



# Lessons from TAACCCT

*Recommendations for  
Future Evaluation  
Investments*

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*This ambitious project would not have been possible without the collaboration of the Center on Education & Skills at New America (CESNA) and Bragg & Associates, Inc. Our combined team included Mary Alice McCarthy (CESNA director), along with Iris Palmer, Ivy Love, and Sophie Nguyen; and Debra Bragg (president of Bragg & Assoc.), with consultants Elizabeth Apple Meza and Grant Blume. The work involved securing the full complement of Trade Adjustment Act Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) third-party evaluations, nearly 220 in all. The review process yielded a meta-analysis of quasi-experimental design studies, as well as two briefs describing strategies advanced by TAACCCT: prior learning assessment (PLA) and comprehensive student supports. Numerous third-party evaluators offered valuable input, as did personnel from the U.S. Departments of Labor and Education, urging us to use an objective lens to reveal lessons for future federal endeavors of this sort.*

*We are immensely grateful to the Lumina Foundation for its generous funding of several projects focusing on TAACCCT, with ours highlighting results of the third-party evaluation studies.*

# FOREWORD

In 2008, the nation experienced one of the most alarming economic downturns in its history. Surpassed only by the Great Depression, the federal government marshaled resources to fund grants dedicated to helping unemployed workers secure living-wage jobs. Recognizing the assets of nearly 1,000 community colleges across the country, the U.S. Department of Labor invited them to apply for funding to implement and scale integrated education and workforce development programs. Dedicated to increasing the capacity of colleges to support economic recovery, the TAACCCT grants required rigorous third-party evaluation to assess the impact of federal funding. Would participants in grant-funded programs attain credentials that lead to good jobs? Would graduates' wages increase after program completion? These and other questions framed the plethora of third-party evaluation studies that produced detailed information on program implementation and impact. Based on careful analysis of all TAACCCT evaluation reports, this brief offers recommendations for the evaluation of future federal investments in community colleges and workforce development.

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# WHAT IS TAACCCT?

*When the nation's economy slipped into the deepest recession since the Great Depression, the federal government sought the help of community colleges as never before.*

*More than any time in their over 100 years of existence, community colleges were spotlighted through the TAACCCT grants as a national priority to postsecondary education, workforce, and economic development.*

The U.S. Congress created the nearly \$2 billion Trade Adjustment Act Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant in 2010 at the height of the Great Recession. Seeking a policy that would help citizens return to living-wage jobs, the Department of Labor (DOL), with input from the Department of Education (ED), established the largest federal investment in community colleges in our nation's history.

Between 2011 and 2018, DOL made 256 awards through four rounds of competitive grants. Of the 729 postsecondary institutions funded, 630 (85%) were community colleges. Of all community colleges in the U.S., approximately two-thirds secured TAACCCT funding to engage in reforms to build capacity to deliver integrated education and workforce training.

TAACCCT charged grantees with implementing programs that “provide workers with the education and skills to succeed in high-wage, high-skill occupations” (DOL, 2016, p. 3). Grantees were encouraged to develop career programs that would offer student participants immediate- and long-term economic and other benefits.

# SNAPSHOT OF TAACCCT

The TAACCCT grant charged community colleges and other postsecondary institutions with enrolling adult workers who had lost their jobs or who needed initial training or retaining to find employment in a dramatically changing workforce.

From 2011 to 2018, four-year TAACCCT grants were made to all 50 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia (DC), stipulating that the funds be used to implement new or to update programs of study using evidence-based innovations and strategies.

A critical element of TAACCCT grants was to increase college capacity to deliver integrated postsecondary education and workforce training. DOL credits TAACCCT with accomplishments listed in the box to the right:

- 146 institutional grants
- 84 single-state consortia
- 26 multi-state consortia
- Wide range of industry sectors involved, manufacturing and healthcare most prominent
- 2,700 new or redesigned programs implemented
- Over 500,000 students enrolled
- More than 350,000 credentials earned



# TARGETED STUDENTS AND STRATEGIES

*The DOL solicitation for TAACCCT asked grantees to enroll workers who had “lost their jobs” or were “threatened with job loss as a result of foreign trade” (p. 1). Grantees were encouraged to implement strategies (called “core elements”) with sufficiently rigorous evidence to support a sizeable federal investment.*

<i>Targeted Student Participants</i>	<i>Evidence-based Strategies</i>
Non-traditional-age learners	Career pathways with stackable credentials, prior learning assessment (PLA), and student supports
Trade-Adjustment Act (TAA)-eligible workers	Transfer and articulation, including credit transfer to baccalaureate education
Unemployed and under-employed workers	Online and technology-enabled instruction and supports
Veterans and veterans' families	Employer and public workforce agency engagement
Individuals with financial needs, disabilities, and other basic needs	Strategic alignment with industry, governors, public workforce systems, and others

# INTENDED OUTPUTS AND OUTCOMES

*Intended outputs and outcomes articulated in the DOL solicitation for TAACCCT were extensive, focusing on students, programs, colleges, and workforce measures.*

## *Capacity-building Outputs*

### *Student/participant education outcomes:*

- Enroll students in TAACCCT-supported programs
- Encourage student persistence
- Support completion of programs
- Provide opportunity to earn credentials of value

### *Implementation of strategies/core elements:*

- Develop partnerships with employers, workforce, other colleges, and others
- Expand student services
- Upgrade facilities and equipment
- Employ online and technology infrastructure
- Develop transfer and articulation agreements
- Build evaluation capacity

## *Long-term Outcomes*

### *Student/participant employment outcomes:*

- Improved student/participant employment and earnings outcomes

### *Community college outcomes:*

- Effective training programs with capacity to serve students
- Networked programming in states/regions

### *Workforce outcomes:*

- Increased employer involvement
- Skilled workforce to meet employer demand
- Well-connected, efficient workforce systems in communities and regions



# TAACCCT Evaluation

- 
- + *Evaluation of TAACCCT grants*
  - + *CLEAR standards*
  - + *TAACCCT evaluation studies*

02

# EVALUATION OF TAACCCT GRANTS

*All applicants are required to procure a third-party evaluator who will design and implement an independent evaluation of grant-funded projects... All evaluation plans must include: 1) an analysis of participant impact or outcomes, and 2) a program implementation assessment (DOL SGA for TAACCCT, 2014, p. 77).*

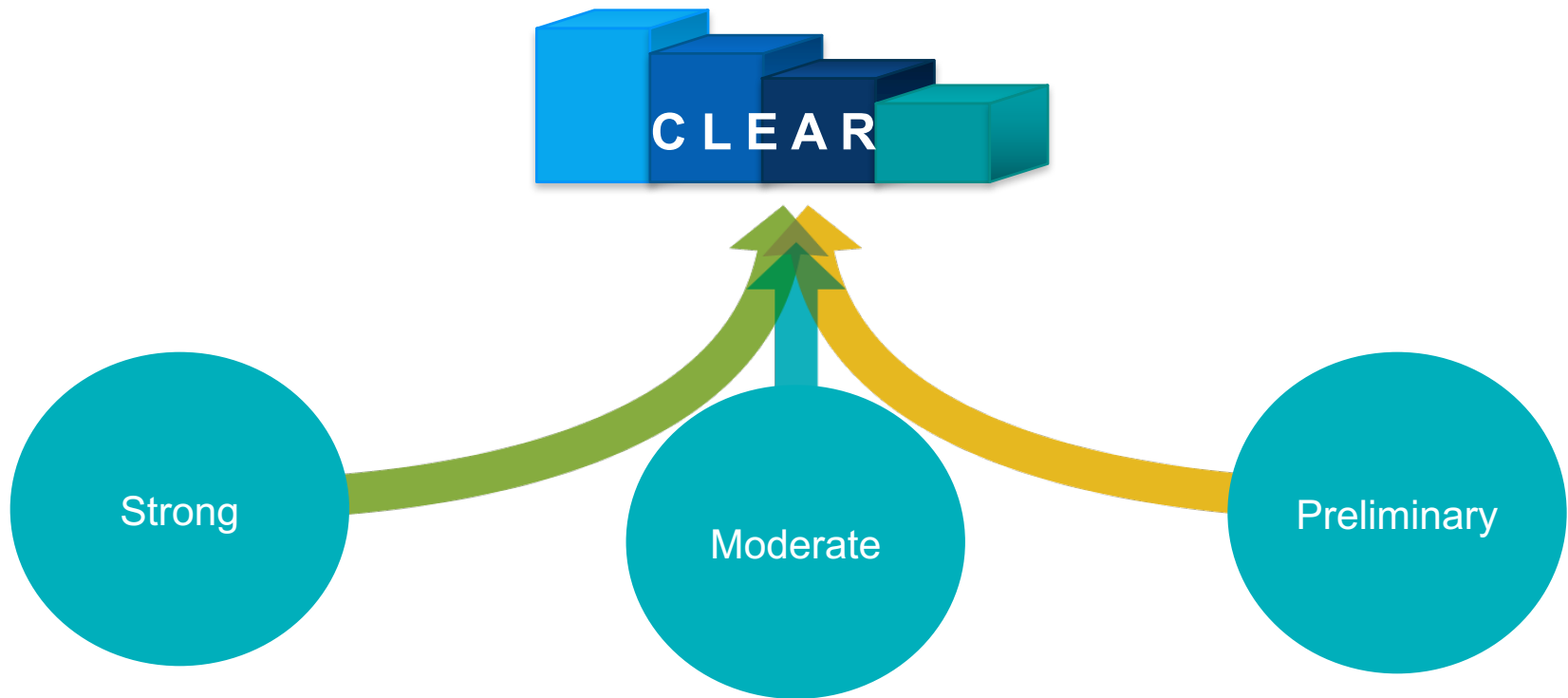
The Solicitation for Grant Application (SGA) for TAACCCT *encouraged* rigorous external evaluation in all four rounds of the program, and third-party evaluation was required in rounds 2-4. As a consequence virtually every grant funded in 2012 and thereafter employed an external evaluator who was assessing implementation, outcomes, and impact.

The SGA was explicit about the need for implementation and replication of evidence-based models, programs, and practices. DOL sought to connect innovations to rigorous evaluation designs funded under TAACCCT in order understand the impact of the grant as well as the potential for scaling up future reforms.

Using the DOL Clearinghouse for Labor and Evaluation Research (CLEAR) standards, grantees were invited to propose evaluation designs that provided the most rigorous level of evidence of impact possible. The standards range from strong to moderate to preliminary, with strong evidence requiring experimental design, moderate evidence representing quasi-experimental design or regression with controls, and preliminary evidence being correlational or descriptive .

Given the focus of TAACCCT on grant implementation by postsecondary institutions, it makes sense that the DOL partnered with the Department of Education to align CLEAR with the Institute from Education Sciences (IES) gold, silver, and bronze standards for rigorous research.

# CLEARINGHOUSE FOR LABOR AND EVALUATION RESEARCH (CLEAR) STANDARDS



Strong evidence is generated by experimental design studies that address causal inference and conclusions with high internal validity. Studies generating strong evidence provide the most compelling evidence for scale-up of programs and core elements.

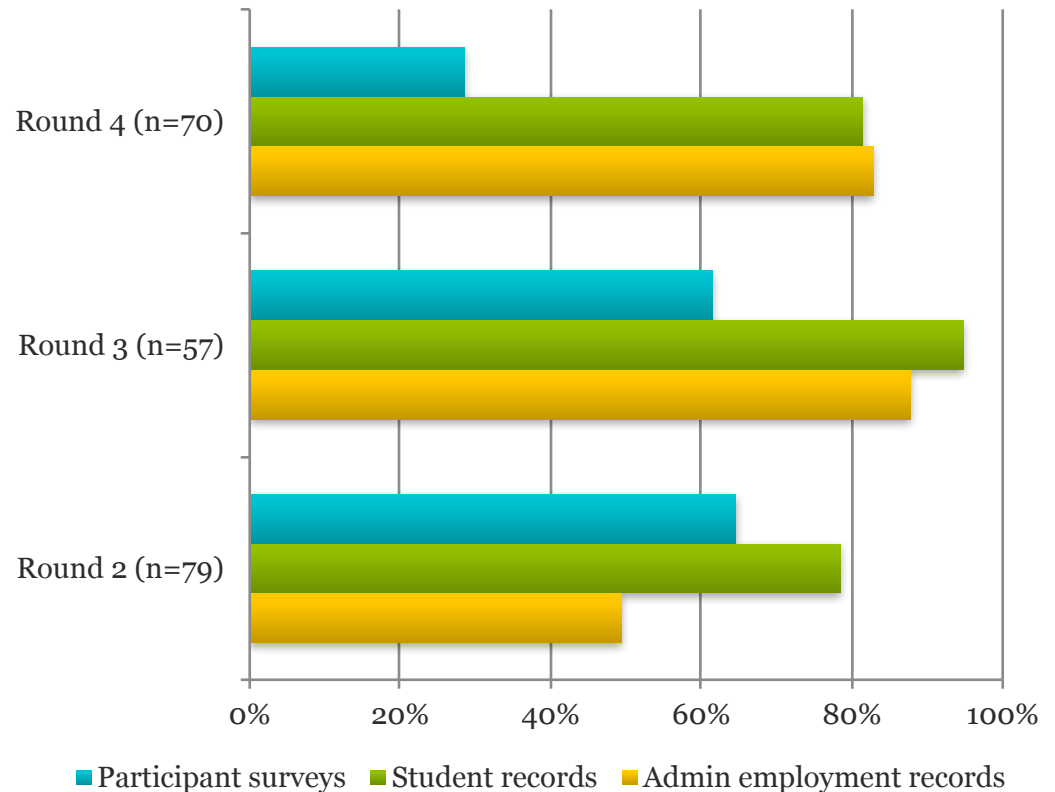
Moderate evidence is generated by experimental, quasi-experimental, and correlational designs using strong statistical controls. Studies providing moderate evidence give some useful information about causal inference and conclusions but lack broader generalizability.

Preliminary evidence is generated by tracking studies, pre- and post-treatment comparisons, and similar designs that offer evidence of limited generalizability. Studies generating preliminary evidence do not offer sufficient quality information to support scaling up.

# TAACCCT EVALUATION STUDIES

*Researchers at the Urban Institute documented third-party evaluation studies funded by TAACCCT, noting the prevalence of quasi-experimental designs and a variety of methods.*

In Rounds 2-4 when third-party evaluations were required of TAACCCT grantees, the vast majority of evaluators made plans to use quasi-experimental design (QED) studies. Based on a series of reports produced by researchers at the Urban Institute (for example, Mikelson, Eyster, Durham, & Cohen, 2017), most evaluators participated in a formal review process to ensure proposed designs were aligned with the CLEAR standards, using a variety of data sources including participant survey, student records, administrative employment records, data collection methods, and comparison groups.





# What We Found

- 
- + *Our team's approach*
  - + *American Evaluation Association (AEA) Standards*
  - + *Initial review results*
  - + *Phases of meta-analysis review*
  - + *Meta-analysis results*

03

# OUR TEAM'S APPROACH

*Our combined team of researchers from CESNA and Bragg & Associates used a multi-phase process to review, analyze, and synthesize information characterizing qualitative and quantitative results of the TAACCCT evaluation studies.*



## *Review*

We began by amassing the total number of third-party evaluation reports for TAACCCT, nearly 200 in all.

We next developed an evaluation rubric and trained team members to independently review the reports, assessing implementation and impact designs, data sources, findings, and conclusions.

## *Analyze*

Qualitative analysis was conducted on studies identified as having used informative implementation evaluation designs, specifically for prior learning assessment and comprehensive student supports.

This analysis involved steps to verify that QED studies were conducive to meta-analysis.

## *Synthesize*

Briefs were produced to report on implementation processes, promising practices, and lessons learned for future policy initiatives.

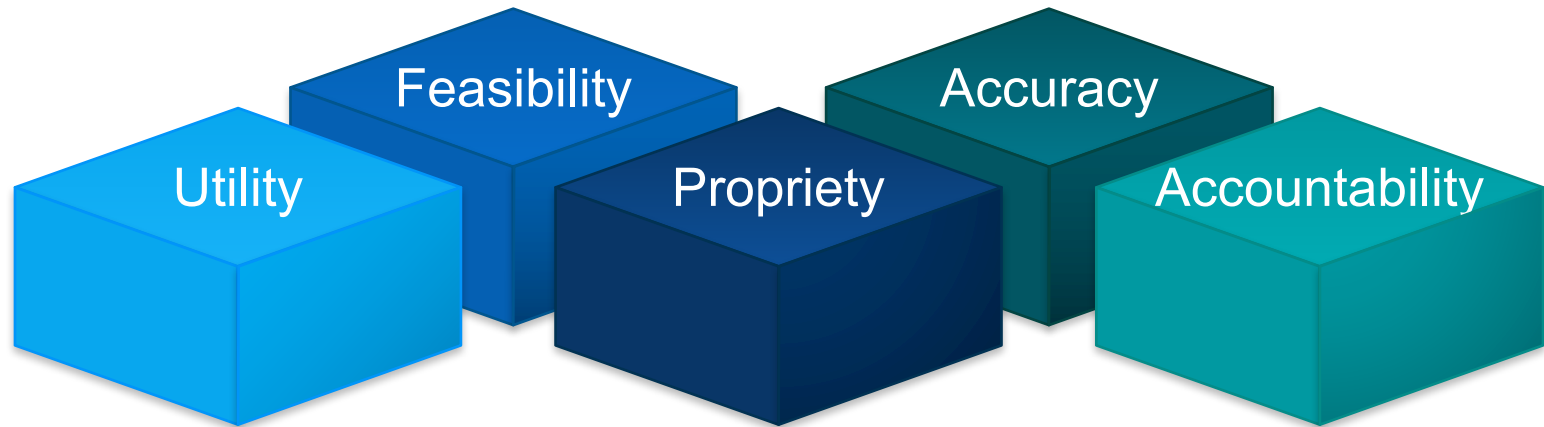
Policy recommendations were prepared and shared with federal agencies and lawmakers.

Academic papers were prepared for the research community.



# AMERICAN EVALUATION ASSOCIATION (AEA) STANDARDS

*An additional framework we found useful was the American Evaluation Association (AEA) standards, competencies, and ethical principles. Our thinking benefited from considering alignment of the AEA standards with culturally responsive evaluation, given TAACCCT's focus on reaching underserved student populations.*



## *Utility*

The extent to which stakeholders find evaluation processes and products valuable

## *Feasibility*

The potential for evaluation to address effectiveness and efficiency

## *Propriety*

The execution of what is proper, fair, legal, and right in the evaluation process

## *Accuracy*

The degree to which representations, propositions, and findings are truthful and dependable, especially interpretations and judgments about quality

## *Accountability*

The way in which evaluation and meta-evaluation focus on improvement and transparency in processes and products

# INITIAL REVIEW RESULTS

*Our team conducted its initial review of third-party evaluation studies between August 2018 and January 2019. Two team members independently reviewed the studies using a rubric that called for rating each evaluation study on the existence and form of rigorous design, usually QED, as well as the relative quality of a theory of change, implementation of programs and strategies, and relationships between implementation and outcomes or impact results.*

## *QED*

Our initial review produced a count of 93 round 2-4 evaluations that provided substantial evidence of a QED study. Another 50 evaluations described comparison studies that could potentially be QED and therefore advanced to the next stage of the meta-analysis.

## *Theory of Change*

The reports varied in the explicit presentation of a theory of change or logic model. Overall, our team gave the reports a 2.3 on a 5-point scale. This distribution of ratings is skewed to the lower end of the scale because a substantial number of reports did not include a theory of change.

## *Implementation*

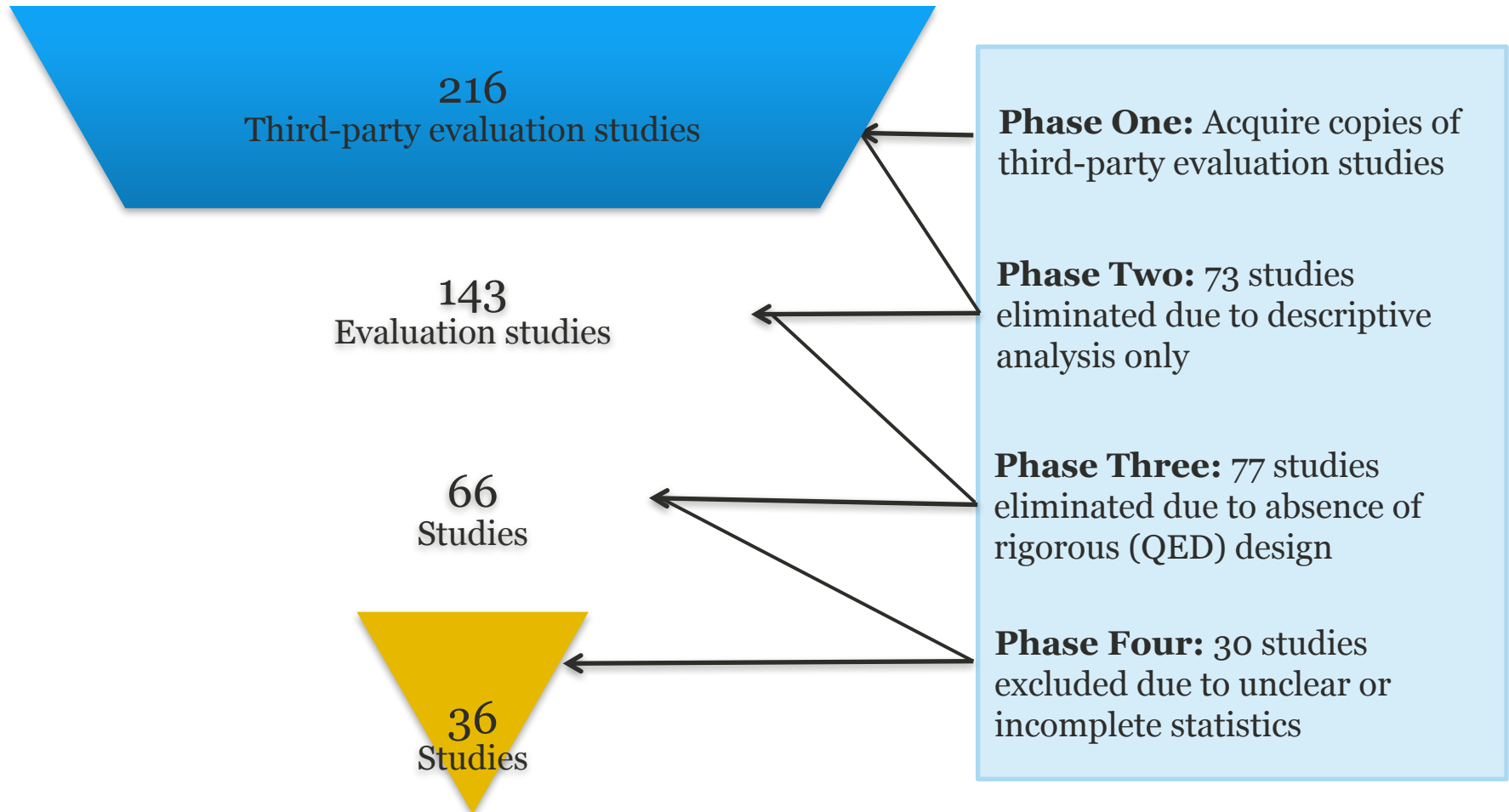
Team member ratings of the relative quality of implementation averaged 3.0 on a 5-point scale. Nearly 100 reports were rated over 3.0, with most between 3.0 and 4.0. The distribution of results shows variation but nearly half of all studies provided valuable information on implementation.

## *Results*

This rating scale focused on the potential linkage between implementation evidence and outcomes results, with an average rating of 2.8 on a 5-point scale. Most studies were rated between 2.0 and 3.0, suggesting weaker evidence of potential impact.

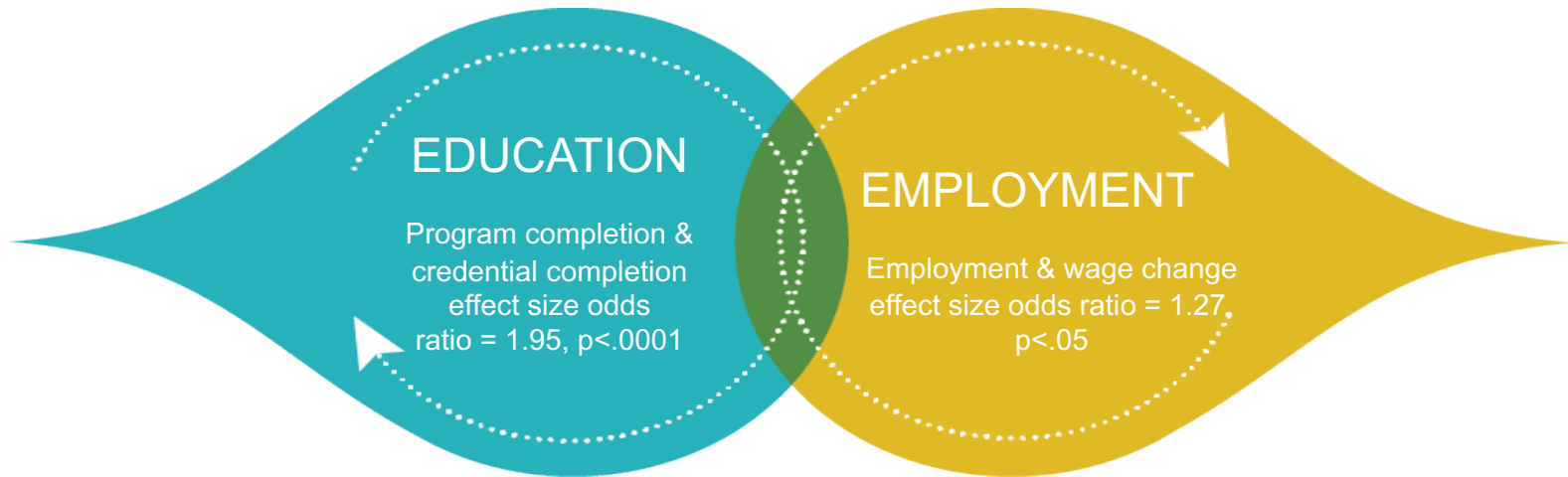
# PHASES OF META-ANALYSIS REVIEW

*We conducted four phases of review, beginning with the total of 216 studies and narrowing to the final set of 36 studies included in the meta-analysis.*



# META-ANALYSIS RESULTS

*TAACCCT had a positive impact on educational and employment outcomes, with participants twice as likely to complete program and attain credential(s) as comparison students. TAACCCT participants were also about 25% more likely to be employed and receive a wage increase as comparison students (Blume, Meza, Bragg, & Love, 2019).*



## *Strategies / Core Elements Implemented in Meta-Analysis Studies*

Career pathways	Stackable and latticed credentials
Prior learning assessment (PLA)	Comprehensive student supports
Career and employment services	Online and technology-enabled learning
Employer engagement	Public workforce partnerships
Evaluation utilization	Sustainability strategies

# What We Suggest

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+ *Recommendations*

+ *Facilitating factors*

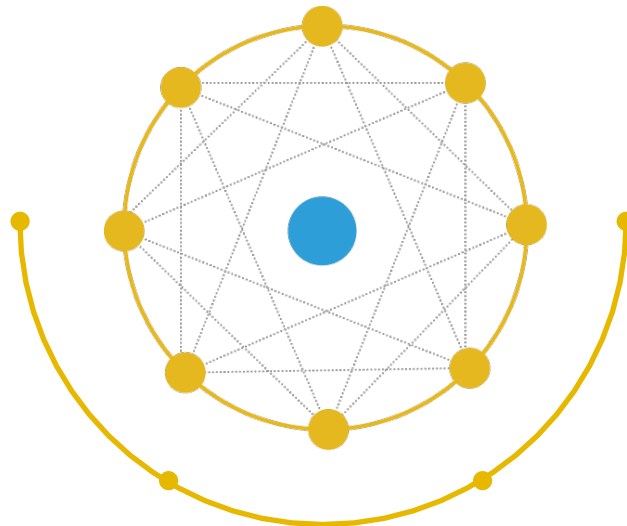
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# RECOMMENDATIONS

*Our study of the TAACCCT evaluation studies led us to offer recommendations in four areas: implementation, impact, outcomes, and sustainability.*

## *Implementation*

Require implementation evaluation to use a theory of change (logic model) to define the intended change, define measures, and document change. Give evaluators technical assistance to enhance their ability to produce accurate implementation results.



## *Impact*

Fund evaluations which use designs (experimental, QED) to produce rigorous evidence. In future federal programs of similar scope as TAACCCT, we estimate about a third of all grants (70 of 200) would produce valuable results on impact and scale. Extensive technical assistance is needed for these evaluators.

## *Outcomes*

Use outcome measures that logically represent intended outcomes for all evaluators as well as grantees. Disaggregate data to ascertain the impact of reforms on student sub-groups.

## *Sustainability*

Ensure grants measure sustainability using evaluation designs, methods, and measures that assess the spread and endurance of programs, strategies, and impact. Use rigorous evaluation to track impact on sub-groups over time.



# FACILITATING FACTORS

*Rigorous evaluations are more likely to be conducted when there is clarity of purpose, strategic alignment of goals to strategies, and consistent communication about what is needed to meet grant expectations. Actions should be taken by the federal government, grantees, and evaluators to ensure that the highest quality evaluation studies are conducted.*



## *Federal government*

Ensure alignment between grant goals, measures, and evaluation requirements

Provide professional development and technical assistance for grantees and evaluators

Assist in providing data sources and timelines to measure impact, especially for administrative employment data



## *Grantees*

Partner with evaluators with the capacity to provide rigorous evaluation

Appropriate adequate funding within the grant to ensure evaluators can conduct rigorous studies over time

Facilitate the use of rigorous evaluation as a form of individual and/or organizational learning to promote and sustain impact



## *Evaluators*

Understand the context and complexity of grant implementation

Adopt developmental evaluation that supports implementation and impact evaluation and organizational learning

Engage cooperatively in promoting the use of rigorous results to scale up transformative change

# REFERENCES

*American Evaluation Association Website, <https://www.eval.org/p/cm/ld/fid=103>*

*Blume, G., Meza, E. A., Bragg, D. D., & Love, I. (2019). Estimating the impact of the nation's largest single investment in community colleges: Lessons and limitations of a meta-analysis of TAACCCT evaluations. Washington, DC: New America.*

*Clearinghouse for Labor and Employment Research (CLEAR), <https://clear.dol.gov/about>*

*Mikelson, K. S., Eyster, L., Durham, C., & Cohen, E. (2017, March). TAACCCT goals, design, and evaluation: The Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training grant program brief 1. Washington, DC: Urban Institute, <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/OASP/legacy/files/20170308-TAACCCT-Brief-1.pdf>*

*What Works Clearinghouse, <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/FWW#>*

# ABOUT

## *Bragg & Associates*

Bragg & Associates is an equity-minded consulting group dedicated to measuring and improving outcomes in education and employment

## *Debra Bragg*

Dr. Debra Bragg is the President of Bragg & Associates and the Director of the Community College Research Initiatives group at the University of Washington. Dr. Bragg is a fellow of the American Educational Research Association and 2016 recipient of the Distinguished Career Award from the Association for the Study of Higher Education.

## *Center on Education & Skills at New America*

The Center on Education & Skills is a research and policy development program focused on the intersection of our higher education, job training, and workforce development systems. The Center is dedicated to building learning-based pathways to economic opportunity that can begin inside or outside of formal higher education.