

Abstract
Workforce Innovation Fund
CFDA 17.283 – SGA/DFA PY-11-05

Applicant Name: Lower Rio Workforce Solutions

Applicant Category: Consortium of WIBs

Lead Applicant City/State: McAllen, TX

Areas Served: Counties in Texas including: Willacy, Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, Jim Hogg, Zapata, Dimmit, Edwards, LaSalle, Maverick, Real, Uvalde, Val Verde, Zavala, Brewster, Culberson, El Paso, Hudspeth, Jeff Davis, Webb, Kinney, and Presidio.

Project Name: Growing Regional Opportunity for the Workforce (GROW)

Funding Level Requested: \$5,999,998

Project Type: B

Description of Proposed Project:

Growing Regional Opportunity for the Workforce (GROW) is an ambitious regional workforce and economic development initiative led by a consortium of five WIBS, the Border Workforce Alliance (BWA), in the Rio Grande Region of Texas. The consortium, made up of the Cameron, Lower Rio, Middle Rio, South Texas, and Upper Rio Workforce Investment Boards, will partner with regional employers, one-stop operators, community colleges, training providers, and community-based organizations, and with national workforce intermediary Jobs for the Future, to align and strengthen workforce system components to accelerate credential attainment and career entry by lower-skilled adults to meet the workforce needs to area employers.

Specifically, the project's theory of change organizes key outputs and outcomes around five key goals based upon the nationally recognized *Breaking Through* initiative, already underway in some parts of the region. These goals are:

- 1) Align programs and services across multiple partners to obtain operating efficiencies and streamline participant progress (through reductions in both time and effort);
- 2) Accelerate time to completion of credentials for lower-skilled adult learners;
- 3) Strengthen coordination of case management and supportive services to increase persistence, retention, and completion of training programs;
- 4) Link education and training programs more strongly to employer labor market needs using a sector-based approach; and
- 5) Strengthen capacity of the workforce development infrastructure in key areas to further support systems change, improved program performance, scale and sustainability.

In order to achieve these goals, GROW will implement an alignment process across all partners in the region using an Administrative System for Program Partners developed by Business Access. This web-based portal will allow partners to enter and track the involvement of participants in education and training programs across the region. Participants will be entered into a training program based upon skill level upon entry, and the project employs three different models in order to best serve the

range of lower-skilled adults seeking to upgrade their skills. Adults with a GED or high school diploma, but without college-ready skills, will participate in the Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement's (VIDA) Innovative Strategies for Increasing Self-Sufficiency project. Adults and out of school youth without a GED or diploma will be placed in contextualized GED preparation to earn both an educational credential and occupational or technical skills necessary for family-sustaining employment in the region. Finally, adults with the lowest skill levels (below 9th grade) will complete contextualized bridge programs to advance into contextualized GED programs or the Increasing Self-Sufficiency project within a year. Each participant, regardless of program model, will have access to an Online Community for Program Participants managed by Business Access.

GROW will also improve and streamline case management and supportive services offered to participants. The project will assess existing services and conduct an analysis of where services can be better aligned and coordinated to improve efficiency of service delivery and participants' access to a range of services to support them through the completion of a credential.

Lastly, GROW will comprehensively link education and training programs to real employer workforce needs in the region. Using a variety of sources of Labor Market Information, the BWA and its partners will develop a core list of specific skills and competencies that employers are seeking in the high-growth sectors in the region and map these competencies to training models.

Key outputs resulting from these activities include: common forms, procedures, and processes for use by all partners in the region; the development of a common web-based tracking system; the development of technology tools and supports for participants; expansion of supportive services across the region; increased employer engagement and better job placement infrastructure through an enhanced hiring database; and documentation and dissemination of effective practice.

Accomplishing key outputs will result in the following outcomes, each of which is directly associated with achieving the goals of the project: increased communication among partners; lower costs of service delivery through reduced duplication of program effort and increased efficiencies; increased learning gains, decreased time to completion, 330 GEDs, and 502 occupational credentials earned by participants; stronger persistence to completion by participants; and greater buy-in for contextualized education and training models and wrap-around supports by key stakeholders, including businesses and legislators.

Ultimately, GROW will result in significantly improved system-level efficiencies and improved outcomes for both adults seeking family-sustaining careers and employers in need of a skilled workforce to remain competitive.

Description of Proposed Evaluation Strategy:

Managed by project partner JFF, the third-party evaluation of the *GROW Initiative* will be by the Ray Marshall Center, an organized research unit of the University of Texas at Austin's LBJ School of Public Affairs. The Center's evaluation will be both *formative* and *summative* in nature, providing ongoing information that can help improve operations over time and inform funders and others regarding the effectiveness of the Initiative as designed.

Central evaluation research questions include: (1) What components of career pathway designs were implemented by the five participating WIBs as part of the *GROW Initiative*, and, as implemented, how were they similar or different across the region? (2) To what extent did integrated and accelerated college and career pathway designs achieve scale within and across areas of the region and within individual colleges? What design and implementation steps, including career center-,

college-, and community-based organization (CBO)-level activities as well as changes to practices, policies, and systems, were essential to scaling up these programs? (3) What impact did integrated and accelerated college and career pathway designs have on student progress and outcomes in college and in the labor market relative to comparison groups of students similar to the population in *GROW* but not participating in the program? (4) What was the return-on-investment (ROI) from the *GROW Initiative* and its component strategies, considered from the participant, taxpayer and societal perspectives? What economic impacts did the Initiative have in the region and each of the participating WIBs? (5) To what extent did the *GROW Initiative* lead to significant changes in systems and processes in the region and the participating WIBs?

The evaluation will collect and analyze data for key educational outcomes, employment outcomes, systems change indicators, and employer engagement indicators, pursuing a mixed-methods approach. This will include qualitative analysis of aspects of program implementation and systems change through field interviews and focus groups, as well as quantitative estimation of impacts for the key outcomes of interest (i.e., using quasi-experimental estimation, including various propensity score matching (PSM) and nearest-neighbor techniques) The evaluation will also incorporate cost data associated with the intervention strategies and their related impacts to estimate return-on-investment (ROI) from the initiative and explore the overall economic impacts in the region.

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