeric targets—one interviewee described him to be “very open to allowing us to explore what [measuring success] looked like for WIP.” As discussed, WIP's metrics and accountability framework developed across phases. One grantee characterized this progression as moving from self-defined metrics to more “prescriptive” requirements, before settling into a “dynamic” middle-ground that combined standardized metrics with flexibility for additional reporting. The resulting framework spans both short-term and long-term indicators (Table 10).

Data systems matured into a central tool for accountability, decision-making, and sustainability.

WIP's data systems were refined into a structured system. In Phase I, reporting was described as “somewhat of a pilot.” By Phase II, projects were required to articulate outcomes against a set of metrics, and by Phase III, the framework in Table 10 was fully embedded. Grantees noted that some of these metrics were already collected for internal purposes or other grants. Regular quarterly reporting, complemented by annual synthesis, created a consistent cadence for tracking performance and communicating results. WIP has released a comprehensive annual report at the end of each phase. The latest highlights key outputs, including: 39 new programs; 1,721 post-secondary enrollments; 80 workforce trainings with 1,931 workforce training participants; 1,901 industry engagements; 460 internships provided, 635 industry credentials; 55 seminars and workshops with 1,800 participants.⁹⁹

A UW Center for Business and Economic Analysis found that “the value-added ROI [of WIP] for a 5-year horizon is estimated at 690%.”¹⁰⁰

Data has also enabled successive investment and continuous improvement. WIP data was presented to three successive appropriations committees to justify continued state investment and, as one stakeholder noted, is now a key asset as WIP seeks external funding: “when you're talking to potential new funders, you have a lot of data on hand that helps solidify and show the impacts you've had.” Moreover, data informed real-time course correction. In at least one case, funding was pulled from an underperforming program and reinvested. One grantee described the reallocation as evidence that “the Governor is reacting appropriately when the delivery is not aligned with the promise.” Overall, a state interviewee observed that WIP programs now have “more data and more accountability than anything” in Wyoming's higher education system.

Standardization improved accountability but revealed tensions across diverse and long-horizon programs.

WIP encountered challenges in aggregating results and constructing a cohesive performance narrative across a highly heterogeneous portfolio. As one stakeholder described, “you really have 45 unique projects with their own subset of metrics,” requiring ongoing crosswalks and program-specific indicators alongside standardized metrics. For programs with particularly long time horizons—for example, entrepreneurship development and research commercialization—quarterly reporting against one-year milestones was viewed as structurally incompatible. As one grantee explained: “I'm developing entrepreneurs. I have no control over when they'll hit. The ROI of this project? I'll get back to you in 20 years.” These tensions are further compounded by system-level constraints such as a statewide longitudinal data system (SLDS) that is only “partially functional” and does not capture non-credit programs.

More fundamentally, progress toward WIP’s long-run—economic diversification and talent retention—is too early to assess with confidence.

The industries WIP has invested in reflect both Wyoming’s existing economic base and its diversification aspirations, but whether funding is meaningfully shifting workforce pipelines toward new sectors and increasing graduate retention remains an open question.

Sustainability

Overall, WIP was designed from the outset as a time-limited catalyst rather than a permanent solution—intended to seed collaboration, stand up new initiatives, and build workforce pipelines that IHEs and industry would ultimately sustain. As one stakeholder put it, the goal was to “*jumpstart something*” and then hand it off. That transition is now underway, with both opportunities to seize and risks to mitigate.

WIP has transitioned smoothly to the WBA and many foundational elements will remain. Future directions for the initiative are emerging—including a sharpened focus on K-12 career pathways, construction trades, and data center workforce development—reflecting an effort to align with Wyoming’s economic priorities and the WBA’s industry relationships.¹⁰¹ Sustaining the PSG as a coordination mechanism beyond state funding and embedding WIP’s collaborative norms into the WCCC’s standard program approval processes, are among the structural mechanisms most likely to outlast the initiative itself.

WIP is actively pursuing a diversified external funding strategy.

Private sector investment, federal grant opportunities, and philanthropic and foundation support present paths forward. One stakeholder argued that a well-executed initiative should be able to attract sustained support: “*if you did it well, you should be able to write compelling grants and transition.*” The WBA’s existing relationships with industry provide a meaningful platform for private sector fundraising. However, Wyoming has

historically lacked federal grants—a function of its small population, limited demonstrated scale of impact, and historically low application rates. Moreover, perhaps most structurally challenging is the tension one interviewee identified between WIP’s own fundraising needs and those of the institutions it built up: “*WIP now competes for some of the same external funding streams it helped colleges unlock.*” This dynamic requires careful navigation to avoid undermining the institutional partners whose success has been central to WIP’s own story.

In parallel, grantees are at various stages of readiness for self-sustainment.

For example, one grantee reports that two WIP-funded full-time positions are already in their FY27 general fund budget process, and several programs have established sufficient enrollment demand to be self-sustaining through tuition revenue. Another shares that they are less optimistic—the college is attempting to absorb WIP-funded positions and activities, but is constrained by declining property tax revenues.

Conclusion

Over four years, WIP moved Wyoming’s nine independent IHEs from structural competition to active partnership—a shift that interviewees consistently attributed not only to funding, but to strategic governance design choices. Ultimately, while WIP’s success in diversifying funding sources has yet to be seen, the initiative’s most durable impact may lie at this system level. The relationships, norms, and coordination mechanisms it established have begun to outlast the funding itself, with institutions now “*partnering better... than they ever have.*” Whether this shift can be sustained—and translated into long-term economic and workforce outcomes—will define WIP’s lasting legacy.

Cross-State Insights

The Governor-led signature workforce investments examined in this report differ in design, target population, funding source, and institutional home. Examined together, they reveal challenges that proved common regardless of program model, as well as enabling conditions that appeared consistently where programs succeeded. These cross-state insights span the full program life-cycle—from the design tradeoffs policymakers navigated at launch and engagement with WIOA to iterative implementation refinements, challenges in outcome-tracking, and the broader systems change these investments catalyzed over time.

Insight #1: Programs navigated design tradeoffs between broad eligibility and strategic targeting

Across the five states, programs differed in how broadly they defined eligibility and how strategi-

cally they targeted workforce priorities across industries, participants, and providers, navigating tradeoffs between scale and flexibility on one hand, and alignment with workforce needs and measurable outcomes on the other.

How States Defined Workforce Priorities

States took different approaches to defining workforce priorities across both industry and participant dimensions (Table 11). **These approaches reflect different choices about where decision-making authority should sit, whether at the state level, with local actors, or with participants themselves.**

Implications of Broad Eligibility

Programs that adopted broader eligibility across participants, industries, or providers were better positioned to scale quickly, develop locally-relevant projects, and expand available training options. In Massachusetts, broad participant

Table 11: **Comparison of Programs by Industry, Eligibility, and Participant Targeting**

Program	Eligibility / Targeting	
	Industries / Occupations	Participants
Drive for 5 Minnesota	Training must align with one or more of five state-defined industry sectors and specific high-demand, high-wage occupations	Shall meet at least one of eight priority population categories (e.g. individuals lacking stable housing)
LAUNCH Idaho	Training must align with the annually updated state in-demand career list	High school seniors (there is a sister program that supports adults)
RWIP North Dakota	Phase 1–2: regions defined priorities across seven broad categories; Phase 3: sector strategy required but sectors not prescribed	No defined population targeting; funding allocated across regions
WIP Wyoming	Projects must align with nine state-defined program categories	No defined population targeting; institutions determine participant focus
MassReconnect Massachusetts	No industry or occupation targeting; participants choose field of study	Adults 25+ without a bachelor’s degree

Source: Authors’ elaboration based on interviews and document analysis.

eligibility, reflected in the simple message of “free community college,” combined with minimal eligibility requirements and no application beyond the FAFSA, reduced barriers to entry and supported strong enrollment gains. In Wyoming and North Dakota, broad industry eligibility gave local actors flexibility to shape investments based on their specific workforce needs. This allowed grantees to develop creative, diverse, and locally relevant projects. In Idaho, broadening provider eligibility to include private and non-credit training providers increased available training options and addressed capacity constraints at public training institutions.

At the same time, broader eligibility made it more difficult to define and compare outcomes, increased the need for coordination and technical assistance, and may not always translate into equitable uptake. In North Dakota and Wyoming, broad industry eligibility made it more difficult to compare results across heterogeneous projects. In Idaho, a wide range of providers created data fragmentation challenges, requiring significant coordination and data-sharing across agencies and providers. Similarly, in Minnesota, broadening provider eligibility to nontraditional partners, such as chambers of commerce, required DEED to provide additional technical assistance, as many were new to the state’s performance reporting requirements. Research suggests that expanding eligibility alone does not guarantee equitable access to benefits. For example, analysis of financial aid uptake demonstrates that those most likely to benefit from financial aid are less likely to apply for it compared to peers from higher-income families.¹⁰²

Implications of Strategic Targeting

Programs that more tightly defined workforce priorities were better able to articulate how training aligned with labor market demand and what success looks like, though this did not always translate into straightforward evaluation. In Minnesota, sector targeting, employer partnership requirements, and wage-based performance

incentives created a clear theory of change linking training to employment in high-demand, high-wage industries. Policymakers could clearly assess whether participants entered targeted occupations and achieved intended wage outcomes. Idaho similarly aligned eligibility with labor market demand through its in-demand careers list, but program evaluation was less straightforward in practice due to challenges linking participants’ employment data.

Strategic participant and/or geographic targeting and partnership requirements also enabled Governors to direct investments toward specific policy goals. In Minnesota, this included advancing equity by encouraging grantees to serve participants from underserved populations and connect them to jobs with family-sustaining wages. In North Dakota, geographic targeting through regional funding caps ensured a more even distribution of funds across the state. Both states also required employer partnerships to strengthen alignment with industry and improve coordination across workforce actors.

However, more tightly defined requirements, including performance expectations, occupational eligibility rules, and sector strategy mandates introduced administrative complexity. In Minnesota, strong partnership and placement requirements led some training providers to develop “closed-loop” training-to-hiring models that, in some cases, inadvertently duplicated the role of the intermediary grantees. Idaho’s in-demand careers list required ongoing methodological updates and communication, adding administrative complexity. In North Dakota, the introduction of sector strategy requirements created pushback from applicants who argued that it increased the burden of participation, with some regions less willing to engage under the new structure.

Insight #2: Programs engaged with the WIOA system while developing independent eligibility frameworks

The five state programs vary significantly in how they relate to the WIOA system. **Notably, as evidenced in Table 11, across all five states, programs did not follow WIOA participant eligibility, allowing programs to expand beyond WIOA's population categories and align eligibility with state-defined priorities.**

Selective Use of WIOA Program Infrastructure and Expertise

Across states, engagement with WIOA program infrastructure ranged from deep integration to limited use.

Idaho LAUNCH has the most direct relationship to WIOA program infrastructure. In developing LAUNCH, the Workforce Development Council created an in-demand career matrix to define priority occupations, which now informs the state's WIOA Eligible Training Provider List (ETPL), shaping which programs are eligible under WIOA. Training providers must be included on the ETPL to be eligible for LAUNCH.

In Minnesota, Drive for 5 employment specialists are embedded within CareerForce, the state's WIOA American Job Center network. This allows the employment specialists to connect Drive for 5 employers to the state's broader workforce ecosystem. Additionally, many tracked program metrics, such as the number of participants attaining a recognized credential and placed in unsubsidized employment, align with established WIOA metrics.

North Dakota, Wyoming, and Massachusetts made less direct use of formal WIOA infrastructure. In those states, program design and delivery relied more heavily on other institutions and agencies, including commerce, economic development, and higher education.

States selectively leveraged workforce boards for strategic planning, even when designing programs outside the WIOA system.

Idaho, Minnesota, North Dakota, and Wyoming each used their state workforce development boards in different ways. In Idaho, the Workforce Development Council played a central role in designing LAUNCH. In Minnesota, the Governor's Workforce Development Board convened sector-based subcommittees aligned with Drive for 5 industries to identify talent needs, define career pathways, recommend target populations and supports, and inform WIOA state and regional planning. In North Dakota, the Workforce Development Council helped recommend RWIP to the legislature, but did not play an ongoing role in program design and administration. In Wyoming, the selection of nine program categories was informed by the priorities of the Workforce Development Council and WIOA and Perkins plans. MassReconnect did not leverage the state workforce board or WIOA planning; the program was designed and implemented through the higher education system, reflecting the program's focus on educational access for all over workforce training.

Insight #3: Programs successfully tracked short-term metrics and are building toward longer-term outcomes tracking, despite operational challenges

Across all five initiatives, program teams successfully tracked inputs and outputs, such as enrollment counts and credential completions, through their early reporting systems. However, capturing long-term outcomes, such as wage gains or economic mobility indicators, proved more challenging.

Table 12: **Common Metrics**

Type of Activities	Short-Term Metrics	Long-Term Metrics
Education and Training <i>Including degree and non-degree</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New academic/training programs established • Enrollment counts • Completion rates • Credential attainment • Retention rates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job placement rates • Wage gains
Employer and Sector Partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of employer partners engaged • Number of new co-designed work-based learning programs established (e.g., internships, apprenticeships) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employer hiring rates from program • Wage outcomes and progression • Workforce shortage reduction in targeted sectors
Child care and Wraparound Supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of child care slots created • Number of participants receiving support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persistence and completion rates for supported participants • Downstream employment outcomes
Business Development and Attraction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of businesses assisted • Number of training events held 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New business starts • Business retention and expansion • New jobs added
Talent Attraction and Retention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-state enrollment rates • Out-of-state leaver rates • Trade show engagements • Talent campaign website visitors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long-term in-state retention of graduates

Source: Authors' elaboration based on interviews and document analysis.

Table 12 below summarizes the common short- and long-term metrics collected across programs, organized by activity type rather than by state. This structure reflects the fact that the signature investments examined often span multiple activities. For example, Minnesota's Drive for 5 delivers education and training in the context of sector partnerships. North Dakota's first two phases of RWIP saw significant investment in child care, whereas its third phase focused on sector strategies. Both Wyoming's WIP and Idaho's LAUNCH consider talent retention goals within broader workforce training.

Overall, short-term metrics were critical to demonstrating early traction and sustaining legislative confidence. Long-term metrics reflect outcomes

that programs identified as priorities. Some have begun collecting relevant data but have yet to observe results, while others identified them as aspirational for future tracking when stronger data infrastructure is in place.

The data above can be further disaggregated to support more targeted analysis and decision-making. Massachusetts, for example, tracks participant enrollment by race/ethnicity, gender, and age group. This helps reveal barriers for different demographic groups, which aggregate counts may obscure. Disaggregation by geographic (i.e., rural versus urban) or employer (i.e., sector or firm size) characteristics can also offer additional analytical leverage for program managers seeking to understand variation in outcomes across contexts.

Furthermore, while traditional workforce metrics tend to capture participant-side outcomes, an emerging frontier in workforce metrics is measurement from the industry perspective. Federal policy has begun pushing in this direction. WIOA introduced an “Effectiveness in Serving Employers” performance indicator in 2014, with states piloting measurement approaches such as repeat business customers and employer penetration rate.¹⁰³ However, the indicator was not finalized until 2024, reflecting how underdeveloped employer-side measurement remains across the field.¹⁰⁴ Metrics more directly capturing industry alignment—such as time-to-fill critical roles, skills gap coverage, and training return on investment—remain largely absent from public workforce program reporting frameworks. As states increasingly co-design programs with industry partners and incentivize deep employer engagement, developing more robust employer-side metrics represents a meaningful opportunity for Governors to better capture whether workforce investments are delivering value from industry’s perspective.

Long-term outcomes remain a work in progress

This gap reflects structural barriers spanning multiple ecosystem actors: colleges, workforce training providers, sector intermediaries, employer partners, and state agencies each operating with different data systems, reporting requirements, and accountability structures. This reflects a broader national pattern and is a manifestation of decades of underinvestment in state longitudinal data infrastructure. Since the federal Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS) grant program launched in 2005, all 50 states have received a combined total of over \$930 million in federal grants to build cross-sector data systems.¹⁰⁵ However, state appropriations are the most common primary funding source for SLDSs, making sustained state-level commitment the decisive factor in whether these systems succeed.¹⁰⁶ A recent survey of SLDS leaders found that most states still need significant additional funding to maintain core functionality, with substantial

anxiety about long-term sustainability.¹⁰⁷

Gaps are particularly acute at the postsecondary-workforce interface. Among state postsecondary data systems that do connect to workforce records, only 11% identify the industry or occupation in which individuals are employed.¹⁰⁸ This disconnect was a barrier identified across the two scholarship programs explored. Employers were not set up to track which hires had received publicly subsidized education and training, severing the link between program participation and employment outcomes. In Idaho, employers could not reliably identify who had used LAUNCH. Closing that loop would require wage-record matching infrastructure that did not yet exist. In Massachusetts, one industry stakeholder noted that employers “*may have hired them, but they’re not even asking that question on intake.*”

Across all five states, program administrators were candid about these limitations and are actively working to address them. Progress is being made toward stronger interagency data agreements, more systematic employer engagement in outcome tracking, and reporting infrastructure that can sustain longitudinal evaluation. This work, however, extends well beyond the scope of any single signature workforce investment.

Insight #4: Programs evolved after launch as states adapted to implementation realities, refining design, addressing gaps, and responding to stakeholder needs

“The state is so willing to say, how do we refine this and make this better? What’s the most impactful?”

Grantee

“Be ready to adjust. Sometimes you have to stop and pivot... and be transparent... if you have to (change) something, be open and honest and tell people, okay, yep, this is how it’s done today.”

State Program Manager

Across the five state investments, states adapted program structure, requirements, and delivery mechanisms over time in response to implementation experience and shifting strategic priorities. The degree of change varied, from incremental refinements within existing models to more substantial redesign across funding rounds. Such adaptations reflect the reality that initial program

design could not fully anticipate on-the-ground conditions, and that implementation itself became a primary source of learning for state leaders.

Drivers of Iteration

In all five states, external feedback from grantees provided a direct mechanism for identifying design challenges and opportunities for improvement.

In response, states modified application structures, eligibility and funding rules, and reporting systems to better align with implementation realities (Table 13). **These patterns suggest that**

Table 13: **Program Changes Informed by Grantee Feedback**

Program	Examples of Grantee Feedback-Driven Changes <i>Non-exhaustive list</i>
Drive for 5 Minnesota	Quarterly convenings with grantees and informal feedback channels revealed differences in program design goals and realities on-the-ground, leading DEED to adjust wage incentives, restructure training and placement roles, and rebalance funding to grantees across the funding rounds.
RWIP North Dakota	Collecting feedback from regional councils on the RFPs before they were released and collecting feedback during webinars revealed coordination challenges, IT challenges, and the continued importance of child care as a workforce barrier. This led to the removal of the bundled application process, creation of additional technical assistance, and reinstatement of child care as an eligible category for funding.
LAUNCH Idaho	Feedback from students, counselors, and training providers during the first year of implementation surfaced recurring friction points in the award and application process, particularly around contingent awards, documentation requirements, and transitions between systems. That feedback led the state to adjust how the program was administered, including adding office hours for students and families, centralizing counselor communication through Basecamp, and creating more structured guidance and implementation materials to reduce confusion and improve follow-through.
WIP Wyoming	Industry-based working groups attended by grantees and 1:1 project management relationships with grantees created ongoing feedback loops, leading to improvements in application design and reporting systems.
MassReconnect Massachusetts	Feedback during early implementation surfaced through regular working groups across the community college system, particularly through the senior student affairs officers, who met monthly and increased their cadence significantly during rollout. As one interviewee noted, this group met as often as every Friday during the pandemic and early implementation period, creating a consistent channel for colleges to surface operational issues, compare approaches, and troubleshoot implementation challenges in real time.

Source: Authors’ elaboration based on interviews and program documents.

ongoing feedback mechanisms can play a critical role in identifying gaps between program design and implementation and enabling timely adjustments. However, as one interviewee noted, power dynamics may limit grantees' willingness to raise concerns directly. States may therefore consider structured feedback processes that provide both clarity and safety—for example, by using neutral third parties to regularly collect, anonymize, and synthesize input before sharing it with program administrators.

Iteration was also driven by broader strategic and fiscal considerations.

In North Dakota, declining funding levels across RWIP phases—from \$15 million to \$5 million—contributed to a shift toward a more targeted sector strategy model, reflecting both resource constraints and a desire to increase alignment with employer demand. In Minnesota, program refinements between rounds reflected an increased emphasis on employer engagement, as DEED expanded partnerships with chambers of commerce, trade associations, and employer engagement specialists and allocated a greater share of funding to these functions. **In those cases, iteration was not only a response to implementation challenges, but also a mechanism for redefining program focus over time.**

How Programs Evolved

While all programs evolved after launch, states differed in how they translated that learning into program change, ranging from incremental adjustments within existing models (Table 13) to more substantial redesign across funding rounds and, in some cases, the development of successor programs.

Phase redesign across funding rounds allowed programs to improve alignment with workforce needs and address challenges identified during earlier phases.

North Dakota's RWIP provides the clearest example of this approach, evolving from a broadly defined,

regionally coordinated grant model to a more targeted structure centered on sector strategy planning and implementation (see Table 2 in the North Dakota case study). Minnesota's Drive for 5 also evolved between rounds, with refinements to wage targets, grant structures, and employer engagement strategies reflecting lessons from early implementation. However, changes across rounds introduced uncertainty for applicants and grantees, who in some cases had to adjust project plans in response to evolving requirements.

In some states, initiatives served as a foundation for subsequent, expanded investments.

In Idaho, LAUNCH started serving adults in 2020 and functioned as a proof of concept that enabled the expansion of the program in 2023, extending funding to high school seniors and significantly expanding the program's scale and reach. In Massachusetts, MassReconnect later expanded into MassEducate, broadening eligibility beyond adult learners and moving the state toward a more universal free community college model. In those cases, early programs created the policy, administrative, and political conditions necessary for expansion, allowing states to scale investments beyond their original scope.

Insight #5: Governor-led workforce investments are building on existing systems to drive change in how stakeholders coordinate and operate

State investments built on prior coordination infrastructure and existing programs, enabling stronger implementation and deeper systems alignment.

In Minnesota, the Drive for 5 manufacturing grantees built on coordination infrastructure

established through the CHIPS Act, where employers had already been convened through the Minnesota CHIPS Coalition and aligned around building a technician pipeline. That prior coordination gave the program a stronger starting point, even as DEED introduced its own strategy and design. In Idaho, LAUNCH built on Next Steps Idaho, a statewide career exploration initiative. Career exploration tools now link to LAUNCH-eligible programs, creating a more continuous path from career awareness to training access. In Wyoming, WIP was designed to complement existing state workforce and economic development efforts. NextGen Sector Partnerships had already established industry-academia relationships in several of WIP's key industries, giving the initiative a stronger foundation for industry-aligned programming. Meanwhile, scholarship programs such as Wyoming's Tomorrow and Wyoming Works provided a recruitment pipeline, as recipients could direct their awards toward new WIP-funded academic and training programs at community colleges. In Massachusetts, MassReconnect leveraged existing financial aid programs such as the Community College SUCCESS Fund, which provide wraparound services to improve student retention and outcomes.

Program governance structures and coordination requirements led to the development of deeply rooted partnerships and culture shifts that persisted beyond the initial requirements.

In North Dakota, RWIP's initial requirement for regions to submit a single, coordinated application forced organizations across counties and sectors to align around shared priorities. Although the requirement was later removed, at least one region continued collaborating by submitting joint proposals, pooling match funds, and sharing administrative capacity. One interviewee attributed this continued collaboration to RWIP shifting regional stakeholders' perceptions of each other from competing for resources to seeing themselves as interdependent partners working toward shared goals.

In Minnesota, an employer and an education partner continued collaborating outside of Drive for 5 to develop a new workforce program. A Drive for 5 pre-apprenticeship exposed demand among the employer's incumbent workers for similar upskilling pathways, prompting partners to develop a new training program together. The employer partner explained that Drive for 5 *"opened our eyes to a lot of other opportunities that we weren't previously aware of."* This continuity suggests that the program not only improved coordination during implementation, but also created relationships, shared strategies, and new training opportunities that persisted beyond the life of the grant.

In Wyoming, multiple stakeholders observed a culture shift in collaboration, noting this as one of the initiative's greatest successes. Before WIP, as one stakeholder put it, *"colleges were so used to working on their own."* WIP's program requirements and sustained convening infrastructure—including the Presidential Steering Group bringing together college presidents and monthly grantee working groups—gradually changed how institutions related to one another. For example, college presidents started using the steering group meetings as a platform to join each other's proposals. WIP also funded statewide initiatives that involved all postsecondary institutions, including a virtual reality program that increased immersive learning experiences across disciplines such as nursing and archaeology.

High performance benchmarks led employers to set wage structures and coordinate in ways that diverged from standard practice.

In Minnesota, Drive for 5 tied a portion of funding to meeting wage and retention benchmarks, including a \$25 per hour placement target. As one stakeholder described, this dynamic reflected *"systems change through procurement,"* where funding conditions incentivized employers to *"do different."* For example, high performance benchmarks pushed employers to align on schedules, wages, and training design across companies.

Furthermore, one employer partner described developing an internal apprenticeship program with base pay set to meet the \$25 per hour target, through which both Drive for 5 participants and other workers can be hired. While stakeholders emphasized that meeting the wage benchmark was challenging, the wage structure in this new internal apprenticeship program reflects changes in employer practices that extend beyond Drive for 5 and which were directly influenced by the program's high performance benchmarks.

“Trying to get to the \$25/hour [wage target] has been a struggle...but you know what? It's systems change through procurement...What can a funder do to incentivize certain things? This funder has incentivized the employers to do different. And that doesn't mean it's going to be easy, but it is hopefully impactful for the people completing the training.”

Grantee

Policy and Implementation Opportunities

From scholarships to competitive grant programs, the five states examined in this paper took different approaches to Governors’ signature workforce investments. However, certain practices consistently emerged as enablers of program success across design and delivery. The tables below (Table 14 and 15) synthesize those policy opportunities and promising implementation practices across key themes. They reflect patterns observed across multiple states and were drawn from interviewee responses to the question: what advice would you give to other states considering investing in their own signature workforce initiative?

The following practices are offered not as a prescriptive checklist, but as a menu of opportunities for Governors to consider. The tables are intended to serve as a starting point for teams who are designing or refining state workforce investments and want to draw on learnings from peer states. Interviewees also emphasized the importance of building on existing state strengths and the uniqueness of each state’s context. The justifications and examples are included to support that contextual judgment.

Table 14: **Policy Opportunities to Shape Investments in Workforce Development**

Policy Opportunity	Justification	Example(s)
Program Design		
Use data to inform key targets e.g., sectors, populations, regions	Targets funding toward areas of highest need.	MN used labor market information to identify priority occupation clusters. ID developed a data-driven methodology to create its LAUNCH in-demand occupations list.
Engage employers as co-designers from the outset	Supports labor market alignment.	ID engaged employers through its Workforce Development Council to shape credential priorities.
Define minimum quality and content standards for funded training programs e.g., provider criteria, industry-recognized credentials, stackable credits, integration of foundational or durable skills components	Without guardrails, funds risk subsidizing training that does not improve participants’ long-term prospects.	WY and MA restricted eligibility to accredited public higher education institutions. MN required industry-recognized certifications or credits towards an associate’s degree.
Build collaboration requirements into grant design from the start e.g., across institutions, regions, employers	Designing in partnership requirements from the start builds ecosystems that persist beyond the grant period.	ND required regional coordination across grantees and formal employer partnerships. MN required employer collaboration and WY required collaboration across colleges.

Policy Opportunity	Justification	Example(s)
Consider recruitment and wraparound support costs	Deliberately investing in recruitment and retention ensures the program covers end-to-end elements of success.	MA and WY invested in state-led marketing initiatives. MA provided \$100,000 in start-up support to colleges, which many used for recruitment efforts, and has identified a need for further wraparound services. MN's community partners expanded access to broader talent pools and provided a range of wraparound supports.
Consider piloting before scaling	Piloting surfaces design problems and builds operational capacity at manageable scale.	MA's MassReconnect eligibility was 25+ before broadening. ID implemented Adult LAUNCH before expanding to graduating high school seniors.
Invest in pre-launch planning and provide adequate runway to grantees before applications open	Rushed timelines can produce under-resourced proposals and costly mid-implementation corrections.	Program teams and grantees across states described rollout timelines as ambitious. Advice converged on ideally 6-12 months of pre-launch planning for the program team and 6-12 months advance notice for grantees.
Governance		
Assess agency strengths and align implementation responsibilities to goals	The right institutional home shapes orientation and effectiveness.	States made deliberate choices. ID and WY placed the implementation team in proximity to the Governor's Office. MN housed Drive for 5 in DEED, ND established RWIP under DOC, and MA placed MassReconnect under EOE.
Leverage workforce system infrastructure and expertise	Building on established systems brings existing relationships, legitimacy, and administrative capacity. Alignment across agencies also helps avoid program duplication and ensure programs are additive.	ID leveraged its Workforce Development Council and MA its Workforce Skills Cabinet. WY designed its steering committee with cross-agency representation.
Funding		
Provide planning grants	Dedicated planning time can produce better-designed programs—stronger partnerships, more defined outcomes, and more realistic implementation plans—before funds are committed at scale.	Grantees across programs expressed interest in having had a planning grant. ND moved to a sector strategies approach in Phase 3, which functioned as a planning grant before implementation funding.
Leverage and integrate federal funding sources	Maximize resources and reduce program costs.	WY and ND used ARPA as seed funding. MA leveraged Pell eligibility to reduce per-student state cost. ID also encouraged participants to apply for federal aid.
Ensure grantees have "skin in the game" e.g., match funding, cost sharing	Skin-in-the-game requirements strengthen commitment and accountability. However, these requirements should also be calibrated to avoid deterring participation.	ND's 25% match helped ensure local buy-in and was seen as a balanced threshold, though some grantees in rural regions encountered challenges. ID required 20% personal contribution with LAUNCH covering up to 80% of tuition and fees.

Policy Opportunity	Justification	Example(s)
Design funding structures to promote equitable access e.g., regional allocations, reserved set-asides	Without explicit provisions, competitive funding may concentrate among better-resourced applicants.	ND used regional funding allocations based on population to ensure all parts of the state—regardless of size—had access to funding.
Front-load high-cost startup expenses	Grant funding should be directed towards capital-intensive launch costs. Programs should be designed so that ongoing costs can be sustained through local or earned revenue once grant funds expire.	ND’s funding covered major up-front costs—such as purchasing a mobile unit and establishing child care facilities including initial staffing—reducing barriers to launch and positioning grantees to generate ongoing revenue or secure local funding.
Aim for flexibility in fund disbursement to accommodate implementation variability e.g., carryover authority, reallocation across grantees, expenditure flexibility	Rigid appropriations cycles create artificial pressure to spend or close projects. Legislative flexibility allows programs to adapt.	ND and WY requested carryover of state funds across bienniums, which helped projects adjust to delays, changing costs, and evolving implementation realities.
Metrics and Accountability		
Define success from the outset and select metrics aligned to those definitions	Defining outcomes upfront creates a shared basis for accountability and makes continuous improvement measurable.	WY began requiring applicants to commit to a metrics framework before funds were awarded. MN’s \$25/hour wage benchmark anchored program design and employer behavior from the outset.
Build in data collection from launch	Programs that collect data from launch produce more credible evidence and are better positioned to course-correct and make the case for continued funding.	Stakeholders across states emphasized building in data collection requirements early and continuously improving systems over time.
Tie funding disbursement to milestone completion or data submission	Phased disbursement can incentivize milestone completion or data collection more reliably than reporting requirements alone.	ND allowed grantees to set their own milestones, disbursing funds in phases tied to progress. MN withheld a job quality incentive until the \$25/hour wage outcome was met. MA stakeholders noted that tying payment tranches to data submission drives reporting compliance.

Source: Authors’ synthesis based on interviews and program documents.

Table 15: **Promising Practices for Successful Implementation**

Promising Practice	Justification	Example(s)
Program Delivery		
Build a strong implementation team	Understaffed implementations create accountability gaps, slow grantee support, and make mid-course corrections difficult.	Interviewees noted capacity challenges, reflecting on experiences transitioning part-time or temporary staff to full-time.
Use standardized application systems to streamline review, involving end users in design	Inconsistent or complex systems create review inefficiencies.	ND’s transition from email submissions to a portal improved application consistency. ID involved financial aid directors from partner institutions in platform design to ensure it met institutional needs.
Provide clear, accessible guidance to applicants and update proactively when requirements change	Grantees cannot meet requirements they do not fully understand. Clear and current guidance is foundational to successful implementation.	ND provided centralized resources (e.g., FAQ, webinars) and saw a need for more communication as program requirements changed. MN required updated FAQs throughout the open RFP period.
Provide targeted support to new grantees e.g., options for onboarding and technical assistance	First-time grantees may submit under-resourced proposals and struggle with compliance. Issues can compound across the grant lifecycle.	First-time grantees across states described wanting more structured onboarding and additional resources to support compliance.
Establish regular grantee convenings This serves a variety of purposes: e.g., facilitate relationship-building, share best practices, collect feedback, and communicate changes	Implementation problems surface faster and solutions spread more quickly when grantees have structured peer-learning channels alongside direct access to program staff.	WY held monthly industry-based working group meetings.
Sustainability		
Invest in impact communication and stakeholder awareness e.g., published reports, campaigns, press, direct policymaker engagement	Proactive communication builds political will, sustains stakeholder support, and strengthens the case for continued investment.	WY phase reports were cited as important for sustaining Governor and legislative support. ND legislators heard about RWIP directly from constituents, strengthening appropriations advocacy.
Maintain visible Governor commitment throughout the initiative	Consistent leadership signals durability to grantees, employers, and partners.	WY stakeholders noted that the Governor’s visible ownership and the Governor’s Office institutional home were essential signals to all partners.

Source: Authors’ synthesis based on interviews and program documents.

Conclusion

State-led workforce investments are emerging as flexible and consequential policy levers during a time of economic change. Across the five states examined, Governors used state resources to expand access, align training with economic priorities, and structure new forms of coordination among employers, education providers, and workforce actors. Such efforts demonstrate what becomes possible when states put significant funds behind new programs, while also surfacing persistent challenges related to data, implementation capacity, and long-term sustainability.

Our findings suggest that the lasting value of these investments lies not only in their immediate outputs, but in how design and implementation choices shape the systems around them. Decisions about eligibility, governance, funding structures, and performance expectations influenced how institutions partnered, how employers engaged, and how programs evolved over time. For Governors and state policymakers considering similar efforts, the cases in this report highlight the importance of aligning design choices with policy goals and building the capacity to adapt as implementation unfolds. State leadership plays a decisive role in this process and sustained impact depends on continued coordination, data collection, and institutional alignment.

Appendix

Data Collection and Analysis

The following provides additional detail on the desk research, interview protocol, and analytic approach underlying this study. The five research themes listed below (Exhibit 1) served as the organizing framework across these stages.

Desk Research

Before conducting interviews, the research team reviewed publicly available materials for each Governor’s signature workforce initiative, including enabling legislation, budget documents, RFPs, organizational charts, and program reports. This desk research served to identify what the public record could answer across the five themes and to surface the gaps that interviews would need to address. Following interviews, the team requested supplemental materials from state contacts—including internal budget documents, grantee reports, and performance data—to corroborate and deepen interview-based findings.

Interviews

The research team developed a semi-structured interview guide organized around the five research

themes and tailored by stakeholder category. For each theme, question sets were adapted to reflect the perspective and responsibilities of different interviewees—for example, Governors’ strategic advisors or grantees. The protocol was intentionally flexible, allowing interviewers to probe areas of particular relevance to each respondent rather than following a fixed script. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and typically lasted 60 minutes, centering on six to eight substantive questions. A simplified overview of the interview protocol, including illustrative sample questions by theme, is presented in Exhibit 2.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were coded using a thematic codebook organized around the five research themes, with additional codes developed inductively. This unified codebook was applied consistently across all transcripts to enable structured cross-state comparison. The research team then developed a crosswalk of findings across all five states, identifying patterns that cut across investments as well as divergences that shed light on how context shapes design and delivery.

Exhibit 1: **Research Themes**

Theme	Description
Strategic Rationale	The motivating issues that necessitated the signature investment.
Governance and Coordination	Decision-making structures, inter-agency collaboration, and coordination with grantees and industry.
Program Design and Delivery	Eligibility criteria, recruitment of priority populations, key program design tradeoffs, and implementation successes and challenges.
Data, Metrics, and Outcomes	How success was measured, including longitudinal tracking (e.g., wages, retention) and data-sharing challenges.
Funding and Sustainability	Use of federal vs. state general funds, match requirements, and sustainability plans post-investment.

Exhibit 2: Sample of Interview Questions

Theme	Governor's Strategic Advisor	State Program Manager	Grantee	Industry
Strategic Rationale	<p>What was the strategic rationale and the specific role of the Governor in this initiative?</p> <p>What statewide problem or opportunity motivated this new investment?</p>	<p>What is your understanding of the overall strategic vision of the initiative?</p> <p>What programmatic goals were you tasked with operationalizing?</p>	<p>Can you describe your organization's role in workforce development and your specific motivations for joining this initiative?</p>	<p>What problems or opportunities were you hoping MassReconnect could help address?</p> <p>What about this initiative specifically appealed to you as an employer or industry partner?</p>
Governance and Coordination	<p>Which agency was chosen to lead the program and how are roles and decision-making structured across secondary stakeholders?</p> <p>What formal or informal mechanisms are there to coordinate with other agencies?</p> <p>What are the biggest structural constraints or limitations in the current governance model?</p>	<p>What is your specific role in the rollout and how do you coordinate with local workforce boards or other state agencies?</p>	<p>Who do you communicate/coordinate with and how as part of this program?</p> <p>What were the most significant successes and challenges in terms of governance and coordination?</p>	<p>Who do you communicate/coordinate with and how as part of this program?</p> <p>What has worked well about this program's partnership structure and what has been challenging?</p>
Program Design and Delivery	<p>What were the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the model and the types of grantees targeted?</p> <p>What tradeoffs were made during the design or rollout phase?</p>	<p>Can you describe the internal and external program delivery process (RFP design, awardee selection, ongoing TA)?</p> <p>What are the biggest bottlenecks in program delivery and implementation?</p>	<p>What specific candidate populations were recruited, and how did you work to recruit those facing barriers to employment?</p> <p>Were employers involved in the design process and how is the curriculum aligned with employer needs?</p>	<p>Were you involved in the initial design of the initiative?</p> <p>Do you feel the program is targeting the right jobs/industries, and do the workers possess the correct skills?</p> <p>How are you engaged in shaping programs on an ongoing basis?</p>
Data, Metrics and Outcomes	<p>What does success look like in terms of outcomes, and what does the infrastructure for data collection look like?</p> <p>Did you use analogous/existing WIOA metrics for this initiative?</p>	<p>What are some successes or challenges in getting outcomes data?</p> <p>What feedback is collected from participants about their experience?</p>	<p>What does required reporting look like, and did the tracked outcomes make sense based on your past experience?</p> <p>Did your organization achieve any performance-based incentives?</p>	<p>How would you define success for this program?</p> <p>Which outcomes matter most to your business (e.g., retention, productivity)?</p> <p>Have you seen measurable improvements based on this initiative?</p>
Funding and Sustainability	<p>What does future sustainability look like in terms of funding sources?</p> <p>What evidence is needed to justify renewal from the legislature?</p>	<p>Do you feel the program is sufficiently funded?</p> <p>How has actual spending compared with planned allocations?</p>	<p>If this initiative were continually funded, would you continue to work with the state?</p> <p>Will the program be able to continue after the initiative ends?</p>	<p>Do you plan to participate long-term in this initiative or engage with the state on other workforce development initiatives?</p> <p>If you are making a financial contribution, how do you measure the Return on Investment (ROI)?</p>

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