

# The Challenge Brief

SyncUp Colorado is a \$5 million prize pool centering on the challenge question:

How might we accelerate **education-to-employment partnerships** that support **Coloradans** ages **12-24** to make informed choices and obtain job relevant skills to build quality careers?

Every Coloradan should have viable choices and access to opportunities to build a meaningful, fulfilling, and financially rewarding career.

- **Job opportunities in Colorado are growing.** Colorado’s average job growth (2.3%) is [nearly double](#) the national average.
- **But the vast majority of those opportunities require a postsecondary degree:** [88%](#) of Tier 1<sup>1</sup> jobs require a credential beyond high school.
- **There is a gap between how many jobs require a degree and how many Coloradans have a degree.** Only [57.6%](#) of Coloradans have a certificate, associate’s degree, bachelor’s degree, and/or professional degree.
- **Plus, the return on investment for many learners varies depending on the school, program, and the individual’s goals.** First-year earnings for the same degree and major can [vary significantly at different colleges](#) and [66.9%](#) of bachelor’s degree students attending Colorado’s public institutions graduated with debt.
- **Additionally, Colorado is behind the national average in high school graduation.** [79%](#) of Colorado’s high school students graduate within 4 years, compared to a national average of 84%.
- **The “skills gap” limits opportunities for individuals and ultimately hurts the economy.** [86%](#) of Colorado’s employers say the “skills gap” is a threat to their businesses.

Job opportunities in Colorado are growing. However, education-to-employment pathways have historically been over reliant on traditional 4-year degrees and the assumption that college credentials are a proxy for skills and talent. Additionally, a disconnect between educational institutions and labor markets often means students graduate without the relevant skills and competencies they need to find employment, and with significant debt. While many degrees offer significant value, others don’t

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<sup>1</sup> The [Colorado Talent Pipeline Report](#) defines Tier 1 a median hourly earning living wage benchmark of \$25.88 or above, a level that supports two adults—one working—and one child.

provide a high return on investment. Combined with a lack of transparency from the market, learners are hindered in their ability to make informed choices about their education-to-employment pathway.

While promising efforts are emerging in Colorado among education, employment, nonprofit, and government leaders to build alternative pathways to equip youth for the jobs of tomorrow, they are largely happening in the silos of a disjointed system. The system faces new pressures of unemployment, underemployment, and permanent job loss as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

### **The Opportunity**

The time for innovation is now. By working together, we can create more high-quality, affordable solutions to help young Coloradans achieve the skills and competencies they need to meet labor market demands.

Our aim is to help young Coloradans transition into skilled employment across all sectors including healthcare, renewable energy, customer service, and other [fast-growing occupations](#). And we need to do it at scale for long-term impact.

### **The Call to Action: SyncUp Colorado**

The SyncUp Colorado Challenge is an open call for breakthrough ideas that harness the power of partnership to ensure Colorado's young people have access to opportunities to build high-quality careers that enable them and the state economy to thrive.

This Challenge is a call to think big and think bold. To take a long-term, system-wide view that challenges conventional approaches, breaks down silos, and builds toward a more coordinated effort across the education-to-employment system in Colorado. To address this challenge and accelerate positive change, SyncUp Colorado is accepting applications for grants from a total prize pool of \$5 million to support partnerships that:

- Build **alignment and foster long-term coordination** across the education-to-employment system in Colorado.
- Address the critical need of developing local talent to be attractive candidates for Colorado's varied and diverse employers
- Directly **impact Coloradans ages 12-24** through creative, affordable, accessible solutions that have potential to scale.

Partnerships will create and deliver solutions that do **one or more** of the following:

- Help learners build job-relevant skills matched to labor market needs
- Provide learners with access to tools, information, and connections to make informed decisions about career navigation
- Clearly define competencies and skills the learner will obtain so they can make informed decisions about career navigation
- Focus on outcomes for learners, including completion, job placement, and salary increase
- Facilitate employers adopting a competencies and skills model for hiring

## Applicants & Eligibility

### Applicant Types

We believe collaboration is necessary to create true impact in the education-to-employment space. Partnerships should consist of two or more cross-sector organizations that agree to cooperate and advance mutual interests. Partnerships should include stakeholders across sectors (employers, educators, nonprofits, government officials) and emphasize bringing all stakeholders to the table in collective, coordinated efforts to create quality solutions for Coloradans.

Partnering organizations can include, but are not limited to:

- Small, medium, and enterprise employers across industries and sectors
- School districts and local school leaders
- Postsecondary institutions, including:
  - departments or teams within higher education institutions
  - academic institution associations
  - career-connected pathways programs including academic or workforce programs
  - credentialing programs and bootcamps
- Nonprofit organizations and associations with a focus on, or expertise in, education-to-employment pathways and economic opportunity
- For-profit companies, including education technology companies
- Government leaders and state agencies

### Eligibility

To be eligible, partnerships must:

1. **Be either**
  - a. a new or existing partnership looking to pilot a new solution for young Coloradans.

**or**

- b. a new or existing partnership seeking to scale an existing solution to new young Coloradans.
2. Have at least one Colorado-based partner.

NOTE: Challenge Partners are **not** eligible to apply. Challenge Partner affiliates and grantees **are** eligible to apply. Challenge Partners do not have influence over the final selection criteria, judging process, or final award decisions. Challenge Partners will not have early access to selection or judging criteria that is not made available to all prospective applicants.

## Awards & Benefits

### Prize Categories

The Challenge will give awards in two categories: Seed and Scale.

#### Seed Award

The Seed Award is for new partnerships between two or more organizations that are developing a breakthrough solution. These solutions should:

- Target Coloradans in the age range of 12-24
- Be in the early stages of implementation and/or have a plan to launch a pilot within 12-18 months
- Outline the outcomes the partnership intends to achieve
- Have high potential to be replicated or scaled

Winners in the Seed category will be awarded **up to \$350,000** each.

#### Scale Award

The Scale Award is for existing partnerships with ambitious solutions that have demonstrated strong results and are planning to scale. For venture-backed startups, this means Series A and beyond.

These solutions should:

- Target Coloradans in the age range of 12-24
- Demonstrate positive outcomes for participating learners to date
- Outline the outcomes the partnership intends to achieve at scale
- Have a clear approach to replicability or scale

Winners in the Scale category will be awarded between **\$350,000 and \$2,000,000** each.

## Funding Schedule

Awards will be distributed over 2-3 project phases appropriate for each winning solution. During the application process, finalists will define the implementation timeline, the metrics, a requested total funding amount, and requested payment tranches.

Winners will be held accountable to their metrics and timeline. Winners who demonstrate successful progress on their metrics and timeline will be awarded the pre-defined, agreed-to amount at each phase.

## Other Benefits for Winners

Finalists and winners will:

- Take a leadership role in the Colorado education-to-employment system
- Contribute to the Colorado education-to-employment system peer to peer learning community, sharing insights and learning from your peer's work
- Receive statewide recognition, press, and exposure for your work
- Receive capacity building support as needed to ensure partnership and solution are successful including, but not limited to support and mentorship from subject matter experts in partnership development, program design, and learner outcome / metrics tracking
- Have an opportunity to build long-term relationships with **ZOMALAB** and other Colorado-based funders

## Application Requirements

All applications—both Seed and Scale—must:

- Describe how the partnership will collaborate to support Coloradans ages 12-24 in making informed choices and obtaining job-relevant skills to build a high-quality career.
- Lay out a clear vision for how the partnership will coordinate efforts and foster alignment across the education-to-employment system.
- Describe how the solution offers an effective, affordable, accessible solution for learners to make informed choices and obtain job-relevant skills required by the market.
- Define the specific metrics to measure solution effectiveness, affordability, and accessibility for the partnership and solution.

In addition, finalists will be required to:

- Include at minimum a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the partner organizations.

- Define the solution implementation timeline.
- Request a total funding amount and payment tranche schedule.
- Commit to share progress on metrics and implementation timeline to funders and the Colorado education-to-employment community for the next one to three years as part of the ongoing learning community.
- Commit to actively participating in the Colorado education-to-employment community and peer to peer learning efforts.

## Selection Process

Applications will be reviewed by a panel of interdisciplinary judges, including industry experts, educators, philanthropists, investors, and entrepreneurs. All applicants will be notified if they have been selected as a finalist by June 22. Finalists will submit a Round 2 application, which will be reviewed by a panel of interdisciplinary judges, who will select the winners.

## Award Timeline

- Applications open April 8, 2021
- Round 1 applications due June 1, 2021
- Finalists notified by June 22, 2021
- Finalists' Round 2 applications due August 17, 2021
- Winners announced September 14, 2021

## About the SyncUp Colorado Sponsor

The Competition Sponsor, ZOMA Foundation, is part of **ZOMALAB**. **ZOMALAB** was founded by Lucy Ana and Ben Walton, whose families have shown a multigenerational commitment to expanding excellent educational opportunities for all. Lucy Ana and Ben specifically have focused on the education-to-employment system and ensuring all Coloradan's have an opportunity to build a quality career. We approach this work by bringing diverse perspectives together to foster collaboration, challenge conventional thinking, and allow innovation to thrive. Read more about [ZOMALAB](#).

## About the SyncUp Colorado Challenge Partners

Challenge Partners provide their expertise in the education-to-employment ecosystem to support the Challenge. Challenge Partners help advise applicants, participate in

events, and amplify the challenge. Challenge Partners are not eligible to apply for the Challenge, and do not have influence over the selection criteria, judging process, or winner selection. Challenge Partners include the Colorado Governor's Office, Colorado Succeeds, Colorado Thrives, SemperVirens, Skillful, and Strada.

## Contact Us

Have questions on the Challenge? Please reach out to us at [info@syncupcolorado.org](mailto:info@syncupcolorado.org)

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