

Building a More Holistic and Inclusive Workforce Development System for Boston's Youth

Northeastern University and the City of Boston's Office of Youth Engagement and Employment (OYEO)

Northeastern lead: Alicia Modestino

OYEO leads: Rashad Cope and Allison Vernerey

Amount: \$650,000 (2021-2024, co-funded by the William T. Grant Foundation, the Doris Duke Foundation, and the American Institutes for Research), \$350,000 (2024-2026, co-funded by the William T. Grant Foundation and the American Institutes for Research)

The Institutional Challenge Grant (ICG) will support a new research-practice partnership (RPP) between Northeastern University's Dukakis Center for Urban and Regional Policy (DCURP) and the City of Boston's Department of Youth Engagement and Employment (DYEE). This partnership will advance the City's work to reduce inequality among young people through the Boston Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) and other year-round workforce development programming by creating meaningful employment experiences that prepare youth for both educational and career pathways into adulthood.

[...]

We will build on a previous RPP between DCURP and the Boston Mayor's Office of Workforce Development (OWD), which sits under the Mayor's Chief of Economic Development. That original partnership was developed over the past four years under an existing WTG research grant to evaluate the Boston SYEP. The research project stemming from that original partnership used an embedded randomized-control trial to estimate program outcomes including a 30 percent reduction in violent and property crime (Modestino 2019) and a 6 percentage point increase in high school graduation for the treatment group relative to the control group (Modestino and Paulsen 2019). We also showed that the program boosts employment and wages among youth of color (City of Boston 2017).

This grant builds on an emerging partnership and prior work focused on the youth summer employment program.

[...]

Moreover, through the prior partnership with the Boston Mayor's Office of Workforce Development, the findings generated from that research were directly used to develop alternative options that could help preserve this year's summer jobs program while still developing the skills that lead to better youth outcomes down the road. With R3 funding from William T. Grant, we were able to shift the dialogue in the Boston Mayor's Office from whether to have a summer jobs program to what form it should take. This positive outcome was achieved by developing a series of research review products to help guide the discussion among the Mayor's cabinet including an employer survey, PowerPoint briefings, internal memos, an external policy brief disseminated to other cities, and a longer literature review that was published in a regional policy journal in June (Modestino 2020). That led to the development of four new tracks this summer including "earn and learn" opportunities where youth take college courses for credit, virtual internships using an established platform and ready-made projects, a peer-to-peer COVID-19 campaign to educate youth about COVID-19 and safe practices, and a new public works program to engage youth in helping to maintain parks and other outdoor recreational spaces. Our joint efforts succeeded in persuading Mayor Walsh to

commit an additional \$4.1 to fund the four new alternative tracks that we developed to ensure meaningful experiences that will help youth develop a similar set of skills and behaviors that have been shown to lead to better long-term outcomes based on our multi-year evaluation funded by William T. Grant.

While this was a great outcome for Boston youth this summer, the policy engagement that took place during the pandemic highlighted the need to broaden the policy partnership as well as our research focus to better serve Boston youth in the long run. While Boston's decentralized model has proven successful as evidenced by our original evaluation study, the need to pivot the program in response to the COVID-19 pandemic exposed several shortcomings that impact the quality of the experience for young people and the ability of the program to reduce inequality. These included the need to work more collaboratively across intermediaries to refer, select, and place young people in summer jobs, assess the impact of various features of the program, focus on laddering job experiences for youth across summers to develop skills, and to link the Boston SYEP to other year-round programming that would expand post-secondary education, training, and career options for youth.

What is the value-added of the grant to your existing partnership? What will you be able to do that you would not otherwise?

Based on these insights, the new partnership funded by the ICG will pursue an expanded research agenda that supports the City's efforts to develop a more holistic youth employment system. The goals of our collaboration are to focus more intentionally on reducing inequality across groups by providing high quality, skill-building opportunities linked across multiple programs that support inner-city low-income youth as they transition from high school to postsecondary education,

training, and careers. The nature of this system-wide effort requires a more inclusive, dynamic, and iterative partnership to ensure that the Dukakis Center produces actionable results that can be used by the City of Boston to make strategic improvements to the youth workforce development system. The ICG would also add value by expanding the capacity of DYEE to be the city convener and leader in strengthening coordination and alignment across the youth workforce development landscape.

These four areas form an active research agenda that we will pursue under a new researcher-practitioner partnership (RPP) with the City of Boston's Department of Youth Engagement and Employment (DYEE) [NOTE: the title of this office changed during the award to the Office of Youth Engagement and Employment]. The goal of the RPP is to conduct research that supports the City's efforts to develop a youth employment system in Boston that provides high quality, skill-building opportunities to support youth as they transition from high school to postsecondary education, training and careers. DYEE is a separate city agency from OWD that sits under the Mayor's Chief of Health and Human Services and has direct oversight for various aspects of youth workforce development more broadly and the summer jobs program in particular. DYEE is in the unique position of being both a city agency with oversight responsibilities as well as an intermediary that places youth in various engagements, including the summer jobs program. Through this partnership, we will work closely with DYEE to conduct and disseminate both long-term research as well as short-term "rapid response" data analysis that directly informs their decisions about policy and practice.

[...]

CHANGING INSTITUTIONAL POLICIES AND PRACTICES

The support provided by the ICG will enable our team to move beyond the one-off RPP engagement that involves only a handful of individuals to develop the capacity, incentives, and strategies at each of our respective institutions to expand this type of work. We will simultaneously use the experience of carrying out our joint research agenda as proof of concept for senior leaders while also shifting the focus within our respective agencies and departments.

On the academic side, there are clearly defined obstacles for faculty wishing to engage in an RPP. The most significant is the tenure and promotion criteria, which frankly values this type of work only as the “icing on the cake” of the tenure dossier, which is largely baked with many peer-reviewed journal articles. There is also a false dichotomy in academia that there is an inevitable “trade-off between producing rigorous research and producing research with relevance for the real world” (Tseng and Gamoran, 2017). Yet PI Modestino has successfully published a number of papers from various RPPs in high-quality economics and policy journals. Clearly, it is possible to bring methodological rigor to highly relevant research questions and be rewarded for both, but it often takes more time to reach the publication stage. How can we better align the rewards and incentives of academic institutions with the realities of participating in RPPs?

This proposal acknowledges barriers to engaged research that exist across most universities. The Foundation encourages applicants to acknowledge barriers specific to your university context (which may very well be the same barriers systemic to academia).

We believe that right now, there is a unique opportunity to make changes within the academy more broadly and at Northeastern University, in particular that makes the case for institutional change quite feasible. Taking the broader perspective, both the pandemic and the need for social change in response to the Black Lives Matter movement have completely disrupted higher education in terms of teaching, research, and service. The latter two areas are currently primed for re-aligning university priorities more in the direction of supporting RPP work. This past spring as universities were shut down, there was a sense that the academy should be drawing on its in-house expertise to serve the surrounding community. Now more than ever there is a recognized need for RPPs that can help the communities in our own backyard address the challenges they face as we adapt to the changes brought about by COVID-19.

Strategic planning processes often provide ripe opportunities to engage in institutional change to support engaged research.

In addition, Northeastern University is currently undergoing a strategic planning process under its new Provost that aims to establish new research clusters that can attract a more diverse set of researchers. There is an expectation that this will shift the focus more towards social science research clusters addressing inequality and racial justice rather than maintaining the status quo in the hard sciences. The university also has a decades-long history of engaging in experiential

teaching and research through its world-class cooperative education program, its traditional undergraduate service-learning programs, and a new experiential Ph.D. program that embeds

a Ph.D. student in a government agency, non-profit or corporate setting to do research related to their dissertation. This rich real-world tradition makes Northeastern primed for incorporating these values into the tenure and promotion process.

Finally, PI Modestino was recently named Research Director of the Dukakis Center and as part of that appointment she is expected to lead the center through a transformation with the goal of creating a hub that brings together researchers on campus and state and local policymakers in the Greater Boston area. She will build on the existing experience, expertise, and convening power of the Dukakis Center to apply the collaborative research model supported by the ICG to pursue joint research projects that can serve as a vehicle for building sustained partnerships between faculty and public entities. In this way, the Dukakis Center will lead the way in building the capacity for RPPs at Northeastern which she sees as a natural extension of the center's original mission as a "think and do" tank.

The proposal demonstrates how the PI is well-positioned to drive the proposed institutional change strategies.

Over the three-year grant period, we will pursue a range of changes at various levels of the institution that seek to build RPP capacity among faculty, expand the RPP model across campus, align incentives and policies for merit and promotion, and expand capacity in our research partner. Most of these activities will be carried out as part of the grant and then institutionalized as part of the Dukakis Center operations. Other activities will require building partnerships across the college or the university. Finally, some activities will require buy-in from college and university leadership.

The proposal identifies ways the grant will address one barrier to engaged research: researchers are not often trained to develop the skills needed to build strong RPPs. The proposal describes how this strategy will grow across the three-year grant period (each grantee can apply for two years of continuation funding, for a total of five years of funding).

Building a cohort of faculty and graduate students who develop the skills to engage in RPPs

The relationship building, management, and organizational skills required to build a successful RPP are not taught in graduate school and are rarely developed independently by researchers. We seek to provide training at different levels of the academy to be able to have a broader impact on encouraging the use of RPPs by both new and experienced researchers that will spill over to others in the university.

- **RPP level (Year 2):** We will provide training for the CSSH Student Graduate Assistant to attend the staff training through [MIT's Poverty Action Lab](#) where PI Modestino is an affiliated researcher.

The five-day training provides staff with the theoretical and technical foundations to design and coordinate high-quality research studies in the field. The training covers the basics of randomized evaluations in the social sciences, research ethics, and research transparency, as well as practical skills involved in managing a research project, designing effective questionnaires, ensuring data quality and security, collaborating with partner organizations, field team management, and data management and analysis. The graduate student will also be mentored by the mid-Career Fellow to develop the skills needed to support the RPP.

- **Center level (Years 2 and 3):** We will create a post-doc position in the Dukakis Center to recruit one post-doc for each of the two years during the research phase of the project. The duties of the post-doc will be to participate in the RPP as both a researcher and the project manager. The PI will mentor the post-doc to develop the skills needed to actively participate in the RPP and eventually lead one of the sub-committees engaged in a particular aspect of the research. The post-doc will also be mentored by the PI to develop the skills needed to support the RPP.
- **Center level (Year 3):** We will seek external funding to establish an annual Dukakis Center fellow to engage in a researcher-practitioner partnership that fulfills the center’s mission of supporting policy decisions within the Commonwealth. This fellow may be either a Northeastern faculty member or a researcher external to Northeastern. As an NU faculty member they will be awarded a 50% fellowship that involves a half-time course release. As an external researcher, we will provide an annual stipend.
- **College level (Years 2 and 3):** We will provide training that is open to CSSH faculty and graduate students to increase research impact and lay the foundation for future researcher-practitioner partnerships through the Training Researcher to Inform Policy course offered by the Scholars Strategy Network. We will seek to have mentoring dyads of graduate students and one of their advisors attend the training to be able to reinforce lessons learned after the training and apply them to existing joint research projects.

Taking the RPP model across campus and elevating the status of RPP scholarship

There are existing resources on campus through which the use of RPPs could be enhanced and even institutionalized as a way of doing research. The ICG will fund the new RPP between Northeastern and DYEE to provide proof of concept that can be highlighted at annual events, expanded in scale and scope through partnerships with other centers on campus, and supported by additional university resources that have often been under-utilized by CSSH faculty compared to those in the sciences who already have seed-funding through their labs.

The proposal identifies how the team will use the ICG RPP to provide “proof of concept,” leveraging their work to draw in other faculty and students but also to model how to grow and build a sustained partnership.

- **Center level (Year 2 or 3):** We will use the Dukakis Center annual daylong conference as a vehicle for highlighting the work of the RPP in the context of the larger topic of workforce development. Coming out of the COVID-19 recession, it would be a natural fit to highlight the work of the RPP to advance a systemic approach to expanding employment opportunities. The conference could also include workshops and breakout sessions for researchers and policymakers to engage in policy discussions that could facilitate new partnerships.
- **College level (Year 2 and 3):** We will develop partnerships with other researcher groups within CSSH such as the [Center on Crime and Community Resilience](#) and the [Boston Area Research Initiative](#) to generate cross-collaboration on RPP type work. Other centers on campus are also engaged in policy evaluation work and often work with community partners. However, each of our centers has limited capacity in terms of researcher time, expertise, and funding sources to take on projects, especially those at larger scale. By working together to submit proposals for larger grants, we can elevate the status of RPP projects while also garnering matching funds to put towards future capacity building.

- **University level (Year 2 and 3):** We will leverage existing university resources for experiential learning to enhance the value of researcher-practitioner partnerships for the Provost. Few faculty members in the social sciences take advantage of the resources the university provides to expand research opportunities for students. These include engaging a full-time undergraduate co-op student for six months, embedding a doctoral student in a community partner through the experiential Ph.D. program, and using PEAK funding to create multi-generational teams that include undergraduate, master's, and Ph.D. students.

Aligning incentives, policies, and practices to remove barriers for faculty to engage in RPPs.

- **Center level (Year 1):** We will use a portion of the Dukakis Center budget (e.g., \$5,000) to award seed funding in a competitive call for proposals to faculty who are engaged in RPP research projects. Given that prior seed-funding competitions have proven effective in increasing the number and size of external grant proposals within the college, we expect that this type of incentive would be an effective way to encourage faculty to shift their research focus towards more relevant work done in partnership with a public entity.
- **School level (Year 1-3):** PI Modestino will advocate for the School of Public Policy and Urban Affairs to value RPPs in the school's annual merit review. The school collects data annually from faculty in the areas of teaching, research, and service to evaluate salary merit increases. Research is typically evaluated based on books published, the number and type of journal publications, and presentations at academic conferences. She will also advocate for the inclusion of research impact as measured by engagement in an RPP.
- **College level (Years 1-3):** Both PI Modestino and co-PI Marks will seek to expand promotion criteria to full professor in CSSH to include external letters from community partners with which faculty have engaged in researcher-practitioner partnerships. We recognize that the timeline for RPP projects does not often align well with the tenure clock and feel that it would be more feasible to shift the promotion criteria for full professor as an important first step in changing the academic evaluation system. Moreover, universities have more leeway to deviate from established criteria for promotion than for tenure where external reviewers and their letters are prescribed in a systemic way. We also feel that it is appropriate to change the incentives for mid-career faculty who have demonstrated the academic rigor needed to earn tenure and can now be encouraged to apply that academic rigor to relevant policy questions.
- **University level (Years 1-3):** PI Modestino will work with the faculty senate to establish a senior leadership role with the responsibility to promoting the use of evidenced-based research. This position would be akin to the recently created Director of Entrepreneurship in the Provost's Office who is

Seed grants can serve as small incentives to support faculty who want to begin to engage with partnership research.

NOTE. This aim was not possible to achieve during the initial award, but the PI recently received a two-year continuation grant, and in responding to feedback from reviewers, met with university leaders and now has a firmer commitment to expand tenure and promotion criteria to value community-engaged scholarship as research, rather than as service.

charged with developing programming to assist faculty and staff commercialize their research. We envision a Director of Policy Impact who would develop programming to assist faculty with promoting research findings, making connections with city, state, and federal policymakers, and getting involved in the legislative process through either expert testimony or drafting of bills.

[...]

*In 2022, one year after the grant was initiated and as a result of the strategic planning, the Northeastern University Provost released an academic plan that challenged the institution to have real-world impact, in part by investing in community engaged partnerships. As part of this effort, the PI was awarded a \$4.5 million award from the university to develop an Impact Accelerator called **Community to Community**, which will serve to institutionalize and expand the infrastructure provided by the ICG grant at each of Northeastern's 14 global campus locations.*

We believe that our plan for institutional change is feasible, particularly given Northeastern University's long-standing commitment to experiential learning. Given the resources and the timeframe, there has never been a better time to act given the recent shifts that are underway across the university. Finally, with PI Modestino's promotion to Research Director of the Dukakis Center, she now has the visibility, influence on institutional policies and practices, and access to the resources needed to optimize and implement the award at the center level.

The response of both the Dukakis Center and Northeastern University to the needs of both city and state policymakers in response to the pandemic demonstrate that the institution is likely to adopt and maintain the changes we are proposing beyond the award period. This is especially true in terms of

building capacity among faculty, providing incentives for RPP work, and expanding the RPP model across campus. It is more difficult to predict whether we will be able to move the needle in terms of policies for merit and promotion given that those decisions are made at the school, college, and university levels. However, we believe that our goals in this regard are realistic with respect to seeking to incorporate the valuation of RPP work in the school's merit practices and the college's promotion policies for full professor.

The literature on research use demonstrates that in the end, simply having new information from research is not enough. It is through relationships that research use actually happens. With more effort on building these relationships, and with organizational structures in place to ensure a sustained commitment in this area, Northeastern could substantially increase its impact.

References

- City of Boston. 2017. Reducing Inequality Summer by Summer. <https://owd.boston.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/SYEP-Report-FINAL-12.12.17.pdf>
- Modestino, A. 2019. How Do Summer Youth Employment Programs Improve Criminal Justice Outcomes, and for Whom? *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 38(3): 600-628.
- Modestino, Alicia. 2019. “Is the Skills Gap Real? Changes in Employer Skill Requirements During the Great Recession.” EconoFact, March 8. <https://econofact.org/is-the-skills-gap-real-changes-in-employer-skill-requirements-during-the-great-recession>
- Modestino, A., & Paulsen, R. 2019. Reducing Inequality Summer by Summer: Lessons from the Boston Summer Youth Employment Program Survey. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 72: 40-53.
- Modestino, A. 2020. “Saving Summer Jobs: How Summer Youth Employment Programs Improve Youth Outcomes during COVID-19.” *MassBenchmarks*, 22(1).
- Tseng and Gamoran. 2017. “Bringing Rigor to Relevant Questions: How Social Science Research Can Improve Youth Outcomes in the Real World.” William T. Grant Foundation.