

Many federal grants include performance reporting and evaluation requirements — but these alone do not ensure that evidence informs practice. Grant-supported efforts often operate as stand-alone projects, insights remain localized, and lessons surface only after a grant ends — too late to benefit participants served during the grant period.

Evidence-based grantmaking has tended to center two priorities: funding programs with demonstrated effectiveness, and building new evidence through evaluation.<sup>1</sup> Both look to evidence that exists before a grant begins or accumulates after it ends. But grant design can also shape whether learning happens *during* implementation — while there's still time to act on it. When grants intentionally structure feedback, reflection and opportunities to adapt while work is underway, grantees are better positioned to identify challenges and improve in real time.

Drawing on a landscape scan of 64 competitive work-based learning programs<sup>2</sup> across 12 agencies (for more details on the landscape scan and resulting catalog, see [Federal Investment in Work-Based Learning: A Catalog and Key Insights from Five Years of Competitive Grants](#)<sup>3</sup>), this brief identifies five recurring design patterns through which federal agencies build these conditions into grant requirements. It is part of a series of spotlights taking a deeper look at specific dimensions of federal grant design.

### WHAT IS CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT?

In the context of evidence-based grantmaking, continuous improvement refers to structured, iterative cycles of feedback and adaptation during implementation — not just end-of-grant reporting or compliance monitoring. It is distinct from performance tracking, which can measure progress without necessarily generating learning or change while work is underway.

Research from implementation and improvement science highlights three conditions that support learning during implementation: timely feedback, structured opportunities for reflection and flexibility to adapt.<sup>1,2</sup> Evidence syntheses of work-based learning similarly find that program impacts vary substantially by design, population and context, underscoring the importance of ongoing feedback and adaptation during implementation rather than reliance on fixed, end-of-grant outcome measures. *The five design patterns identified in this brief represent different ways agencies create these conditions through grant requirements.*

---

<sup>1</sup> See Results for America, *Federal Evidence-Based Spending Guide*, <https://federalspending.results4america.org/>

<sup>2</sup> Work-based learning programs—grants supporting apprenticeships, pre-apprenticeships, internships, clinical or field placements, on-the-job training, transitional jobs, cooperative education, and other models that combine work experience with training or instruction—are a useful lens for examining grant design because implementation requires real-time coordination across employers, training providers, and participants.

<sup>3</sup> The linked catalog provides program-level detail on grant characteristics across agencies and serves as a reference for policymakers and practitioners seeking to understand how federal workforce priorities have been operationalized through competitive funding.

## Design Patterns That Support Learning During Implementation

Across the programs reviewed, we identified five recurring design patterns that shape whether — and how — learning occurs while work is underway. These patterns represent different ways federal agencies embed learning into grant requirements: (1) requirements for iterative improvement; (2) structures for peer learning; (3) roles for adaptive management; (4) milestone-based accountability; and (5) embedded supports for continuous improvement.

Together, these patterns illustrate the concrete grant design mechanisms agencies use to create the conditions for learning during implementation. Multiple patterns may operate independently or in combination within a single program.

Programs are categorized based solely on features explicitly required in Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) text — this reflects how learning is structured in grant design, not whether or how effectively grantees engage in continuous improvement in practice. The tables that follow spotlight strong examples of each pattern — programs where NOFO language explicitly embeds that design feature into grant requirements. They are illustrative, not exhaustive. Appendix A provides a fuller reference of programs that include one or more of these design patterns.

### 1. Requirements

Some federal work-based learning programs explicitly require grantees to engage in iterative testing, reflection and adjustment during service delivery — complementing outcome evaluation by supporting learning while there's still time to adjust. These requirements take different forms — rapid-cycle quality improvement (RCQI), developmental evaluation, ongoing formative assessment — but share a common expectation: rather than treating learning as an end-of-grant activity, grantees must use performance information to refine strategies while implementation is underway. Research suggests that rapid-cycle approaches can strengthen implementation and increase the likelihood that programs identify and address delivery challenges in time to improve results.<sup>3,4</sup>

NOFO (FY)	Agency	Description	What the NOFO Requires	Selected NOFO Language
Disability Innovation Fund (FY24)	ED (RSA)	Grants/cooperative agreements to State vocational rehabilitation agencies for developing and disseminating new employment strategies for youth and adults with disabilities.	<b>Requires ongoing formative and summative evaluation throughout the grant period.</b> Continuous improvement is explicitly defined in the NOFO and embedded in both application requirements and merit review, positioning evaluation as an input to ongoing management decisions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The NOFO defines "refine" as a "process of continuous improvement to ensure that project activities are reviewed against the project's goals and objectives, including securing feedback... from program participants throughout years two, three, four, and five."</li> <li>• The evaluation plan must describe "how data collected as part of this proposed project will be used to inform and refine the logic model and evaluation plan."</li> <li>• Merit review assesses "the extent to which performance feedback and continuous improvement are integral to the design of the proposed project."</li> </ul>
Strengthening Community Colleges Training Grants (FY24)	DOL (ETA)	Grants to community colleges (often in partnership/consortia with employers and workforce partners) for building sector-based career pathways and related capacity to connect learners to good jobs in in-demand industries.	<b>Requires a grantee-contracted developmental evaluation designed to generate real-time feedback and support continuous adaptation during implementation.</b> The NOFO defines the evaluator's role as a collaborator supporting course correction and requires an annual "Good Jobs and Equitable Employment Outcomes" data review and analysis process.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The NOFO requires "that each grantee use a developmental evaluator to support them in documenting outcomes, providing real-time feedback to inform the development of the intervention, and identifying potential adaptations to the intervention."</li> <li>• The evaluator must be "positioned as a collaborator" who "gathers data to provide feedback and support course correction as part of an ongoing process of continuous improvement, adaptation, and intentional change."</li> <li>• The NOFO specifies that the evaluator supports an annual "Good Jobs and Equitable Employment Outcomes data review and analysis process."</li> </ul>
Advanced Nursing Education – Nurse Practitioner Residency and Fellowship (FY23)	HHS (HRSA)	Grants to accredited U.S. schools of nursing for establishing or expanding nurse practitioner residency/ fellowship programs (including integrating primary care with behavioral health and/or maternal health).	<b>Requires rapid-cycle quality improvement during implementation.</b> The NOFO mandates RCQI as part of both the work plan and evaluation plan and scores applicants on their capacity to integrate performance data into ongoing program operations. Links to a dedicated RCQI Resource Guide.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Merit review assesses applicants' "plan for the program performance evaluation that will contribute to continuous quality improvement, including a plan for Rapid Cycle Quality Improvement ... and the implementation of necessary adjustments to effect course corrections."</li> <li>• The NOFO requires that "Advisory Council activities include regular meetings to discuss program progress as part of an ongoing feedback mechanism for rapid cycle quality improvement."</li> </ul>

NOFO (FY)	Agency	Description	What the NOFO Requires	Selected NOFO Language
Health Careers Opportunity Program (HCOP): National HCOP Academies (FY23)	HHS (HRSA)	Grants to accredited health professions schools, public and nonprofit educational entities, and community colleges to help students from disadvantaged backgrounds enter and complete health professions education through academic enrichment, experiential training and support services.	<b>Requires an ongoing program performance evaluation that explicitly contributes to continuous quality improvement during implementation.</b> Evaluation activities must monitor program processes and progress toward goals, with data used to inform program development and service delivery. Continuous improvement is embedded in merit review through explicit scoring of applicants' evaluation and Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) capacity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Merit review assesses applicants' "required program performance evaluation plan that will contribute to continuous quality improvement," including evaluation that "monitor[s] ongoing processes and the progress towards meeting the goals and objectives of the project."</li> <li>• Merit review assesses whether the proposed evaluation approach "frequently monitor[s] ongoing processes and progress toward achieving the project's goals and objectives, utilizing rapid quality cycle improvement concepts or framework[s]."</li> <li>• Applicants must explain "how the data will be used to inform program development and service delivery."</li> </ul>

**Design Insight:** In these programs, CQI is not merely encouraged — it is embedded in merit review. By scoring applicants on their capacity to use performance data for improvement, these NOFOs signal that learning during implementation is a core expectation, not an optional add-on.

## 2. Structures for Peer Learning

Some federal programs build learning structures across entire grantee portfolios — not just within individual organizations. These designs require grantees to learn with and from each other during implementation: sharing challenges, comparing approaches and adapting based on what peers are learning. Research on networked improvement communities suggests this approach accelerates problem-solving and reduces duplication of effort beyond what isolated, site-by-site implementation can achieve.<sup>2,5</sup>

NOFO (FY)	Agency	Description	What the NOFO Requires	Selected NOFO Language
Manufacturing USA Workforce, Education and Vibrant Ecosystems (WEAVE) Public Service Awards (FY23)	DOC (NIST)	Grants to current Manufacturing USA institutes for multi-institute WEAVE projects that strengthen inclusive advanced manufacturing ecosystems and/or accelerate domestic production/commercial transition of institute-developed technologies.	<b>Requires participation in network-wide institute convenings.</b> Grantees must engage in Manufacturing USA network meetings to share lessons learned and effective practices across the national institute network, with dissemination plans that extend workforce insights to other institutes and federal partners.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Applicants must describe "approaches for sharing lessons learned and best practices resulting from the project, including with other institutes within the Manufacturing USA network and with other key stakeholders."</li> <li>• Merit review assesses "the clarity and sufficiency of the described approaches for sharing lessons learned and best practices resulting from the project with other institutes within the Manufacturing USA network."</li> </ul>
CDC John R. Lewis/Ferguson Fellowship (FY22)	HHS (CDC)	Grants to states, local and territorial governments, public and private colleges and universities, and other eligible nonprofits to operate mentored public health experiential learning programs for undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate students from historically underserved populations.	<b>Requires a common learning and evaluation framework across fellowship sites.</b> Fellows must jointly develop shared performance domains, coordinated recruitment strategies and common evaluation methods, creating a portfolio-level learning structure across host organizations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recipients "are expected to cooperate with each of the other award recipients funded under this NOFO in the development of common performance domains, coordinated national recruitment strategies, and program performance evaluation methods."</li> <li>• Merit review assesses the extent to which applicants "describe how they will work with other sites and CDC as an award recipient in a national program."</li> <li>• Award recipients must report on and "describe promising practices incorporated into the program," creating an expectation that lessons are shared portfolio-wide.</li> </ul>
Rural Communities Opioid Response Program –Northern Border Rural Workforce (FY25)	HHS (HRSA)	Grants to networks of public, nonprofit and for-profit entities for behavioral health workforce training and job placement in rural Northern Border communities.	<b>Requires participation in a federally facilitated, cross-site peer learning collaborative.</b> The NOFO mandates structured, ongoing peer learning across grantees through a required learning collaborative designed to support sharing best practices, addressing implementation challenges, and coordinating workforce strategies across rural sites. Peer learning is operationalized through required participation, designated staff roles and regular convenings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Award recipients must "participate in the quarterly RCORP-Northern Border learning collaborative, facilitated by the HRSA-funded RCORP technical assistance provider."</li> <li>• The learning collaborative provides opportunities to "network, share best practices, address challenges, and receive targeted technical assistance."</li> <li>• Grantees must "designate one individual to serve as the point of contact for the learning collaborative" who "participates in monthly learning collaborative meetings."</li> </ul>

NOFO (FY)	Agency	Description	What the NOFO Requires	Selected NOFO Language
Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Nutrition Training Program (FY23)	HHS (HRSA)	Grants to public and nonprofit private institutions of higher learning to establish or enhance nutrition centers of excellence to train graduate-level MCH nutrition professionals and provide continuing education and technical assistance to Title V agencies and other MCH organizations.	<b>Requires participation in annual grantee meetings and cross-grantee collaboration.</b> The NOFO mandates structured peer learning through required annual meetings explicitly designed for sharing research, innovative training activities and coordinating efforts across programs, with rotating hosting responsibilities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The NOFO requires "joint efforts across all MCH Nutrition Training Program recipients to advance the field, address the MCH nutrition workforce needs, increase visibility of the MCH nutrition workforce, and raise interest among potential trainees."</li> <li>• Grantees must participate in "the MCH Nutrition Training Program annual grantee meeting," with the purpose "to promote interchange, disseminate new information, share trainee research, share innovative training activities and fieldwork, and promote partnerships with Title V."</li> <li>• One recipient each year is responsible for "hosting the annual MCH Nutrition Training Program grantee meeting," with supplemental funding of up to \$25,000.</li> <li>• Merit review assesses "the strength of the evidence of planned collaborations with other MCH Nutrition Training program recipients."</li> </ul>

**Design Insight:** In these programs, peer learning is an explicit expectation set in the NOFO — not an optional or informal activity. Agencies design and require participation in shared learning infrastructure (convenings, common frameworks and facilitated sessions, for example), transforming individual grantee experience into portfolio-level learning during implementation.

### 3. Roles for Adaptive Management

Some federal programs embed continuous improvement directly into grant operations by requiring specific roles whose formal responsibilities include using performance information to guide implementation decisions. Rather than assuming learning will occur organically, these designs require designated staff to monitor progress and coordinate course correction. Research on implementation suggests that programs with such roles are more likely to achieve effective and sustained execution than those that leave learning to informal processes.<sup>1,10</sup>

NOFO (FY)	Agency	Description	What the NOFO Requires	Selected NOFO Language
Equitable Transition Models (FY24)	DOL (ODEP)	Grants to state governments and federally recognized tribal governments for developing and testing comprehensive transition-to-employment models for low-income youth and young adults with disabilities (ages 14–24), implemented through multi-partner consortia.	<p><b>Requires a designated Evaluation Liaison role with explicit responsibility for adaptive management during implementation.</b> The NOFO institutionalizes learning by requiring awardees to assign a dedicated staff role responsible for coordinating with the independent evaluator, analyzing process data, and supporting continuous quality improvement and course correction throughout the life of the grant.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Awardees must designate an evaluation liaison who is "heavily involved in programmatic data collection activities," with "a minimum of one (1) full time equivalent allocated to performing programmatic data collection and evaluation liaison activities."</li> <li>• DOL "expects awardees to analyze process data as part of Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI)" to "improve ETM Demonstration Grant implementation."</li> </ul>
Health Careers Opportunity Program (HCOP): National HCOP Academies (FY23)	HHS (HRSA)	Grants to accredited health professions schools, public and nonprofit educational entities, and community colleges to help students from disadvantaged backgrounds enter and complete health professions education through academic enrichment, experiential training and support services.	<p><b>Requires a dedicated evaluator (≥0.5 FTE) whose role is explicitly defined as contributing to continuous quality improvement.</b> The NOFO requires evaluation activities to monitor program processes and outcomes during implementation and use findings to inform program development and service delivery.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Applicants must propose "an approximately 0.5 FTE program evaluator who is considered key personnel."</li> <li>• Applicants must "describe the required program performance evaluation plan that will contribute to continuous quality improvement."</li> <li>• Merit review assesses whether "the proposed evaluation should ensure the applicant can frequently monitor ongoing processes and progress toward achieving the project's goals and objectives, utilizing rapid quality cycle improvement concepts or framework."</li> </ul>
Regional Technology & Innovation Hubs (Phase 2) (FY23)	DOC (EDA)	Phase 2 implementation grants to designated Tech Hub consortia — including higher education institutions, state and local governments, industry, economic development organizations, and labor organizations — for coordinated regional workforce, business development, technology maturation and infrastructure projects.	<p><b>Requires a funded Regional Innovation Officer (RIO) position with explicit accountability for adaptive problem-solving during implementation.</b> The lead consortium member must proactively identify implementation challenges and develop solutions, and merit review explicitly scores how consortia will "approach challenges as an opportunity to learn and improve." <i>Note: The RIO is a broad leadership and coordination role; adaptive management is one of several responsibilities.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Applicants must "identify the RIO and their responsibilities," and "the RIO will be accountable for ensuring clear and effective governance and leadership of the consortium."</li> <li>• The lead member must "timely and proactively identify challenges and barriers to execution and impact of individual projects or across projects, communicate those challenges to EDA, and independently or in collaboration with EDA identify solutions, alternative approaches, and necessary resources."</li> <li>• Merit review assesses "how will the consortium approach challenges as an opportunity to learn and improve?"</li> </ul>

**Design Insight:** By assigning formal responsibility for synthesizing performance information and coordinating course correction, these NOFOs treat continuous improvement as implementation infrastructure. While many programs require project directors or coordinators, explicitly requiring dedicated staff for adaptive management is less common. Where it appears, it signals that agencies view learning during implementation as a core operational function.

#### 4. Milestone-Based Accountability

Some federal programs structure accountability around formal decision points during implementation. These designs use milestones, benchmarks or staged funding releases to create checkpoints where performance data must be reviewed and progress assessed before subsequent phases proceed. Several programs pair this phased structure with ongoing technical assistance that creates opportunities for grantees and agencies to identify implementation challenges and adjust approaches mid-course. Research on adaptive governance suggests that milestone-based accountability — particularly when combined with structured support — can motivate more strategic data use than retrospective reporting alone,<sup>6,7</sup> especially for complex workforce programs where outcome impacts are sensitive to implementation decisions and participant characteristics.<sup>8</sup>

NOFO (FY)	Agency	Description	What the NOFO Requires	Selected NOFO Language
Career Skills Training Program (FY23)	DOE	Grants to industry organizations and labor unions partnering with training providers to develop and implement energy efficiency workforce training programs that combine classroom instruction with on-the-job training, targeting workers in underserved communities.	<b>Ties continued funding to use of evaluation findings for program improvement.</b> The NOFO structures awards in two funding tranches, with the second 50% contingent on both achieving performance benchmarks and submitting plans that show how evaluation results will be incorporated into program refinements. This creates a formal accountability mechanism that rewards learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To release funding, grantees must submit "results of the program evaluation" <i>and</i> "plans for incorporating the evaluation results into improving the current program."</li> <li>• Grantees must also submit "corrective action plans to address outstanding issues or concerns; and plans for improving partnerships."</li> <li>• Merit review assesses "the proposed process that will be used to measure outputs and collect data and feedback mechanisms for assessing the efficacy of the workforce solutions."</li> </ul>
Industrial Assessment Centers (IAC) (FY24)	DOE (MESC)	Grants to community colleges, trade schools and union training programs to establish Industrial Assessment Centers that train workers for clean energy and advanced manufacturing jobs while providing energy assessments to small and medium-sized manufacturers.	<b>Structures multi-year awards in annual phases with Go/No-Go decision points.</b> DOE evaluates milestone completion at the end of each phase before determining whether to proceed with subsequent phases. Grantees receive ongoing technical assistance and mentorship from IAC Regional Centers of Excellence throughout implementation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Awards are "staged in three 12-month phases. At the end of each phase, DOE will evaluate project performance and completion of milestones outlined in the Business to Business Agreement and determine whether to proceed with subsequent phases."</li> <li>• Applications must include "a 36-month workplan, including at least one SMART milestone per quarter and one Go/No Go decision point at the end of Years 1 and 2."</li> <li>• Awards include "in-kind coaching and mentorship via DOE's IAC Program" and "technical assistance from the IAC Regional Centers of Excellence."</li> </ul>
Climate Ready Workforce for Coastal States, Tribes, and Territories (FY24)	DOC and NOAA	Cooperative agreements to partnerships led by backbone organizations (state, tribal, territorial and local governments; institutions of higher education; and nonprofits) to train and place workers into good jobs that enhance climate resilience in coastal communities.	<b>Structures funding around applicant-proposed benchmarks that gate access to subsequent award phases.</b> NOAA pairs this phased structure with ongoing technical assistance and collaborative "codesign" of program approaches, creating formal decision points that support adaptive implementation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NOAA's "substantial involvement" may include "stipulation that the recipient must meet or adhere to specific procedural requirements before subsequent stages of a project may continue."</li> <li>• NOAA "will provide technical assistance to successful applicants" and agency involvement "will generally be collaboration between the NOAA Program Team and the recipient to develop the project's scope of work and to codesign approaches."</li> </ul>

**Design Insight:** In these programs, milestones function as learning checkpoints. The strongest examples tie funding decisions explicitly to evaluation results and improvement planning; others pair phased funding with ongoing technical assistance and collaborative program design to support adaptive implementation. *This pattern is less common than others in this analysis.*

## 5. Supports for Continuous Improvement

Some federal programs strengthen continuous improvement by embedding technical assistance (TA) and capacity-building supports directly into grant implementation. These supports go beyond pre-award guidance to provide ongoing assistance during implementation — whether through dedicated TA providers, structured mentorship or required engagement with learning infrastructure. Research suggests that embedded, ongoing technical assistance increases the likelihood that grantees can meaningfully use performance data and sustain improvement practices — particularly for newer or capacity-constrained organizations.<sup>8,9</sup>

NOFO (FY)	Agency	Description	What the NOFO Requires	Selected NOFO Language
CDC John R. Lewis/Ferguson Fellowship (FY22)	HHS (CDC)	Grants to states, local and territorial governments, public and private colleges and universities, and other eligible nonprofits to operate mentored public health experiential learning programs for undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate students from historically underserved populations.	<b>Embeds technical assistance and adaptive management into the cooperative agreement structure.</b> CDC provides ongoing TA throughout the award cycle explicitly aimed at organizational capability enhancement, and works directly with recipients to adjust work plans based on evaluation results and program outcomes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"Technical assistance is provided throughout the grant award cycle" including "technical consultation, decision-making support, training, resource/tool provision, knowledge management support, organizational capability enhancement, strategy fit assessment, and technology transfer."</li> <li>CDC will be "working with recipients on adjusting the work plan based on achievement of outcomes, evaluation results and changing budgets."</li> </ul>

NOFO (FY)	Agency	Description	What the NOFO Requires	Selected NOFO Language
Equitable Transition Models (ETM) (FY24)	DOL (ODEP)	Grants to states and tribes to develop employment transition models for youth and young adults with disabilities.	<b>Requires engagement with a DOL-contracted TA provider to codevelop program fidelity measures and implementation guides.</b> TA is explicitly tied to using process data to monitor service quality and support continuous quality improvement throughout the five-year grant period.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "DOL will contract with a technical assistance provider" to "support planning and pilot activities in year one and implementation activities in years two through five." Awardees must use the TA provider "to support their project's particular needs, such as barriers they may encounter in establishing necessary partnerships, effective coordination among partners, and successful recruitment of [youth and young adults with disabilities] participants."</li> <li>• Applicants must "describe the applicant's approach to CQI and how the applicant will coordinate it with the evaluator. It must identify a specific CQI model and detail how the applicant will use the model."</li> <li>• DOL "expects awardees to analyze process data as part of Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI). This will improve ETM Demonstration Grant implementation."</li> </ul>
Strengthening Population and Public Health Workforce Pipeline (FY22)	HHS (CDC)	Grants to community colleges, trade schools, universities and other organizations to train public health learners in leadership development, data science and public health practice through fellowships and applied learning experiences.	<b>Embeds technical assistance into the cooperative agreement structure.</b> CDC provides ongoing TA throughout implementation explicitly tied to evaluation, performance measurement and quality improvement, and works directly with recipients to adjust work plans based on outcomes and evaluation results.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CDC will "provide technical assistance in work plan development, program planning, program execution, evaluation and performance measurement to assist with the successful implementation of the program."</li> <li>• CDC will "collaborate with recipients to develop guidance and technical assistance related to program planning, implementation, progress, evaluation, quality improvement, and dissemination of successful strategies, products, tools, and lessons learned."</li> <li>• CDC will be "working with recipients on adjusting the work plan based on achievement of outcomes, evaluation results and changing budgets."</li> </ul>

**Design Insight:** In these programs, TA is explicitly tied to interpreting performance data and refining implementation. By embedding TA throughout the grant period, agencies position it as core learning infrastructure that supports adaptation as programs evolve.

## Conclusion

Together, these examples show that grant design can intentionally structure the conditions for continuous improvement. Learning during implementation does not happen by default; it depends on whether grants build in feedback, reflection and opportunities to adapt while programs are underway.

The design patterns highlighted in this brief demonstrate that agencies have multiple, practical levers to embed learning into implementation. These patterns can operate independently or in combination, but all shift learning from an end-of-grant exercise to a core feature of program execution.

Importantly, design creates conditions for learning — it does not guarantee it. Design choices matter most when paired with clear expectations and milestone-based oversight. As agencies continue to invest in work-based learning, the central question is not whether programs measure performance, but whether grant design enables learning to inform decisions in time to improve outcomes for participants.

## References

1. Fixsen, D. L., Naoom, S. F., Blase, K. A., Friedman, R. M., & Wallace, F. (2005). *Implementation Research: A Synthesis of the Literature*. Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, National Implementation Research Network (FMHI Publication #231). <https://fpg.unc.edu/sites/fpg.unc.edu/files/resource-files/NIRN-MonographFull-01-2005.pdf>
2. Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L. M., Grunow, A., & LeMahieu, P. G. (2015). *Learning to Improve: How America's Schools Can Get Better at Getting Better*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
3. Stetler, C. B., Legro, M. W., Wallace, C. M., et al. (2006). The role of formative evaluation in implementation research and the QUERI experience. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 21 (Suppl 2), S1–S8.
4. Atukpawu-Tipton, G., & Poes, M. (2020). *Rapid Cycle Evaluation at a Glance* (OPRE Report #2020-152). Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. [https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/Rapid-Cycle-Evaluation\\_508.pdf](https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/Rapid-Cycle-Evaluation_508.pdf)
5. Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L. M., & Grunow, A. (2010). *Getting Ideas Into Action: Building Networked Improvement Communities in Education*. Carnegie Perspectives. Stanford, CA: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. (ERIC Document ED517575)
6. Moynihan, D. P. (2008). *The Dynamics of Performance Management: Constructing Information and Reform*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
7. Williams, B. K., & Brown, E. D. (2014). Adaptive Management: From More Talk to Real Action. *Environmental Management*, 53(2), 465–479.
8. Scott, M. M., Kuehn, D., Eyster, L.,... & Barnow, B. (2020). *Implementation, Outcomes, and Impact Synthesis Report*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor. Available at [https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/OASP/evaluation/pdf/ETA\\_TAACCCT\\_Round4\\_Synthesis-Report\\_December2020.pdf](https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/OASP/evaluation/pdf/ETA_TAACCCT_Round4_Synthesis-Report_December2020.pdf)
9. Anderson, M. A., Conroy, K., Mastri, A., Benton, A., & Lehman, G. (2021). *Improving the Design, Targeting, and Effectiveness of Training and Technical Assistance: A Learning Agenda*. Washington, DC: Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. [https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/migrated\\_legacy\\_files//198136/Training-TA-Learning-Agenda.pdf](https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/migrated_legacy_files//198136/Training-TA-Learning-Agenda.pdf)
10. Peterman, K., & Gathings, M. J. (2019). Using a community-created multisite evaluation to promote evaluation use across a sector. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 74, 54-60.

## Appendix A: Continuous Improvement Features in Selected Federal Competitive Grants

This appendix provides a reference for where learning-oriented design features appear among the federal grant programs reviewed for this brief. Programs are listed only when the NOFO includes at least one explicit requirement aligned with a continuous improvement design feature. Inclusion reflects how learning is structured in grant design — not how, or how well, grantees engage in continuous improvement in practice. Links to each grant program can be found in the NOFO catalog at: [Federal Investment in Work-Based Learning: A Catalog and Key Insights from Five Years of Competitive Grants](#)

### Requirements for Iterative Improvement

The NOFO requires grantees to engage in iterative testing, reflection and adjustment during service delivery — such as rapid-cycle quality improvement, developmental evaluation or ongoing formative assessment tied to program refinement.

- Disability Innovation Fund (ED/RSA, FY 2024)
- Behavioral Health Workforce Education and Training for Professionals (HHS/HRSA, FY 2025)
- Behavioral Health Workforce Education and Training for Children, Adolescents, and Young Adults (HHS/HRSA, FY 2023)
- Advanced Nursing Education –Nurse Practitioner Residency and Fellowship (HHS/HRSA, FY 2023)
- Advanced Nursing Education –Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (HHS/HRSA, FY 2024)
- Health Careers Opportunity Program: National Academies (HHS/HRSA, FY 2023)
- Strengthening Community Colleges Training Grants, Round 5 (DOL/ETA, FY 2024)
- Equitable Transition Models Demonstration Grants (DOL/ODEP, FY 2024)
- Strengthening Population and Public Health Workforce Pipeline (HHS/CDC, FY 2022)
- Rural Communities Opioid Response Program –Northern Border Workforce (HHS/HRSA, FY 2025)
- Opioid-Impacted Family Support Program (HHS/HRSA, FY 2024)
- Maternal and Child Health Nutrition Training Program (HHS/HRSA, FY 2023)
- Maternal and Child Health Public Health Catalyst Program (HHS/HRSA, FY 2025)
- Native Hawaiian Career and Technical Education Program (ED, FY 2021)
- Jobs Plus (HUD, FY 2023)
- Refugee Career Pathways (HHS/ACF, FY 2024)
- Good Jobs Challenge (DOC/EDA, FY 2024)
- John R. Lewis/Ferguson Fellowship (HHS/CDC, FY 2022)
- Career Skills Training Program (DOE, FY 2023)

### Structures for Peer Learning

The NOFO requires grantees to learn with and from each other during implementation — through federally facilitated learning collaboratives, cross-grantee convenings, shared evaluation frameworks or coordinated learning activities designed to support portfolio-level learning.

- Behavioral Health Workforce Education and Training (BHWET) for Professionals (HHS/HRSA, FY 2025)

- Pathway Home 6 (DOL/ETA, FY 2025)
- Advanced Nursing Education – Nurse Practitioner Residency and Fellowship (HHS/HRSA, FY 2023)
- Advanced Nursing Education – Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (HHS/HRSA, FY 2024)
- Manufacturing USA Workforce, Education and Vibrant Ecosystems (WEAVE) Public Service Awards (DOC/NIST, FY 2023)
- John R. Lewis/Ferguson Fellowship (HHS/CDC, FY 2022)
- Rural Communities Opioid Response Program – Northern Border Workforce (HHS/HRSA, FY 2025)
- Maternal and Child Health Public Health Catalyst Program (HHS/HRSA, FY 2025)
- Maternal and Child Health Nutrition Training Program (HHS/HRSA, FY 2023)
- Second Chance Act – Adult Reentry Education, Employment, Treatment and Recovery Program (DOJ/OJP, FY 2021)
- Strengthening Community Colleges Training Grants (DOL/ETA, FY 2024)
- Workforce Opportunity for Rural Communities (WORC) Initiative (DOL/ETA, FY 2024)
- Enhancing Agricultural Opportunities for Military Veterans (AgVets) (DOL/ETA, FY 2024)
- Apprenticeship Building America 2.0 (DOL/ETA, FY 2024)
- Industrial Assessment Centers Program (DOE/MESC, FY 2024)
- YouthBuild (DOL/ETA, FY 2024)
- Climate Ready Workforce for Coastal States, Tribes, and Territories (DOC+NOAA, FY 2024)
- Personnel Development to Improve Services and Results for Children with Disabilities – Personnel Preparation at HBCUs, TCCUs, and MSIs (ED/OSERS, FY 2025)

### **Roles for Adaptive Management**

The NOFO requires designated staff roles with explicit responsibility for coordinating implementation, synthesizing performance information and supporting learning-based adjustment during the grant period.

- Regional Technology & Innovation Hubs (Phase 2) (DOC/EDA, FY 2023)
- Equitable Transition Models Demonstration Grants (DOL/ODEP, FY 2024)
- Health Careers Opportunity Program: National Academies (HHS/HRSA, FY 2023)
- Rural Communities Opioid Response Program – Northern Border Workforce (HHS/HRSA, FY 2025)

### **Milestone-Based Accountability**

The NOFO uses milestones, phased funding or continuation decisions to create formal decision points where performance data must be reviewed and strategies reassessed before work continues — distinct from designs where missed benchmarks result solely in termination or clawbacks.

- Climate Ready Workforce for Coastal States, Tribes, and Territories (DOC+NOAA, FY 2024)
- Industrial Assessment Centers Program (DOE/MESC, FY 2024)
- Career Skills Training Program (DOE, FY 2023)

- **Supports for Continuous Improvement**

The NOFO includes embedded technical assistance, coaching or mentorship explicitly tied to interpreting performance data or refining implementation

during the grant period.

- Industrial Assessment Centers Program (DOE/MESC, FY 2024)
- Equitable Transition Models Demonstration Grants (DOL/ODEP, FY 2024)
- Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (DOL/VETS, FY 2024)
- Strengthening Population and Public Health Workforce Pipeline (HHS/CDC, FY 2022)
- Strengthening Community Colleges Training Grants (DOL/ETA, FY 2024)
- Rural Communities Opioid Response Program – Northern Border Workforce (HHS/HRSA, FY 2025)