TEXAS HIGHER EDUCATION FOUNDATION
SUPPORTING 60x30TX – A TEXAS-BOLD PLAN FOR A TEXAS-BOLD FUTURE

REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS

EVALUATION OF HOUSTON REGION COMPLETION INITIATIVE

ABOUT THIS REQUEST

The Texas Higher Education Foundation and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board seek an external evaluator to provide timely and comprehensive formative and summative information on all aspects of this regional initiative. A full description of the evaluation needed is provided here to inform proposal content in response to this request for proposal (RFP).

There will be only one award based on this RFP process. Subcontracts are acceptable and must be identified in the proposal. The maximum award will be approximately $50,000. Applicants may be a private or public organization, or an independent evaluator with experience in program evaluation and appropriate qualitative and quantitative research methods. In this document, references to "the initiative" describe the THECB-led regional completion initiative. References to "the project" describe the needed evaluation.

TEXAS HIGHER EDUCATION FOUNDATION

The Texas Higher Education Foundation is the official nonprofit partner of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. Through our work, the Foundation strives to lead and inspire support to meet the higher education and workforce needs of our state's students, businesses, and communities. Our work focuses on raising funds, building partnerships, and implementing strategies that support the state's higher education priorities.

TEXAS HIGHER EDUCATION COORDINATING BOARD

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) was created by the Texas Legislature in 1965 to represent the highest authority in the state in matters of public higher education. The mission of THECB is to provide leadership and coordination for Texas higher education and to promote access, affordability, quality, success, and cost efficiency through 60x30TX, resulting in a globally competitive workforce that positions Texas as an international leader.

INITIATIVE TO BE EVALUATED

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) has led efforts to re-engage, re-enroll, and complete students who stopped out of college with some college but no credential (SCNC).[1] SCNC is conceptualized as any public higher education student who has not earned a credential and has stopped out for at least one full-length semester. The agency is launching a regional approach to supporting institutions as they support returning adult students, starting in Houston. The metropolitan region of Houston provides fertile ground for testing and refining strategies to complete the SCNC population because: (1) prior to COVID-19, it was one of the fastest growing economic regions in the nation (Douglas 2019, BLS 2020), (2) it is home to a large and economically, racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse population, and (3) it is home to a large and diverse number of higher education institutions as well as robust business partnerships. The experiences of the Houston partnership will inform a statewide strategy.

The THECB began partnering with a local non-profit in March 2020 to facilitate program partnerships with institutions (IHEs) and advise on program design elements. The goals of this initiative are to (1) re-engage non-completers and remove barriers to their achievement of relevant, high-value credentials, in order to improve their own and their region's economic outcomes, (2) create new and redesigned systems to sustain engagement of non-completers, and (3) to inform future initiatives. Our ambitious, aspirational aim for this work is that by the end of 2021, ten percent of Houston-area adults with some college will have earned a credential of value. Details about this initiative are in Appendix A.

SCOPE OF WORK FOR EVALUATION

The purpose of this evaluation is to provide comprehensive formative and summative information on all aspects of the initiative that is both timely and instructive. This evaluation will ultimately inform a primer on how to replicate this initiative in other regions of Texas. The scope of work speaks to overarching research questions. First, what constitutes effective outreach for re-engaging and re-enrolling stopped out students? This will include monitoring the conversion rate from outreach to enrollment, and enrollment in subsequent academic terms. Student-level data to inform this research question will be provided to THECB each semester by institutions (see "grantee data" in Appendix B). THECB administrative data will also be a resource for baseline and follow-up. Second, what processes informed and influenced successful re-engagement and re-enrollment? This will include qualitative as well as quantitative analyses. Critical to the utility of this evaluation will be timely results that will inform any shifts needed to improve program design or implementation.

Research Question 1. What constitutes effective outreach for re-engaging and re-enrolling stopped out students?

    a. Who are the state and partner institutions trying to reach / contact through their marketing and communications efforts? What methods have they used to identify different populations?

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[1] The national narrative around SCNC has been focused on "some college, no degree," driven by the available self-reported Census data. The Census American Community Survey (ACS) includes a question on educational attainment; anyone who responds they have earned college credits, but not an associate's degree or higher is reported as "some college no degree."

b. How are the state and partner institutions connecting with target populations, i.e., direct outreach, mass marketing, various partnerships?

c. What are the state and partner institutions saying to identified adults, and what language and framing are being used in marketing and communications materials, i.e., financial aid, scheduling, career impact, barriers and motivations, personal connections?

d. What was the efficacy of the marketing campaign? For example, did the marketing campaign generate direct responses among SCNC? Did those direct responses lead to enrollment in and completion of a credential of value? What was the return on investment for marketing?

Research Question 2. What processes informed and influenced successful re-engagement and re-enrollment?

a. What supports are the state and partner institutions offering to help sustain interest and drive enrollment after potential students have received initial communications?

b. How are the state and partner institutions preparing to support and continue all the above activities?

The evaluation for the initiative will include the design and execution of formative and summative methods to determine the efficacy of program elements, including the phased implementation of the initiative. Quantitative analysis may make use of appropriate THECB data and marketing analytics. Qualitative analysis may make use of interviews, focus groups, surveys, or other methods deemed appropriate and reasonable. Data to inform quantitative analyses will be provided by THECB; data to inform qualitative analyses will be collected by the evaluator. The entirety of the evaluation must operate with a social justice framework to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion layered on an improvement science framework.[2] Appendix B provides detailed information on the above research questions, including data and information sources, the formative and summative aspects of each question, and how they are related to the key components in the next section.

KEY COMPONENTS TO THE EVALUATION

The key measurement components to this evaluation will determine if any change is an improvement. All proposals must address these key measurements with an improvement science framework. Data to inform these measures will be based largely on data collection designed in partnership with the selected evaluator.

1. **Outcome Measure(s):** The *60x30TX* goal for an educated population tracks the percent of the adult population holding a credential of value (certificate level 1 or 2, or an associate's degree or above). In alignment with that overarching goal, success will be measured in the Houston region by:

    a) number of SCNC who complete a credential of value, by credential level;

    b) percent of adult population holding a credential of value.

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[2] THECB borrows from both the Institute for Healthcare Improvement and the Carnegie Foundation to guide thinking on improvement science.

2. **Process Measures:** These measures inform whether parts or steps in the system are performing as planned to affect the outcome measures. Examples include outreach to SCNC population in the Houston MSA, recommended changes to policies and practices, and recommended innovations to financial aid. Process measures may also include quantifiable measures, such as the number of students who respond to outreach materials, and the number of financial aid applications.

3. **Balancing Measures:** Balancing measures indicate if any parts or steps in the initiative are introducing problems elsewhere. Potential negative consequences of stakeholder efforts throughout the duration of the initiative require diligent monitoring, with attention to: (1) amount of student loan borrowing, and amount of student borrowing relative to students in similar programs and with similar credentials, (2) post-completion wage data, and (3) disaggregating outcomes, process (where possible), and balancing measures by demographics, i.e., age, degree, race/ethnicity, sex, and Pell status.

4. **Analysis of Marketing Campaign and Outreach Efforts.** Identify appropriate marketing [evaluation methods]. Methods must be established early in the initiative to ensure preferred measures are collected and necessary measurement techniques (i.e., automated data analytics) are in place before the marketing campaign begins. Outreach efforts are to be determined and may include a traditional marketing and a social media campaign.

DELIVERABLES FOR THE EVALUATION

Key expectations for this evaluation. Applicants are welcome to include additional deliverables appropriate to their proposed methodologies. See the timeline in Appendix A for comparison. The evaluation will begin upon execution and persist for the life of the initiative, which is anticipated to be 18 months. Student-level data will be accessed on site at the THECB in Austin; remote access is not available at this time.

- Any data collection tools and protocols.
- Data analyses and methodologies that address initiative design and key components.
- Intermediate reporting for a practitioner audience to ensure timely initiative information and improvements to implementation. Intervals to be based on marketing and outreach and should include Phase I and II (see Appendix A for phases and timeline). This may include but is not limited to regularly scheduled meetings with THECB staff. Key components to include samples of effective marketing messages, process maps, effective institutional policies, inventory of practices/strategies used, and an appraisal of what was useful/not useful in re-engaging, re-enrolling, and completing returning adult students.
- Written final report, due December 2021, to include a cumulative review of key components from Phase 1 and Phase 2.
- Prospective toolkit, i.e., recommendations for scaling initiative to other regions and statewide, including plan for sustainability of evidence-based practices, based on lessons learned about key components from written final report.

THECB responsibilities to ensure evaluation needs are met.
- THECB staff will collaborate on data analysis and the development of any data collection tools.

- THECB staff will review and approve data collection tools, data analysis, and reports.
- Key THECB, IHE, and non-profit partners leading/collaborating with evaluator on toolkit.

CRITERIA FOR SOLICITATION AND CONTRACT AWARD

The Foundation and THECB will review proposals based upon the evaluation criteria listed below. Formal proposals should be no more than 20 pages. The deadline for these proposals is close of business on Friday, November 6, 2020.

Qualifications of Evaluation Personnel
List all personnel that will work on the project, briefly describe the qualifications, including relevant education, evaluation experience, and experience with the types of evaluation and research listed below. Identify principal investigator and co-investigator(s), and the amount of time each will devote to the evaluation. As supplementary information, one-page curriculum vitae for key personnel.
Prior Experience with the following:
1. Analysis of outreach / marketing campaign that include different treatments 2. Process evaluation 3. Analysis of website data analytics 4. Analysis of education outcomes 5. Data collection tools and protocols
Quality of Writing Samples
Include a maximum of two writing sample(s) from an analysis of a survey project, program evaluation, or other related research by key personnel. At least one of the writing samples should be accessible to a non-research audience such as decision makers.
Quality of Management Plan
Describe how your evaluation tasks will be implemented and how they will be managed. The Management Plan should not exceed four pages in length. The narrative, at a minimum, must address the following: 1. Describe how the evaluation tasks will be managed, explain how these tasks clearly meet the key components and deliverables of the evaluation, 2. An evaluation timeline considering activities and timeline of the initiative (see Appendix A), 3. The extent to which the time commitments of the principal investigator and other key personnel are appropriate and adequate to meet the evaluation objectives, 4. A reasonable budget, 5. Strategies for communicating with the Foundation and THECB staff, and 6. Recommendations for sustainability of the analyses performed as part of the evaluation, along with future analyses recommended as the initiative is scaled.

APPENDIX A. DETAILS ABOUT THE HOUSTON REGION COMPLETION INITIATIVE

WHAT ARE WE TRYING TO ACCOMPLISH?

Problem statement. Nearly one million residents in the Gulf Coast region aged 25 years or older started college but never received a degree.[3] Both these individuals and the local and state workforce are missing an opportunity to benefit from the greater skills and wages afforded by credentials of value. People with college degrees have higher wages, are less likely to be unemployed, are more likely to possess skills that are in demand, and are poised to adapt to changes in the labor market relative to non-completers (Trostel 2014; Chamorro-Premuzic and Frankiewicz 2019).

Intent statement. This partnership intends to re-engage non-completers and remove barriers to their achievement of relevant, high-value credentials, in order to improve their own and their region's economic outcomes, create new and redesigned systems to sustain engagement of non-completers, and to inform future initiatives. The experiences of the Houston partnership will inform a statewide strategy.

Aspirational aim statement. By the end of 2021, 9,000 Houston-area adults with some college will have earned a credential of value.[4]

MAJOR DESIGN COMPONENTS

THECB staff strive to design a program that will succeed and endure. The working title for this initiative is Grad TX 2.0; this may help orient proposals given THECB's ten-year history to re-engage, re-enroll, and complete students who stopped out of college with some college but no credential (SCNC to re-engage, re-enroll, and complete students who stopped out of college as SCNC.

1. **Regional, student-centered approach**. A regional approach recognizes and values both the variation and the needs of populations and industries by region. Key components to this student-centered approach include matching students to institutions based on the personal, educational, and employment needs of individual adult learners via a central intake / portal. This intake system will capture the individual history for each returning adult learner, i.e., employment needs, academic history, financial need, support needs, etc. The essential components of a central intake will be determined by starting with a minimally viable product (MVP) this fall. This student-centered approach will also include institution review of institution policies and practices that require change to meet returning adult students where they are, including admissions, financial aid and incentives, credit acceptance, transfer policies, flexible scheduling, and individualized student supports. This may take the form of a self-review, where institutions assess their own policies, or it may be a collaborative effort across regional institutions.

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[3] Approximately 930,000 identified using 5-year American Community Survey (ACS) Census data for 2018 for counties in the Gulf Coast, Higher Education Region 6. Data were not available for all Region 6 counties using ACS 1-year data. Data for ages 18 to 24 years are not included because "some college" is not separated from "associate degrees" for that age group in the online data reports.

[4] The data for 2021 will use five-year ACS Census data collected January 1, 2016 through December 31, 2021. These data will be available in 2022.

2. **Regional marketing campaign**. Engage a professional communications firm(s) to design and implement a regional marketing campaign to recruit SCNC adults to return to higher education through the central portal and MVP. The Foundation anticipates securing these professional services by August 2020.

3. **Shared navigation**. The state will manage the central intake and initial navigation / advocacy for returning adult learners. Much of this may be accomplished through high touch-point automation, accompanied by human interface, and help the student connect to any needed wrap-around services. Ideally, the state navigator will reside in the local region. THECB is planning to leverage existing advising efforts to provide both the automated and human interface for this initiative. Once a student is matched to an institution, the state navigator will pass frequent contact to the campus navigator or advisor, who will provide academic support and also advocate for the student in regards to transfer of credits, alternate credits, and flexible course offerings.

4. **Data informed education pathways with Burning Glass and Brookings**. The THECB and the Foundation are working with Burning Glass and Brookings to develop tools that will inform adult learners and institutions on needed pathways for upskilling and reskilling. Burning Glass has use cases posted on their website to demonstrate how their work can support higher education institutions. The Foundation anticipates securing these professional services by August 2020.

PHASED ROLL-OUT

In addition to the major components listed above, the initiative will develop in two phases that incorporate 90-day cycles. While there is an element of Phase I that will impact a limited number of IHEs, much of the initiative is designed to impact the region at-large, including but not limited to the 45 IHEs with a physical presence in the Houston MSA. An example of an IHE that may participate but is not physically located in the Houston MSA is Western Governors University Texas. The evaluation scope of work will also include formative and summative evaluation of the efficacy of each phase and components.

Phase I: July – December 2020
- **Grant program**. The THECB was appropriated $150,000 for 2020 for "early adopter" institutions to begin or expand work to serve returning adult students.
- **MVP portal**. An MVP central intake will incorporate the essential elements of a more comprehensive system to be developed. This will allow us to test essential elements for reliability and validity.
- **Policy and practice review**. The Houston-based partner organization, IHEs, and THECB will collaborate to identify change possibilities to improve how we respond the needs of returning adult students.

Phase II: January – August 2021
- **Build and launch central portal**. Based on the testing of essential components from Phase I, a comprehensive central portal will be developed, beta tested, and launched.
- **Launch regional communications and marketing campaign**.
- **Shared navigation**. The Houston-based partner organization, IHEs, and THECB will design and implement a system for shared support to help returning adult students maximize the impact of outreach while also minimizing any burdens on student time.

INITIATIVE TIMELINE
The timeline for this initiative is approximately 18 months. The main initiative activities are provided below, to help inform your proposed evaluation timeline. THECB is responsible for oversight of all activities. The only activity listed here the evaluator is expected to execute is the evaluation itself. The selected evaluator may be invited to participate in the post-initiative review. Implementation and execution of each activity is represented by the color grey.

ACTIVITY	2020											
	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12
Landscape analysis and corresponding research				▨	▨	▨	▨	▨				
Policy and practice review										▨	▨	▨
Economic development research									▨	▨	▨	▨
Launch MVP											▨	▨
Outreach and marketing											▨	▨
Evaluation of initiative											▨	▨

ACTIVITY	2021											
	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12
Landscape analysis and corresponding research	▨						▨	▨	▨			
Policy and practice review	▨	▨										
Economic development research	▨											
Beta test central intake				▨	▨							
Launch central intake								▨	▨			
Outreach and marketing	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨
Mid-course review					▨							
Late-course review											▨	
Evaluation of initiative	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨			
Final outcomes, analysis, and plan for sustainability and scale												▨

ACTIVITY	2022											
	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12
Post-project review												▨

Appendix B. Evaluation Research Questions, Information Sources, and Types of Evaluation.

	Research Questions	Theme	Responsible Party	Measures	Information Source		Type of Evaluation	
					Data	**Program Materials**	**Formative**	**Summative**
1	What constitutes effective outreach for re-engaging and re-enrolling stopped out students?	N/A	Evaluator	Outcome, Balancing	Marketing data, Current analyses, THECB admin and grantee data	Commitment document, MVP analytics	Are there any gaps in program efficacy?	Did program successfully re-engage and re-enroll SCNC students?
a	Who are the state and partner institutions trying to reach / contact through their marketing and communications efforts? What methods have they used to identify different populations?	Identification and Targeting	Evaluator, Contracted marketing firm	Process, Balancing	Marketing data, Current analyses, THECB admin and grantee data	Grantee action plans	Are there any gaps in the populations or methods?	Did the state and partner institutions reach intended audience through their marketing / communications efforts? Were methods effective? Why or why not? What methods were most effective?
b	How are the state and partner institutions connecting with target populations, i.e., direct outreach, mass marketing, various partnerships?	Dissemination Channels	Contracted marketing firm, Evaluator	Process	Marketing data	Grantee action plans	Are state and institution efforts coordinated in a regional approach?	Are there any design principles or lessons learned that would improve or expedite future roll out of this program? Or THECB future marketing campaigns in general?
c	What are the state and partner institutions saying to identified adults, and what language and framing are using in their marketing and communications materials, i.e., financial aid, scheduling, career impact, barriers and motivations, personal connections?	Messages and Themes	Contracted marketing firm, Evaluator	Process	Marketing data	Grantee action plans	Are state and institution efforts coordinated in a regional approach?	Are there any design principles or lessons learned that would improve or expedite future roll out of this program? Or THECB future marketing campaigns in general?
d	What was the efficacy of the marketing campaign? For example, did the marketing campaign generate direct responses among SCNC? Did those direct responses lead to enrollment in and completion of a credential of value? What was the return on investment for marketing?	Efficacy	Evaluator, THECB	Outcome, Balancing	Marketing, CRM, and outcome data	MVP and Central Portal analytics	Was there variation in efficacy by different student groups?	Did program successfully re-engage and re-enroll SCNC students? Did program lead to SCNC student credential attainment?
2	What processes informed and influenced successful re-engagement and re-enrollment?	N/A	Evaluator	Process	Marketing data	MVP analytics, Tiered selection, Tiered engagement	Are there any gaps in program processes?	What processes successfully supported re-engagement and re-enrollment of SCNC students?
a	What supports is the state and partner institutions offering to help sustain interest and drive enrollment after potential students have received initial communications?	Pre-Enrollment Supports	Evaluator	Process, Balancing	N/A	Commitment document, Grantee action plans	Are there any gaps in these supports?	Were supports effective? Why or why not?
b	How is the state and partner institutions preparing to support and continue all of the above activities?	Internal Capacity Building	Evaluator	Process, Balancing	N/A	Commitment document, Grantee action plans	Are there any gaps in these approaches to sustainability?	Is program sustainable? Why or why not?