



# BLUEPRINT FOR A FEDERAL INVESTMENT IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

**A**s the skills and credential requirements of good jobs continue to increase, institutions of higher education – especially community colleges – have become increasingly central to developing the nation's workforce. Particularly in times of economic downturn, community colleges provide a critical service by helping workers build new skills, enhance existing ones, and transition back into the labor force. Historically, however, there have been few federal resources available to build the capacity of community colleges to carry out these critical aspects of their mission.

The Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant program is an important exception. This historic \$2 billion investment aimed to build the capacity of colleges to meet the needs of adult learners for valuable postsecondary skills and credentials. Over four rounds of grant-making from 2011-2014, more than 700 institutions – nearly two-thirds of all community colleges – received one of the TAACCCT grants as a single grantee or part of a consortium of colleges. The program offers important lessons for future investments designed to address the effects of economic dislocation and job loss on communities.

New America and Bragg & Associates have examined over 200 evaluation reports of TAACCCT grants to capture the impact of the program on institutional capacity and student outcomes and to distill lessons for policymakers on the design and implementation of federal investments in community colleges.

Title III of the Higher Education Act provides investments to under-resourced institutions that enroll high percentages of minority and/or disadvantaged students. We recommend this new program be permanently authorized in this title of HEA. Additional investments in community colleges are critical to ensure colleges can help their communities prepare for future labor market disruptions, whether a recession or the effects of automation or globalization.



## Size and Scale

We recommend a new total investment of \$2 billion, equal to that of TAACCCT, administered in the following way:

**Eligible Grantees.** Grants will be awarded to either consortia of colleges or single institutions that enroll at least 15,000 students. Our research suggests that consortia and large institutions were generally better able to implement grant activities with fidelity and to collect sufficient and appropriate data for rigorous evaluation after the grant period. We recommend limiting consortia to colleges operating within the same state, with an exception for consortia comprised of colleges in contiguous states and designed to meet the needs of regional economies.

**Grant Size.** Grant awards should range from \$10 million to \$15 million, which would allow for approximately 50 grants per round. For reference, each of the four rounds of TAACCCT awarded around 60 grants, including many small grants to individual colleges. Grants to large single institutions should not exceed \$10 million. This program would award fewer grants overall (around 150, compared with 256 for TAACCCT), but the average grant size would be larger.

**Timeline.** We recommend three rounds of grants, with solicitations issued 18 months apart to allow adequate time to adjust for changes in the economy and to learn from prior rounds of grants. Similar to TAACCCT, we recommend a four-year period for grant activ-

ities. We recommend extending the data collection period to six years from the start of the grant to capture the impact of new certificate and degree programs that can take colleges more than a year to stand up. Our review of TAACCCT final grant evaluations indicates a great need for a longer period of data collection, particularly to capture impacts on earnings, which are critical for determining the value of particular interventions.

**Set Asides.** We recommend setting aside 5% of the total investment (\$100 million) to fund an interagency office with staff from the U.S. Departments of Education (ED) and Labor (DOL) to administer, support, and rigorously evaluate the program. See below for more details on the composition, role, and responsibilities of the inter-agency office. We also recommend that each individual grant include a 5% set aside to be awarded to a state agency or agencies for technical assistance and policy development while supporting scale and sustainability. Grantees would identify this agency in their application. Our research indicates many interventions developed through TAACCCT, including coaching and career navigation services, open-educational resources, and prior learning assessments, were difficult for colleges to sustain once the grant funding ended. Greater involvement from relevant state agencies could provide a foundation for policy development to sustain promising interventions.



## Administration

Given the need for policy and administrative expertise spanning the domains of higher education and workforce development, we recommend establishing an interagency office to oversee the investment with relevant staff from the Departments of Education and Labor. There are precedents of

interagency offices established for the purpose of jointly administering a federal grant program, including the School to Work Opportunities Act and more recently the Preschool Development Grants (ED and HHS).

The Preschool Development grants included a set-aside of up to 3% designated for technical assistance, evaluation, and other national activities related to the grants. The office should be led by a jointly-appointed Deputy Assistant Secretary, supported by detailed full-time staff representing both the Education Department and the Department of Labor. This Deputy Assistant Secretary will report to the Assistant Secretary of the Employment and Training Administration at DOL and the Undersecretary of Education at ED.

**State Role.** Federal investments in community colleges should empower institutions to implement changes that will last beyond the grant period. Such lasting change may best be achieved through coordination among consortium institutions, supported by state education and workforce agencies. For example, the Colorado Community College System leveraged TAACCCT to develop and implement a comprehensive redesign of developmental education that community colleges across the state are still using today.

To foster productive state collaboration with grantee institutions, we recommend making at least one state agency a mandatory partner in the grants. The specific agency or agencies may vary depending on the state, but each application should include at least one state education and/or workforce agency as a named partner. Specifically, we recommend that each state that is home to an applicant college demonstrate:

- Commitment to facilitating the data-sharing agreements necessary to evaluate the grant
- Plans to sustain and scale grant activities determined by third-party evaluation to have improved student education and labor market outcomes
- A detailed proposal for how the state engagement set-aside is to be used
- Articulation policies that support further education and training after completion

We also recommend that proposals that include a state match for a percentage of federal funds to receive additional points in the proposal evaluation process.

TAACCCT grants offered an unprecedented opportunity to analyze the impact of federal capacity-building investments in institutions of higher education through third-party evaluations. However, many TAACCCT evaluators encountered difficulties in accessing the data necessary to determine if and how grant funds affected student outcomes. Employment and wage data were particularly difficult to access.

To ensure thorough analysis of the program's return on investment, we recommend requiring states to assure participation in the necessary evaluation, including obtaining an upfront commitment from the state agency that houses wage records.

Third-party evaluators must be granted either access to the necessary information or participation of a qualified analyst(s) at the state wage agency to facilitate the evaluation.

Exact data elements that grantee colleges are required to report to evaluators should be decided by the interagency office through the Solicitation for Grant Applications (SGA) development process, rather than written into statute. However, we recommend that Congress require, at a minimum, the following categories of outcomes data:

- Program completion
- Continuing education
- Employment (pre- and post-program) aligned with WIOA metrics
- Earnings (pre- and post-program) aligned with WIOA metrics



# Interventions and Activities

**Focus Interventions.** Under the TAACCCT program, applicants were required to address all of the "core elements" identified in the SGA, which numbered between five or six interventions. Our research indicates that some grantees struggled to successfully address so many distinct priorities in one four-year grant. We recommend that applicants for the grants detail plans to implement just one or two of the evidence-based and/or promising interventions of their choice provided in the SGA. This is the approach used in the First in the World program.

However, before grantees select and implement strategies of choice, we recommend requiring that 25 percent of the total grant be used for student support services, such as enhanced advising, case management, and direct services, such as emergency grants, child care, and transportation resources. We then recommend grantees provide a detailed plan to implement one or two strategies on a list developed by the interagency office. We suggest including the following strategies:

- Implementing or expanding work-based learning for credit

- Embedding industry certifications into programs where appropriate
- Developing or redesigning curricula to better serve adult learners and/or to better align with industry
- Creating new credit-based programs of two years or less with labor market value

**Allowable Activities.** We suggest allowable activities include:

- Establishing and enhancing paid work-based learning opportunities
- Developing and implementing new or revised openly-licensed curricula
- Purchasing or upgrading equipment, technology, or supplies needed for effective delivery of grant-impacted programs
- Implementing target interventions on a list developed by the interagency office
- Other activities deemed allowable by the interagency office

**Prohibited Activities.** Grant funds may not be used to pay or subsidize students' wages in work-based learning components of any program, nor to cover students' tuition or fees. Additionally, grantees may not use funds to supplant resources already supporting activities in the grant proposal.



## Evaluation

We recommend requiring a third-party implementation and sustainability evaluation of each grant, due one year following the closing of the six-year grant. Furthermore, we recommend that 30 percent of grantees receive additional funding to support a rigorous impact analysis of program outcomes, based on a competitive application process. Before determining data elements required to be made available to evaluators, the interagency office should solicit comments from experienced TAACCCT evaluators who are familiar with the process of analyzing and interpreting similar data.