01. Timeline

The SkillsFWD Story

The SkillsFWD initiative unfolded across a series of carefully planned phases, each designed to advance the development, demonstration, and adoption of interoperable LER ecosystems. From early collaborative planning to grantee selection, onboarding, and full implementation, each phase built on the last to ensure that grantees' challenges were taken into account during this demonstration grant and projects were positioned for real-world impact. The following timeline highlights key milestones, activities, and participants, illustrating how the initiative progressed from concept to actionable evidence and field-wide learning.



Project Timeline

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Spring 2023-
Summer 2023

Development

The development phase of SkillsFWD was grounded in deep collaboration and intentional ecosystem alignment. Walmart, serving as chair of the SkillsFWD funder collaborative, convened a group of strategically aligned funders with a shared interest in advancing skills-based learning and hiring. From the onset, the goal was not simply to fund individual projects, but to design an initiative that could meaningfully shape the future of LERs at a critical moment for the field.

The grant design process was highly participatory. Funders and the initiative team engaged dozens of subject matter experts through interviews, focus groups, and facilitated working sessions. These experts represented a wide range of perspectives, including technology, education and training, employers, and governance. Insights from this process directly informed the creation of the Request for Proposals (RFP) as well as the SkillsFWD Principles, Rights, and Responsibilities (PRRs)—a set of guidelines intended to ensure that funded projects prioritized user agency, trust, interoperability, and scalability while still allowing for innovation across varied contexts.

This development work served a critical purpose: establishing shared expectations and a common LER implementation framework to set the stage for future scale and interoperability. The PRRs, in particular, helped align stakeholders across the ecosystem and have since been adopted and adapted by other initiatives, including the LER Accelerator Coalition, reinforcing SkillsFWD's role in shaping broader field alignment.

Fall 2023

Grantee Selection

The response to the SkillsFWD RFP underscored the timeliness and relevance of the initiative. More than 55 teams applied for just six available grants, representing a wide range of sectors, geographies, and use cases. The application process was intentionally rigorous, reflecting the initiative's emphasis on readiness and real-world implementation. Applicants were required to submit detailed proposals, secure letters of commitment from key partners across the LER ecosystem, and clearly articulate how their projects would meet each of the SkillsFWD PRRs.

Grantee selection was conducted by a committee of 25 subject matter experts drawn from across the education, workforce, technology, and policy landscapes. Reviewers assessed applications based on multiple criteria, including the quality and feasibility of the proposed work, demonstrated readiness to execute complex, multi-partner projects, and alignment with SkillsFWD's guiding principles. Importantly, selection decisions also considered the value of the cohort as a whole, with the goal of supporting a diverse set of use cases that could generate transferable insights for the broader ecosystem.

This phase advanced SkillsFWD's objectives by identifying teams positioned to move beyond conceptual pilots and into implementation—teams capable of demonstrating how interoperable LER systems could function across the full lifecycle in real labor and education markets.

Winter 2024

Onboarding

The onboarding phase focused on setting grantees up for success by formalizing partnerships, disbursing funds, and aligning expectations across the cohort. During this period, the SkillsFWD team worked closely with grantee leads to ensure that the right stakeholders were fully engaged and that governance, communication, and project management structures were in place.

Within the first couple of months of the grant period, one initially selected grantee was unable to finalize partnership agreements due to state procurement limitations and withdrew from the project. As a result, in Spring 2024, two additional grantees were selected from among the top applicants to split the original award amount, receiving $700,000 each. Both teams had already completed significant preparatory work, maintained strong relationships with technology vendors and ecosystem partners, and were able to quickly onboard and integrate with the existing cohort.

This phase reinforced the initiative's emphasis on adaptability and momentum. By bringing in teams that were ready to execute, the onboarding process ensured continuity across the cohort and preserved SkillsFWD's ability to generate meaningful, comparable insights across multiple demonstrations.

Spring 2024-
Fall 2025

Implementation

The implementation phase represented the core of the SkillsFWD initiative. Grantees were given approximately 20–22 months from the start of their grant period to complete their projects and submit final reports. During this time, teams worked to design, build, test, and refine interoperable LER ecosystems tailored to specific regional or sector-based workforce challenges.

Implementation activities varied across grantees but commonly included developing and/or integrating digital credentialing infrastructure, aligning skills taxonomies, engaging employers and training providers, piloting learner and worker use cases, and testing how LERs could be issued, shared, and used in real hiring or advancement decisions. Throughout this phase, grantees tracked metrics of success, incorporated user feedback, and documented lessons learned related to adoption, interoperability, and trust. Grantees had regular communication with one another through which they learned from one anothers' challenges and shared emerging best practices.

This phase directly advanced SkillsFWD's primary objectives by generating concrete proof points of what it takes to operationalize LERs at the ecosystem level. Detailed descriptions of grantee activities and outcomes are presented in subsequent sections of this report.

Winter 2026

Closing

The closing phase marked the transition from implementation to synthesis and knowledge sharing. After grantees completed their projects and submitted final reports, the SkillsFWD team focused on aggregating findings, identifying cross-cutting themes, and distilling lessons learned from across the cohort. This work was essential to translating individual demonstrations into insights that could inform future investments, policy decisions, and ecosystem coordination.

Closing activities included final evaluations, synthesis of outcomes related to interoperability and lifecycle progress, and reflection on remaining barriers to scale. The initiative team also engaged funders, partners, and the broader field to share findings and reinforce alignment with other skills-based and LER-focused efforts.

This final phase ensured that SkillsFWD's impact extended beyond the funded projects themselves, contributing actionable knowledge and shared frameworks to advance the broader goal of equitable, skills-based hiring and learning systems.

Grantee Experience

This timeline reflects how the initiative evolved alongside the work itself, balancing ambitious goals with the realities of implementing complex, interoperable LER systems.

The original plan anticipated completing the initial demonstration phase by August 2025. However, due to the scope and complexity of the work, an extension was granted until October 2025. Four of the seven grantees participated in the extension. Throughout the initiative, **the four SkillsFWD workstreams—cohort development, research and discovery (R&D), technical and IUX assessment, and communications**—operated in close coordination to support grantee success, maintain alignment with expectations, and document lessons for the broader ecosystem.

MILESTONES

- Cohort Development
- Research and Discovery (R&D)
- Technical and IUX Assessment
- Communications

Fall 2023

- RFP released, application process, grantee selection
- Initial cohort announced, with public announcement at Retail Opportunity Network in Bentonville

Winter 2024

- Initial cohort onboarding, developing teams, procurement
- Initial meeting with R&D team in Arizona where R&D dimensions of progress, process, and metrics were established

Spring 2024

- CAEL and WGU joined the cohort
- First in-person meeting as a full cohort in DC in conjunction with NGA Skills-Based States Event

Summer 2024

- First 6-month report
- 6 month webinar, sharing progress to date and early insights

Fall 2024

- In-person meeting in Colorado Springs in conjunction with CBExchange
- First quarterly report on R&D metrics
- Formative technical and IUX assessments

Winter 2025

- Second 6-month report
- Second quarterly report on R&D metrics
- First edition of FWD Thinking Published

Spring 2025

- Third quarterly report on R&D metrics
- Second edition of FWD Thinking published

Summer 2025

- In-person meeting in Boulder in conjunction with Badge Summit, grantees presented table talks
- Final report and R&D metrics due for August-end grantees
- Summative technical assessments for August-end grantees
- Third edition of FWD Thinking published

Fall 2025

- Final report and R&D metrics for extension grantees
- Summative technical assessments for October-end grantees
- Final edition of FWD Thinking Published

Ongoing Activities

- Monthly cohort meetings - opportunity to connect with one another
- Monthly team meetings - check in with SkillsFWD team, updates on projects, identifying resources needed, etc.
- Monthly office hours - informal opportunities to connect and share
- Technical assistance and support available to grantees
- Monthly R&D meetings cohort meetings
- Quarterly R&D individual team meetings
- Regular social media promotion and engagement
- Monthly newsletter featuring grantee and ecosystem updates
- Regular grantee feature blog posts