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Workforce Pell: AFT State Affiliate Guide

Workforce Pell is a major expansion of the federal Pell Grant program. It went into effect on July 1, 2026. This expansion opens federal grant money to students pursuing short, intensive, career-focused training programs—such as programs to earn healthcare credentials or programs in advanced manufacturing—that prepare students for high-skill, high-wage or in-demand occupations.

This guide focuses on how Workforce Pell grants are already being implemented in the states, and how your union can leverage these grants to create career pathways for in-demand careers that pay a sustainable wage.

AFT Important Contacts

AFT staff are available to support affiliates throughout Workforce Pell implementation by providing policy guidance, technical assistance, resources and opportunities to collaborate.

Department	Contact	Email
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STEP 1—Learn about Workforce Pell

To qualify for Workforce Pell funding, an educational program must meet the following criteria:

- ☐ **Length:** Last at least eight weeks and fewer than 15 weeks (150 to 599 clock hours).
- ☐ **Institutional standing:** Be offered by an accredited, [Title IV-eligible institution of higher education](#) and have operated for at least one year.
- ☐ **State approval:** Be approved by the governor and align with the hiring needs of local employers.
- ☐ **Credit pathways:** Lead to at least one credit-bearing pathway so students can continue their education later.

Checklist:

- ☐ Review [“AFT Workforce Pell Grants: Implications for AFT Locals, Career and Technical Education, and Community Colleges.”](#)
- ☐ Review [“AFT FAQ on Workforce Pell Program.”](#)
- ☐ Review [Workforce Pell: Standards and Definitions Briefs](#) in America Achieves’ Workforce Pell Resource Library.
- ☐ Share information with affiliate leadership.

STEP 2—Identify labor and industry institutions

Strong partnerships with labor organizations, employers, workforce boards and registered apprenticeships are essential to the success of Workforce Pell. These partners help ensure training programs align with local workforce needs, lead to high-quality jobs, and provide students with clear pathways to employment and career advancement. Identifying and engaging these stakeholders early also creates opportunities for collaboration, strengthens advocacy efforts, and helps affiliates stay informed about workforce priorities and program implementation.

Labor unions

Most union training centers are not Title IV-eligible colleges, so they cannot directly receive Pell funds. However, labor unions can partner with community colleges to meet eligibility requirements. For labor unions, Workforce Pell can be

a recruitment tool for people who could not previously afford pre-apprenticeship programs, introductory craft training, safety training or technical classroom instruction. The funding from Workforce Pell can provide stackable credentials, such as Occupational Safety and Health Administration certifications, for students to become highly qualified to enter apprenticeships.

Workforce Pell is an opportunity for unions to recruit students from unrepresented communities, including women entering the trades, unemployed workers, and young adults not attending four-year colleges.

Employers

We foresee many [employers using Workforce Pell partnerships](#) as an employee benefit—for example, wage increases after credential completion, paid release for training, tuition assistance and more. Others will use these partnerships as a workforce development strategy to address persistent labor shortages, improve hiring pipelines and reduce recruitment costs. This can mean fewer dollars spent on entry-level training, shorter onboarding periods and lower recruitment costs. Regardless of their approach, employers should form partnerships with Title IV institutions.

Workforce boards

Every state has a workforce board that includes employers, government officials and education institutions charged with determining the greatest workforce shortages affecting their states and how to address them. A state can have a single workforce board, separate boards per industry or multiple boards divided by region. Under the Workforce Pell program, governors (or designated state agencies) must certify that eligible programs align with state workforce needs before they can receive federal approval.

Many states are integrating Workforce Pell with the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act to create more coordinated funding systems. This includes coordinating Pell payments for tuition and instructional costs and WIOA payments for student support services and referring participants to American Job Centers. Such integration reduces duplication and allows more people to complete training.

Checklist:

- ☐ Review “[US Departments of Labor, Education Issue Guidance for State Plans to Align Education and Workforce Development Systems](#)” news release.
- ☐ Review the [Apprenticeship.gov](#) website for resources about the apprenticeship model.
- ☐ Identify your state’s workforce board using [CareerOneStop’s Workforce Development Board Finder](#).

STEP 3—Understand the Workforce Pell timeline

Understanding the Workforce Pell timeline helps educators and affiliates prepare for [upcoming changes](#) and identify opportunities to support students and strengthen workforce education programs. By knowing when their states begin implementation, when postsecondary institutions can apply and when students may become eligible for funding, affiliates are able to engage with partners and provide informed guidance to advocate for high-quality programs. See which programs have already been approved here with the [Workforce Pell State Implementation Tracker](#).

July 1, 2026: The Free Application for Federal Student Aid application cycle opened for the upcoming academic aid year.

- Students can begin submitting [FAFSA forms](#) to determine their eligibility for future Workforce Pell-supported programs.¹ The FAFSA application has been updated to include a new field labeled “Enrolled in Eligible Workforce Program.”

2026-27 academic year: Colleges and workforce programs will develop and seek approval for eligible Workforce Pell programs.

- Institutions of higher education will build systems for completion, placement and earnings requirements.
- Additionally, institutions may begin to expand short-term workforce programming and new employer partnerships that align with the labor market demand.

¹ Note that while students can submit FAFSA forms starting July 1, 2026, programs must first be approved before students can utilize Workforce Pell grants.

2027-28 academic year: This is the earliest that student access is expected.

- Students will begin enrolling in approved Workforce Pell programs using Pell Grant funding.

Affiliates should first focus on engaging in Workforce Pell program development and approval before the start of the 2027-28 academic year. After programs are approved, affiliates can begin student recruitment efforts for these programs.

STEP 4—Identify key state contractors

To prepare for Workforce Pell implementation, affiliates should begin [by identifying the agencies and organizations leading efforts in their state](#). Most states require a written articulation agreement or a credit-for-prior-learning crosswalk specifying which college or program agrees to accept the training program for credit and how much credit it will grant. Review the websites of your state's higher education agency, workforce development agency and apprenticeship office for implementation guidance, approved training providers and policy updates. Connect with local community colleges, technical colleges, workforce boards, employers and labor partners to learn about eligible programs and workforce needs. Building relationships with these partners will help your affiliate advocate for high-quality programs that support students, workers and communities.

States are currently creating lists of occupations eligible for Workforce Pell grants, to be updated every two years to align with the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. Each state list requires that eligible occupations must be high-skill, high-wage or in-demand, and states define these terms differently. States also are creating statewide plans for short-term Workforce Pell criteria that a workforce board or the governor can invoke for occupations tied to documented economic-development priorities. Examples include [Maryland's expanded and redesignated Enterprise Zones](#), [Tennessee's Strategic Priority Exception](#) and [Minnesota's Drive for 5 designated](#) occupational groupings. Some states are requiring Workforce Pell programs to document that their program meets employer hiring requirements.

Checklist:

- ☐ Review "[Making Workforce Pell Deliver: 9 Options for States to Improve Outcomes for Students and Employers](#)."
- ☐ Identify a contact in the governor's office regarding Workforce Pell and the state workforce board.

STEP 5—Questions for state officials

State officials play a key role in overseeing Workforce Pell implementation, approving eligible programs and establishing policies that affect students and training providers. Asking these questions helps affiliates understand the state's implementation process, timelines, accountability measures and opportunities for stakeholder engagement.

Questions to consider:

- What is the implementation timeline?
- How will programs be approved?
- Who reviews applications?
- How will quality be monitored?
- How are labor organizations involved?
- How are community colleges involved?
- What accountability measures will be used?
- What instructional training work for these programs remains in the bargaining unit?
- How will students be protected from fraud, for-profit institutions, etc.?

STEP 6—Meet with postsecondary institutions

Engaging with postsecondary institutions is an important step in understanding how Workforce Pell will be implemented and how eligible training programs will serve students and employers. The information gathered can also help affiliates advocate for high-quality, accessible programs that lead to valuable credentials and strong employment outcomes.

Questions to consider:

- Who will apply for Workforce Pell?
- Which programs are eligible?
- Are faculty involved in program design?
- What credentials are offered?
- Are programs aligned with labor market demand?
- What student supports are available?
- How will completion rates be tracked?
- How will employment outcomes be measured?

Eligible postsecondary institutions are likely to re-evaluate and expand short-term workforce programs in response to the new Pell eligibility structure. Institutions may:

- Create new short-term credential programs and stackable credential pathways.
- Expand noncredit workforce education.
- Increase partnerships with employers and unions to meet labor demands.
- Build stronger data collection and reporting systems.

AFT members working in community colleges, technical education, adult education, workforce development, student advising and apprenticeship-related instruction may experience:

- Increased enrollment in workforce and career and technical education programs.
- Growth in accelerated and short-term instructional models.
- New curriculum development responsibilities.
- Greater involvement with employer partnerships and workforce boards.
- Expanded demand for instructors in high-demand technical fields.

A common point of confusion is whether non-Title IV providers (like private bootcamps, community organizations or independent industry training centers) can get this funding. They cannot apply directly, but they can participate indirectly under strict limitations:

- **25 percent rule:** A Title IV institution can contract a portion of an eligible workforce program to an unaccredited or non-Title IV outside provider, but no more than 25 percent of the total instructional program can be delivered by that provider.
- **Apprenticeship exception:** This threshold increases to 49 percent if the arrangement is part of an official, signed agreement for a registered apprenticeship program. In all cases, the primary Title IV school remains entirely accountable for the program's outcomes and funding compliance.

Checklist:

- ☐ Review "[Workforce Pell as a Pathway: The State Role in Credit Articulation, Stackability, and Transferability](#)."
- ☐ Review [One Big Beautiful Bill Act FAFSA Processing Updates](#).
- ☐ List the [postsecondary institutions](#) you plan to reach out to regarding Workforce Pell.