



Partnership Name: South Central STEM Network  
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Fiscal Agent: Educational Service District 1605

**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 South Central Washington STEM Network (the STEM Network) is pleased to submit this letter of interest for the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) Regional Challenge Grant. The STEM Network, in partnership with Yakima Valley College, the College Success Foundation, Educational Service District (ESD) 105, the ESD 105 Migrant Department, South Central Workforce, the Yakima County Development Association, regional employers, and local school districts, has partnered together to implement research-based strategies to increase post-secondary credential attainment. Community leaders from these partner organizations bring their skills, strengths, relationships, and unique understanding of their communities to this collective work. The following descriptions of each organization's experience and contributions to the partnership clearly illustrate why they are included in this collaboration.

- The STEM Network convenes business, community, and education partners to identify opportunity gaps for students and employers. Network members collaborate to develop and implement regional place-based solutions and measure impact to inform the implementation and scale-up of effective programs. The STEM Network occupies the center space of the Venn Diagram connecting K-12 and postsecondary education, business, and community-based organizations.
- Yakima Valley College (YVC) plays a crucial role within the partnership, catering to a diverse student body, 86% of whom are first-generation college students (2021-2022). As a Hispanic-serving institution (HSI), YVC brings a depth of understanding of the unique needs of Hispanic students and the essential support required for student success. An average of 34.1% of college-going students from six Yakima County high schools (Davis, Eisenhower, East Valley, Selah, Toppenish, West Valley, and Zillah) chose YVC as their postsecondary institution.
- The College Success Foundation (CSF) brings over 15 years of experience working with students from focal populations in our communities to this partnership. The CSF works to dismantle the inequities that limit opportunities for students from focal populations so that race, socio-economic status, and first-generation status do not predict their future. They are a long-standing partner of the STEM Network, providing high-quality advising and financial aid training and support.
- Educational Service District (ESD)105 supports the learning success of more than 66,000 students who attend the 25 public school districts and more than 20 state-approved private and tribal schools of South Central Washington. The ESD brings extensive experience managing federal, state, and foundation grants to the partnership and will serve as the fiscal agent.
- The ESD 105 Migrant Education Department is dedicated to meeting the varied needs of migrant students, families, and educators. The Migrant Department brings a deep understanding of the needs of Migrant, farmworker, and Indigenous students to the partnership.
- The South Central Workforce is a trusted partner with regional businesses and serves as a conduit between the regional business community and K-12 and postsecondary education. Both the South Central Workforce and the Yakima County Development Association take responsibility for recruiting regional businesses to support the Pathway to the Top Career and College Expo.
- As the economic development association for Yakima County, the Yakima County Development Association will assist the partnership in identifying and recruiting businesses from multiple industry sectors to participate in the Pathway to the Top Career and College Expo.
- Regional employers partner on the Pathway to the Top Career and College Expo. They provide information to high school students related to in-demand jobs at their company and the possibilities for future advancement.
- High school counselors, Career Readiness Specialists, Advisory teachers, and CTE teachers from regional school districts advise students and promote partnership events and opportunities.



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

The STEM Network at ESD 105 will serve as the backbone organization for the partnership. The Network has experience and a solid reputation in the community as a convener of regional stakeholders and one who fosters authentic, respectful, and effective partnerships. This collaboration is grounded in evidence-based research and data-driven decision-making that is enhanced by our connection with our workforce and economic development partners (YCDA & SCW). These elements are crucial for bridging gaps and connecting students from focal populations to postsecondary opportunities. The partners will jointly implement the strategies for this grant, providing hands-on support and resources directly to the students and families they serve. The Network will work collaboratively with Yakima Valley College to implement the Climbing Higher sequence of events. By collaborating with our school districts and Yakima Valley College, the partnership will create seamless educational pathways for students, especially those from underrepresented communities and our focal population. To provide regional financial aid support, the STEM Network, alongside the College Success Foundation, will support students and families in completing their FAFSA & WASFA applications. Additionally, the partnership will expand the regional Pathway to the Top Career & College Expo to increase postsecondary engagement and career awareness among students and their families. Recognizing the challenges many rural students face, the partnership will facilitate transportation for school districts, ensuring that all students can connect with and learn about various post-secondary opportunities available to them.

## **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?**

The partnership is designed to mitigate the multifaceted challenges faced by students transitioning from K-12 to postsecondary education and into the workforce. Leveraging each partner's unique strengths and insights, we will create a more robust, cohesive support system. The partners bring an established relationship that stems from a long history of collaborative learning on how to best serve students and families across our communities (e.g., Limitless Learning Network, financial aid events, Migrant Parent Advisory Committees, family STEM nights, etc.). We prioritize input from students and families through surveys, listening sessions, and feedback from CSF advisors and our ESD 105/STEM Network Migrant and Indigenous student coordinators. The effectiveness of the Network is directly related to the collaborative relationships the Network has developed by being located at ESD 105. It has been easy to develop collegial and productive relationships with the Career Connect Washington Career Connected Learning Coordinator, the Migrant Education Department's Career Readiness Coordinator, the Indigenous Migratory Education Coordinator, the ESD 105 Open Doors program, and Student Support Services. This collaborative relationship has allowed for the free flow of information between the partnership and those who work closely with our K-12 education partners. Communication between the Network and those coordinating programs across the ESD 105 region has made it possible to have a pulse of the barriers and opportunities for students and families from our focal populations. The Network has benefited greatly from this authentic connection to the K-12 school districts in the region to successfully develop and implement Climbing Higher, Pathway to the Top Career and College Expo, and Financial Aid events across South Central Washington. Moreover, the Network, YVC, workforce partners, and CSF have collaborated on many grants and funding opportunities, resulting in the resources necessary to pilot and scale innovative programs and events. This illustrates just how the Network occupies the space in the center of the Venn Diagram between the worlds of education (K-12 & post-secondary) and business.



ESD 105, CSF, YVC, workforce partners, and regional school districts provide a foundational understanding of the immediate needs and barriers students and their families face within the community. By continuously sharing data, culturally responsive strategies, community needs, and best practices, they offer a ground-level view of educational challenges and successes, allowing the partners to tailor their strategies more effectively. An existing example of this is our participation in the Limitless Learning Network (the STEM Network, YVC, Granger and Selah School Districts, and CSF) funded by the Gates Foundation. Yakima Valley College offers insights into the transition challenges from high school to postsecondary education. Learning from YVC's experiences, the partnership gains an understanding of the supports necessary for student enrollment, persistence, and completion in higher education, enabling the adaptation of strategies to smooth this transition. The College Success Foundation provides a model of direct, individualized support for students and families, particularly those from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The partners prioritize direct feedback and engagement with students, parents, and families to deeply understand the barriers to student success. This community-centric approach ensures the voices of those from focal populations are heard and that their experiences inform continuous improvement efforts.

**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 focal populations that our partnership will serve are Latinx, English language learners, migrant, Indigenous, rural, low-socio-economic, and 1st generation postsecondary students. These groups bring invaluable assets into the educational landscape, contributing significantly to the richness and diversity of learning environments. These students and their families possess remarkable adaptability, resiliency, and an innate ability for creative problem-solving, developed through navigating life's various challenges and transitions. Their multilingual skills are valuable and provide a competitive advantage as they prepare to enter post-secondary and the workforce. Moreover, their lived experiences foster a strong work ethic and a heightened social awareness. These qualities are immensely valuable as they face the challenges of pursuing a post-secondary education. By deliberately celebrating these assets, we not only champion the success of our focal populations but also elevate their confidence and greatly enhance the students' self-identity positioning to serve as a role model in their community.

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

The focal populations for our partnership include Latinx, English language learners, migrant, Indigenous, rural, low-socio-economic, and 1st generation postsecondary students. These student populations are represented widely in the communities of Grant, Kittitas, Klickitat, and Yakima Counties. The demographic makeup of the 65,000 students in the ESD 105 region includes 64.5% identifying as Hispanic, 3.3% as Native American, 25.7% as English Language Learners, and 68.4% qualifying for free or reduced-price meals. This area includes 25 public school districts and 23 state-approved private and tribal schools, extending from Easton in the northwest to Mt. Adams in the southeast, down to Goldendale, and northeast to Royal City and Mattawa. All but one of the public-school districts in this area are federally designated as rural. Framed by the Cascade Range and the Columbia River, the region benefits from a variety of landscapes that significantly contribute to its agricultural prosperity and educational dynamics. Key industries in the region include agriculture, food processing, warehouse/distribution, industrial machinery and supplies, aerospace, and health care. Agriculturally, the region produces a variety of crops, including apples, cherries, hops, grapes, and hay, underlining the importance of agriculture to the local economy and community identity. The educational institutions within this landscape serve a student body challenged by formidable obstacles, including transportation, broadband connectivity, access to business/industry, and quality healthcare. The postsecondary education institutions within the region include Central Washington University, Heritage University, Pacific Northwest University of Health Sciences, Perry Technical Institute, and Yakima Valley College.



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

In South Central Washington, various systemic barriers affect postsecondary enrollment outcomes for our focal populations. These include financial obstacles, rural isolation, language barriers, cultural disparities, lack of representation, family obligations, and limited postsecondary navigation support. Language barriers for students whose primary language isn't English can impede effective communication and hinder their ability to navigate the enrollment process. Cultural differences and family responsibilities can pose additional challenges, particularly for Latinx and Indigenous students, who may struggle with cultural adaptation and find a lack of support at postsecondary institutions. Limited representation among faculty and staff can lead to feelings of isolation and a lack of mentors or role models. Moreover, cultural norms and family expectations may add extra pressure, such as caring for family members or contributing to the household income. The STEM Network staff is representative of the region and has faced the same challenges first-hand as the students we serve.

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

The work we propose to undertake during our granting period aims to generate awareness of postsecondary opportunities, increase financial aid completion, and increase postsecondary credential attainment. To meet these objectives, the partnership will implement the following strategies:

- **Pathway to the Top Career & College Expo:** This initiative informs high school students of the broad spectrum of postsecondary options, including two-year and four-year colleges/universities, technical schools, certificate programs, military, and apprenticeship programs, available to them. Regional employers showcase in-demand jobs and career pathways available in our region. In 2023, the Expo hosted over 4,500 students from 21 school districts, where they connected with 83 different vendors represented. By hosting this event, we ensure that students are not only aware of their educational options but also understand the tangible career paths that their postsecondary credentials can unlock, thereby aligning their educational goals with the job market's needs and the unique economic landscape of South Central Washington. With additional funding, we will continue to host this event, help offset transportation costs for our most rural school districts, increase the number of vendors, and impact a greater number of students.
- **Regional Financial Aid Completion Support:** To align with WSAC's goal of increasing postsecondary attainment across the state of Washington, we recognize the significance and impact that completing a Financial Aid application has on individuals enrolling in postsecondary. To address the challenges that students from our focal populations face (see Question #6) in regard to Financial Aid completion, we will implement strategies that mitigate these barriers. One strategy will be to host regional (Kittitas County, Grant County, Upper Yakima Valley, and Lower Yakima Valley) events to increase the support students and their families have to successfully complete financial aid applications. A second strategy will be to offer these events in English and Spanish, with support provided in Sahaptin. We will also provide information and presentations in multiple languages. Furthermore, we will ensure that staff who can speak the languages of our students and their families are available, offering a more inclusive and accessible service. A third strategy will be to hold our events in the evening to meet the community needs of families from our focal populations across our service area. By taking these steps, we aim to significantly increase financial aid application rates in our region, meet the statewide target, and ensure broader access to postsecondary education opportunities for our students.



- **Climbing Higher:** The expansion of the Climbing Higher series to Yakima Valley College is a strategic move to serve a greater number of students from our focal populations. Students participating in Climbing Higher will receive targeted support during their senior year of high school to facilitate a successful transition to YVC. Participating students receive support in Financial Aid completion, admissions, matriculation, registration, exploring educational and career pathways, and available student support services. During their first year at YVC, students will receive academic advising, financial aid guidance, and career planning. This expansion will include the launch of a near-peer program to help new college students at YVC navigate through their first year of college. This near-peer program is crucial as it pairs first-year students with older peers from the same communities who have navigated similar educational and personal challenges. These mentors will provide guidance on maneuvering through college life, tackling academic and social barriers, and leveraging campus resources effectively. The shared experiences and backgrounds of the mentors and mentees foster a unique bond and understanding, greatly enhancing the relevance and impact of the advice and support provided. This expansion will embrace the principles of the Guided Pathways philosophy of post-secondary education to improve the transition between secondary and post-secondary education.

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

The proposed strategies are designed to eliminate barriers preventing educational attainment among our focal populations in South Central Washington. Through the implementation of our identified strategies, we aim to increase postsecondary credential attainment by increasing career and postsecondary education exploration, increasing Financial Aid completion, increasing enrollment into postsecondary, decreasing summer melt, increasing postsecondary persistence/retention, and increasing postsecondary credential attainment. By expanding the Regional Pathway to the Top Career and College Expo, we are increasing postsecondary awareness. Through the Expo, students will receive the information they need to choose their desired postsecondary pathway. Successful completion of financial aid applications greatly increases the likelihood a student will have the necessary resources to complete a postsecondary credential. Student participation in the Climbing Higher series will facilitate the transition between K12 and YVC, therefore decreasing the possibility of Summer Melt. Student participation in the near-peer mentorship component of the Climbing Higher series will ensure students have access to a supportive community and resources tailored to their needs, leading to an increase in persistence and completion.

