

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Illinois Opens Application Window for New Workforce Pell Grant Program

Illinois colleges and universities can now seek eligibility for federal Pell Grant funding for short-term, high-quality workforce programs; Illinois approval program protects students from fraudulent programs

SPRINGFIELD – Today, the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE), Illinois Community College Board (ICCB), and the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) announced the release of the Illinois Workforce Pell application for short-term workforce programs.

Workforce Pell is a federal expansion of the Pell Grant program that, for the first time, allows eligible students to use Pell funding for short-term workforce training programs aligned with in-demand occupations. Beginning in Academic Year 2026–27, qualifying programs, 8 to 14 weeks in length, can offer students a pathway to a recognized credential, tied to employer-validated, high-skill, high-wage or in-demand jobs across the state.

“The Illinois Workforce Pell program is opening the door for more students to gain affordable, and high-quality training for high-paying, reliable careers,” **said Governor JB Pritzker**. “By adding new opportunities, the expanded Pell Grant is helping colleges and universities across the state strengthen the talent pipeline, attract new employers and bring broader economic development to those regions.”

By extending Pell eligibility to shorter-term programs, Workforce Pell expands access to a more affordable path to in-demand credentials. Illinois developed a rigorous approval process to ensure participating programs meet high standards for quality, workforce alignment and student outcomes – protecting students while ensuring public investments support credentials with strong labor market value. Eligible programs are required to demonstrate strong completion and job placement outcomes, employer-validated demand and reasonable tuition relative to graduates' expected earnings – all to ensure that Illinois students can pursue short-term workforce training with confidence. The program also supports the state's broader economic development goals by aligning training investments with the skills employers need across Illinois.

The application for the first round of approvals opened July 15 and closes August 31, 2026. Illinois community colleges, universities and approved private business and vocational schools may submit applications for individual programs for award consideration in academic years 2026–27 and 2027–28. Approved program applications will then be sent to the U.S. Department of Education for final federal approval, expected winter 2026-27.

“Workforce Pell represents an important milestone in Illinois' efforts to expand access to workforce education,” **said ICCB Executive Director Brian Durham**. “ICCB is proud to help lead this initiative, ensuring Illinois community colleges can continue providing high-quality, employer-driven training that prepares students for in-demand careers. By expanding Pell eligibility to short-term programs, we're creating new pathways to valuable credentials while strengthening the workforce that drives Illinois' economy.”

“Workforce Pell will expand access to postsecondary training for adult learners, career changers and working Illinoisans and will allow the state's institutions to equip students with the skills employers need most today,” **said IBHE Executive Director Ginger Ostro**. “This program will give people in the state an opportunity to pursue jobs that lead to economic mobility and will ultimately contribute to a thriving Illinois economy.”

“By expanding access to short-term, high-quality training programs, we are helping more Illinoisans gain skills and credentials while also strengthening the talent pipeline that supports business growth across the state,” **said DCEO Director Kristin Richards**. “This furthers our state's commitment to connecting people with good-paying careers and ensuring employers have the skilled workforce they need to compete and succeed in Illinois.”

Institutions may access the application using this link: <http://www.iccb.org/programs-and-initiatives/workforce-pell/>.

Technical Assistance

A group of State agencies will provide an overview of the state Workforce Pell application during a webinar on Tuesday, July 21 from 1 – 2 p.m.

Presenters will demonstrate the application, discuss its requirements, describe the processes for data collection and program approval and share information on upcoming opportunities for additional technical assistance.

Register for the webinar using this link:

https://us02web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_fby1U9AJTriAKafu2KFH5w.

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About Illinois Board of Higher Education

The Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) is the planning and coordinating body for the state's higher education system. In June 2021, IBHE adopted the new strategic plan, “A Thriving Illinois,” to accomplish three goals: close the equity gaps for students who have historically been left behind, build a stronger financial future for individuals and institutions, and increase talent and innovation to drive economic growth.