

Tech Talent Accelerator 3.0
Innovation Grant - Request for Proposals

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Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) has accelerated innovation in workplaces across industries around the United States. In Connecticut, demand for AI skills is rising. Since February 2025, over 13,100 job postings have required AI skills – a 56% increase from the year prior. Today, 1 in 27 jobs in the state list AI skill requirements, up from 1 in 70 two years ago. The demand is even stronger in roles requiring an associate or bachelor’s degree, where 1 in 22 jobs now call for AI expertise, spanning nearly every industry and occupation (BHEF analysis of Lightcast Job Postings). Current and future workers in Connecticut must be equipped with the necessary skills to thrive in an AI-driven world. To meet the burgeoning demand for AI-skilled talent and keep Connecticut’s workforce competitive, the state must deploy its entire workforce ecosystem, including its higher education institutions, comprised of community colleges, four-year public and independent colleges and universities, in addition to engaging the K-12 system. Each sector and institution, public and private, has a critical role to play in preparing learners for the workplace, and in reskilling and upskilling incumbent workers and those currently out of the labor force.

Since 2022, Business-Higher Education Forum (BHEF) and The New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE) have worked with the Connecticut Office of Workforce Strategy (OWS) to direct a higher education innovation challenge: **the Connecticut Tech Talent Accelerator (TTA)**. Through two grant periods (TTA 1.0 and TTA 2.0), TTA has built higher education-business partnerships to modernize curricula, deliver short-term credentials that offer targeted training in essential tech skills, and increase the supply of skilled tech talent for Connecticut’s employers.

The third phase of TTA (“TTA 3.0”) launched in 2025 and is focused on providing postsecondary learners and workers with essential skills in AI. A Pilot Grant cohort was selected in January 2026 to discover how **current** business-higher education collaborations, established through the first two rounds of the challenge, can effectively update existing curricula, courses, credentials and programs with industry-driven AI skills. The [seven partnerships](#) serve learners preparing for careers in engineering, manufacturing, healthcare, business, and cybersecurity through a mix of credit-bearing courses, non-credit microcredentials, and work-based learning experiences. To learn early insights from this cohort, [click here](#).

This RFP introduces the Innovation Grant phase, which will support business-higher education collaborations that introduce **new** partnerships and pathways to AI-enabled jobs in CT. While the Pilot Grant phase focuses on institutional capacity by embedding AI competencies into existing academic and training offerings, the Innovation Grant phase will expand the state’s offerings to match an economy increasingly impacted by AI skills, tools and jobs. This phase encourages innovation in delivery models, including work-based learning, short-term, stackable credentials, dual enrollment opportunities and/or accelerated pathways for learners and workers.

The Innovation Grant period will run from **September 1, 2026 to August 31, 2027**. The due date for applications is **June 12, 2026**.

Program Priorities & Objectives

TTA 3.0 aims to increase the number of learners and workers with AI skills and credentials across industries, disciplines, and career stages by accelerating AI program development at Connecticut's public and independent higher education institutions. Four priorities for business-higher education collaborations guide the implementation of TTA:

- **Priority Area 1: Reskilling/Upskilling the Tech Workforce for AI Competencies**
Create, *short-term postsecondary programs* focused on reskilling and upskilling those currently employed within industries that have a high demand for AI competencies.
- **Priority Area 2: Aligning Postsecondary Programs with Industry AI Needs**
Develop new curriculum, courses, concentrations or degrees that advance the attainment of industry-recognized AI credentials and/or industry-validated AI knowledge, skills and abilities in *postsecondary degree pathways*.
- **Priority Area 3: Creating Pathways to AI Skills Development for Secondary Students**
Develop and enroll students in *credit-bearing* dual enrollment pathways or short-term secondary programs aimed at preparing secondary students with AI skills – with transferability to postsecondary programs.
- **Priority Area 4: Expanding Innovative Work-Based Learning Models**
Design AI-focused Work-Based Learning (WBL) models to provide learners with the opportunity to apply academic learning to the workplace and develop durable, professional skills.

The Innovation Grant provides institutions with the time, resources, and technical assistance needed to design and launch new AI programs and pathways aligned with industry demand in one or more of these priority areas.

Institutions are at varying stages of AI implementation with differing institutional strategic priorities, governance, and guidelines. Therefore, innovation is defined relative to each institution. Applicants are not necessarily required to propose a program that is new to the broader market but rather are encouraged to propose an initiative that represents meaningful advancement within their own institution or department, aligned to labor force needs.

The year-long grant period builds on lessons from the Pilot cohort and provides deeper support in program design, industry partnership development, and scale. Partnerships and proposed projects may be focused on technical or domain-specific AI skills that target new AI jobs or essential AI skills that appear in jobs augmented by AI.

The following **examples** demonstrate the types of initiatives that may be supported through the Innovation Grant:

- **Employer-driven AI upskilling:** Partner with a regional manufacturer to co-develop a short, non-credit AI upskilling program for engineers focused on practical applications such as predictive maintenance, production optimization, or data analysis using real operational scenarios.
- **Stackable credential with industry certification:** Collaborate with regional employers to develop a credit-bearing certificate in AI for Cybersecurity Professionals that embeds an industry-recognized credential (e.g., the CompTIA SEC AI+ certification), enabling learners to build applied AI skills for security contexts while earning both academic credit and a leading-edge cybersecurity credential.
- **Experiential learning through industry-aligned coursework:** Partner with a technology company to design a new sequence of credit-bearing courses that integrate real-world AI-enabled projects across multiple classes. Students work with company mentors, use real or simulated company datasets, and apply AI tools to solve authentic industry challenges throughout the program. The business partner then hires 5 students into their summer internship program.

Applicants are free to propose additional topics or projects for consideration. A successful Innovation Grant project will launch a new AI program or learning pathway co-designed with industry partners that equips learners and workers with in-demand, industry-validated AI skills. Grantees will collaborate closely with employers to define competencies, select tools, integrate experiential learning, and create clear pathways to quality jobs, with learners enrolled during the grant period.

Technical Assistance

As part of TTA 3.0, postsecondary institutions have access to the combined expertise of BHEF and NEBHE. During the proposal development process and during the grant period, applicants and grantees may contact BHEF and NEBHE for assistance that includes:

- Access to regional labor market data including metrics on job openings, in-demand AI skills and hiring demand, top employers, and required credentials.
- Access to the preliminary Connecticut AI Skills Model for proposal crafting purposes and industry alignment.
- Assistance in identifying prospective business partners and industry subject matter expert (SMEs), leveraging the state's Regional Sector Partnerships for partnership and proposal development.
- Access to experts in Connecticut and around the United States to better understand AI knowledge and skill requirements, in-demand industry recognized credentials, or training for faculty or learners.
- Information on curriculum mapping tools, models, and case studies.
- Project promotion and amplification via social media, press and events.
- General feedback on proposal concepts.

Grantees will also participate in a Community of Practice that meets regularly to share best practices, hear from national experts and learn from their peers.

Eligibility

We invite Connecticut-based 2- and 4-year independent and public postsecondary institutions to apply for TTA 3.0 Innovation Grants.

Available Funds

- **Total funds available:** \$1.1 Million
- **Number of awards:** Expected minimum of 15 and maximum of 24
- **Award range:** Applicants can request up to \$75,000 per Innovation Grant project

Fund Use

Awarded Innovation Grant funds can be used for:

- Faculty and/or staff stipends to create curricula and instructional materials related to programs, courses, curricula, support resources, credentials, and certificates.
- Course, credential or certificate implementation costs, including funds to offset fees for students related to Industry-Recognized Credential (IRC) assessments.
- Internal and external convenings with employers or other partners to support program planning and implementation.
- Support for faculty or staff to attend professional development related to the proposed project.
- Qualified consultants.
- Course or program marketing.
- Project staff travel.
- Other costs related to grant planning, credential development and implementation.
- Student compensation for their participation in WBL experiences (note: any student compensation must be matched at least 1:1 by a business partner).
- Costs associated with utilizing experiential learning platforms (e.g. Riipen, Parker Dewey, etc.).

Applicants are permitted to request funds for program activities not explicitly stated in the current document. Applicants must have a clear purpose and strong justification for their alternative activities.

Indirect costs are not allowed. Grantees may not commence grant activities until the receipt of a grant award letter and the completion of a grant agreement.

If relevant, applicants may consider the [Connecticut AI Alliance's AI Computing Access Program](#) as a complementary opportunity to the TTA 3.0 Innovation Grant.

Grant Timeline

- 04/13/2026 – RFP released
- 04/17/2026 – Informational webinar, [register here](#)
- 04/24/2026 – Informational webinar, [register here](#)
- 04/24/2026 – FAQ and webinar recording published on the TTA website
- 06/12/2026 – Proposals due by 11:59pm
- 08/07/2026 – Grantees selected, notification of awards
- 09/01/2026 – Grant period begins
- 08/31/27 – Grant period ends

Award Criteria

Innovation Grants will be awarded on a competitive basis. Successful grant proposals will include adequate consideration of the following:

- How the proposed project aligns with at least one of the four priority areas of the TTA 3.0 initiative.
- Current labor market data demonstrating demand for, and future relevance of, the proposed certificate, credential, course, or programmatic innovation to AI skills needs in Connecticut.
- Current or future hiring and skill needs of the business partner.
- How a TTA 3.0 grant will catalyze the creation of a new AI skills-focused initiative, program or partnership.
- A strong commitment from at least one business partner that has a presence in Connecticut, such as provision of subject-matter expertise to inform curriculum development, hiring commitments, WBL opportunities, or other partnership activities represented through a letter of support. (Note: letters of support from business associations, chambers of commerce or workforce boards do not fit this criterium.)
- Evidence of how the proposed course, credential, certificate, or program activity connects to further postsecondary programs or credentials, supports stackability, transfer of credits, and/or clearly aligned degree pathways.
- Ability to leverage other federal, state, institutional or other support to sustain the program or partnership.
- Ability to complete proposed project and begin instructing learners before the end of the grant period.
- Clear statement of expected outcomes and impacts, including how they will be measured.

For those programs incorporating WBL into their proposal, they will be considered on the items above, as well as:

- A thorough description of the WBL learning model (e.g. project-based learning, micro-internship, co-op, etc.), how it blends learning with work experience and how partners

will ensure a high-quality experience for learners.

- The AI knowledge and skills that learners will gain through WBL that they would not receive through classroom learning alone.
- Commitment of pay, credit or coverage of other expenses that typically prevent learners from participating in WBL. For paid activities, business partners must provide at least a 1:1 wage match.

Proposal Scoring

Proposals will be scored out of 100 points in the following domains:

- Proposal Overview and Priority Alignment
- Business Use Case and Employer Demand
- Capacity and Sustainability
- Timeline, Milestones, & Metrics
- Budget and Compliance

To promote collaborative innovation between local businesses and higher education institutions, up to **10 bonus points** will be awarded for proposals that include **Priority Area 4: Expanding Innovative Work-Based Learning Models**.

Evaluation Guidance

Utilize the following evaluation guidance to assist you in composing your proposal.

Proposal Level	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
Features and Criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clearly meets one or more of the priority areas/objectives (align with language in the other categories). Presents a compelling, highly coherent, and fully aligned vision for an AI-focused program or pathway that directly responds to Connecticut’s labor market needs and/or business partner hiring and skill needs using strong, recent evidence. Clearly demonstrates meaningful innovation for the institution. Articulates a detailed and feasible program model. Includes a well-defined learner pathway that supports stackability, transfer, and/or credential attainment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offers a solid, well-structured idea grounded in some labor market evidence and/or business partner hiring and skills needs and generally aligned with TTA 3.0 priorities. Innovation for the institution is evident though less strongly articulated. The program model is mostly clear. A learner pathway with stackability, transfer, and/or credential attainment components is present but may lack detail. Includes at least one employer partner with a clear but moderately detailed role and a letter of support that reflects genuine but 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Presents a basic idea that has potential but lacks specificity, evidence, or clarity in several areas. Shows some alignment with TTA 3.0 objectives but requires significant refinement to demonstrate readiness for implementation. Labor market demand and/or business partner hiring and skills needs are referenced generally without strong data or justification. Project’s innovation relative to the institution is either underdeveloped or unclear. Employer partnership is tentative or high-level with limited commitment or details on roles; generic letter of support. Program structure, learner pathway, and stackability components are loosely defined. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proposal does not reflect readiness, alignment, or capacity to execute the project. Provides little to no evidence of labor market or business partner relevance. Program model is incoherent and/or lacks feasibility. Meaningful innovation for the institution is not articulated. Employer partnerships are missing or nominal with no substantive commitments; letter of support does not illustrate a strong partnership between institution and business. Key components such as pathways, stackability, and program structural components are unclear, missing, or misaligned with grant goals. Timeline and sustainability plan are missing, incomplete, or unfeasible.

- Features a deeply engaged Connecticut employer partner with concrete commitments (such as codesigning curriculum, hosting WBL, hiring, or providing SMEs) supported by at least one detailed Letter of Support (LOS).
- Presents a realistic project timeline.
- Demonstrates exceptional institutional capacity and a credible, detailed sustainability strategy
- Demonstrates ability to enroll learners during the grant period.
- Has measurable outcomes aligned with industry needs.
- The proposed WBL component offers paid, credit-bearing opportunities for learners where they can learn durable, industry-relevant skills that are not readily accessible within a traditional classroom setting.

- not fully developed commitment.
- Presents a feasible timeline.
 - Presents adequate institutional capacity and a sustainability plan that is present though less comprehensive.
 - Demonstrates institutional ability to enroll learners during the grant period.
 - Outcomes and metrics are included but lack specificity.
 - WBL elements are described clearly but may not fully integrate quality indicators or alignment with curriculum.

- Timeline and/or sustainability plan may appear unrealistic or incomplete.
- Program is unlikely to enroll learners during the grant period.
- Project outcomes are broad and not readily measurable.
- WBL is described conceptually rather than concretely with little mention of quality indicators or curriculum alignment.

- Project outcomes are vague or absent.
- WBL is not student-centered and/or does not define roles and responsibilities.
- Required documentation (e.g., letters or support, completed budget sheet) is incomplete or noncompliant.

Resources to Consider in Developing a Proposal

The following resources provide relevant information that can inform the development of successful proposals:

- [CT AI Skills Model: Landscape Analysis](#)
- [WIL Resource Hub](#)
- [Pilot Grant Blog Post: Early Signals from a Regional Talent Ecosystem](#)
- [The Connecticut Tech Talent Accelerator: Partnerships Closing the Tech Skills Gap](#)
- [Expanding Internships: Harnessing Employer Insights to Boost Opportunity and Enhance Learning](#)
- [Regional Partnerships: Creating Highly Tailored Educational and Work-based Learning Opportunities In Communities](#)
- [Blurring Lines: How Business and Technology Skills are Merging to Create High Opportunity Hybrid Jobs](#)
- [The New Foundational Skills of the Digital Economy: Developing Professionals of the Future](#)
- [The Digital Talent Forecast: Mapping the Evolving Role of Digital Skills in a Dynamic Labor Market](#)
- [CSCU Transfer Navigator - CT Guarantee](#)
- [The WPI Playbook: How Business-Education Partnerships Prepare Tomorrow's Talent](#)
- [Forging Partnerships to Align Education and Industry for the Workforce of Tomorrow](#)

Labor Market Information on AI Skills and Industry Transformation

- **AI Workforce Consortium**, [ICT in Motion: The Next Wave of AI Integration \(2025\)](#)
- **Microsoft**, [Working with AI: Measuring the Occupational Implications of Generative AI](#)
- **Lightcast**, [Beyond the Buzz](#)
- **Stanford**, [Artificial Intelligence AI Index Report 2025](#)
- **PwC**, [The Fearless Future: 2025 Global AI Jobs Barometer](#)
- **World Economic Forum**, [The Future of Jobs Report 2025](#)

Please email the TTA team with any questions about the RFP or applications at techtalentaccelerator@bhef.com.