



**SHEEO**  
State Higher Education  
Executive Officers Association



## **RURAL TALENT LAB REQUEST FOR APPLICATIONS**

### **Summary of Opportunity**

The Rural Talent Development and Attraction Lab (“Rural Talent Lab”) is a multi-year initiative led by the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges (ARRC) in partnership with the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO) and HCM Strategists (HCM) that aims to improve rural higher education opportunities. Funded by a \$7,245,600 grant from Ascendium Education Group, the Rural Talent Lab will support five states in developing a Statewide Plan for Rural Talent Development and Attraction that will initially include the implementation of at least four, middle-skill credential (i.e. sub-baccalaureate) pathways in each state that are accessible, transparent, and as low-cost as possible for rural learners.

These associate-degree and undergraduate-certificate programs will be directly connected to each state’s respective rural workforce needs, as informed by multiple data-collection efforts. In addition to analyzing demographic and economic data, the Rural Talent Lab will bring participating state teams on a community listening tour to visit rural communities in their respective states for conversations with a range of stakeholders representing municipal government, economic development organizations, employers, local school districts, regional healthcare systems, and more, to better understand community assets, wants, needs, and prior successes or failures in developing and attracting talent. Additionally, the project team will be administering public-opinion surveys to rural residents in each of the selected states in order to gather similar input from rural constituents beyond the listening tour stops. Equipped with robust data, state teams will work closely with an expert adviser and attend four in-person Academy sessions over the course of the project to develop their statewide plan and implement the four initial credential pathways. State teams selected for the Rural Talent Lab will have access to up to \$100,000 in technical assistance funding, as well as \$25,000 for travel expenses, to support additional needs related to their Rural Talent Lab participation.

Rural learners will be enrolled in the initial pathways beginning in Fall 2027, with subsequent cohorts to follow. The project team will evaluate the first cohort by using state administrative data and the results of a Pathway Participant Survey administered to learners in Spring 2028. The evaluation will be presented to state teams during the final in-person Academy session for the purposes of informing the maintenance and expansion of these pathways. State teams will be periodically surveyed to help the research team understand how their perceptions of rural talent-development needs evolve over the course of the project.

The Rural Talent Lab will also include strategic dissemination and engagement activities. While the project will be limited to five participating states, the project team will also be identifying states that demonstrate emerging potential for this type of work in the near future for the purposes of scheduling site visits to Rural Talent Lab states for co-learning opportunities and readiness assessment. The project team will share highlights and outcomes with state and federal policymakers, as well as host a panel presentation and reception to engage with think-tanks, philanthropic organizations, institutional membership associations, and research firms to highlight how efforts like the Rural Talent Lab can be replicated in other states. The dissemination strategy will also include presentations at national professional and academic conferences, podcast episodes, a blog to share project insights and updates, research reports, and academic journal articles.

The Rural Talent Lab aims to serve as a new model for creating and expanding higher education opportunities in rural communities across the country, and one that allows each state to be responsive to the unique assets and needs of their respective rural populations. By directly engaging rural stakeholders in the process and building on-the-ground relationships, these opportunities will enable rural residents to live, learn, and work in the places they love for many years to come.

### **Eligibility**

Applications will be accepted from state planning teams made up of collaborative organizations with responsibility for oversight and/or coordination of public postsecondary institutions that confer associate's degrees and/or undergraduate certificates. At least one organizational partner on the team must be a named SHEEO member, although this entity is not required to formally submit the application nor take central lead on the project. Roles and responsibilities of organizational coalition members must be addressed within RFA responses.

### **Expectations for Selected States**

The five states selected to participate in the Rural Talent Lab will be expected to:

- Demonstrate a commitment to the following guiding principles:
  - *Low-income students and low-resource, rural communities deserve investment to enhance their futures, as well as the future of their state as a whole.* Strategies to serve these people and places must acknowledge the cultural, geographical, structural, financial, and policy barriers to rural talent development and attraction.
  - *Regionality and place-based focus are key features of any strategy to support rural learners and communities, even for activities that seek to support statewide economic goals.* Rural communities can vary greatly from each other, even within the same state, and these regional differences have meaningful impacts on strategies for rural talent development and attraction.
  - *Rural people, communities, and postsecondary institutions have unique assets and knowledge that can be leveraged for their own self-determination and to support long-term regional and statewide economic resilience.* We must identify and capitalize on the specific assets of rural communities and postsecondary

institutions, while also rejecting persistent deficit-based narratives regarding rural people and places.

- *Rural people should be able to live, learn, work, and earn a family wage in the rural places they love.* The solutions to challenges related to rural talent development and attraction should aim to empower rural people to stay in rural places.
- *Technology will have an important role in enhancing rural postsecondary opportunities and outcomes, but this does not reduce the need for physical campuses in rural places.* Physical campuses provide important spaces for rural learners and communities to come together, as well as serving as vital regional economic engines; but advances in technology and digital pedagogy should be intentionally leveraged to identify innovative approaches to rural talent development and attraction.
- *This work is not about moving toward the merger, consolidation, or closure of rural colleges, but rather, realistic assessments of fiscal challenges and the institutional adaptations required.* Robust, accessible, and comprehensive postsecondary institutions are a critical aspect of a rural talent development and attraction strategy that serves the holistic needs of the region and state now and for the future. In light of demographic trends, widespread enrollment declines, and a myriad of expense pressures, cost restructuring and strategic right-sizing may need to be topics of discussion.
- Develop at least four middle-skill (i.e. sub-baccalaureate) credential pathways targeted to rural workforce needs by Fall 2027 that will be sustained beyond the grant period.
  - While new program development may be feasible in some cases, it is anticipated that implemented pathways will also involve credential programs that already exist but are underutilized by, or inaccessible to, rural residents in the state.
- Attend four in-person academies.
  - State teams selected for the Rural Talent Lab will be convened to participate in four in-person Academies to promote cross-team co-learning and collaboration. These events will include expert facilitators, structured goals and deliverables, opportunities for state teams to share their successes, challenges, and lessons-learned. Each Academy will occur over two full days, not including travel time, and take place on the campus of a rural-serving institution in selected states. The date and location for the first Academy has been set, and the tentative timing of remaining Academies can be found below. Exact dates and campus locations for the last three Academies will be finalized by the first Academy in October 2025.
    - Academy #1: October 28-29, 2025, Appalachian State University
    - Academy #2: June 2026, TBD
    - Academy #3: November 2026, TBD
    - Academy #4: September 2028, TBD
- Participate in community listening tours.
  - The Rural Talent Lab's approach honors that rural residents and organizations have expertise and experience that are critical to understanding each

community's needs, assets, and opportunities. As such, one of the key data-gathering activities will include community listening tours to rural communities in each of the selected states. Each state team, accompanied by members of the project team, will travel together on chartered buses from the state capital to three to five communities (depending on the state) over the course of a business week. At each tour stop, the Rural Talent Lab team will be conducting focus groups with local and regional stakeholders from educational institutions, healthcare systems, municipal government, community organizations, and employers, to learn more about the talent-development needs, desires, opportunities, and histories, as well as build relationships in these communities. This will also give state teams the opportunity to get first-hand exposure to the realities, challenges, culture, and beauty of their rural communities, while also having time to debrief in real-time with the project team between stops.

- Community listening tours are tentatively scheduled to occur in March-April 2026. The project team hopes to share specific dates for each state by the first Academy event in October 2025.
- Complete surveys administered by the project team to understand how state teams' understanding of their state's rural talent-development needs and opportunities evolves over the course of the Rural Talent Lab. One survey will be administered following the selection of state teams, and another will be administered after pathways have been implemented.
- Selected states will host members of state teams that were not selected for the initial Rural Talent Lab project to hold site visits to share what is being learned, what challenges have arisen, and what conditions are most conducive for state readiness to engage in statewide rural talent development and attraction planning. These site visits will allow selected state teams to help other states understand their own preparedness to engage in this work.
- Ensure that selected state teams are represented at a panel presentation and reception event in Washington, D.C., in Fall 2028, to inform and engage research organizations, think-tanks, membership associations, journalists, philanthropic organizations, and others with the outcomes of the Rural Talent Lab.
- Support other dissemination efforts as appropriate (e.g., co-author op-eds, blog posts, or policy briefs; present at state or national conferences; engage with state or federal policymakers).

## How to Apply

An application is provided on the [project overview page](#) on the SHEEO website. Applications should be downloaded and responses should be typed directly into the Application.

Applications must not exceed eight (8) pages, with the criteria rubric included as a separate final page, for a total of nine (9) pages. Completed Applications should be submitted to [ruraltalentlab@gmail.com](mailto:ruraltalentlab@gmail.com) by no later than 11:59pm (EDT) on Tuesday, May 6, 2025.

Applications will address the following questions:

### *State Leadership*

- Describe how your state has provided leadership for rural postsecondary talent development, explicitly reference positions in agencies, dedicated funding, cross-agency collaborations, special commissions, budget line items, etc.
- Please provide a statement on the permanent capacity that you would like to increase over the next four years for rural postsecondary talent development.

### *Rural Opportunities*

- Which rural communities or regions in your state have the greatest opportunity to benefit from the Rural Talent Lab over the next four years and why do you want to work in those communities or regions? What do you think will be the greatest challenges for those communities or regions?
- Does your state currently have any rural-specific postsecondary initiatives in existence or being developed? Please describe how your state has the capacity to serve rural populations.
- What do you know about the perceptions that your rural communities have about postsecondary education in your state? In the communities you want to work with, specifically? How do you understand that?

### *Connections to Workforce/Industry*

- What state policies and investments are in place that you envision wanting to leverage to be able to enroll students into new and/or existing pathways?
  - Minimally speak to state-level financial aid assistance, transfer policies, credit for prior learning (CPL) policies, and ability to remove barriers and coordinate resources across K-12, postsecondary, and workforce.
- Please name your state's in-demand industries, provide evidence that they are in-demand and list the available jobs in those industries.
- Does your state have a Credentials of Value definition or policy? If so, please provide a description and/or link to this information.

### *Data*

- Please describe your state's current data capacity, data baseline, and data aspiration. Are there statewide metrics available to monitor that are disaggregated by rural communities or learners? How are those data collected and used?

- Does your state have any data and/or reports about rural communities, institutions, or learners?
- What are your aspirational goals to improve the use of data? Particularly for rural learners?
- How will your state use data to support selecting the region and institutions to scale these pathways?
- How will your state use data to track outcomes and transitions of students who participate in these pathways?
- What state and regional workforce data would be used to understand supply and demand? Rural communities and talent?
- What state and institutional data will be used to understand top priorities for pathways development and expansion?
- What cross-agency data will need to be used to support these pathways?
- What is your state and institutional capacity to collect and disaggregate non-credit course and learner information, including workforce outcomes?

#### *Partnerships*

- Improving sustainable state capacity for rural talent development is a major objective of the Rural Talent Lab. This requires collaboration across executive branch agencies and other state entities with a focus on rural workforce and economic development. Please list the positions, people, and/or entities that would be included on your state team.
- This project requires developing or expanding pathways over the next four years. Please list the positions, people, and/or entities that would be on your state team that would provide this expertise.

#### *Selection Site Visit*

- Prior to final selection, the project team will be conducting two-day site visits to the highest-scoring states for additional discussions. These visits will take place in May and June 2025. Please indicate dates in this period when your team would be available to host the project team, or alternatively, when your team is not available, should your state be selected for a site visit.

### **Selection Criteria**

Applications will be reviewed and scored by ARRC, SHEEO, and HCM staff. Scoring is based on the five Application question categories (State Leadership, Rural Opportunities, Connections to Workforce/Industry, Data, Partnerships). Reviewers will score the proposals based on the rubric below:

- 0 - No substantial demonstration
- 1 - Emerging: Newly created or minimal demonstration
- 2 - Developing: Growing and/or evolving demonstration
- 3 - Established: Advanced and/or robust demonstration

Each Application has the potential for a score of 0-15.

Category	Score (0-3)	Reviewer Notes
State Leadership		
Rural Opportunities		
Connections to Workforce/Industry		
Data		
Partnerships		
<b>TOTAL SCORE</b>		

### **Questions**

Please join us for our Rural Talent Lab Introductory Webinar on Tuesday, April 15, 2025 at 1:00pm (EDT).

If you have additional questions, please contact [ruraltalentlab@gmail.com](mailto:ruraltalentlab@gmail.com).