03. Case Studies

The diverse ways LERs are being explored, implemented, and scaled across the SkillsFWD grantees.

While all projects shared a common commitment to advancing skills-based practices and interoperable digital records, each was shaped by distinct community needs, institutional contexts, and strategic priorities. As a result, the teams pursued different use cases, assembled different partnerships, and encountered unique challenges that required adaptive approaches.

Each case study is organized to provide a clear view into these efforts, including the project's background and origins, the partners and roles that formed the project team, a description of implementation and key milestones, major takeaways and lessons learned, and plans for sustaining and expanding the work. Together, these case studies illustrate that there is no single path to LER implementation. Instead, successful efforts are grounded in intentional design, strong relationships, and solutions tailored to the learners, workers, employers, and systems they are meant to serve.





Montana Validated Skills Demonstration

Pilot LERs to understand large scale adoption across all sectors and Montana's urban, rural, and Indigenous communities and with small and medium employers.

Accelerate Montana

Serving small businesses incumbent workers, rural and Indigenous communities

Background

When Montana set out to experiment with LERs, they were responding to a set of challenges shaped by the state's geography, economy, and communities. Montana is large and sparsely populated, with tight-knit relationships among employers, educators, and learners. They aimed to reach small businesses which form the backbone of the state's economy, rural communities, and Tribal Nations, which bring unique cultural strengths that often remain invisible in traditional workforce systems. The state's unique combination of needs, assets, and momentum made Montana a strong candidate to explore whether LERs could serve as a unifying tool to bridge institutions, employers, and learners across very different contexts.

The team, led by Accelerate Montana, took a deeply user-centric approach, partnering with 4 Poles Educational Consulting and Education Design Lab. These efforts allowed them to identify and promote use cases and approaches that most resonated with their target users to demonstrate success that can be leveraged for expanded efforts.

Team

ACCELERATE MT

Team Lead

Set vision, convened and managed partnerships, ensured project progress.

4 Poles Educational Consulting Group

User Engagement & Consulting

Led user engagement work and case study with the Blackfeet Nation.

1:1 Studios

Communications

Produced video featuring the work done with the Blackfeet Nation.

Credential Engine™

Technology Partner

Provided tech and data infrastructure for the statewide credential registry development.

SmartResume

Technology Partner

Provided technology that enables learners and incumbent workers to store and share digital credentials

CANVAS Credentials

Technology Partner

Created digital credential issuing technology and designed credentials.

Edalex

Advisor

Advised on the process of translating Blackfeet cultural values into Rich Skill Descriptors.

Education Design Lab

User Engagement

Supported user engagement work with employers and learners.

Implemenation

Accelerate Montana

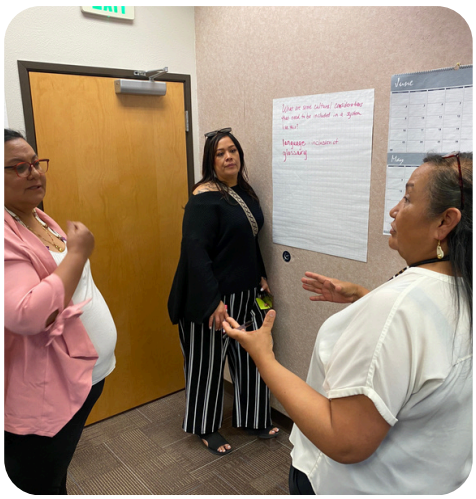
Serving small businesses incumbent workers, rural and Indigenous communitiess

The Accelerate Montana team began their project with deep user engagement, working to understand how LERs could serve the needs of small businesses as well as rural and Indigenous communities. They partnered with 4 Poles Educational Consulting to lead virtual sessions with learner personas from the Blackfeet Nation, exploring how individuals and employers understood skills, learning, and cultural values in relation to work. Insights from these sessions shaped the team's communication and outreach strategy, helping them design materials that resonated with their target users and reflected the priorities and language of the community.

For their work with small businesses, Accelerate Montana collaborated with Education Design Lab to engage employers directly. Through these conversations, they found that hiring was not the main challenge—retention and maximizing the skills of existing employees were these employers' primary challenges. Many employers expressed a need for tools to better inventory and manage their teams' capabilities. This user feedback guided the project team's technology choices and revealed important considerations for implementation. Accelerate Montana had been using Canvas Credentials prior to the grant and chose to continue leveraging that asset for this project since it was known and used by other Montana organizations. They also established a partnership with SmartResume as their digital wallet.

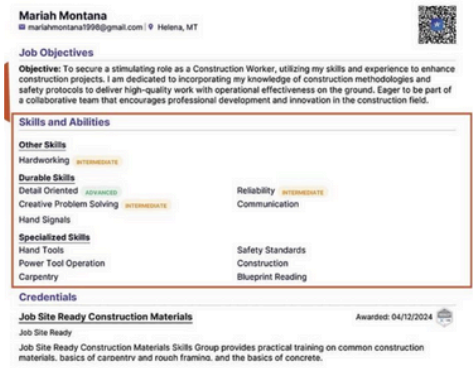
During product testing, they discovered that many participating employers used Gmail accounts, which SmartResume did not yet support. Rather than let this limit participation, the team worked directly with the vendor to ensure compatibility. This responsiveness to user needs reflected the project's human-centered approach and helped strengthen employer trust and engagement.

To further understand how SmartResume could support internal talent management, the project team first tested the platform within their own organization. Staff participated in a short workshop to compare their skills and experiences to their job descriptions, identifying strengths and growth areas. This exercise helped the team visualize how LERs could reveal hidden skills and align individual development with organizational needs—insights they later shared to illustrate the tool's potential value for other small employers.



In January 2025, Accelerate Montana began working with Credential Engine to pilot a statewide credential registry partnering with six two-year and community colleges, developing standards and guidelines to support statewide credential transparency. Momentum for the team's work grew in 2025 when the Montana legislature passed the STARS Act, requiring the creation of a statewide credential registry. The registry not only advanced the state's goals but also created a pathway for the RSDs developed with the Blackfeet Nation to be recognized within Montana's broader education and employment ecosystem.

In parallel, the team advanced their work with the Blackfeet Nation. Collaborating with Edalex and 4 Poles Educational Consulting, they began translating the Blackfoot Living Principles, rooted cultural values, into rich skill descriptors. The result was a draft set of nine cultural competencies, each capturing the ways traditional knowledge and values align with transferable workplace skills.



Throughout the project, the team maintained strong relationships with Montana state leaders and other ongoing workforce initiatives, ensuring alignment and shared learning. By grounding their work in authentic user engagement, leveraging existing technology, and demonstrating the value of LERs through real-world use cases, Accelerate Montana has built a durable foundation for continued progress. As the project transitions beyond the grant period, the team is well positioned to extend its reach—scaling its employer pilots, advancing the statewide credential registry, and deepening the integration of cultural and community-based skills into Montana's talent ecosystem.

Insights for the Field

Translating cultural principles elevates unseen skills.
Values and skills that are gained within a specific cultural context are often not visible to employers and are likely to be undervalued and overlooked in an employment context. By taking the time to translate those values into skills-based language, employers can surface candidates that align with their needs which they may not have recognized before, unlocking opportunities for individuals to leverage their lived experience at work.

Understanding and building for user priorities drives adoption.
We most often talk about the value of LERs for employers in the context of skills-based hiring, but they have other important applications as well. Accelerate Montana realized that by being open to pivoting their approach to address the most pressing needs their target employers were facing, they were able to drive adoption of the technology which could lead to leveraging other features as needs arise.

Looking Ahead

By the end of 2025, the project aims to complete the statewide credential registry pilot and continue its work with the Blackfeet Nation personnel office. In 2026, the focus will expand to collaborate with the state on its credential registry and support small business adoption of LERs for workforce management.

Overall, the Accelerate Montana team is positioned to take the technical and data infrastructure they have built, along with what they have learned through intensive stakeholder engagement through the grant period, to expand their reach in partnership with organizations across the state.