

REQUEST FOR LETTERS OF INTEREST
REGIONAL CHALLENGE GRANT

SUBMISSION DEADLINE: OCTOBER 21, 2022, 11:59PM



The Regional Challenge Grant

Regional Challenge Grants seek to advance statewide postsecondary attainment goals¹ by expanding the number of community and regional partnerships—and supporting the further development of existing community and regional partnerships—that are focused on increasing postsecondary enrollment and credential completion (inclusive of certificates and degrees) for students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, English language learners, students with disabilities, and foster and homeless youth by doing one or more of the following:

- Increase direct enrollment of high school students.²
- Increase enrollment of adults returning to education.
- Increase the completion rate of students' postsecondary credentials.³

The Regional Challenge Grant will support partnerships to create an opportunity for powerful systems change. Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) prioritizes racial equity as a necessary part of Washington's goal to increase student postsecondary credential attainment to 70 percent and seeks to address historic and current structural racism in part by supporting partnerships that are embedded in the communities they serve.

Using the new Regional Challenge Grant investments, WSAC will support a major increase in the number of communities and regions who share the commitment to improve postsecondary enrollment, completion, and student success. By investing locally and regionally, Washington State will be able to scale up impact and make progress that will ultimately enable us to reach the statewide goal.

The Strategy Underlying the Work

After decades of continuous growth in the second half of the 20th century, college and career going patterns have been stagnant in Washington and nationally for the past 15 years and more. While Washington has made significant investments expanding access to financial aid, focusing on improving financial aid application (FAFSA and WASFA) filing rates, improving access to dual credit programs like Running Start and College in the High School, bolstering funding for high school counselors, utilizing High School and Beyond Plans, and emphasizing the use of multiple measures for college course placement and guided pathways in career and technical colleges, taken together, these efforts have not resulted in significant system improvement. Low rates of enrollment and completion persist, and racial, ethnic, and income-based gaps continue and have been further exacerbated during the pandemic.

WSAC recognizes that changing settled patterns of individual and organizational behavior is complex work and requires not only the investment of resources but also time. This grant program is intended as a long-term initiative to help communities and the state better understand these patterns of behavior and identify what strategies, programs, and action-oriented collaborations work best to create opportunity for all Washington residents.

¹ Postsecondary refers to education beyond high school; includes but is not limited to colleges, universities, trade, and vocational programs.

² Students are considered direct enrollees who have an enrollment record at a postsecondary institution at some point in the academic year following high school graduation, which is defined as the summer term immediately following graduation through spring term of the next calendar year.

³ Credential refers to a degree or certificate; includes but is not limited to apprenticeship programs, two-year and four-year degrees, and industry-recognized credentials.

Why community or regional?

Local and regional environments have tremendous influence over the decisions that most Washington residents make when they consider starting and continuing a college or career pathway. Investing in pathways that are deeply aligned with communities' needs reflects a place-based approach that may contribute to additional students pursuing college and career pathways. Operating from place-based, regional frameworks provides the opportunity for partnerships to directly leverage state investments and local resources to help shape student outcomes from a position of deep community knowledge, trust, and needs.

Why partnerships?

Environments shape people's decisions and extend far beyond a school or college campus. People's views on college and career pathways are multifaceted, influenced by family members, neighbors, employers, unions, faith communities, community-based nonprofits, local media, leaders from all sectors, and more. Educational organizations cannot be expected to change the environment by themselves; simply put, college and career pathways are not confined to the classroom.

Successful and supportive college and career pathways improve residents' lives, strengthen the economy, expand community engagement, and deliver a wide range of benefits to individuals, families, and their communities while also actively working toward closing the opportunity gap for students furthest from the attainment goal.

Why innovation?

College and career going patterns have been stagnant for many years in Washington. Once settled in place, the forces that drive these patterns are not likely to be affected by modest changes or even continuous improvement strategies alone. Success requires bolder innovation that can launch new models of how communities support pathways to postsecondary opportunities. The state seeks to fund such innovation by supporting partnerships to understand what works and how to evolve and adapt the work to achieve more success at scale. WSAC recognizes that local leaders are the experts in knowing their communities' needs and should therefore take the lead in shaping innovative approaches that are deeply aligned with local needs, with assistance from WSAC to understand research, best practices, and promising innovations elsewhere around the state and country.

The Strategy Underlying the Grant Process

Given that innovation and learning are essential to Washington's long-term success, WSAC seeks to maximize the flexibility for partnerships to shape the proposed work for two tiers of grants: one focused on partnership formation and one focused on program implementation. This means that our application process is not grounded in many prescriptive standards on what an eligible partnership or program might look like.

The statute ([SB 5789](#), [RCW 28B.120.060](#)) creating the grant fund appropriated \$6 million in Fiscal Year 2022-23 and states that a purpose of the Regional Challenge Grant program is to eliminate educational opportunity gaps for students of color, English language learners, students with disabilities, and foster and homeless youth. Partnerships will be required to address that purpose in their work, and WSAC considers this to be a mandatory element for all applicants.

The statute also describes Regional Challenge Grant recipients as local and regional partnerships that represent cross-sector collaborations inclusive of, and beyond, education institutions. It also includes other factors to be considered, such as the engagement of community-based organizations, providing support beyond tuition and fees, and expanding integrated work-based learning. In the interest of flexibility, this application process intentionally creates opportunity for applicants to interpret these elements. WSAC encourages applicants to apply their own understanding and knowledge to interpret and define key elements within the context of their community.

Regional Challenge Grant Priorities

WSAC will prioritize and invest in regional partnerships that:

1. Develop community-informed, student-centered goals and strategies;
2. Engage in equitable decision-making within and across the partnership;
3. Share data and invest in learning processes; and
4. Involve new sectors and entities in improving student access to and success in postsecondary pathways.

WSAC will prioritize and invest in coordinated action plans that:

1. Address historic inequities and close opportunity gaps through approaches that demonstrate cultural competency and community knowledge;
2. Map community assets and identify systemic barriers;
3. Test innovative approaches to improve student outcomes specific to the regional needs of students;
4. Measure results by establishing baseline and intermediate data, working with WSAC to evaluate progress specific to the strategies implemented, and demonstrate the ability to adapt strategies based on data-informed practice; and
5. Effectively utilize grant funds, including leveraging existing investments and state resources.

Focus Populations

The Regional Challenge Grant requires that partnerships work to improve outcomes and eliminate opportunity gaps for the following student groups: students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, English language learners, students with disabilities, and foster and homeless youth in Washington State.

Partnerships are encouraged to consider other students who are underrepresented in postsecondary or who face increased barriers to credential attainment, including but not limited to:

- Family caregivers
- First-generation college students
- Incarcerated or formerly incarcerated youth and adults
- LGBTQIA+ students
- Low wage earners
- Military veterans
- Opportunity Youth, youth ages 16-24 who are disconnected from school or work
- Single parents
- Undocumented students
- Youth or adults who did not complete high school

For more information about existing populations' progress toward postsecondary attainment goals, applicants are encouraged to view [WSAC's reports and publications](#), including a [2020 report focusing on opportunity gaps for students in Washington](#).

Types of Grants

WSAC will invest in two types of grants.

Tier One: Partnership Formation

Grants will be awarded to a group of entities focusing on building a strong partnership, ideally supporting an early-stage partnership who will work to create or solidify a plan aimed at improving postsecondary attainment and career pathways for focus populations.

Tier One grants will be up to one year in length, and up to \$125,000. No indirect costs will be allowed. These grants are intended to serve as the building blocks for new, strong regional partnerships investing in increasing postsecondary attainment. Upon the successful development of a strong partnership, awardees should be well positioned to apply for a Tier Two grant and/or identify other sources to support the partnership in the future. Tier One grantees are not guaranteed a Tier Two grant.

Partnerships require at least two organizations, with at least one based in the region.

- a. Must include at least one Community-Based Organization.
- b. Must include at least one educational entity, such as K-12 (school, district, etc.) or higher education institution.
- c. Other entities could include, but are not limited to, employers, local government, workforce, local/regional economic development entity, or labor unions.

Tier Two: Implementation

Grants will be awarded to already established partnerships working to increase postsecondary attainment for focus populations that are ready to test new strategies, expand efforts, or scale up the number of students they can impact with their collaborative actions.

Tier Two Grants will be up to 2.5 years in length, with an estimated average investment of \$750,000 per year. Indirect costs are not allowed for K-12 entities or institutions of higher education. Grant length and amount funded will be dependent upon the needs of partnerships and may vary based upon their potential scale and impact. Tier Two Grants are required to identify existing investments (e.g., financial aid supports, FAFSA completion, guided pathways, etc.) and demonstrate alignment in leveraging other state resources.

Partnerships require at least three organizations, with at least two based in the region.

- a. Must include a Community-Based Organization.
- b. Must include at least one educational entity, such as K-12 (school, district, etc.) or higher education institution.
- c. Other entities could include, but are not limited to, employers, local government, workforce, local/regional economic development entity, or labor unions.

Roles

WSAC highly encourages partnerships to identify and define clear roles that will bolster the partnership's efficiency and success above and beyond the requirements to identify a single fiscal agent and a single point of contact. Potential roles may include partnership conveners, implementation leads, project managers, data leads, and more.

Single Point of Contact

All partnerships must designate a **single point of contact** during the application phase. Applications should state if the partnership has identified one partner as the convener or host organization to coordinate the roles, responsibilities, and work of the partnership. If so, the application should explain why that partner was chosen and how that partner will enable the partnership to set its agenda and chart the course for the partnership while balancing the interests of all partners in a mutually equitable manner.

Fiscal Agent

Partnerships are required to identify a **single fiscal agent** to receive and manage the grant funds. The fiscal agent will be responsible for expense reporting, receipt of funds, and the disbursement of funds to appropriate entities. It is important that the fiscal agent have the capacity to manage funds and maintain fiscal records.

The fiscal agent can be a tax-exempt entity; local government agencies and community-based organizations are eligible to be fiscal agents. WSAC will consider proposals for other types of entities if appropriate. The fiscal agent may also serve as the single point of contact but does not need to be a direct service provider.

Application Process

The grant process has two steps. First, interested applicants will submit a letter of interest that addresses the requirements for the type of grant they seek. Second, WSAC will select a limited number of both Tier One and Tier Two applicants to advance for further review and discussion. Applicants selected for further review will participate in discussions with the agency that allow for engaged conversation between WSAC and the applicant. Applicants may be asked to submit additional documents and information and will be able to ask questions. Selected finalists will negotiate final grant agreements. This process is intended to meet the goal of flexibility in this process without overburdening applicants.

Applicants who are invited to engage in discussions should be prepared to elaborate upon additional components of their plan. Additional information will vary for each type of grant, which may include but is not limited to:

- A full budget spreadsheet with detailed expenditures.
- Workplans that delineate key tasks, timelines, and action plans for implementation.
- Detailed explanation of the lead staff for the partnership, including why they are well-suited to lead the effort.
- Strategies to utilize existing investments to maximize college and career going efforts.
- A detailed plan for data and analysis including methods of evaluation, measures of success, and research used to inform the proposed strategy.

WSAC encourages applicants to work with the agency to discuss components of the application where they may have additional questions or need support. Throughout the review and selection process, WSAC reserves the right to seek clarification through discussion or writing. WSAC may ask applicants to elaborate upon materials, submit additional information, or modify proposals. Applicants who are not responsive to discussion and engagement requests will not be considered.

For applicant planning purposes, additional information requests are anticipated to occur from November 10 through December 9, 2022.

Key Information for Applicants

Letters of Interest must be submitted to WSAC no later than October 21, 2022, at 11:59pm.

Timeline	Date
Request for Letters of Interest issued	September 8, 2022
Last date to submit questions for FAQ	September 16, 2022
FAQ responses posted & FAQ webinar	September 22, 2022
Letters of interest due — online submission	October 21, 2022 by 11:59 PM
Selected applicants invited to engage in additional discussion and/or submit additional information. During this time, selected applicants may also begin contract negotiations.	November 10 – December 9 *
Ideal contract start date	January 3, 2023

** Dates provided for planning purposes and are subject to change.*

Evaluation Factors

The evaluation process will include a review of the applicant’s letter of interest, in addition to discussions with the applicants advanced for further review. Components such as budgets, workplans, data, implementation, etc., may be considered and amended as part of the discussion process. Evaluation factors provided represent components of applications that are likely to promote successful investments while providing flexibility for an eligible partnership or their program. Evaluation factors should be used as a guiding principle for determining priorities, not as a singular model of the “right” approach. WSAC does not expect applicants to include every factor and encourages applicants to indicate areas where they may need additional support within their letter of interest.

WSAC recognizes that regions have different needs with respect to their college and career pathways. For all grant applications, WSAC maintains the right to apply additional considerations when making the final decisions for investments. This could include factors such as regional representation across all applicants, the diversity of focus populations served, statewide needs, or more.

WSAC staff will review applications and may solicit additional input from [key stakeholders representing cross-sector perspectives](#) within the state.

Tier One Partnership Formation Grants will be evaluated using the following factors:

Partnership Development

- Focus on building partnerships with demonstrated community engagement and authentic collaboration.
- Evidence of healthy, deep community relationships, knowledge, and trust.
- Representation including new entities who have not previously engaged in postsecondary college and career pathways.
- Commitment to create a strategic plan of action to address postsecondary attainment for focus populations including:
 - Demonstrated understanding of student needs, access, and success.
 - Demonstrated understanding of assets and systemic barriers facing students in your region.
 - Demonstrated evidence of assessment and innovation in past initiatives, if applicable.
 - Intentional planning to obtain data: high school graduation rates, postsecondary enrollment rates for overall population and for the focus population.
- Evidence of resourcing and strategic investments that will actively contribute to the future implementation of action-oriented strategies and long-term sustainability.
- Decision-making is shared with partners in a mutually equitable way.
- Commitment to shared learning across and within the partnership.

Tier Two Implementation Grants will be evaluated using the following factors:

Strong regional partnerships

- Evidence of healthy, deep community relationships, knowledge and trust that reflect focus populations and communities including community engagement and authentic collaboration.
- Representation in the partnership that includes new entities who have not previously engaged in postsecondary college and career pathways; representation from multiple education entities across sectors (e.g., Higher Education *and* K-12) including evidence of substantial institutional commitments.
- Demonstrated understanding of assets and systemic barriers facing students, using an equity lens in your region.
- Identification of the landscape of college and career development in the region, including evidence of past examples that demonstrate understanding and commitment to student needs, access, and success by focus population. This could include specific data related to graduation and enrollment rates, in addition to other factors determined by the partnership.
- Ability to operate with a deep knowledge of the nuanced needs, hopes, challenges, and dreams for students and their communities.
- Demonstrated use of culturally appropriate strategies and application of equitable approaches across and within the partnership.
- Evidence of continual evaluation, evolution, and improvement, not only related to strategies that support students, but also for the partnership itself.

- Demonstrated ability to navigate complex, student-centric decision-making as a collective.
- Demonstrated collaboration for sharing resources, including but not limited to data.
- Evidence of alignment across the partnership including established structures and staffing.

Action-oriented strategies that close opportunity gaps and serve focus populations

- Focus populations:
 - BIPOC, low-income, English language learners, students with disabilities, foster or homeless youth, and additional populations or intersections of students underrepresented in postsecondary or who face increased barriers to credential attainment, including but not limited to opportunity youth, youth or adults who did not complete high school, first-generation college students, LGBTQIA+ students, military veterans, incarcerated or formerly incarcerated youth and adults, undocumented students, single parents, and family caregivers.
 - Populations who are furthest from the state’s postsecondary attainment goals with limited existing strategies in place.
 - Populations who are historically marginalized and underserved where strategies have not yet been effective or don’t yet exist.
- Strategies that are data-informed, student-centered, culturally appropriate, and address historic inequities to close the opportunity gap:
 - Ability to identify systemic barriers and propose strategies that can disrupt the system or reduce barriers to students.
 - Innovative or new strategies that have not been tried or applied to focus populations in the regional area of grant service.
 - Testing multiple approaches within the grant period.
- Resources:
 - Demonstrated ability to share data within and across the partnership to evaluate program outcomes and outputs.
 - Established track record demonstrating both a willingness for using data for improvement and evidence of using data for improvement.
 - Experience using data to measure, evaluate, and make decisions.
 - Clear plan for strategic investments and collaboration to continue the strategy and partnership after the initial grant period. This should include exploring additional funding sources for long-term sustainability.
 - Commitment to exploring strategies that promote the utilization of other investments. This could include, but is not limited to, traditional in-kind or monetary matches. Partnerships who do not propose a match will still be considered.

Program evaluation, data, and analysis

Tier two grantees will be expected to discuss plans for program evaluation as part of the additional discussions if advanced for further review. While this level of detail is not expected in the letter of interest, applicants should anticipate engaging with WSAC in a results-driven analysis of their program that includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- Identifying method(s) of evaluation for the chosen strategy.
- Developing output measures (e.g., the number of unduplicated students or families served, or the number of hours of services provided, such as training or mentoring).
- Developing outcome-based success measures (e.g., increasing the percent of students applying to college).

Grant recipients can expect WSAC to serve as an active partner for analysis and evaluation.

Writing your Letter of Interest

Applicants must submit a letter of interest addressing the questions below. Requirements differ for Tier One and Tier Two. Additional information including how to submit the application, along with what to include in a cover page, page limits and more, is found online at <https://wsac.wa.gov/challenge-grants>.

Requirements for Tier One: Partnership Formation Grant

1. Share applicants' single point of contact for WSAC, including the name, organization/entity name, email, and phone number.
2. List all partnership entities by name. For each entity, include a brief mission statement and any links to resources, websites, or information that describes their work. Include potential roles and responsibilities of entities within the partnership, including the rationale for working together.
3. What is the total amount of money are you requesting?
4. Describe any prior history of the proposed partners working together, if applicable.
5. Describe who you wish to serve and why.
 - a. Clearly identify your geographic region as well as your student population(s).
 - b. Include a description of the current landscape for college going and career development in your region. Discuss measures of access and student success specific to the region, as well as access and student success by focus populations (e.g., students of color; a specific list can be found on page 3). Identify educational opportunity gaps within those measures by subpopulations.
 - c. Describe the assets and systemic barriers that may impact your region.
6. Describe your vision for the partnership in the next 12 months.
 - a. Clearly identify your main goals and what you will accomplish during the grant period. Include a description of the main activities you anticipate completing.
 - b. Describe what you hope to accomplish in terms of partnership development and growth and why you think the grant can assist in accelerating progress.
 - c. Describe how your vision is representative of the community including how connections help build the partnership over time.
 - d. Explain your approach to working together, including how you will make decisions and report your progress.
 - e. Share your commitment to an innovation-focused learning agenda and participation in a statewide learning community.
 - f. Share how you intend to use the requested funding.

7. Describe the vision for your partnership and community impact in the next 5-10 years.
 - a. Describe the growth in the partnership that you hope to achieve.
 - b. Describe the outcomes you hope to achieve for students in your region.
8. Provide a brief description of key personnel who will lead this effort now and into the future.

Requirements for Tier Two: Implementation Grant

1. Share applicants' single point of contact for WSAC, including the name, organization/entity name, email, and phone number.
2. List all partnership entities by name. For each entity, include a brief mission statement and any links to resources, websites, or information that describes their work. Include the roles and responsibilities of various entities within the partnership and the rationale for working together.
3. What is the total amount of money requested?
4. Describe the partnership in terms of its:
 - a. Length of time the partnership has been in place. Include prior accomplishments to date and why you think the grant can assist in accelerating progress.
 - b. Connections to the local community and how those connections will help the partnership over time.
 - c. Ability to effectively serve different populations in your geographic region.
 - d. Commitment to an innovation-focused learning agenda to shape the work and participation in a statewide learning community.
 - e. Approach to working together, including how your partnership will make decisions, use data, share responsibility, report on progress.
5. Include a description of the current landscape for college going and career development in your region. Discuss measures of access and student success specific to the region overall, as well as access and student success by high priority focus sub-populations (e.g., students of color; a specific list can be found on page 3). Identify educational opportunity gaps within those measures by subpopulations.
6. Describe the strategy you hope to implement and launch.
 - a. Describe the anticipated outcomes and goal(s) of the strategy.
 - b. Identify the geographic region, focus population, direct service provider(s).
 - c. Include a description of the direct service(s) provided, the intended results, and metrics that will indicate measures of success.
 - d. Share the rationale and research (if applicable) used to design the strategy.
 - e. Include a description of your partnership's capacity and prior experience related to using data to measure outputs and outcomes.
 - f. Share how you intend to use the requested funding. Show how the work will be aligned with existing investment(s) and how existing state investments will be leveraged including, if applicable, other revenue streams that support this work.
7. Describe the vision for both your partnership and the strategy in the next 5-10 years.
8. Provide a brief description of key personnel who will lead this effort now and into the future.