

# Regional Ecosystem Innovation in Texas

## Progress and Learning from the Reskilling and Upskilling Learning Community

The Trellis Foundation, in partnership with JFF, supports a set of nine grantees in the Foundation's Regional Ecosystem Innovation for Reskilling and Upskilling [portfolio](#) to strengthen reskilling and upskilling strategies and foster stronger regional collaboration among postsecondary and workforce initiatives. This report highlights lessons learned and best practices elevated over the past six months.

The grantees received tailored technical assistance and coaching to advance their projects. This phase of work culminated in a daylong convening on September 30<sup>th</sup> in Dallas which brought together the grantee cohort, regional partners, and state leaders and focused on: learning about postsecondary and workforce initiatives across Texas; building knowledge about pathways design; and opportunities to learn from peers about effective reskilling and upskilling strategies.

## Aligning Workforce and Postsecondary Initiatives in Texas

There are several postsecondary and workforce initiatives across Texas that aim to bring together cross-sector partnerships to design and implement career pathways. JFF created an [interactive map](#) visualizing the organizations and institutions involved with each initiative in each region. A crosswalk of regional pathway initiatives overlapping within regions is included in the Appendix to this report.

State leaders from across initiatives are supportive of regional efforts to better align them. During a panel at the September 30<sup>th</sup> convening, leaders representing WE CAN TX, Advance Together, and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's TRUE grants shared their initiatives and strategies for aligning efforts within local areas. The following themes emerged from the discussion:

### Coordinating stakeholders

- Build out structures and regional teams that are reflective of the regional context
- Engage students in the design and execution of strategies
- Keep partners and stakeholders informed of what you're engaged in and follow up

### Engaging employers

- Employers should be at the table from the beginning to co-create solutions
- Involving early in the process will lead to more buy-in
- Seek feedback post engagement to understand what was done right and where you need to pivot

### Leveraging expertise

- Connect to organizations and individuals who already have the answers
- Focus on sustaining and scaling effective solutions, not reinventing the wheel
- With diverse perspectives, more diverse solutions arise

In initial conversations, we found two types of support needed for grantees to engage and collaborate effectively with other initiatives. Grantees in Austin and San Antonio focused on building understanding of the other entities in the region driving workforce initiatives, such as the local workforce development board and employer intermediary. Other grantees, like Workforce Solutions in West Central Texas are trying to identify how to align goals and engagement strategies across multiple initiatives. A goal for this period of work was to identify metrics for the learning community informed by the types of metrics collected by other related initiatives in the state. We learned that other initiatives are also in early development and are not collecting standard metrics.

## Benefits of a diverse cohort of grantees

The grantees in the learning community represent workforce development boards and chambers, community-based organizations (CBOs), regional intermediaries, and community colleges. Each grantee plays an important role in both their regional pathway ecosystem and this learning community. Having a diverse set of organizations with different expertise has led to positive peer-sharing opportunities - when surveyed 96% of attendees said they were able to gather valuable insights from peers about local challenges.

Communities supported one another in finding solutions for dilemmas related to the following topics:

- Scaling work-based learning models
- Formalizing cross-sector regional pathway partnerships
- Working through challenges with partners
- Engagement and influence in pathway design as a CBO
- Leading alignment among regional partners as an intermediary
- Designing and sustaining the roles of regional navigators
- Strategies to build awareness and interest in regional growth industries
- Engaging disconnected workers and connecting to wrap-around supports to support entering and persisting in a pathway program

## Promising practices elevated

The following are select strategies shared among the communities as promising approaches to advancing reskilling and upskilling efforts.

### *Building partnerships*

- **Communication is key.** Lack of communication leads to duplication of efforts.
- **Learn together.** Bringing entities together triggers a more in-depth landscape analysis in each region.
- **Challenge assumptions.** Build common definitions and understanding. Don't assume everyone in the region understands work-based learning or other pathways design elements.
- **Build trust.** Internal or external challenges boil down to building trust and designing meaningful engagement to facilitate relationship building.

- **Formalize partnerships.** Formal agreements help right size roles and responsibilities with regional partnerships and employer groups.

### **Community engagement and marketing**

- Hire staff specifically for recruiting, particularly individuals from the communities you're seeking to engage
- Increase visibility in the community through community events and hosting mobile "expos"
- Build and leverage relationships with local chambers, judges, wrap-around support organizations, and churches to support executing recruitment efforts in target communities
- Put the adult learner at the center of marketing design and strategy (e.g. project website in Spanish, personalized emails, utilizing a text messaging platform, including up-to-date program and labor market information, and clear next steps for getting connected to a program)

### **Engaging employers**

- Employers need to be part of a regional collaborative from the beginning to understand their needs and bring in their expertise
- Host no-cost employer forums with the opportunity for employers' needs and perspectives to be heard
- Create opportunities for employers to network that didn't exist previously
- Limit the number of staff contacts within your organization and ensure there are good practices for communicating internally about employer engagement activities

### **Pathway design**

- Utilize the Business and Industry Leadership Team (BILT) model to engage industry partners in the design of curriculum, credentials, and work-based learning opportunities
- Invite industry presenters to P-20 council meetings to discuss skills and support teach back to faculty and administrators
- Design pathway maps and materials geared towards navigators and adult learners

#### **Exemplars from the learning community**

- Amarillo College's [Automotive Technology](#) pathway
- [Occupational Crosswalk](#) for declining retail occupations to high-growth occupations in the Coastal Bend region
- [Industrial Construction](#) pathways in the petrochemical industry, created with support from Upskill Houston
- [Mechatronics](#) pathway in Waco

### **Guided pathways**

During the convening, the Texas Success Center (TSC) shared about the implementation of guided pathways, a holistic, system framework for community colleges across the state that focuses on supporting students' academic success and transfer to four-year institutions. The model is expanding the way colleges design pathways, advise students, and engage employers along the way. The model is showing positive statistical improvements for students. Last year, TSC launched a reskilling and upskilling proof point pilot where twelve colleges created 50 different programs with 40 employers and engaged over 1,000 students in only 9 months.

## Looking Ahead

Braiding initiatives in each region will take time and consistent effort. This includes tactical pieces like organizing goals, meetings, and data collection in a streamlined way. It also relies on deep trust building among initiative leaders and stakeholders. Most critically, braiding initiatives will be most effective if a cross-sector leadership team in each region develops a shared vision and goals for pathways strategies; this shared vision will provide a useful framework for alignment of initiatives in a way that is responsive to the unique context and goals of each region.

Two communities will be supported through in a deeper engagement by conducting a mini asset map and strategic planning to align goals, activities, data collection, and engagement strategies for the initiatives. This work will also be an opportunity to learn and share more broadly the successes and challenges in aligning regional initiatives.

Based on survey feedback from the regions, the learning community will continue to focus on opportunities for building connections and collaborative opportunities for peer sharing and problem solving. Additional topics of interest that may be covered within learning community activities include aligning metrics within regions and across the learning community, employer engagement, data access and use, sustainability planning, and community engagement.

## APPENDIX

### Matrix of Postsecondary and Workforce Initiatives by Region

The table below shows the intersection

	Trellis Upskilling & Reskilling	Advance Together	Texas Regional Pathways Network**	TRUE Initiatives***	WE CAN TX
Amarillo	X	X*		X	X
Brazos Valley	X			X	
Coastal Bend	X		X	X	
Greater Dallas / Tarrant County			X	X	
Deep East Texas / Houston	X	X		X	X
East Texas			X	X	X
Greater Austin	X	X	X	X	X
North Texas			X	X	X
Permian Basin		X		X	
RGV		X*	X	X	X
Temple	X		X	X	
San Antonio	X			X	X
Waco	X		X	X	
West Central	X	X	X	X	X

\*Design grantee only. Now in the Advance Together Leadership Academy.

\*\*Grantees of the current cohort only (Cohort 4)

\*\*\*Additional regions also received TRUE grants. This table only shows the intersection with the communities in the other listed initiatives.