

Regional Challenge Grant - LOI

Lead Applicant: Multicultural Community Coalition

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In partnership with College Unbound

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?

With funding from the Washington Student Achievement Council's (WSAC) Regional Challenge Grant (RCG), The Multicultural Community Coalition (MCC) will come together with College Unbound (CU) in an emerging partnership. Our partnership will focus on post-secondary attainment for adults from low-income East African immigrant and refugee communities in South King County. During the Partner Formation Grant period, MCC and CU will identify cross-sector organizations willing to come together in partnership, with the shared goal of creating a collaborative, community-driven approach to overcome the barriers our focal population faces when attempting to pursue educational advancement. We will make a plan to increase educational attainment and degree completion in our service area, to then be implemented in partnership with MCC, CU, and additional cross-sector partners.

In King County, [only 29% of high school graduates go on to complete a college credential by age 25](#). This community is increasingly foreign-born, [with refugees and immigrants accounting for 50% of the population growth of the region](#). With barriers to postsecondary credentials amplified, this immigrant adult population is most in need of a community and employer-based approach to adult degree completion.

The Multicultural Community Coalition is composed of three community-based, non-profit organizations: Horn of Africa, Eritrean Community in Seattle and Vicinity, and Oromo Community Service of Seattle. Each of the three partnering organizations is led by and based in communities of color, serving as a vital cultural anchor for immigrants, refugees, and people of color throughout Southeast Seattle and King County. With a history of deep, trusted relationships, the organizations of MCC have worked in collaboration for over 10 years, and joined together to create a vibrant and welcoming cultural home and community center for more than 15,000 people who rely on them for vital services and cultural connection. The work of each MCC organization is steeped in equity, inclusion, and social justice.

Through this partnership, these organizations bring a deep connection with the community. MCC is already removing many of the barriers to postsecondary education that low-income adult learners face. MCC's partnering organizations are those people turn to when faced with eviction, or threatened with deportation, or taunted and harassed in an act of hate. These are the organizations most effective in convening communities to address urgent needs and emerging trends; in bringing voice to concerns and shared struggles; and in bringing shape to new ideas and inspiring community visions. Through these organizations, our RCG partnership will ensure local knowledge drives program design. Priority issues will be identified and defined by residents and their voices will be included in program design, implementation, and evaluation.

MCC has chosen to work in partnership with College Unbound, an accredited college, designed to meet the needs of adult learners who are furthest from educational justice, working to end cycles of poverty for adults and their families through BA completion. The mission of College Unbound is to reinvent the higher education experience for underserved adult learners, using a student-driven model of rigorous and engaged scholarship. CU believes everyone has a right to postsecondary education; colleges bear the responsibility to remove barriers that prevent historically underserved students from completing their

degrees. With the ability to embed itself in the community, CU's model is designed to identify and serve the specific needs of the community through place-based partnerships and employment-based professional pathways. As part of the RCG partnership, CU will help eliminate educational opportunity gaps by providing a college program designed for working and parenting adults to successfully earn their degree, with the ability to build support services to meet the needs of immigrant and refugee families.

Over the planning year, MCC and College Unbound will formalize partnerships with other cross-sector organizations that are already embedded in the community. We will identify organizations to join our RCG partnership with the ability to provide support services future students will need to learn about the opportunity to enroll, engage, and successfully complete their degree.

How is or will the partnership be structured?

The Multicultural Community Coalition will act as the lead applicant with Asmeret Habte (MCC Board Member; semiera@gmail.com; (206)434-6587) the point of contact. College Unbound will serve as fiscal agent, with Megan Demeroutis (Director of College Unbound Washington; megan.demeroutis@collegeunbound.edu; (315)243-9303) serving as point of contact.

The Multicultural Community Coalition partnering organizations include Horn of Africa, Oromo Community Services of Seattle, Eritrean Community in Seattle and Vicinity, anchor organizations for immigrants, refugees and people of color throughout Southeast Seattle and King County. These organizations come together to build power, combat displacement, and preserve culture through collective ownership and shared programs; with the vision that Greater Seattle is a city that is diverse, just, equitable, and free of racism in which communities of color have the power and authority to determine their futures and all people thrive.

College Unbound: Established in 2009, College Unbound (CU) is an accredited, nonprofit college specifically designed for adults. Using a student-driven model of rigorous and engaged scholarship, CU's mission is to reinvent the higher education experience for underserved adult learners. CU will launch the first cohorts of WA students Fall 2024. When compared to the average 4 year college, students who attend CU overrepresent people of color, women, low incomes families, and students who are parenting, all while demonstrating a significantly higher than average graduation rate for the same populations. Through low tuition, accommodating schedules, and awarding credits for prior knowledge, CU students are able to graduate with little to no student loan debt on an accelerated timeline.

Horn of Africa: Horn of Africa Services is a nonprofit that serves the East African immigrant and refugee community in Seattle. HOAS was established in 1992 by a group of East African immigrants and refugees, and concerned volunteers. For over 20 years, HOAS has been serving the East African immigrant and refugee community in Seattle. Their services include social services, educational assistance, youth programs, and economic empowerment to address the needs of the community.

Eritrean Community in Seattle and Vicinity: The Eritrean Community in Seattle and Vicinity (ECSV) is a non-profit organization established in 1983. ECSV has served the Eritrean refugees and immigrants as a bridge to adjust to the culture of their new home here in the United States. The mission of the Eritrean

Community in Seattle and Vicinity is to promote, through its members, the social, economical, educational and cultural interests of Eritrean refugees in Seattle while conserving and passing-on the Eritrean culture and tradition to the children. Volunteerism, members' participation and involvement are the backbone of achieving our goals.

Oromo Community Service of Seattle: The Oromo Community Service of Seattle was established in 2014 to serve as a place where Oromo can congregate, participate in workshops, take classes, and participate in other activities of the like. The Oromo population is the second largest group from the Horn of Africa Communities residing in Seattle. The Oromo Community Service of Seattle Mission is the empowerment of the Oromo community especially the youth in education, social integration for life, liberty and happiness as active citizens and serves all like communities without discrimination on legal guidelines.

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?

College Unbound has shown great success in supporting adult students through graduation. While still incorporating community voice, CU will be able to identify and implement key elements of their model that have led to high rates of degree completion. By partnering with community-based organizations CU can lift up the existing high-quality relationships and create cohorts built on familiarity and trust, thus radically impacting college completion outcomes for our partner organizations.

With deep knowledge of the community they are embedded in, MCC will work with College Unbound to engage with community members to identify the strengths the focus population bring with them, barriers they face when trying to access higher education, and what organizations are trusted by the community to provide the support services they will need to ensure degree completion. Suggestions from MCC and community input will determine what other cross-sector organizations we will bring into our RCG partnership, where how many cohorts CU will launch, where they will meet, who will serve as Lab Faculty, and what support services will need to be provided.

**Please see action items in response provided below for details on how we plan incorporate community voice*

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

This partnership will focus on serving adults from low-income East African Communities in South King County, who are ready to earn their Bachelor's Degree. In this community education is a high priority, where many people have already earned degrees from their home country. In this community, people honor strong commitments to their families and prioritize taking care of each other over all else. This runs over into the greater community, with families doing what they can to support each other. Additionally, many people are multilingual, with experience being immersed in new situations with persistence and determination to succeed.

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

The majority of our Southeast King County focal population lives in Kent, Tukwila, Burien, Des Moines, and Skyway. As a result of gentrification, families have been forced to move out of the city into areas where the cost of living is lower, however, so is access to opportunity and resources.

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

While many people from our focal population may have already started or earned a degree in their home country and have high skills, earned credits are not easily transferred or their credentials are not recognized in the United States, forcing them to work low-wage, entry-level positions. At the same time, some people are expected to support family members in their home country, resulting in them working multiple jobs with rigid schedules. As a cultural expectation, often the oldest sibling forgoes their opportunity to pursue higher education to help take care of their younger siblings or get a job right out of high school to contribute to their family's income. Some youth might start college and then drop out due to a family obligation or inability to pay tuition. Difficulties navigating an unfamiliar educational system, language differences, lack of cultural responsiveness of service providers in the US, and lack of access to reliable employment, housing, childcare, and transportation can all act as barriers as well. Navigating systems that are different from their home country, including education and support services adds an extra layer of challenge.

What work do you propose undertaking during the granting period?

We are proposing \$125,000 in funding to support the emerging partnership between MCC and CU. Throughout the one-year partner formation grant period, MCC and CU will incorporate community voices to identify systemic barriers to degree completion. Based on the barriers that are identified, MCC and CU will bring in cross-sector organizations that are embedded in the community and willing to work in partnership to create an ecosystem that will create a college-going culture in the community, provide the most relevant resources required for system navigation and support services so our focal population can overcome barriers to degree completion. Food, childcare, and transportation stipends will be provided at community meetings.

Action items:

1. Planning meetings between MCC and CU:
 - a. Monthly planning meetings
 - b. Prompt communication between MCC and CU via email, phone, text with additional meetings planned as needed
 - c. Inviting additional cross-sector organizations to join our RCG partners as soon as it is appropriate
2. Incorporating community voice:
 - a. Small group meetings (8 small group meetings hosted)
 - b. One on one interviews (40 interviews conducted)

- c. Community Discussions (4 community meetings hosted)
- d. Survey (50 surveys completed)
- 3. Cross-sector RCG partnership development
 - a. Sign MOU's with at least 6 cross-sector organizations to contribute to our RCG partnerships
 - b. Identified partners and sign MOU's prior to implementation, Fall 2025

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

Anticipated Outcomes:

1. Identify systemic barriers focal population faces in pursuit of degree attainment
2. Identify cross-sector organizations that are embedded in the community and available to help adult community members overcome systemic barriers to degree attainment
3. MCC has increased capacity to help direct adult community members to access best-fit postsecondary options
4. CU development of student cohort partnerships with employers with the goal of enrolling 20 -30 students starting in Fall 2025 or Winter 2026 with the sustainable infrastructure to grow and continue to serve the community
5. The expansion of MCC and CU RCG partnership to include additional cross-sector organizations providing services to increase our focal population's access to education attainment, degree completion, and career advancement
6. A plan for our RCG partnership team to engage with our focal population and support them in working towards earning a degree or other post secondary credential with conditional MOU's for services provided and an implementation timeline