

Streamlining Success in Nursing Programs in Texas

Executive Summary

[Trellis Foundation](#), in partnership with [UpSkill America](#) at the Aspen Institute, is excited to announce a new opportunity designed to support innovations in nursing education and clinical training.

The initiative ultimately intends to address shortages in the nursing talent pipeline, enabling more students from low-income backgrounds to pursue and succeed in completing their academic and clinical requirements. Specifically, the initiative seeks to address hardships faced by nursing students that are created by unpaid clinical requirements.

Through this learning community, 8-10 partners will participate over three years, supported by evaluation services, technical assistance, convenings, learning activities, and funding. Organizations eligible to apply include **public and private non-profit institutions of higher education in Texas**. Institutions that are based outside of Texas but serve Texas students may also apply, but the proposed work must occur in the state and impact local students. In geographies where work is best coordinated outside of postsecondary institutions, particularly rural communities, **workforce boards** may apply as the lead.

Training organizations and non-profit community-based organizations that support nursing students and for-profit businesses and organizations are **not eligible to serve as the lead organization**, though may be involved and supported through funded projects.

The initiative focuses on two objectives, both of which must be addressed in applicants' proposals:

- 1) Enabling nursing students working in healthcare environments to earn credit toward their clinical requirements through work.
- 2) Identifying policies and practices that are restricting nursing students' ability to complete academic and clinical requirements while also holding a job (in healthcare or otherwise). This may include shifting didactic learning online, creating more flexible clinical placement schedules, development regional clinical placement and faculty recruitment systems, and other approaches.

To learn more about the learning community and activities, read on, and [register to join](#) a live webinar, April 7 (2:00 PM CT).

Contact us at TXhealthcare@aspeninstitute.org with questions and comments.

Background

In Texas, the shortage of nurses is acute, and expected to grow over the next decade. In 2022, the most recent staffing survey by the Texas Department of State Health Services' Texas Center for Nursing Workforce Studies, the vacancy rate for Registered Nurse (RN) positions was 17.6%, up from 5.9% in 2019. Licensed Vocational Nursing (LVN) roles remained open at a rate of 23.1% from up from 5.5% in 2019, and 17% of Nurse Aide (NA) roles were vacant, compared to 10.3% in 2019.

Among incumbent employees, Texas facilities experienced significant turnover, with 28.3% of RNs, 18.9% of LVNs, and 35% of Nursing Aides turning over each year.

Over the next decade, demand for nurses will [outgrow supply](#). The state projects a shortage of more than 57,000 registered nurses and more than 12,500 LVNs by 2032, with the most acute shortages in the Gulf Coast region of the state.

These shortages are the result of multiple factors:

- **Increased Student Needs** - While there are a growing cohort of nursing training programs that are designed for working learners, most programs are traditionally formatted. While the program admissions pipeline is limited by the availability of faculty and clinical placements, program completions are impacted by student financial barriers. A [third of nursing programs](#) reported that vocational nursing students exited programs due to financial or personal circumstances.
- **Limited Nursing Faculty** - All nursing programs require faculty with advanced credentials and experience. Yet, an educated and experienced nurse practitioner can make [significantly more money](#) working in industry compared to teaching.
- **Lack of Clinical Space** - To complete clinical requirements, students must work a specific number of hours in a clinical setting under the supervision of a preceptor and must demonstrate specific competencies. Finding sites and hours for clinical placements can be difficult, especially in rural areas – limited clinical sites limit the number of students who can enroll in nursing programs.
 - In 2023, nearly [20,000](#) qualified applicants to Texas nursing schools were denied entry into training programs.
 - 43 Texas [Vocational Nursing Programs](#) and 74 [Registered Nursing Programs](#) that did not offer admission to all qualified applications indicated that lack of clinical space was the greatest reason behind their decision.
- **Aging Population** - As the American population ages and their health declines, more nurses will be required to care for them. By [2050](#), the population of Texans aged 65 or older will increase by 88%, more than three million additional people and 17.9% of the total population (compared to 13.9% in 2023).
- **Aging Workforce** - [Nearly one quarter](#) of all LVNs and nearly one third of RNs in Texas are 51 years or older, and will likely retire within the next 10-15 years.

Opportunity

Trellis Foundation, in partnership with UpSkill America at the Aspen Institute, is excited to announce a new opportunity designed to support innovations in nursing education and clinical training.

Through this learning community, 8-10 partners will participate in a three-year initiative, supported by evaluation services, technical assistance, convenings, learning activities, and funding. Eligible lead organizations include

Objectives

The initiative ultimately intends to address shortages in the nursing talent pipeline, enabling more students from low-income backgrounds to pursue and succeed in completing their academic and clinical requirements. Specifically, the initiative seeks to address hardships faced by nursing students that are created by unpaid clinical requirements.

The initiative focuses on two objectives:

- 1) Enabling nursing students working in healthcare environments to earn credit toward their clinical requirements through work. The [Texas Board of Nursing Education Guideline 3.7.4](#) enables nursing students to meet clinical hours requirements through employment, based on the development of a partnership arrangement between the education provider and employer partner.
 - a. For nursing students who are already working as unlicensed personnel, the opportunity for work-based learning to apply toward clinical requirements can be beneficial in many ways: allowing students to avoid unpaid work, allowing students to remain employed at levels to retain wages and benefits, and more tightly integrating the work and learning experiences.
- 2) Identifying policies and practices that are restricting nursing students' ability to complete academic and clinical requirements while also holding a job (in healthcare or otherwise). This may include shifting didactic learning online, creating more flexible clinical placement schedules, development regional clinical placement and faculty recruitment systems, and other approaches.
 - a. These broader strategies, designed to ensure that more students can make progress through academic and clinical requirements, should result in an increased nursing talent pipeline and improved overall completions and transitions into nursing roles, especially for learners from low-income backgrounds.

Applicants must address both initiative objectives in their proposals.

Through this learning community, we hope to spur and support innovation, increased coordination, and improvement for the institutions, partners, and learning workers involved, resulting in measurable impacts in student access, success, and ability to learn and work simultaneously. We also hope to address the following learning questions:

- 1) What are the range of impacts on student access and success, and on the overall nursing talent pipeline, and what is the potential reach of those impacts, resulting from

scaled implementation of allowance of clinical hours requirements to be met through employment?

- 2) What are the specific ways in which nursing students from low-income backgrounds may be positively affected by the policy and practice change supported via this effort?
- 3) What are the regular and unique barriers to implementation of the policies and practices supported through this initiative faced by higher education institutions and employers?
- 4) What are the potentially scalable solutions to addressing those barriers across systems, including policy solutions?
- 5) What can we learn from this body of work that will inform and influence other industries, including education, and what can we learn from other industries that will hasten the scale and equitable impact of this project?

Learning Community Activities

Organizations selected to advance will participate in a variety of learning activities, including:

- **Annual convenings** hosted in Texas designed to share learning across sites and strengthen the network of people working to advance these strategies. Selected applicants should include funds for in-state travel and accommodations for up to four people to participate in three two-day convenings over the course of the project term in their grant budgets.
- **Quarterly network calls** designed to support relationship building between organizations, to gain current-state insights about projects, and to get ahead of issues that may affect success. Each network call will be 90 minutes and will be held virtually.
- **Evaluation activities**, designed to solicit and understand lessons learned, impacts created, and scalable solutions. [Higher Ed Insight](#) will support evaluation directly and will integrate all data collection into regular reporting requirements. Selected applicants do not need to support additional evaluation work in their grant budgets, though they may request funds to support data collection and/or reporting.
- **Technical Assistance** to support project goals, particularly in enabling learning gained through work to apply toward clinical requirements.
- **Annual reports** collecting project status through narrative, budget, and evaluation data. These reports will be due in July 2026, 2027, and 2028. Submission of reports and evidence of project will trigger subsequent grant payments in 2026 and 2027. The final report due in July 2028 will cover content inclusive of the entire project.

Eligible Organizations

Organizations eligible to apply include **public and private non-profit institutions of higher education in Texas**. Institutions that are based outside of Texas but serve Texas students may also apply, but the proposed work must occur in the state and impact local students. In geographies where work is best coordinated outside of postsecondary institutions, particularly rural communities, **workforce boards** may apply as the lead.

Training organizations and non-profit community-based organizations that support nursing students and for-profit businesses and organizations are **not eligible to serve as the lead organization**, though may be involved and supported through funded projects.

We are interested in partnering with organizations that serve students from low-income backgrounds, and which are seeking opportunities to better serve students in nursing career preparation programs.

We encourage organizations within the same communities to coordinate in developing and submitting responses to this opportunity. We are committed to supporting a learning community of projects across Texas and are unlikely to support multiple projects within the same community.

Criteria

Across projects, we will be seeking opportunities for geographic representation, with impact across the state of Texas, working in urban, suburban, and rural areas, and working across higher education and healthcare employer sectors.

In addition to being submitted by an eligible organization, proposals will be assessed on the following criteria:

- 1) **Alignment to Initiative Goals** – Proposals should include thoughtful and well-reasoned plans to address both initiative objectives.
 - a. So long as both objectives are addressed, there are no penalties or incentives for prioritizing one objective over the other. How the applicants advance these objectives should be determined based on their own priorities and current state. For example, institutions that have already taken steps to enable nursing students to fulfill clinical hours requirements through employment may wish to scale existing efforts and focus primarily on advancing strategies that enable more students to advance through credential pathways.
- 2) **Opportunity for Impact** – Proposals should include realistic and achievable indications of expected outcomes.
 - a. Including outsized impact goals will not positively impact an applicants' probability of receiving a grant. Applicants should share their impact goals as accurately and honestly as they can and be transparent about barriers to implementation and goal achievement.
 - i. We do not have hard and fast guidelines for the number of students that should be engaged/impacted by the project, nor the improvement in rates of change. Applicants should be realistic in their goals but work to develop solutions that support as many students as possible.
 - b. Applicants should ensure that proposals include disaggregated data about program impacts for students from low-income backgrounds and clear commitment to serving and improving outcomes for those students.
 - i. Projects may focus on specific student groups, or whole populations. For example, projects may focus on supporting students who have completed a certain number of credit hours, or who meet certain criteria

or conditions, or even students who work for a particular employer partner.

- 3) **Opportunity for Learning and Scaling** – Proposals should share compelling information and ideas that support both the initiative goals and broader learning questions. Applicants should have the capacity to support reporting on enrollment, progression, and completion outcomes.
 - a. Organizations that provide insights into how a strategy or activity could move the needle, or how a small initiative can reach scale will be competitive within this opportunity. Not every project will be successful, but it is our hope that the learning gained through this initiative will support more impactful, faster, scaled innovation in the future.
 - b. Organization should ensure that it has the staff and capacity to support initial and ongoing data reporting required for the project.
- 4) **Evidence of Support and Partnership** – Proposals should include accurate assessments and evidence of buy-in from institutional leadership and of partnership with external organizations.
 - a. The initiative intends to create measurable impact within program sites over the grant term. This will not be possible without the buy-in and support from institutional leadership, especially at the program and department level, and from external partners. No external partner should be named in this application without their knowledge and full understanding of the activities and strategies the project proposal will support.
 - i. A letter of support from nursing department leadership must be included with the application submission materials.
 - b. While new employer partnerships are very appropriate for this opportunity, applicants should include information and confirmation of the maturity and current standing of partnerships and identify any agreements that exist or need to be developed to advance project goals.
 - i. While not required, applicants may include letters of support from employers.
 - c. Given the nature of the initiative goals, we do anticipate that proposals will include partnerships with other organizations. Proposals that reflect only institutionally focused work will likely not be competitive in the program.
 - i. Prior to making final decisions, we will conduct interviews with full project teams to understand roles, partnership maturity, shared understanding, and buy-in across all partners.

Application Process

The application process will follow these stages:

- Application and Proposal
 - o Interested applicants should review the application and proposal forms and initiative overview to determine their eligibility for the opportunity.
 - o A live webinar, scheduled for **2:00 PM CT, April 7, 2025** will cover all initiative information and provide an opportunity for interested organizations to ask

questions and receive feedback in real time. [Register for the webinar here](#). This webinar will be recorded and hosted at [website].

- Applicants should complete the application and proposal form in full and submit the forms, along with all required information (listed in the application) by **5:00 PM CT, May 16, 2025** via email: TXhealthcare@aspeninstitute.org.
 - Application documents should be attached separately as PDFs, and submitted via email. The submission email should include your organization's name in the subject line using the following standard: [Institution Name] – Application Submission.
- Proposal Review
 - Once all applications and proposal submissions have been received, each application package will be reviewed for completeness. Organizations missing required documents will be notified and given a window to submit those documents.
 - We will reach out to applicants where there are specific questions, items for clarification, or needed details to complete proposal reviews.
 - Each proposal will be reviewed by at least three individuals and scored using a rubric aligned to the criteria and priorities listed above.
- Notifications
 - Regardless of status moving forward with the project, all applicants will be notified of their status via email no later than June 30, 2025.
- Grant Agreements
 - For organizations moving forward, grant agreements will be developed and shared for review and signature over the course of July 2025, with payments delivered no later than mid-August.

Timeline

- March 31 – RFP announcement and materials release
- April 7 (2:00 PM CT) – [Webinar for potential applicants](#)
- May 16 – Application and proposal forms due by 5:00 PM CT
- Week of June 2nd - Applicants contacted to schedule interviews and given prep materials
- 3rd and 4th Weeks of June - Interviews conducted with applicant and partner orgs
- June 30 – Applicants notified
- July 31 – Grant agreements signed
- August 15 – Grant payments dispersed

Funding

Eligible applicants may request funding in any amount up to \$300,000. Requesting less than \$300,000 will not increase an applicant's probability of receiving a grant. The opportunity does not require matching funds, though this funding may be used to secure matching grants and grant dollars may be complemented by additional funds from other sources.

We recognize that \$300,000 over three years will never address the systemic funding limitations in many nursing programs' budgets, but it is our hope that these resources along with the learning community activities and technical support this opportunity provides will

enable participants to accomplish their goals. The grant funds provided are **flexible**, within some boundaries noted below. Applicants can elect to allocate them in whatever way they believe best suits the initiative's goals.

Grant funds may support:

- Personnel, including existing or new salaried, hourly, or contract staff
 - o For example, grant funds may support program staff, faculty time in collaborative work with employers, consultants to support curriculum updates, and other people-driven costs.
- Programs, including project operations, required materials, subcontracts/partnership support, travel, and other program-related expenses
 - o For example, these funds may support sub-grants to community-based organizations, investments in institutional infrastructure to increase training capacity, contracts with employer partners to enable their full participation, and other program-driven costs.
- Other direct costs, including technology, communications, publications, etc.
 - o For example, funds may cover needed website development and data management efforts designed to organize clinical placements, communications to support nursing student enrollment or job placement, and other direct costs.

Boundaries for these grant funds are:

- Funding should support people, programs, and direct costs associated with the initiative – these funds are not intended for general operating support.
- Funding may not be used to support political or lobbying activities.
- Funding may not be used to support individual or institutional student scholarships or stipends.
- Overhead charges within this opportunity are capped at no more than 10% of the total grant amount.