



Strengthening Community Colleges (SCC) Training Grant, Round One: Summary of Lessons Learned & Promising Practices

Overview

This summary highlights the lessons learned and promising practices gathered from grantees in Round One of the Strengthening Community Colleges Training Grants program (referred to as SCC1). The goal of the SCC grants is to build the capacity of community colleges to collaborate with employers and the public workforce development system to meet local and regional labor market demand for a skilled workforce. The SCC1 grants also focused on building the capacity of community colleges to address challenges associated with the COVID-19 health crisis, such as by expanding technology-enabled and online learning and migrating services to a virtual environment. The [U.S. Department of Labor's \(DOL's\) website](#) hosts further grantee details, a grantee map, program design details, and authorizing legislation along with funding information.

Rationale and Feedback Form Design

As SCC1 grants near the end of their period of performance (February 1, 2021, to January 31, 2025), the information gathered from Round 1 grantees could identify useful practices for subsequent rounds, in terms of lessons learned, strategies for pivoting when challenges arise, and methods of achieving actionable results in shorter timeframes.

To gather learnings from SCC1 grantees, DOL's technical assistance contractor, High Impact Partners (HIP), sent a feedback form to the 11 SCC1 grantees. The form had six sections:

- Section 1-Introduction
- Section 2-Sector Strategies and Employer Engagement
- Section 3-Enhancing Career Pathway Programs and Accelerated Learning Strategies
- Section 4-Strategic Alignment with the Workforce Development System
- Section 5-Innovative Systems Change (Consortium Grantees Only)
- Section 6-Overall and Closing

Sections 2-5 each addressed a Core Element of the grant framework, and questions were open-ended. HIP reviewed the responses, coded them for larger themes, and aggregated results to inform this summary. It is important to note that this work is not a formal research study or project evaluation, but rather an exploratory endeavor to gain general insights.

High-Level Takeaways

The following are high-level summative takeaways related to promising practices and lessons learned based on feedback shared.

The most compelling promising practices stemmed from activities related to establishing genuine, engaged partnerships, developing and maintaining consistent and clear communication, and securing stellar staffing/working professionals (including consultants).

Key lessons learned include the following:

- People matter, whether they are program staff, leadership at the state office, faculty or the dean, partners, or students. Developing close relationships and collaborative partnerships with people at all levels ensures a smoother process in getting things done. It can also facilitate securing buy-in and mitigate gatekeeping, while strengthening a social network that can help with sustainability and other efforts even after a grant has ended. This is a blend of “people power” and communication, both of which must be handled with care and clarity.
- A high staff turnover rate and lack of clear communication often yielded challenges that required swift action to mitigate concerns.
- Maintaining an adaptive and pivot-ready mindset is key.
- Some grantees found it useful to seek help, even though this practice is not typical in education settings. Grantees used technical support, when needed, from other colleagues, support staff or consultants, and subject matter experts (SMEs).

The second half of this report delves into these and other themes in more detail.

Deeper Dive: Results by Theme

The following are high-level results for each question, aggregated into larger themes, in order of most frequent mention (unless noted otherwise).

Section 2 - Core Element 2: Sector Strategies and Employer Engagement

Q1: Thinking back on your experience with the grant thus far, please describe your top successes (what worked well, key players, the critical resources) in your approach to sector strategy, employer engagement activities, and expanding partnerships.

Key themes shared: 1) building authentic relationships for partnerships, 2) creating or joining for collaboration, and 3) administrative practices with impact

1) Building authentic relationships for partnerships: Building strong, authentic, and consistent relationships and partnerships was the top strategy for success, with the inclusion of key individuals (state agents, college representatives, professors). These relationships truly helped to strengthen the work in general.

[A] cornerstone of our achievement [is our] robust collaboration with consortium site leads. This partnership has fostered a vibrant community of practice. We've shared successful campus initiatives, tackled challenges collectively, and forged relationships that enhanced our overall effectiveness.
—Forsyth Technical Community College

2) Creating or joining for collaboration: Actively creating or joining councils, collaboratives, and other groups was the second most impactful approach to strategically increasing awareness. Collaborative efforts led to curriculum development, flexible pathways to achieving academic goals, and increased awareness of student needs.

3) Administrative practices with impact: Foundational programmatic functions and support are as important as any other outcome, including dedicated staffing, training, data collection practices (surveys, focus groups), and increased program and curriculum development support.

[We staffed] a grant position dedicated to employer engagement (Business Partnership Coordinator) that directly supported the consortium[’s] Employer Engagement Committee.
—Savannah Technical College

Data collection, employer partner surveys and focus groups to collect feedback at a consortium level, in particular around employability skills and digital badges, [and] creating a letter template for consortium colleges to use for strategic employer partners and work-based learning (WBL) commitments.

—Mt. Hood Community College

The combination of well-trained students [with] the contributions of key individuals, such as professors, the program director, and the grant coordinator, along with critical resources and strategic partnerships, has been central to our success in implementing the sector strategy and effectively engaging employers.

—Broward College

Q2: What would you have done differently in challenging areas or areas where activities did not succeed?

Key themes shared: 1) streamline and clarify expectations early on, 2) greater employer outreach and earlier engagement, and 3) grant implementation delays

1) Streamline and clarify expectations early on: Grantees shared examples of challenges that could have been mitigated had there been greater clarity and more frequent and earlier engagement with partners, including thought partnership and discussions on expectations, especially if there are costs involved.

[W]e should have involved employer stakeholders more frequently to foster a more collaborative relationship.... By involving employers more deeply in this process, we could have streamlined our efforts and gained earlier clarity on whether employers would endorse and support digital badges in their hiring practices. This insight could have guided our strategy more effectively.

—Forsyth Technical Community College

2) Greater employer outreach and earlier engagement: Grantees suggested that a more proactive approach to engagement and outreach and targeting specific departments or partnerships from the start could have been a more productive approach.

[C]onsortium meetings might have focused more on employer outreach and establishing dedicated employer "destinations" for students who have completed coursework/programs.... [I]dentifying pathways and formalizing them ... would have been helpful much earlier on in the life of the grant.

—Savannah Technical College

3) Grant implementation delays: Starting "late" with grant implementation was identified as a key challenge as it puts programs behind schedule and may compound or exacerbate other issues.

Section 3 - Core Element 3: Enhancing Career Pathway Programs and Accelerated Learning Strategies

Q3. What advice would you give to help others overcome the biggest challenges or barriers to achieving the goals of Career Pathways and Accelerated Learning Strategies?

Key themes shared: 1) involve leadership at all levels, 2) strengthen communication efforts, and 3) prioritize sustainability efforts

1) Involve leadership at all levels: Grantees stressed the importance of communication and ensuring campus leadership involvement at all levels, including deans, department chairs, faculty, support staff and "system office" leadership, as they are needed to help implement and operationalize decisions and actions involved in systems change and capacity building.

Work with deans, department chairs, and faculty more readily. We tended to work with system office leadership and with college leadership on these discussions. As a result, these discussions tended to get

stuck at the executive level [even though] those closer to the classroom have invaluable insights on what types of pathways students are pursuing/would like to pursue ... and which types of accelerated learning strategies are most efficient.

—Savannah Technical College

2) Strengthen communication efforts: Strong communication efforts are key to any successful project, especially in work that requires frequent updates, process clarification, buy-in, and stakeholder engagement. In multi-year projects, effective communication is important for clarifying objectives and the program roadmap.

[T]he creation of a comprehensive list of all stakeholders early in the process and [regular updates] to ensure no key players are overlooked. Equally important is the creation of a detailed communication matrix that outlines each stakeholder's preferred method and frequency of communication.

—Forsyth Technical Community College

3) Prioritize sustainability efforts: To further deepen engagement and buy-in, grantees framed collaborative efforts through the perspective of long-term sustainability, both for the benefit of the workforce and for students. In addition, colleges may need to contribute to other sustainability efforts, such as sharing the cost of a grant coordinator.

Keep sustainability at the forefront of planning.

—Grand Rapids Community College

Q4. When thinking about achieving the goals of Career Pathways and Accelerated Learning Strategies, what resources worked best for you and/or what resources did you need to do your best work?

Key themes shared: 1) partnerships and people power and 2) key staff and subject matter experts (SMEs) are important

1) Partnerships and people power: Grantees indicated that partnerships and close connections with faculty, staff, community partners, industry partners, and campus faculty were by far the most important and valuable resources for achieving outcomes, expanding outreach efforts, and moving work forward. People power and collaboration are key to continued progress.

Community [p]artners were our greatest resource. They have firsthand knowledge of traditionally underserved populations who may best benefit from apprenticeship [i]nnovation. Community partners, collaboration and sharing of resources were key to our success.

—Grand Rapids Community College

2) Key staff and subject matter experts (SMEs) are important: Grantees noted the value and expertise that SMEs can bring. Whether they are consultants or dedicated hired staff for programmatic work, such as dedicated faculty, staff members, or “site leaders,” the contributions of SMEs, including technical training, strategy development, and implementation, are extremely valuable.

The college did not have key subject matter experts in place to aid in the [set-up] of the training facility and its programs. Once the vital roles were filled, the project team was able to make progress. Having vital roles in place at the start of [the] grant would be a great way to begin strategy development and implementation.

—Virginia Peninsula Community College

Section 4 - Core Element 4: Strategic Alignment with the Workforce Development System

Q5. What is a “success story” you are most proud of that is specifically related to alignment with the workforce development system? (If none, please explain.)

Grantees reported several examples of success stories, most of which involved strong partnerships, service implementation, and the opportunity to create local jobs for local graduates. No universal theme was evident; however, the various success stories were powerful, and it is clear that the grantees have vast experience and are dedicated to the success of their programs.

[Fast Track Logistics] enjoys a 95% ... placement rate ... and an average starting pay upwards of \$30 an hour. Between these two Fast Track programs (Manufacturing and Logistics), most graduates stay local ... and find work with many of the distribution centers/warehouses that support the Port of Savannah.
—Savannah Technical College

Q6. Thinking back to the start of the grant cycle, you declared your intended outcomes for strategies and initiatives that align with the workforce development system. What more would you need to maintain the outcomes, wins, and overall achievements you fostered and developed?

Key themes shared: 1) sustained funding and staffing and 2) more time, along with systemic coordination

1) Sustained funding and staffing: Grantees stated that they needed commitments on continued funding and partnerships with schools and the workforce to maintain the progress and successes they had accomplished. Staff retention, turnover, and other staffing challenges are ever-present obstacles to program implementation.

To maintain the outcomes and achievements from the grant cycle, we would need continued support from our school and sustained funding. Ongoing backing from the school is crucial for integrating and sustaining our initiatives within the broader educational framework.
—Grand Rapids Community College

2) More time, along with systemic coordination: Some grantees referenced time as a factor for sustaining their wins, while another participant stated that systemic coordination is important for creating longitudinal change. Systemic challenges can take many years to overcome through policy change efforts.

Oregon is a decentralized “system” state[,] with several state agencies focused on workforce development. This decentralized [model] results in a scattered approach that is labeled as strategy. I think what is needed moving forward is a clear and coordinated approach from all of the agencies.
—Mt. Hood Community College

Section 5 - Core Element 5: Innovative Systems Change (Consortium Applications Only)

Q7. Thinking of the option you selected, what has been the most challenging part of achieving sustainable systems change AND what would you do differently (lessons learned)?

Grantees provided varied responses, with no single overarching theme. Their comments addressed various challenges with systems change and suggestions for what can be done differently. For example, one participant noted that in their state, there is no coordinating system of higher education, which presents a whole slate of challenges when attempting to effect systems change.

We do not have a system of higher education in the state of Michigan. Therefore, systemic change is a misnomer. We have created systemic elements with the Strengthening Community College Grant, such as open education resources, but there is no overriding system to improve.
—Grand Rapids Community College

Others pointed to challenges around “external technical support and assistance,” the goal of maintaining close communications with system partners, and engaging employers early on for stronger relationships and program buy-in. As stated in prior responses, grantees invested significant time in resolving staffing challenges, from leadership turnover to frontline staffing.

The most challenging aspect of systems change for our grant mostly stemmed from staffing changes that occurred and continued to occur over the life of the grant, from various leadership staff (e.g., presidents, vice presidents, and deans) to grant leads (mostly deans and directors) to faculty and staff involved with the grant. I would ensure that each of the consortium colleges had stronger internal mechanisms for managing staffing changes to [produce] successful systems change.

—Mt. Hood Community College

Section 6 - Overall and Closing

Q8: We would like to better understand your experience throughout this grant project. Thinking about your proposal and the planning and delivery of short-term, intermediate, and long-term outcomes, what approach and strategies were the strongest to achieve all your grant project goals and outcomes?

Key themes shared: 1) full staff support, including project teams and consultants/SMEs, 2) strong communication and partnerships, and 3) adaptability and pivoting

1) Full staff support, including project teams and consultants/SMEs: The importance of having dedicated staff and team members, including consultants and SMEs, to help with critical issues/tasks arose as a consistent theme across responses. The absence of staff and turnover in key positions often created challenges that affected basic operations.

[W]e're using the outside consultant again to help scale and sustain the project as the system office prepares to take over.... [S]eeking expert guidance in this domain has been the strategy that has produced the most return on investment[,] and it was a hard sell to spend grant funds in this direction, especially because those in public education aren't always used to having funds for this type of activity.

—Savannah Technical College

2) Strong communication and partnerships: Grantees stressed the importance of stakeholder engagement and robust communication for success. One example included the development of a comprehensive list of stakeholders and a detailed communication matrix to facilitate outreach efforts. Establishing solid partnerships with genuine engagement and transparency, coupled with a strong communication cadence, were effective approaches.

Overall, communication was the foundation of our success, enabling us to form strong relationships, build trust, and work to achieve our project goals.

—Savannah Technical College

3) Adaptability and pivoting: Grantees shared many examples of challenges they encountered (staffing shortages, turnover, time limitations, and program buy-in). Participants stressed the importance of remaining nimble and able to pivot to meet challenges not only as a necessity but often as a strategy. Ongoing feedback can also inform the need for change and adaptability.

Adapting our strategies based on ongoing feedback and changing needs allowed us to address challenges and refine our approach effectively. Regular assessment and progress monitoring helped us track short-term achievements and adjust strategies to meet our intermediate and long-term goals.

—Broward College

Q9: What do you know now that you wish you had known at the beginning of your grant?

Participants' diverse responses were candid and offered sage advice on topics such as adaptability and pivoting, communication, and staffing.

[T]he project is complex[,] with many interlocking pieces that seem, on the surface, to be standalone outcomes.... I've found that clearer messaging helps to gather momentum sooner.
—Savannah Technical College

Communicate, even when you think a member of the team "should" be on the same page with something! Extra clarity never hurts.
—Northwest State Community College

My advice is to continually pivot, adjust and have constant and consistent communication mechanisms in place with each college.
—Mt. Hood Community College

Understanding that flexibility in our approach and willingness to adapt based on feedback and evolving needs could have improved our ability to address challenges and optimize our strategies.... Knowing the importance of continuously assessing and securing adequate resources would have helped better plan for long-term sustainability and program success.
—Broward College

[W]e should have hired a staff person to manage the grant. Instead, we rolled it into [the] current workload[,] and [this diminished performance].
—Grand Rapids Community College

Q10: Thinking about your overall experience, what else would you like to share regarding the expertise you developed, recommendations you might offer, insights you gained, any "Ah-ha" moment that stands out, or other overall learning in any area?

Grantees offered a wide range of experiential feedback, "ah-ha" moments related to adaptability and sustainability, comments on the importance of building relationships and collaboration, and lessons learned in the administration and management of the grant project.

This is based on my perspective as a project director who inherited the work midway through: 1.) [G]etting an early handle on all aspects of the project, especially ways outcomes might interact, is vital ... [as] identifying who/what/etc. can help move those outcomes within the first several months of the project will help immensely; 2.) take time to identify outside experts/consultants who can help with the project ... [and] project management; and 3.) relationship-building is paramount for a systems change/capacity-building grant.
—Savannah Technical College

Building strong relationships is essential. Make the most of project director meetings to connect with other project directors. Their insights and experiences can be invaluable in helping you overcome barriers in your own project. Additionally, maintain strong relationships with your DOL representatives and FPO. These connections are extremely valuable as you navigate your grant.
—Forsyth Technical Community College

Encourage institutional and state level leadership to fully engage and support the enhancements and strategies developed by the consortium colleges as a collective across the life of the grant. This is

connected to having strong internal communication pathways within the colleges. Also, having a champion (not just an assigned grant lead) at each college is critical [as they] can directly influence college leadership, which in turn has an impact at the state level.

—Mt. Hood Community College

[O]ne significant “Ah-Ha” moment was realizing how adaptable and responsive our strategies needed [to be] to address unforeseen challenges effectively. Developing a robust framework for evaluating and adjusting our approach proved crucial in refining our efforts and achieving our goals. Overall, these experiences highlight the importance of proactive engagement, flexibility, and continuous assessment in ensuring the success and impact of grant-funded projects.

—Broward College

Exceptional teamwork amongst the colleges.... [T]he Strengthening Community Colleges grant allowed us to focus on recruiting students from our local community and bolster the number of traditionally underrepresented students entering USDOL apprenticeships in healthcare.

—Grand Rapids Community College