In 2016, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) awarded $6,000,000 to a consortium of New York State community colleges and workforce development boards led by Monroe Community College of Rochester, NY. The consortium, referred to as New York Inspire, comprised three community colleges (Monroe, Genesee, and Finger Lakes), their respective workforce entities (RochesterWorks!, Finger Lakes Works; and the Genesee, Livingston, Orleans, and Wyoming (GLOW) Workforce Development Board), and associated business and community partners. The consortium introduced and expanded training in information technology (IT), healthcare, and advanced manufacturing and sought to create education and training opportunities for underserved populations impacted by the region’s decade of economic decline.

New York Inspire implemented a comprehensive program to connect underserved urban and rural youth, veterans, and incumbent workers with quality middle- to high-skills training in high demand occupations in the nine-county Finger Lakes Region. The project expanded accelerated completion, work-based learning, supportive services, and job placement. A key training strategy was to implement the Advanced Manufacturing curricula developed under the previously-awarded DOL Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) and to develop a certified nursing assistant (CNA)-to-licensed practical nurse (LPN) bridge program with articulation to associate level registered nurse (RN) career pathways (with transfer agreements to the baccalaureate level RN).

The consortium drew upon its lessons learned as a TAACCCT grantee to stand up the America’s Promise grant. With existing partners cultivated from the previous grant, the team was able to quickly bring the partners and systems into play. “This (TAACCCT) grant offered lots of investment. What this grant does demonstrate is skill-based and short-term training programs that we could do under America’s Promise,” according to Todd Oldham, MCC vice president. “Hopefully, other community colleges will look at how we
did short-term training and how it can be funded. The only way we can do this great work is through a grant program.” From the start, America’s Promise would foster sustainable growth for the region.

**PROMISING PRACTICES**

**SECTOR STRATEGIES**

One of the elements of the America’s Promise grant was to promote training along a career pathway that would lead to employment in middle- and high-skilled occupations and that aligned with regional sector strategies. Drawing upon guidance from a number of business advisory groups and labor market research conducted by MCC’s Economic and Workforce Development Center, the project focused on offering training in five manufacturing occupations including precision machining, mechatronics, heating, venting and cooling (HVAC), welding, and optics. This alignment forged an effective sector strategy partnership. The strategies were successful, in large part, due to the top-down support from each of the key partners beginning with senior leadership at Monroe. Commitments were made to adequately staff the project and provide direct grant funded and leveraged resources to ensure its success. This philosophy, which each partner shared, was reinforced through regular communication and coordination among the partners.

Monroe played a central role in leading the grant with Genesee and Finger Lakes Community Colleges and their respective workforce boards managing their shares of the grant's nine-county region. The consortium identified and recruited employer partners and solicited their input and guidance to ensure the training programs aligned with evolving labor-market demand. The workforce boards and their service arms assisted with recruiting participants and providing them with career guidance and job search help. An effective practice was to connect career service advisors and business services representatives with each college to streamline service delivery and more effectively connect participants with employers. Overall, the consortium began with strong ties to its partners which were reinforced over the course of this grant.

**EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT**

The New York Inspire Consortium understood the importance of aligning the training programs with employer needs. One successful healthcare example was the partnership with a managed healthcare facility that helped to recruit training candidates and provided paid work-based learning opportunities. This training model created the perfect symbiotic relationship—the employer was able to identify employee candidates and the grant team had a partner to provide hands-on paid work experience. This model led to increased completion rates in the training program and greatly improved employment retention rates for the employer. Through this relationship, the college was able to update and revise its training to reflect the evolving workplace needs communicated by the employer. New York Inspire also included a post-graduation assessment to identify additional training to help the participants advance along their career pathway.

Employer engagement was also central to the grant’s advanced manufacturing skilled machinist program. Every aspect of the training reflected input from local employers including the schedule, which was restructured to allow incumbent workers to participate. The lead instructor had extensive experience in
advanced manufacturing and recruited other instructors from the industry to ensure the program reflected current labor market needs. The advanced manufacturing program also highlighted the grant’s holistic approach to serving participants by providing tutors for English language learners and assessing the need for other supportive services which ultimately led to improved completion rates.

New York Inspire leaned on the support from manufacturing and health care partners to facilitate effective employer engagement, including: Rochester Technology and Manufacturing Association (RTMA), Finger Lakes Advanced Manufacturers Enterprise (FAME), Rochester Regional Photonics Cluster (RRPC), and Rochester Regional Health (RRH).

SUSTAINABILITY PLANNING
Monroe pursued this grant opportunity because it aligned with its prior and existing training strategies. Within the consortium, Monroe, Genesee, and Finger Lakes had an existing collaboration focused on the nine-county region the colleges serve. Monroe’s senior leadership and workforce development leaders from the colleges met regularly to discuss priorities and align services. These discussions also included the public workforce system, employer and industry representatives, and community-based organizations. With this approach, sustainability was an element of their core operating principles, rather than something not addressed until the end of the grant.

The New York Inspire team has been able to leverage the successes of the America’s Promise grant into additional federal and private discretionary grant awards. This success also led to obtaining a privately funded research and planning grant and increased training resources supported by the county. These sustainability and fundraising activities, all building upon the New York Inspire program, have been incorporated into the overall sustainability plan of the consortium.

SUPPORTIVE SERVICES/SUCCESS COACHES
The New York Inspire grant partners all subscribed to the philosophy of addressing all their participants’ education and training needs. This extended to services such as transportation, childcare, access to social services, and developmental and work readiness training. The dedicated “success coaches” regularly checked in with participants to monitor their progress and help them stay on track. The grant encouraged the innovative approach of engaging program instructors to flag issues they noted in class or training settings. This comprehensive monitoring of the participants helped them access counseling resources or other supportive services to improve the chances of a successful outcome. The emphasis on support from the success coaches and instructors contributed significantly to student persistence, retention, and completion rates.

“The support and encouragement from the program staff and instructors helped me get through the program. I still talk with them almost daily.”
– Sarah D., New York Inspire Graduate
EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Effective communication among partners was another promising practice. The Monroe team implemented a “hub and spoke” approach to sharing information by bringing the entire team together initially then on an as-needed basis. All partners had access to the case management tool and could monitor their respective participants’ progress. The grant also took advantage of existing consortium meetings and communications channels, like their regional economic development partnership, to further reinforce project goals and objectives. Interviews with community college and workforce system partners illustrated the close working relationship that existed within the consortium.

LESSONS LEARNED

COMPREHENSIVE PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

The Monroe team started its America’s Promise grant program using an Excel spreadsheet to track grant outcomes. The project leads quickly acknowledged that this approach had limitations, prompting a search for a data management tool that could be used across all the partners. They learned through peer-to-peer technical assistance about other data management options that were available and decided to invest in the tool that best fit their needs. In the case of Monroe, that tool was G*STAR. The Monroe representatives said their only regret was not implementing a data management system sooner.

Program staff regularly reviewed grant data to track completion rates as well as job placements. Staff used the information in the system to inform decisions on where to deploy grant funds and/or to consider revisions to the implementation plan. One example of this data-informed decision making occurred when the program decided to discontinue medical interpreting because participants were not entering employment after completing the training. Monroe decided to offer it only to incumbent worker participants.

The comprehensive data management focus allowed the grant team to review data to identify the causes for students dropping out of the program. The data review process showed that students often put off taking their most difficult courses and then would be faced with a concentrated work load they could not successfully complete, causing them to drop out. The new approach introduced student plans of study which required the students to schedule their courses in closer coordination with their instructors to balance the workload, and the schedules had to be approved by faculty. The result was improved completion rates.

SUMMARY

The New York Inspire Consortium, led by Monroe Community College, was extremely well-organized beginning with the development of the grant application and extending through the implementation of the program. The consortium established the program by building on systems developed during previous

1 The data systems used by Monroe Community College are examples of available data systems and are not endorsed by DOL.
federal grants and leveraged resources from across the consortium. All their sector strategy partners were engaged, including local employers, regional workforce development boards, community colleges, community-based organizations, and subject matter experts in healthcare, IT, and advanced manufacturing. The team was engaged throughout the implementation of the grant and provided full access to participant data and grant information ensuring a fully coordinated effort. And the results demonstrate the effectiveness of this approach with the grant not only meeting but exceeding all their grant performance goals.

The following aspects of the grant were identified as keys to the successful implementation of the New York Inspire America’s Promise grant:

- **Sector Strategy** – *New York Inspire* leveraged an existing economic development foundation that contributed to the success of the America’s Promise grant. A key element of the strategy was taking advantage of other federal, state, and leveraged resources to amplify the value of the America’s Promise grant.

- **Sustainability Planning** – This process cannot start soon enough as it is central to a successful sector strategy.

- **Employer Partnerships** – These relationships created opportunities for work-based learning and contributed financially to leveraging training costs.

- **Success Coaches** – This role was filled by dedicated counselors as well as engaged instructors, all focused on ensuring the success of the participants by assessing academic as well as supportive service needs.

- **Data/Case Management System** – It is critical to have an effective system that tracks participant outcomes and is accessible by all partners.

- **Faculty Engagement** – The grant involved faculty in the design of the courses and applied a continuous improvement approach to address what was not working.