

Strength in Numbers: Strategic Partnerships Helped Provide Better LMI

Strategic collaborations can offer many benefits to the public workforce system. Recently Jane Oates, Assistant Secretary of the Employment and Training Administration, U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), wrote that partnerships and consortia “offer a cost-effective and efficient way for states to work together to lower costs and free scarce federal dollars for other priorities.”¹ This strong support for partnership was embedded in the requirements for State Labor Market Information Improvement Grants. DOL received \$50 million to help state workforce agencies improve labor market information (LMI) on green jobs and funded 30 grantees to develop practices with the potential for broader use and impact. Applicants had to propose activities based on “robust strategic partnerships” to achieve their goals in the 18-month

Look to High Quality LMI for These Data

- ✓ Demand for jobs
- ✓ Supply of skilled workers
- ✓ Characteristics of growing and declining occupations and industries, including wages and benefits
- ✓ Training for new hires and displaced workers

grant period. This brief, based on site visits to a subset of grantees, explores the strategic choices grantees made about partnering as well as activities pursued and promising practices.

Why Partner?

Partnerships are powerful—they can use “strength in numbers” to engage with target audiences, test ideas, expand resources, and plan for the future. Grantees in our study described the following benefits of partnerships.

Advancing LMI at every stage. State workforce information departments, or “LMI shops,” drew on partners’ skills and resources to help produce, disseminate, and refine LMI. Partners can provide information that improves knowledge about labor supply, demand, and training. Partners who are also LMI data users can offer valuable feedback on how to improve LMI quality, timeliness, and relevance. Those with expertise in research or technology can suggest ways to enhance data analysis and dissemination.

Sharing investments. Partnerships can help leverage funding, solve problems, and develop solutions for common technical needs. Benefits include cost sharing for technology investments and systems modernization, integration of information for multistate labor markets, development of consistent definitions to enable cross-state comparisons, and creation of uniform, industrywide training and certification programs.

All state LMI grantees used multiple types of partnerships to achieve their goals, engaging with other agencies, educational institutions, research organizations, technology providers, and nonprofit organizations. Most state consortia subcontracted some work to outside organizations. Single-state grant-

3 Common Partnership Structures

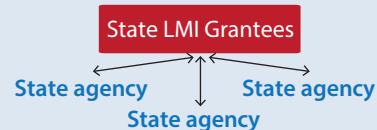
Partnerships Between States



Common goals

- Serve a regional labor market
- Serve similar target populations (such as displaced workers)
- Invest in infrastructure and new products, including advancing real-time LMI

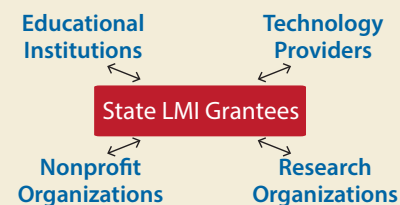
Partnerships Within a State



Common goals

- Collaboration across agencies that develop and use LMI
- Enhanced access to expertise within other state departments
- Access to broad audiences

Partnerships with Other Organizations (NGOs, Higher Ed)



Common goals

- Gain niche expertise
- Expand staff capacity
- Engage stakeholder groups
- Gain technical expertise for surveys and infrastructure improvements
- Align with needs of stakeholders
- Connect with job training programs
- Temporarily increase staff resources in the face of hiring freezes

¹ U.S. Department of Labor. “Encouraging State Partnerships and Consortia to Support the Workforce Investment System.” Training and Employment Notice, no 7-11, August 30, 2011. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, 2011.

ees coordinated efforts, such as updates to the Career Information System used by many state LMI shops, with other states conducting similar types of work.

Services Partners Offer

Grantees used partnerships to pursue many activities, including:

- **Advisement/consulting.** Partners provided expertise in survey design, data collection, and economic analysis and advised on specific products and activities.
- **Data collection.** Employer surveys, as well as interviews and focus groups with stakeholders, were common activities. Partners helped draw representative survey samples, develop questionnaires, conduct surveys, and create green-jobs estimates. Many drew on their networks to recruit focus group and interview participants.
- **Data analysis.** Outside organizations such as research universities enhanced grantees' abilities to complete in-depth analyses. These partners provided technical expertise—such as economic forecasting. They also had broad access to staff and technical resources, such as academic libraries.
- **Dissemination.** Partners helped disseminate products using print and web-based resources. They also hosted web pages outside of state websites, published grant work, planned conferences, and recruited attendees through their existing networks and lists.
- **Software/technical support.** Some partners developed software or web portals and provided technical support for their use.
- **Grant management.** Some consortia selected states with more nimble procurement systems to serve as the grant's fiscal entity. Others used partners' project management expertise to handle workflows.

Ingredients of Success

Our study suggests the following are promising practices for partnerships.

Involve partners early to set goals. Collaboration at the start ripples throughout the life of the grant. Identifying potential partners and assessing their needs at the application stage allows potential grantees and partners to discover complementary interests, key stakeholders, and gaps to be filled through agreements or activities. Early engagement enables partners to establish collaborations that meet everyone's needs and facilitate management.

Seek additional partners as goals evolve. Creating partnerships is an iterative process: partners can shape grant goals, and vice versa. It is important to keep goals and partnerships aligned throughout the grant. Grantees should expect to add partners as activities are implemented. Some grantees brought on additional partners, such as software developers or economic researchers, to produce specific products. Others engaged new partners to obtain feedback on products.

Manage work and track progress collaboratively. Grantees used structured activities to manage work, track progress, and engage partners across activities. To facilitate collaboration, grantees used regular meetings and collaboration tools such as SharePoint. Others implemented metrics to measure progress against goals, identify potential challenges, and engage partners early in addressing them.

Leverage relationships. Prior relationships are an opportunity to form partnerships quickly. Assessing a potential partner's goals can clarify whether it makes sense to build on an existing relationship. Strengths and gaps can be identified quickly, and existing trust can ease the process. In some cases, prior relationships alleviate administrative burdens because written agreements are already in place.

Coordinate with other grants or programs. Other grants can facilitate partnerships. The State Energy Sector Partnership

(SESP) grants awarded to states around the same time as the LMI grants required grantees to develop green training programs. Some SESP grantees and LMI grantees used the LMI grant to determine what types of training programs were needed and used the SESP grant to create them.

Move operations forward. Adapting processes to ease administrative burden can reduce management challenges. Some grantees used standardized memoranda of understanding to establish partnerships with outside organizations quickly. Others created fiscal organizations to simplify the procurement process or factored member states' fiscal systems into financial coordination. Selecting a state with a nimble procurement system to serve as the fiscal entity promoted interstate cooperation by reducing start-up time and enabling funds to be shifted easily among organizations.

Plan for the future. The state LMI grant offered an opportunity to create lasting partnerships and facilitate future work. Some partnerships resulted in formal structures, such as a fiscal entity that would persist for future grants. Some informal partnerships facilitated intrastate collaboration to inform future work.

Utilize networks. Grantees drew on their partners' networks to expand input and facilitate dissemination. Considering partner networks when planning data collection and dissemination activities can help reach intended audiences. Partners distributed completed products through their email lists and sponsored conferences attended by stakeholders.

What Have We Learned?

State LMI grantees' experiences provide valuable lessons for developing future partnerships. State workforce agencies can use this information as a foundation on which to build and implement effective partnerships with the potential for regional, multistate, or national impact.

Read more about Mathematica's study at www.mathematica-mpr.com/labor/green_jobs_economic_growth.asp.