

FELLOWSHIP SPOTLIGHT



Supporting Michigan's Sixty by 30 Efforts to Close Skills Gap and Increase Postsecondary Attainment

Michigan's labor market demands a more educated and skilled workforce, yet it ranks 34th in the country with only 48.9% of its adults holding a postsecondary education.¹ And until recently, Michigan was one of nine states without an educational attainment goal. To address this, during her first State of the State address in 2019, Governor Whitmer set an ambitious goal to raise the state's postsecondary attainment rate to 60% by 2030 and outlined a series of initiatives focused on improving the state's economy by:

- *closing the skills gap*
- *increasing opportunity for Michiganders, and*
- *making the state's economy more competitive.*



¹Lumina Foundation, A Stronger Nation: State-by-state comparisons

The Challenge

Despite the strong bipartisan support in the legislature for some of these initiatives— including a program designed to boost post-secondary educational attainment called **Michigan Reconnect** (Reconnect) — the COVID-19 pandemic required that funding for new programs be repurposed to address more immediate needs and temporarily derailed these economic development efforts.

In recognizing both the tremendous sacrifice Michigan’s frontline workers made during its state shutdown in spring 2020 and the steps required to support Michigan’s economy, the Governor sought to advance a new policy effort that was inspired by the G.I. Bill provided to U.S. veterans after World War II. **Futures for Frontliners** (Frontliners) was outlined as a state scholarship program for Michiganders without college degrees who worked in essential industries during the shutdown period, providing them with tuition-free access to Michigan’s public community colleges to pursue an associate degree or industry-recognized certificate. The Governor announced the program to the public in April 2020 and earmarked \$24 million of the Governor’s Emergency Education Relief (GEER) Fund from the CARES Act to launch the program and provide the scholarship awards.^{2,3}

In order to meet the deadline to expend the federal funds supporting the program and give applicants enough time to apply for the opportunity, the program had to be designed, marketed, and launched within four months.⁴

The Fellowship

In 2019, the University of Michigan’s Youth Policy Lab placed a Data & Policy Fellow with the Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity (LEO) to provide LEO leadership with technical assistance and strategic support in improving its state-run programs. When the COVID-19 pandemic set in roughly six months into the placement, the Fellow was reassigned to assist the State of Michigan in identifying its short- and long-term priorities to address Michigan’s growing economic and healthcare crisis. Frontliners was one of those priorities.

In April 2020, the Fellow joined a small, new interagency team, which was led by the Governor’s Education Advisor and included 1 staff member from LEO and 5 from the Department of Treasury’s Student Scholarships and Grants Outreach (SSGO) office. The Fellow was assigned to support the project team leaders in designing and marketing the Frontliners program to help ensure the team met their goals in time for the program’s scheduled launch in September 2020. As a brand-new program and first-of-its-kind in the nation, much of it had to be shaped during the condensed period of time. This challenge presented a perfect opportunity for the Fellow to assist in all aspects of the process while promoting the use of data and evaluation to drive decisions around the program’s design and reach.

The Strategy

Phase 1: Pre-launch | April – September 2020

- Building a network of champions and partners to support the marketing and outreach of the program and maintaining communication with all 60+ Champions and Get Out the Word partners, including Michigan's labor unions, trade associations, corporations, and non-profit organizations.
- Drafting program guidelines,
- Developing the scholarship application and system logic for interpreting the application results,
- Developing information on the Frontliners website, including the frequently asked questions (FAQ) page to help inform the public,
- Drafting email communications to keep applicants informed and engaged in the application process.
- Hosting orientations on the program and developing necessary training documents for:
 - Student Scholarships, Grants and Outreach's (SSGO) Customer Care Center, which provides customer service support to applicants,
 - Adult Education providers, and
 - Representatives from each of the Michigan Works! offices
- Establishing a protocol for sharing feedback from the Customer Care Center to LEO in order to ensure concerns and issues are resolved in real time.
- Creating a secondary verification process for applicants whose eligibility could not be verified with wage record data during the second quarter of 2020.
- Presenting about the program to the public and internal and external partners at over 20 town halls, live webinars, or stakeholder meetings.

Phase 2: Application Period | September – December 2020

Having been heavily involved in the program's pre-launch period, the Fellow was appointed to lead the program, under the newly developed **Sixty by 30** office and oversee the implementation and management of the program's Community College pathway, including:

- Monitoring and analyzing weekly applicant demographic data to better inform marketing and communication outreach efforts across the state, including working with Michigan's Labor Market Information team to develop **public-facing data visualizations**.
- Developing a handbook with FAQs on the program for the Community Colleges, in collaboration with stakeholders, to guide and inform their staff in supporting interested applicants and current students on applying for, receiving, and maintaining the scholarship award.
- Assessing the efficacy of the secondary verification process, onboarding and training a team of reviewers to review employment verification forms, and developing a remote review process to both reduce administrative burden and shorten the review turnaround time to applicants.
- Monitoring questions, concerns, and feedback from the Customer Care Center, members of the public, champions and partners, and financial aid staff from community colleges to identify trends and determine where improvements needed to be made in outreach.

The Results

During its three-month application period, Frontliners received just over 121,000 applications of interest. At the time of this report, scholarship applications are still being reviewed, with over 80,000 accepted thus far. In its first semester of scholarship recipients, the community colleges reported that over 15,000 scholarship recipients had enrolled in the winter/spring 2021 semester.

The Next Steps

Phase 3: January 2021 and beyond

With the first semester of Frontliners scholarship recipients enrolled in classes in January 2021, administrative attention has shifted from marketing the program to ensuring accepted applicants have the information and resources needed to successfully take advantage of the scholarship opportunity, enroll in community college, and eventually graduate. The Fellow will continue to lead the Frontliners program and support LEO leadership in achieving high persistence and completion rates for the scholarship recipients by:

- Maintaining active communication and partnership with the community colleges to ensure they have the information needed to effectively award and support the Frontliners scholarship recipients.
- Collaborating with partners to develop a system to encourage persistence and completion for F4F scholarship recipients while they are enrolled in school.
- Connecting LEO, the Youth Policy Lab, and UpJohn Institute to develop a pilot intervention for providing career and post-secondary information to the public.
- Developing a communications plan which encourages and supports accepted applicants via emails and text message reminders to complete necessary steps to receiving their award.

Frontliners serves as both a model for other states looking to increase postsecondary attainment and as a pilot for Reconnect – which launched in February 2021. This allows the state to test out the design, implementation, and interventions on a smaller, more targeted scale with Frontliners before applying efforts to the larger Reconnect scholarship program. With the Fellow's hands-on experience and comprehensive knowledge designing and implementing the Frontliners program, the Fellow has been working with the Reconnect program team to share practical lessons learned and provide guidance to support the state's efforts in developing an inclusive universal education system and meet its Sixty by 30 goals.

The Fellow



Avazeh Attari is a Data & Policy Fellow for the Youth Policy Lab focusing on workforce development issues. Prior to joining YPL, Ava worked with NGOs in the US, Tanzania, and Myanmar and the US Peace Corps in Madagascar to design, implement, and manage projects and programs on promoting social cohesion and inter-communal harmony, understanding and accessing citizenship for ethnic and religious minorities, and improving health care access and delivery for at-risk populations. Ava holds an MPA in Development Practice from Columbia University and a BA in Anthropology from the University of Central Florida.

The Lab

The University of Michigan Youth Policy Lab helps community and government agencies make better decisions by measuring what really works. We're data experts who believe that government can and must do better for the people of Michigan. We're also parents and community members who dream of a brighter future for all of our children. At the Youth Policy Lab, we're working to make that dream a reality by strengthening programs that address some of our most pressing social challenges.

We recognize that the wellbeing of youth is intricately linked to the wellbeing of families and communities, so we engage in work that impacts all age ranges. Using rigorous evaluation design and data analysis, we're working closely with our partners to build a future where public investments are based on strong evidence, so all Michiganders have a pathway to prosperity.

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