

**Partnership Name:** College Scholars, College Success

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**1. Why are the partner organizations that are or will be included in this work the ones that came together to address educational attainment through place-based work in your region?**

Through this partnership, Lower Columbia College (LCC), the [Cowlitz Indian Tribe](#), [Youth and Family Link](#), and the [Ethnic Support Council](#) will work to deepen existing relationships with underserved communities and expand outreach efforts to better represent and serve low income families and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities in our region. Each partner will build upon their unique perspectives and experience in engaging underserved communities and leverage the strengths of the communities they serve to expand access to educational pathways. Additionally, this partnership will work to identify and dismantle educational barriers experienced by historically underserved populations, grow culturally relevant outreach and engagement, and more effectively serve underserved communities.

LCC, a rural comprehensive community college located in Longview, Washington, provides the only post-secondary educational opportunity within Cowlitz and Wahkiakum counties. The college offers a mix of Transfer, Professional Technical, Bachelors of Applied Science, high school completion and developmental educational opportunities. Established in 1934, LCC has long-standing established relationships with many community-based organizations who share the college's mission to increase educational opportunities and provide living-wage employment opportunities for its citizens.

The college resides on the ancestral lands of the Cowlitz People. The Cowlitz Indian Tribe plays a key role in the economy of the Pacific Northwest. Known as the Forever People, the Cowlitz Tribe views vocational certificates and college or university degrees as an investment in both the Tribal members and the future of our Tribal community. One way they do this is by offering tuition assistance and other educational benefits for tribal members. Specifically, the [Cowlitz Employment Support Services](#) provides holistic and culturally-responsive services to American Indians and Alaska Natives through guided pathways to housing, education, employment, careers, and self-sufficiency within all directions of their lives. LCC has partnered with Cowlitz Tribe in several key ways, including student scholarships and tribal educational programming.

Youth and Family Link has provided programs since 1960 to serve the local community within Cowlitz County, focused specifically on underserved populations and partnering with other community organizations to maximize resources and avoid duplication of services. Their mission is to promote positive change in a child and family's life by engaging and linking them to resources that will result in success in school, having positive friends, a healthy home life and being involved in positive activities. Youth and Family Link is well positioned to reach populations such as first generation and low-income students that may have barriers to college access. Their established connections and collaboration with other community-based organizations (CBO) also situates them well to bring other CBOs to the table to work directly with the college.

The Ethnic Support Council, founded in 1989, has worked to empower the lives of our diverse community by eliminating barriers and ensuring equitable opportunities and outcomes. Through the mission of serving diverse individuals and communities, the Ethnic Support Council offers a variety of programs that provide resources and support for historically underserved populations. Through programs such as interpretation, translation, wrap-around services, youth mentoring programs, and scholarships for local BIPOC students, the Ethnic Support Council works with other community organizations to support communities of color and other underserved populations. The Ethnic Support Council brings deep community connections and trust among immigrant, non-native English speakers, and other communities of color, and the organization's strong relationships with other community-based organizations are an asset to developing a network of referrals and support.

## **2. How is or will the partnership be structured?**

Partnerships will be structured in two primary ways: 1) Collaborative and mutual engagement to increase opportunities for historically underserved students such as BIPOC, non-native English speakers, and low income community members to access postsecondary opportunities at LCC, and 2) Convene community based organizations (CBOs) to assess community needs, strengths, and opportunities for improving educational access, persistence, and completion of postsecondary degree and certificate attainment.

Specifically, LCC intends to build on their Men of Color Summer Scholars Program, which launched in 2023. The Scholars Program provided tuition funding and intensive support for BIPOC men to enroll in LCC's College Success (College 101) course and participate in social-affinity activities, including cohort lunches, faculty engagement, financial aid application support, and campus resource connections. Participants also provided ongoing feedback to identify individual and community needs and high impact retention opportunities. The college plans to expand the Summer Scholars Program to offer tuition funding through the college foundation and mentoring support each quarter for the College Success course. LCC will formalize its partnerships with these identified CBOs through information sharing and direct outreach, including hands-on support with applying to the college, transcript evaluation and placement into English and math, financial aid application and scholarships guidance, and advising into career pathways. Partners will participate in active recruitment and information sharing with their community members and prospective students and their families.

At a larger scale to better understand and ensure the college is providing culturally responsive support and curricula, LCC will convene these partners and other CBOs in regularly scheduled meetings to assess community needs, identify barriers to accessing post-secondary education, highlight community strengths, and develop strategic planning and goals to improve enrollment, retention and completion of BIPOC students, non-native English speakers, low income community members, and other historically underserved student populations. Using a strengths-based, intergenerational lens, the college and its partners will gain a better understanding of each other's services and unique needs and develop mutually beneficial outcomes.

## **3. How have or will the partner organizations learn from each other and the communities served, and how does or will the partnership incorporate this learning into ongoing work?**

A continuous cycle of learning will occur in several ways. First, LCC's outreach team will actively engage with the identified partners to provide information and access to the college's educational pathways (i.e. Transfer, Professional Technical, Bachelors of Applied Science, high school completion, and developmental educational opportunities). Through such engagement, the college will incorporate feedback and learning about the CBOs and the community members they serve to develop culturally responsive supports and services, such as family focused events, mentoring, and bilingual and translational services.

As part of the scholars program, students participating in the College Success course will provide ongoing feedback about the college's processes and services and their individual needs, which LCC will incorporate into its large-scale service model. Students most impacted by barriers to postsecondary education will inform us through their lived experiences. LCC will also include the CBOs in their mentorship opportunities with these students and improve the mutually beneficial referral process.

As LCC convenes its partners and other community representatives, the mutual information sharing about educational pathways, access barriers, and community strengths and needs will be integrated into a shared mission and strategic alignment of services and supports. Such learning and

support have already been occurring. Financial access is one of the key factors in individuals and their families being able to attend and complete college. LCC partnered with Youth and Family Link in 2022 to increase college-going rates through financial aid awareness and financial aid application support. In just its second year of collaboration, Youth and Family Link has engaged over 170 participants, 98% of whom identified as students of color, students with disabilities, low-income students, immigrants and English language learners, former foster youth, Veterans, or students experiencing homelessness. During this time, the college has seen a 9.7% increase in financial aid applications over the previous year.

**4. Who are the focal population(s) in your partnership's work, and what assets do learners and families in these populations bring to their educational journeys?**

The focus of this work is to serve communities that are historically underserved, such as BIPOC, non-native English speakers, and low-income community members. These individuals and families bring tremendous assets to both the community and the campus environment. By partnering with community-based organizations, LCC can more effectively connect with potential students and their families in their own cultural context, within their neighborhoods, and among trusted mentors. Additionally, by engaging in strong partnerships, this work is focused on family connections and the social fabric of the community and helps to transform the standard higher education systems that have not typically honored the diverse cultural experiences of students. In this way, the unique assets that students and their families bring to the community, such as personal and family experiences, social networks, bilingual and multilingualism, and the rich cultural traditions of BIPOC and other communities, are celebrated and integrated into the practices of the student experience. Specifically, a family approach will consider the needs of all family members and how the college's offerings can be utilized to meet these needs in a mutually beneficial way. For example, non-native English speakers not only bring their own language to the community, but also their cultural traditions, personal experiences, and the resiliency and determination of navigating a different culture in every aspect of their lives. These perspectives can highlight many aspects of the campus experience that may go unnoticed or unchallenged for those who do not experience language barriers.

Youth and Family Link is highly committed to actively addressing equity for historically underserved families and is adept at working with families to support them in learning the skills necessary to overcome barriers and access the services they need to flourish. Through the Care Coordinator model, Youth and Family Link staff can identify individual and family strengths and partner with families as they work to accomplish goals, access services, meet basic needs, and work towards long-term health and wellness. Youth and Family Link continues to focus intentional outreach efforts to build trust and establish relationships with BIPOC communities, such as Chuukese speaking Micronesian families that have not been well served by other community organizations or social service agencies.

The Cowlitz Indian Tribe holds a rich legacy of tradition and relationship to its place in the Pacific Northwest and celebrates its community assets of family and village participation, natural resources, storytelling, vision quests, smelt, salmon and river ceremonies, canoe journeys, drum and song ceremonies, and celebrations. The Cowlitz Employment Support Services builds on these community assets by providing a holistic and strengths-based approach, including engaging the whole-family through culturally specific support.

Through the mission of serving diverse individuals and communities, the Ethnic Support Council celebrates the community assets by providing educational scholarship, language support, building connections and trust among immigrant, non-native English speakers, and other communities of color, celebrations of BIPOC and communities of color, and relationship-based referrals.

Through this project, LCC and partners are committed to identifying the strengths of the individuals and communities served and to invite them to participate as equal partners and experts in their own experiences and cultural contexts. This work will require all partners to intentionally practice governance models that focus on listening, shared leadership, and mutual respect of each individual's unique perspectives and expertise.

**5. What is the geographic region where the focal population(s) that would be served by this investment live?**

Lower Columbia College is located in Longview, Washington, and serves Cowlitz and Wahkiakum counties. While Cowlitz and Wahkiakum counties are considered rural, much of the population is concentrated in the cities of Longview, Kelso, and to a lesser extent, Woodland. Within Longview and Kelso, the Highlands and South Kelso neighborhoods have been historically underserved, are predominantly low income, and experience disproportionate levels of poverty and unemployment. According to the City of Longview, of “4,800 people living in the area, close to 16% are unemployed and over 40 percent live in poverty”. This level of poverty is nearly double that of Longview overall and more than double the rate of Cowlitz County as a whole. Additionally, the Highlands and South Kelso neighborhoods are not easily walkable and are considered food deserts according to the USDA.

**6. What are some of the systemic barriers that learners and families in your focal population(s) encounter?**

The College's service district is primarily rural with a population of 110,890, with 17% of residents under 18 below the poverty line (American Community Survey, 2022). Due to barriers relating to financial resources, transportation, and lack of access, many individuals in the service area, especially those with children, are place bound with limited employment and higher education options. Within Cowlitz County, the educational attainment rate for individuals with an associate degree is 14.7% compared to the average of 10% statewide; however, the attainment rate for those with a bachelor's degree is less than half of the statewide average (17% versus 39.5%). There is a positive correlation between educational attainment and employment outcomes including higher median wages and lower unemployment rates, which strongly suggest that higher education, especially an associate degree or higher, pays off.

Cowlitz County statistics indicate that poverty is pervasive in the community at large and is consistent with demographics of those served by both LCC and community partners. To illustrate, 20% of households, and 49% of households with children in Cowlitz County received SNAP benefits in 2022 (US Census Bureau, 2022). Racial disparities are evident in poverty rates by race; in Cowlitz County, poverty is most prevalent among American Indian/Alaskan Natives (40%), Latinx (20%), Multiracial (16.7%) and Black/African Americans (24%) compared to White populations (11%). Additional factors such as household and family composition exacerbate poverty rates with over 41% of single mothers having incomes that fell below the poverty line, and of single mothers with children under five years of age, 57.5% lived in poverty (American Community Survey, 2020). In the Longview and Kelso school districts 84% and 72.6% of students receive free or reduced lunch, respectively (Office of Public Instruction, 2023). This translates to a high percentage of students and families that may need extra support to afford and navigate college.

Nearly 8% of the population in LCC's service district speak a language other than English at home, with most non-native English speakers identifying Spanish as their primary language (5%) and Pacific Islander languages such as Chuukese (1%). Similarly, about 8% of students in Longview and Kelso school districts are non-native English speakers receiving English Language instruction.

Disabilities as a barrier to employment is a specific obstacle for American Indians and Alaskan Natives. While 18% of American Indians and Alaskan Natives in Washington State have a disability, only 5% of those individuals are being served by the Washington State Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. Additionally, co-occurring disabilities, low high school completion rates, transportation, cultural barriers, and addiction are significant barriers for those community members.

#### **7. What work do you propose undertaking during the granting period?**

The primary goals of the grant are two-fold: 1) Build on the success of the Summer Scholars program by actively increasing the referral network to the program and opening educational opportunities for historically underserved, (BIPOC), non-native English speakers, and low income community members and 2) Convene Community Based Organizations (CBOs) to assess community needs, strengths, and opportunities for improving educational access, persistence and completion of postsecondary degrees and certificates, including financial access and resources.

The outcomes for this grant are to offer the Scholars program each academic quarter (summer, fall, winter, spring) by enrolling 50 students in LCC's College Success course (2-credit, required class for graduation). Intensive support, and social-affinity activities, including cohort lunches, faculty engagement, financial aid application support, and campus resource connections, will be provided. Participants will also share ongoing feedback to identify individual and community needs and high impact retention opportunities, which will contribute to the community assessment. College application and onboarding support will be provided by the college and active referrals and networking opportunities will be provided by the CBOs.

LCC will also develop a community assessment by convening the CBOs in assessment and planning through regular meetings, networking and feedback to identify barriers, community strengths, opportunities and strategic initiatives to increase access to and completion of postsecondary educational pathways for populations identified.

#### **8. How will this proposed work contribute to increasing educational attainment for the focal population(s) in your region?**

The Summer Scholars pilot program data has shown promising outcomes for enrolling and retaining students of color. The program offered the required College 101 course for free to a small pilot class of BIPOC males, which was initially composed of 8 students. Of these 8 students, 100% of Summer Scholars successfully enrolled in Fall 2023 (first quarter persistence rate), 87.5% are currently enrolled for Winter 2024 (second quarter persistent rate), and 100% sustained a successful financial plan and/or completed a financial aid application (FAFSA or WASFA).

The proposed work aims to significantly impact educational attainment within our region by addressing key and regionally specific barriers for educational attainment for the focal populations identified by providing culturally responsive support through an extensive network of community partners. The initial iteration of the Summer Scholars program established a solid foundation to grow in the direction of developing a community system of support, referrals, and holistic collaborative efforts. Focused on relationship and affinity development, the core practices of the Summer Scholars program would be exponentially enhanced through the expansion of the proposed community-based organizations partnerships and formalized network that will result in increased educational attainment of low-income families and (BIPOC) communities within the greater-Cowlitz and Wahkiakum counties.