02. The Team

The SkillsFWD initiative was carried out by a nimble team of contractors working in close coordination to support grantees and advance the initiative's objectives. Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors (RPA) serves as the initiative's operational foundation and fiscal sponsor. The contractor team was responsible for the day-to-day execution of the work, serving as the primary interface with grantees and ecosystem stakeholders.

Organized to align with the core functions of the initiative, the SkillsFWD Team operated as an integrated set of partners delivering implementation support, evaluation and reporting, technical and user experience assessment, and communications. The specific roles and responsibilities of each group are detailed in the sections that follow: **Project Implementation, Research and Discovery, Technology** and **IUX Assessment, and Communications.**



Implementation Team



Dawn Karber
Executive Director

Dawn Karber is a senior workforce and education innovation leader with extensive experience guiding large-scale, multi-stakeholder initiatives. She brings strategic leadership, systems-level thinking, and deep expertise in partnership development to advancing equitable learning and employment solutions.

For SkillsFWD, Dawn provided administrative oversight and high-level strategic direction, managing funder relationships and external partnerships to ensure strong alignment, accountability, and impact across the initiative.



Madelyn Rahn
Network Director

Madelyn Rahn is a strategist, consultant, and convener working at the intersection of workforce development and technology, with a focus on building policies and systems that create pathways to economic success. Her work focuses on translating complex, multi-stakeholder initiatives into actionable systems, policies, and practices that expand pathways to economic opportunity.

For SkillsFWD, Madelyn served as a central connector across grantees, partners, and technical experts. She led day-to-day engagement and oversaw research and assessment functions, aligning technical assistance, learning activities, and evaluation efforts to drive implementation and generate insights.



Lori Vitenheimer
Administrative Director

Lori Vitenheimer is an operations and administrative professional with experience supporting complex, multi-partner education and workforce initiatives. She brings strong organizational, coordination, and process management skills that enable project teams to operate efficiently and stay aligned across timelines, budgets, and deliverables.

For SkillsFWD, Lori provided administrative and operational support across the initiative, assisting with documentation, scheduling, budgeting, and logistics for both the project team and the research and discovery team.

Goals

- Provide high-level direction and ensure smooth operations, including alignment with funder priorities, efficient administration, and cross-team coordination.
- Facilitate opportunities for learning and success by connecting grantees with subject matter experts, the R&D and assessment team, and one another, while providing access to relevant resources and guidance.
- Foster a collaborative grantee community that encourages knowledge sharing, peer support, and engagement with best practices across the initiative.
- Maintain strong relationships with funders, external partners, and ecosystem stakeholders to enable collaboration, resource sharing, and alignment with broader workforce and learning objectives.
- Track and synthesize grantee activities and outcomes to surface insights, inform iterative improvements, and support evidence-based decision-making for the initiative.

Approach

Stakeholder Engagement and Project Design
The Project Team served as the primary interface with RPA and funders, managing expectations, budgets, reporting, and other stakeholder communications throughout the initiative. The team translated funder priorities into actionable project structures by convening subject matter experts to inform the initiative design and the RFP process. They led the grantee selection process, coordinating between funders and the selection committee to review applications and finalize grantee cohorts.

Grantee Support and Cohort Development
Once grantees were selected, the Project Team facilitated onboarding and established clear expectations, ensuring each grantee had the necessary teams and supports in place. The team organized monthly meetings with project and research teams to track progress, identify opportunities for targeted support, and maintain alignment across all activities. Additionally, the team hosted monthly and periodic in-person cohort meetings to foster peer learning, share insights from subject matter experts, and strengthen connections across grantees.

Team Management and Operational Oversight
The Project Team managed the R&D and assessment teams to ensure their work supported grantee success while meeting funder requirements and benefiting the broader ecosystem. They collaborated with communications partners to share findings and highlight grantee successes, and oversaw administrative processes—including grantmaking, reporting, and documentation—to maintain operational efficiency and provide funders with the information necessary to guide future investments in this space.

Lessons Learned

- **Peer learning is invaluable.** Providing structured and unstructured opportunities for grantees to connect, share experiences, and learn from one another was consistently highlighted as one of the most valuable aspects of the grant. Cohort meetings, peer discussions, and informal networking fostered knowledge exchange and strengthened grantee capacity.
- **Collaborative funders offer both value and complexity.** Working with a funder collaborative supporting complex systems brings the benefit of multiple perspectives and priorities, which can enrich program design and ecosystem alignment. At the same time, balancing these expectations requires careful coordination and compromises to ensure all voices are heard while maintaining clear guidance for grantees.
- **Early support is critical.** Grantees often needed more time and assistance at the start than anticipated, due to distinct regulatory processes, procurement and finance challenges, and varying levels of internal team alignment. Providing early and proactive support helped teams establish momentum and set the foundation for successful project implementation.
- **Objective experts strengthen implementation.** Engaging third-party technical experts and evaluators is essential for ensuring grantees met technical expectations, while also providing independent insights to inform best practices in emerging areas such as LERs and skills-based hiring. Objective guidance helped maintain rigor, consistency, and credibility across the initiative.
- **Clear expectations drive accountability.** Establishing explicit expectations at the outset, including in RFPs and action plans, was critical for supporting grantees and maintaining accountability. Clear communication of deliverables and responsibilities minimized surprises, promoted adherence to project goals, and allowed grantees to plan effectively throughout the grant period.