

Meaningful Employment Readiness & Retention in the Yakima Valley

Application Point of Contact: Courtney Reilly, Co-founder of Skillsline

Fiscal Agent: One Question Consulting Foundation

Applicants must submit the [Letter of Interest Submission Form](#) and upload to the form a Letter of Interest as a PDF attachment **no later than February 16, 2024 by 11:59PM Pacific Time**. To ensure formatting aligns with the below guidelines, we encourage applicants to make use of this Letter of Interest template.

A Letter of Interest must adhere to the following guidelines:

- No more than five pages in total length, excluding the cover page
- Cover page identifies:
 - o Partnership name (If applicable)
 - o Application point of contact
 - o Name of the organization that will act as fiscal agent
- All bolded questions are numbered and answered serially (see pgs. 6-8 in the Request for Letters of Interest)
- Responses are single spaced in Times New Roman 11-point font

Note: All LOIs submitted to WSAC will be publicly available on the WSAC website in advance of the recommendations made to Council (est. May 2024).

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?

The organizations included in this pilot bring those that educate, support, and employ into a team built strategically in partnership with local leadership to address the challenge of meaningful employment readiness and upward mobility in the Yakima Valley community.

Given low unemployment combined with historically low labor market participation rates and secular demographic trends, Yakima Valley leaders, employers, and educators have acknowledged that new approaches supporting learners and employees in an innovative, inclusive, and scalable way are necessary. Critically, we must engage historically marginalized populations in the community in the creation of a diverse and dynamic workforce.

Adult learners, specifically, are a key component of a new strategy for building such a diverse and dynamic workforce. Adult learners in higher education tend to be highly motivated, recognizing the relevancy and value of education in a more direct way than their younger counterparts. And yet, only 50% complete the degree program in which they enroll, nearly fifteen percentage points lower than younger student populations. Adult learner demographics suggest these students are also most in need of the career benefits conveyed by a credential - they tend to overrepresent populations that are non-white, low socioeconomic status, and veteran.

Too many in this population have found the Yakima Valley talent development ecosystem opaque, inaccessible, and inadequate for genuine opportunity and mobility. Skillsline has been offered the privilege of bringing this partnership group together to reimagine and recreate the system to directly support the communities that need it the most. Building on its success as a scaled provider of human skills curriculum and training – a key component for job readiness and stability – Skillsline is broadening into a Job and Life Readiness company and partnering with the Yakima Valley community to develop its model as the connective tissue within a high-functioning talent development ecosystem, initially focused on healthcare career pathways.

In support of the partnership’s mission to see more people achieve meaningful, sustainable employment through education attainment, we are developing the Skillsline Navigator Support tool to provide that infrastructure for people working hard to achieve a better life.

2. How is or will the partnership be structured?

We are currently in the development phase of this partnership. Our local strategic advisors include:

- Buffy Alegria –local community leader, national women's healthcare leader, Board Chair of SignalHealth, former Vice Chair of the Board of Trustees of Yakima Valley Memorial Hospital, Managing Director of Loud Capital, and philanthropist
- Bob Gerst – Chairman of the Board of Directors of Heritage University, Vice President of Human Resources at John I. Haas
- Tim McGree – Past President and Founder of La Salle High School
- Dan Ferguson – Director, Yakima Valley Community College, Allied Health Center of Excellence

To build our team, we are currently engaging in productive conversations with leaders of local education institutions, including Yakima School District, Heritage University, and Central Washington University. Similarly, we are engaged in discussions with leaders of local healthcare employers, including Multicare Memorial Hospital, SignalHealth, and Yakima Valley Farm Workers Clinic, as well as community-based organizations including the YWCA of Yakima and Downtown Yakima Rotary Club..

In March, we are meeting in Yakima to build our execution team and strategy. Meetings are scheduled with Trevor Greene, Superintendent of Yakima School District; Sharon Miracle, CEO of Yakima Valley Community Foundation; Christy Trotter, CEO of Yakima Valley Farm Workers Clinic; Erin Black, CEO of The Memorial Foundation, Board Chair of Central Washington University, and President of Downtown Yakima Rotary Club; with more invitations still in process. We have engaged WSAC in these conversations and some will be visiting our Yakima team in late March.

Our intention is to build out the partnership through the end of March, move into a community needs assessment and research process through the spring, and be ready for initial implementation by mid-summer as the Regional Challenge Grant period begins.

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?

To best serve the needs of the local community, this must and will be a collaborative effort. Central to our methodology is the inclusion of diverse participant voices. We will begin this spring with a needs assessment survey completed by learners, employers, and resource providers in order to gather a full range of needs and supports to facilitate success for youth and adult learners.

Discussion groups, surveys, and one-on-one interviews to gather insights will follow and continue throughout the project to create a robust and responsive feedback loop. This inclusivity will ensure the program reflects the rich variety of user experiences, challenges, and aspirations, making our solutions more accessible and impactful.

To ensure the Skillsline Navigator Support technology's reliability and validity, we have engaged educational institutions and research organizations interested in supporting empirical validation in real-world settings. Leveraging collected data, we will continuously analyze user platform engagement, interactions and learning outcomes to iterate, ensuring we remain evidence-based and responsive to learner needs.

Additionally, our internal team has deep experience participating in and contributing to communities of practice in both workforce development and education. We desire to share learnings within the community and outwardly to contribute to – and learn from – best practices across the state.

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?

In aligning our efforts with the specific needs and assets of the Hispanic and Yakama Nation communities within the Yakima Valley, our partnership is poised to foster impactful relationships and support targeted educational and employment pathways. Our focused engagement acknowledges the unique assets these communities bring to their educational journeys, emphasizing their cultural strengths, cultivated skills, and social capital. These communities value support in developing personal skills, accessing life opportunities, and connecting with social determinants of health (SDOH) resources as essential steps toward not just entering the educational system but also remaining actively involved and enthusiastic about future prospects. Supporting families who might otherwise be overlooked in this landscape of opportunity fosters a more robust community, a more vibrant economy, and a significant positive impact on the lives of those who consider the Yakima Valley their home.

Hispanic community: Comprising over 50% of Yakima Valley's population today, this vibrant community contributes a rich cultural heritage and linguistic diversity while reflecting the determination of immigrants who have persevered to make the Valley their home. Their strong work ethic – evident in their significant roles in the orchard, vineyard, and hops industries – demonstrates resilience, adaptability, and a deep commitment to family and community well-being. These traits embody a powerful asset: the ability to persevere in the face of challenges and to leverage collective efforts for community improvement. Our partnership has members who sit on the Yakima Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, and actively supported their efforts in the last decade to win participation in local government and decision-making. We understand the skills embedded in this community as foundations for education and economic empowerment, and intend to be part of the next chapter in this community's fight for economic mobility and equality in the Yakima Valley.

Yakama Nation: The Yakama Nation brings a profound connection to land, tradition, and community, underpinning their educational journeys with a sense of identity and belonging. Their commitment to preserving cultural practices and norms, alongside their stewardship of natural resources, illustrates a deep-rooted resilience and a collective wisdom passed through generations. These qualities highlight critical thinking, environmental stewardship, and community leadership as key assets. Our partnership seeks to recognize their history and value in this geographic region as well as their value to the broader

Yakima Valley community through supporting their development of stronger connections and resources to uplift their journey towards educational and economic empowerment.

By narrowing our focus to these communities, we aim to deepen our understanding of their specific assets and needs, ensuring our partnership can effectively support their paths to meaningful employment and educational achievement, while recognizing that solutions developed will also support the Yakima Valley community more broadly. We look forward to showing how we work in partnership with the community in building an ecosystem that strategically impacts all of the Yakima Valley Community in seeing a future of purpose.

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

The Yakima Valley is a rural area of central Washington, nestled between mountain ranges to the east and west. With the self-proclaimed moniker of “The Palm Springs of Washington”, the Yakima Valley is sunnier, flatter, and more water-challenged than the population centers of western Washington. Settled by Americans in the early 19th century, those early farmers created a system to bring water from the mountains into the valley, ultimately creating a thriving agricultural sector focused on orchards, vineyards, and hops fields. While the area is decidedly rural, significant businesses serving growers are located in the region, as are sizable healthcare and logistics industries.

Following the establishment of the agricultural sector, fieldworkers and their families were invited from other countries, primarily Mexico, which reached its zenith during World War 2 when local men were away at war. This formed the foundation of the Hispanic community that exists today, and that continues to grow as workers arrive from south of the border to work in the fields of the Yakima Valley.

Also located in the region is the 2,000 square mile Yakama Indian Reservation, established in the mid-19th century. While it is primarily flat and dry similar to the rest of the region, it does contain one of the largest commercial forests in the country, providing the primary economic base for the Yakama Nation community. The Reservation has banned alcohol for decades in an effort to combat substance abuse, but continues to struggle with unemployment, homelessness, crime, and high poverty rates.

In 1980, Mt. St. Helens – located just west of the Yakama Reservation – erupted on “Black Sunday”, devastating the region. Yakima received an estimated 600 tons of ash over the course of the 8-day volcanic eruption, leaving the city at a standstill. With little immediate incoming assistance from state or federal governments, the community came together, working side-by-side to clear the ash and rebuild their infrastructure. Their resilience and collaboration to restore the city in under a week is a powerful demonstration of what this community can accomplish together, and how it can thrive in the challenges of its natural environment.

Our partnership benefits from intended collaboration with a diverse array of critical partners within the Yakima Valley, each bringing unique strengths and resources to our collective efforts. These partners include:

- Heritage University, Yakima Valley Community College, and Central Washington University, each contributing educational excellence and opportunities for local learners
- The Yakima Valley Community Foundation, which plays a pivotal role in supporting various community initiatives and enhancing the quality of life in the region
- Memorial Hospital and SignalHealth, alongside specialized organizations like Farm Workers Clinic and Community Health of Central Washington, offering essential health services and contributing to the well-being of their communities
- The robust fruit and hops industries, which are central to the economy and culture of the Yakima Valley, providing employment opportunities and supporting the local community.

Together, these partners form a rich ecosystem of education, healthcare, business, and community investment. This network not only enhances the fabric of the Yakima Valley but also serves as a foundation for our work in creating meaningful opportunities and fostering a future filled with purpose for all community members. Our commitment is to work hand-in-hand with these partners to build a supportive ecosystem that addresses the needs of the Yakima Valley community holistically, paving the way for a brighter, more inclusive future.

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

Through our partners in service, we intend to support those most affected by disconnection from meaningful employment at a living wage, including The Yakama Nation and Hispanic communities, many of whom in the latter group are recent arrivals or first generation. These communities have experienced a significant set of barriers related to unequal economic status, unequal access to opportunity, and cultural and linguistic difference.

Over time, these barriers have led to more significant challenges within the communities. The Yakama Nation and Hispanic communities of the Yakima Valley struggle with well-documented gang involvement, substance abuse, and lack of support for mental health. Underlying these external manifestations is a limited belief in opportunity and self-value, and a lack of connections to options for meaningful advancement.

We know through our own work that a preventative and intervention approach can address these internalized barriers by supporting effort, connecting to peers and positive community role models, and persistent teaching to see personal value, the power of individual choices, and the contribution that's possible to make to family and community.

By building the strategic alliances mentioned and authentically engaging across the focal populations, we intend to uplift and uphold community members in roles across all levels of this project, to assist in developing and implementing the learning and mentoring required to serve. People need to see those who look, communicate, and live as they do in positions of significance to build trust in the work and the process.

The barriers identified and understood from our life and work experiences in Yakima revolve around self-belief, access to support, development of work and life readiness skills, and connection to opportunity. Our navigation and peer engagement components speak clearly to the participatory nature of our efforts, and we see what could be possible when those who are on the outside of the system are seen and supported along a pathway towards meaning and purpose.

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

We will start the grant implementation work by mapping the Yakima Valley's pathways, leading from basic needs to credential attainment and meaningful employment. This ground-level analysis, facilitated through the diversity and reach of this partnership, will underlie Navigator Support's role as the connective tissue of the regional ecosystem and power its automation and AI augmentation. This is integral to enabling adult learners to navigate the complexities of a typically opaque and inaccessible system, connecting with proven supports most relevant to them.

In building towards a scaled solution, the partnership will focus first on healthcare career paths during the granting period. We will demonstrate that talent development pipelines can be meaningfully strengthened, supporting adults to complete credentials and move into healthcare-related roles.

This will begin with a working collaboration between Skillsline and Heritage University and Yakima Valley Community College to prepare learners to be ready for retained employment: supporting their ability to complete a necessary credential and gain the non-technical skill set required for their desired position. The work will include embedding relevant human skills learning alongside the academic program, enabling access to the Skillsline Navigator (an on-the-ground position and evolving AI-enhanced technology tool) for support, facilitating peer connection groups, and monitoring progress to gauge intervention needs and readiness.

It will continue by Skillsline working with the key local healthcare employers who join the partnership to prepare frontline employees to be ready to build their careers: supporting their ability to persist in their role initially, and developing a plan towards stackable credentials and a career pathway that will enable internal and upward mobility. The work will include creating an enhanced human skills-focused onboarding program with each employer partner, enabling access to the Skillsline Navigator to new employees, and guiding goal creation with established milestones to encourage and support taking the next steps in credential attainment and career progression.

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

Research shows that when adult learners fail to complete their credentials, it is rarely due to academic struggles or lack of motivation. Rather, it's a result of balancing a full life of responsibilities while trying to fit education into the cracks. By looking holistically at the needs of this community and partnering with Skillsline to fill in the pieces missing in the existing talent development ecosystem, Heritage University and Yakima Valley Community College will see higher retention, higher completion rates, and higher alumni gainful employment from their learners participating in this grant-funded program.

Skillsline Learning teaches the fundamentals of durable human skills. These valuable personal and employability skills are associated with such broad categories as self-agency, collaboration, higher-order thinking, intentionality, and results orientation – which employers overwhelmingly demand, but also report are disappointingly lacking in new employees. Skillsline Learning structures these skills into a library of 10-minute microlessons that engage users in interactive Socratic learning. Skillsline promises that learners will gain awareness of the skills; the language to discuss them, the ability to recognize in themselves and others; and enough practical tips to practice intentionally in their daily context.

Significant literature demonstrates the value of these skills in achieving life, education, and employment success. For example, acquiring various durable human skills, including resilience, growth mindset, and self-regulation, is positively correlated with higher persistence, higher graduation rates, better job performance, and better overall personal well-being. Additionally, “learning how to learn” using human skills such as time management, goal setting, and self-regulation correlates with higher academic achievement, motivation, and completion in both K-12 and postsecondary programs.

But while learning human skills is valuable and opens opportunities for all learners, it is rarely the only missing piece in achieving better opportunity and life outcomes. Skillsline Navigator Support (both analog and AI-enhanced) helps adult learners and support staff with the unique challenges adult learners face. Based on our initial mapping of the community and ongoing field research, the Navigator will personalize connections to resources addressing specific obstacles as they arise, such as food insecurity, transportation, or childcare. It will monitor for isolation and stress, and foster relevant relationships among peers or facilitate a warm handoff to a mental health provider. Recognizing the many competing priorities that adults face, the Navigator will personalize reminders and motivational encouragement through a nudging system. Finally, the Navigator will monitor learners' progress in Skillsline Learning, offering encouragement and/or intervention as adult students learn, apply, and develop the human skills relevant to their current and future goals.

Our mission is to demystify and streamline the journey toward personal growth and employment, making it accessible and achievable for all. Through strategic partnerships, innovation, and a commitment to community and equity, we will transform the talent development ecosystem in the Yakima Valley into a more inclusive, effective, and upwardly mobile system.