



Overview

Rural communities across the country are unlocking stronger talent pipelines by strengthening the alignment between education, workforce and employer partners.

Without a clear strategy, students invest time and money into credentials that don't clearly lead to good jobs, employers struggle to find qualified workers and chambers are left managing workforce shortages, stalled growth and missed opportunity.

To bridge this gap, chambers of commerce can step forward to support education and workforce systems. Chambers can bring industry partners to the table with firsthand knowledge of current and emerging workforce demands. This can ensure that educational programs remain relevant and aligned with real-world job opportunities.

When chambers and employers actively participate in shaping programs and curricula, they help create pathways that equip learners with the skills and credentials local economies require, thereby increasing the likelihood of meaningful employment upon graduation.

In partnership with ECMC Foundation, the ACCE Foundation (ACCEF) is launching the Rural Postsecondary Attainment & Ecosystem Alignment Program to support chambers of commerce in leading cross-sector efforts to improve postsecondary completion and strengthen local talent pipelines.

Application Materials

[Application Template \(Microsoft Word\)](#)

Submission Deadline

To apply for the cohort, please complete the application template provided above. Applications should be sent as an email attachment to foundation@acce.org no later than 5:00 pm ET on Friday, May 15, 2026.

Program Specifics

This is a cohort-based initiative designed to help rural and rural-serving chambers strengthen collaboration across their local education and workforce ecosystem. As part of the cohort, chambers will receive a \$15,000 subgrant, individual and group technical assistance, and resources to lead a structured process in their community to develop a shared local vision for postsecondary ecosystem change.

Participating chambers will facilitate 5 - 8 local stakeholder sessions, with coaching from ACCEF and program partners, to take stakeholders through key phases of the community visioning process:

- Understanding local education and workforce data
- Identifying barriers to postsecondary completion
- Mapping existing programs, partnerships, and resources
- Clarifying a shared vision for improving outcomes
- Developing a Community Action Plan with clear next steps

Key milestones for the program are outlined below:

- **July 2026:** Cohort kickoff convening; chambers begin receiving technical assistance and preparing for local engagement
- **August 2026:** Chambers prepare to distribute an initial Relationship Assessment to collect baseline data on the effectiveness of existing partnerships.
- **September 2026:** Chambers host first community stakeholder session
- **December 2026:** Chambers participate in group webinar to discuss mapping existing resources and identifying gaps.
- **February 2027:** Mid-project evaluation, where chambers measure progress against goals and discuss needs for support
- **June 2027:** Chambers share executive summary of Community Action Plans with cohort and with local community stakeholders in a final session

FAQs

- **What do you mean by rural communities?** Since there are multiple definitions of what is considered rural, ACCEF used US Census Bureau population maps and definitions in scoping this work. The application allows chambers to discuss how you define the rural area(s) that you serve.
- **What chambers are eligible to apply?** We are accepting applications from chambers that are in rural areas and those that serve rural areas. For example, if your chamber is located in a town of 30,000 people but serves a surrounding rural area, you would be eligible to apply for this cohort provided that your work focuses on that surrounding rural area.
- **How much time should I expect to spend on this program?** Selected participants should plan to dedicate at least 5 – 10 hours a month to activities related to this work. This includes cohort meetings, technical assistance sessions, community stakeholder meetings, project planning and more. For more details on the expectations for participating, please see Question 7 of the application.