



# Institutional Challenge Grant

## **2026 Application Guidelines**

*Updated March 2026*

Online Application Opens:  
May 15, 2026

Application Deadline:  
September 9, 2026, 3 PM ET

Finalist Interviews:  
January 29, 2027

# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>01</b>
<b>The Award</b>	<b>05</b>
<b>Eligibility</b>	<b>07</b>
<b>Application Requirements</b>	<b>09</b>
<b>Application Review Criteria</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Application Review Process</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Selection Committee</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Appendix A: Application Checklist</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Appendix B: Awarded Grants</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Appendix C: Useful Links</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>30</b>

# Introduction

## Program Overview

The Institutional Challenge Grant supports university-based research institutes, schools, and centers in building sustained research-practice partnerships with public agencies or nonprofit organizations in order to reduce inequality in youth outcomes.

The grant requires that research institutions shift their policies and practices to value collaborative research. Institutions will also need to build the capacity of researchers to produce relevant work and the capacity of agency and nonprofit partners to use research.

We welcome applications from partnerships in youth-serving areas such as education, justice, child welfare, foster care, mental health, immigration, and workforce development. We especially encourage proposals from teams with African American, Latinx, Native American, and Asian American members in leadership roles. The partnership leadership team includes the principal investigator from the research institution and the lead from the public agency or nonprofit organization.



### PARTNERSHIP

Grow an existing university partnership with a public agency or nonprofit organization



### RESEARCH

Pursue a joint research agenda to reduce inequality in youth outcomes



### INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

Create institutional change to value research-practice partnerships and their work



### CAPACITY

Enhance both partners' capacity to collaborate in producing and using high-quality relevant research

## Background

Policymakers and practitioners need rigorous research evidence that is relevant to their work. But too often the evidence produced by research institutions is shaped by the traditional values of the academy—the work is rigorous, but it speaks most clearly to the research community. This misalignment limits the usefulness, use, and impact of research in policy and practice, a challenge compounded by limited resources and capacity of the research and practice partners to engage in collaborative research.

Research-practice partnerships—long-term, mutually beneficial collaborations that promote the production and use of rigorous and relevant research evidence—are a promising strategy for better aligning researchers, policymakers, and practitioners in their efforts to reduce inequality. Researchers who partner with practitioners or policymakers are better equipped to understand local contexts, address pressing questions, and produce informative and actionable findings. They also gain access to programmatic and/or policy insights and data that can facilitate rigorous and groundbreaking research to make headway on issues relevant to youth. Policymakers and practitioners, meanwhile, can more easily access, interpret, and use research evidence when they collaborate with researchers. They can also help define and shape research agendas. Partnerships, then, equip public agencies and nonprofit organizations with new knowledge and tools to better serve youth.

Building sustained research-practice partnerships requires significant investments. It takes time to develop the trusted relationships that form the foundation of the partnership. Establishing the infrastructure to grow and sustain a partnership requires considerable resources. And for research-practice partnerships to thrive, they cannot be dependent on individuals alone, as turnover among individuals threatens partnerships' sustainability.

Although we suspect that research-practice partnerships are most robust when they are built at the institutional level, research produced by partnerships is not always valued by institutions. Research institutions' policies and practices can inadvertently create disincentives to participating in research-practice partnerships. In turn, this can make it difficult to recruit experienced researchers to participate in research-practice partnerships or to sustain their involvement beyond a single project.

The Institutional Challenge Grant is a direct response to these obstacles. The program challenges research institutions to remove barriers to partnerships' success. Doing so involves the careful scrutiny and redesign of internal policies, practices, or incentives that limit the longevity of partnerships or discourage exceptional researchers from taking part. In turn, when partnerships are more productive, respected, and commonplace, communities of research, policy, and practice will be better aligned to reduce inequality in youth outcomes.



**Practical Guidance:**

- **Research-Practice Partnerships Website**  
A “one-stop shop” for research-practice partnerships, the Foundation’s RPP website includes guiding tips, work samples, and resources from successful partnerships.
- **Assessing Research-Practice Partnerships: Five Dimensions of Effectiveness**  
This paper outlines specific elements that members of existing RPPs have reported are essential to their work. In addition to indicators for each dimension of effectiveness, the authors provide a unified framework for assessing partnerships.
- **No One-Size-Fits-All: A Context-Sensitive Approach to Research-Practice Partnership Health and Effectiveness**  
The post shares insights on using tools that are tailored to the specific needs, politics, and contexts of different RPPs in education settings, ensuring they are truly helpful and actionable in real-world settings.

**Recent Thinking:**

- **Research-Practice Partnerships in Education: The State of the Field**  
Scanning the current landscape of partnerships, identifying points of variation, and outlining shared principles, this paper, published in 2021, offers an updated definition of research-practice partnerships in education: “A long-term collaboration aimed at educational improvement or equitable transformation through engagement with research. These partnerships are intentionally organized to connect diverse forms of expertise and shift power relations in the research endeavor to ensure that all partners have a say in the joint work.”
- **Racial Equity and Research Practice Partnerships 2.0: A Critical Reflection**  
One of three written reflections on Research-Practice Partnerships in Education: The State of the Field, this essay centers on equity considerations in RPPs and cautions: “to avoid reproducing the very inequities that many claim to challenge ... we need to confront racial injustice directly and build RPPs that are committed to dismantling it.”
- **Universities Take Promising Steps to Reward Research that Benefits Society**  
This report details promising institutional changes taking place at universities around the United States. These include department-, campus-, and university system-wide reforms to faculty tenure and promotion processes; formalized structures to implement expanded faculty reward systems; capacity-building, training, and funding to advance faculty’s engaged scholarship; and infrastructure supports for public-engaged scholarship.

## Goals

*The Institutional Challenge Grant asks grantees to pursue four goals:*

**1. Grow an existing institutional partnership with a public agency or nonprofit organization.**

The research-practice partnership will have defined objectives, roles, and agreements, and will be built for the long term. In this way, the partnership will be mutually beneficial, enabling the partners to develop and pursue a joint research agenda that is relevant to the public agency or nonprofit organization's work over an extended period of time.

**2. Pursue a joint research agenda to reduce inequality in youth outcomes.**

The partnership's research will aim to build, test, or increase understanding of programs, policies, or practices to reduce inequality in the academic, social, behavioral, or economic outcomes of young people ages 5-25 in the United States. Specifically, the research agenda will seek to inform responses to inequality on the basis of race, ethnicity, economic standing, language minority status, immigrant origins, or sexual or gender minority status (i.e., LGBTQ+ youth).

**3. Create institutional change to value research-practice partnerships within research institutions.**

The research institution will design a feasible strategy for institutional change that addresses observed structural, motivational, and financial barriers that inhibit research-practice partnerships at the institution. By establishing structural supports and incentives that encourage skilled, mid-career researchers to conduct joint work with policymakers and practitioners, the institution will develop an environment for partnerships to thrive.

**4. Enhance the capacity of both partners to collaborate on producing and using research evidence.**

Through new experiences that foster deeper understandings of a given policy or practice context and deepen relationships with partners, grantees on the research side will enhance their capacity for participating in effective partnerships. At the same time, the public agency or nonprofit partner will enhance their own capacity to partner with researchers, as well as understand, conduct, and use research through activities such as technical assistance, infrastructure improvements, or staff training.

# The Award

**This year, we will award at least two Institutional Challenge Grants. Each award will provide \$650,000 over three years. This includes:**

- Up to \$60,000 for up to 9 months of joint planning activities (e.g., refining protocols for partnering, selecting fellows, finalizing partnership and data sharing agreements, etc.).
- Funding for two years of a full-time equivalent *mid-career* fellowship. In addition, universities are required to fund one additional year of a full-time equivalent fellowship for the mid-career fellow.
  - Fellowships may be allocated in different ways, for example, by appointing one individual fellow for three years, or three different fellows each for one year, or six half-time fellows for one year each, etc. ***The minimum appointment level for a fellow is half-time for half of one year.*** See Figure 1 (p. 06) for additional examples.
- Up to three years of support for the partnership to conduct and use research to reduce inequality in youth outcomes.
- Resources to advance the proposed institutional shifts and capacities of both partners.
- Indirect cost allowance of up to 15 percent of total direct costs.

*Following the initial three years of funding, grantees have the opportunity to apply for a funded two-year continuation grant in order to solidify the partnership and institutional changes. At the end of the five years, we expect the following results:*

- The research institution has established a set of strategies that facilitate sustained research collaborations with public agencies or private nonprofit organizations.
- The public agency or private nonprofit organization has increased its capacity to use research evidence.
- Participating researchers have improved partnership skills.
- The research generated has been used in decision making and is likely to lead to improved outcomes for youth.

## NOTE

Since 2018, we have been able to make multiple awards per year thanks to the generosity of the Spencer Foundation, the Doris Duke Foundation, the American Institutes for Research, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and the Bezos Family Foundation.

FIGURE 1. EXAMPLE ALLOCATIONS OF MID-CAREER FELLOWS

This Institutional Challenge Grant provides funding for two years of a full-time equivalent fellowship. In addition, universities are required to fund one additional year of a full-time equivalent fellowship. The tables here provide examples of different ways to allocate mid-career fellows during the grant period.

*Example A*

	Funded by William T. Grant	Funded by Your Institution
Year 1		
Year 2		
Year 3		

*Example B*

	Funded by William T. Grant	Funded by Your Institution
Year 1		
Year 2		
Year 3		

*Example C*

	Funded by William T. Grant	Funded by Your Institution
Year 1		
Year 2		
Year 3		

*Key*

100% FTE    
 50% FTE    
 Colors represent different individuals

# Eligibility

## Eligible research institutions

- The Foundation makes grants only to tax-exempt organizations. We do not make grants to individuals.
- Eligible organizations include university-based research institutes, schools, or centers. Institutions that sit outside of the academy, such as research organizations and think tanks, are not eligible.
- We encourage proposals from organizations that are under-represented among grantee institutions, including Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic-serving Institutions, Tribal Colleges and Universities, Alaska Native Serving Institutions, Native Hawaiian-Serving Institutions, and Asian American Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions.

## Eligible principal investigators

- Eligible principal investigators are leaders at eligible research institutions. They have visibility, influence on institutional policies and practices, and access to the resources needed to optimize and implement the award. They also possess the skills needed to cultivate trusting relationships with leaders from the partner public agency or nonprofit organization and to ensure the conduct of high-quality research.

## Eligible public agencies or nonprofit organizations

- Eligible public agencies include state or local agencies and their departments and divisions.
- Nonprofit, tax-exempt organizations are eligible if they are open to the general public and provide or coordinate services for youth ages 5 to 25 in the United States.
- Eligible agencies and organizations engage in work relevant to youth in the areas of education, justice, prevention of child abuse and neglect, foster care, mental health, immigration, or workforce development and have the resources needed to implement and optimize the award.

## **Eligible leaders from the public agency or nonprofit organization**

- Eligible leaders from the public agency or nonprofit organization have the authority and influence required to successfully institutionalize the partnership and the use of research evidence in the agency or organization's work.

## **Eligible partnerships**

- We are most interested in supporting existing research-practice partnerships that will use the grant to continue learning and growing.
- While the competition is open to partnerships at different stages of maturity, the grant is intended to add significant value to what already exists. As a general guideline, the partnership should be far enough along to conduct the proposed work, but not so established that the grant adds little value to what is currently in place.

## **Eligible fellows**

- All fellows must be mid-career.
  - For researchers, we define mid-career as having received the terminal degree within 8 to 20 years of the date that the application is submitted. (This should be calculated by adding 8 and 20 years to the date the doctoral degree was conferred. For medicine, an institution should use the date from the completion of the first residency.)
- The research fellow does not need to be an employee of the research institution and can be recruited from another institution.
- You may appoint one mid-career fellow from the public agency or nonprofit organization. (All other fellows must be researchers). This should be a mid-career professional at the agency or organization who will be called on to facilitate the use of research. A mid-career professional has 8 to 20 years of cumulative experience in his/her current role.

# Application Requirements

## NOTE

The Foundation accepts applications only through our online application system, which is accessible through our website. Instructions for creating and submitting your application are also available online. We recommend starting the application as early as possible to allow sufficient time to develop a strong proposal, secure the necessary agreements and letters of support, and resolve any technical issues that may arise.

*All applications must include the following materials:*

### 1. Budget and Budget Justification

- Provide budget information for three years using the budget grid in the online application.
- Complete the budget justification form, which can be downloaded from the online application. The budget justification should map tightly to the activities and staffing described in the narrative.
- The total budget should amount to **exactly \$650,000** (including the combined direct and indirect costs for the full grant period). Indirect costs may not exceed 15 percent of total direct costs.
- Funds for the planning period may not exceed \$60,000.
- At least half of the planning budget should be allocated to the public agency or nonprofit organization(s).
- The remainder of funds may be used to support the fellows, capacity building activities, and research-related work. (The Foundation pays expenses for the research and practice or policy leaders of the partnership to participate in Foundation-sponsored meetings, such as grantee convenings. Do not include funds for those expenses in the budget.)
- If funds to the public agency or nonprofit organization exceed \$50,000, complete a separate subcontract budget and budget justification. (The forms can be downloaded from the online application.) Subcontract funds of \$50,000 or less do not require separate forms, but must be explained in detail in the primary budget justification.

## **2. Short CV/Resume of PI**

*Five pages maximum.*

- Include education; position history; recent and relevant publications; grants, roles, and products related to work with policymakers and practitioners; and leadership roles within the institution.
- Requests to fund recipient's salary must not exceed 50 percent of the total salary received from the sponsoring institution. The portion of the grant used for salary must be equivalent to the time made available for research by this award. The remainder of funds may be used to support research-related work. (The Foundation pays expenses related to the PI's participation in Foundation-sponsored meetings.)

## **3. Short CV/Resume for lead from the public agency or nonprofit organization**

*Five pages maximum.*

- Include education, position history, key roles and responsibilities at the current agency or organization, and positions or products related to work with researchers.

## **4. Short CV of any identified Fellows (optional)**

*Five pages maximum.*

- Include education; position history; recent and relevant publications; and grants, roles, and products related to work with policymakers or practitioners (for research fellows) or with researchers (for policy or practice fellows).

## **5. IRS Tax-Exempt Status Determination Letter (for the applying research institution)**

- A copy of your institution's IRS tax-exempt status determination letter is required as part of your application.

## **6. Structured Abstract**

*Four pages maximum.*

- Abstracts are a critical part of the application. Foundation staff use them to screen applications for further review. In addition, Selection Committee members review

the abstracts of all finalists, but do not necessarily read the full applications. Thus, the abstract should clearly and succinctly demonstrate how the proposed work aligns with the four goals of the grant program.

- Include sections providing sufficient detail about each of the following areas of the application: 1) the partnership; 2) joint research agenda, including research questions and design; 3) shifts in organizational practices at the university to elevate the status of partnership work among faculty; and 4) criteria for selecting mid-career fellows and activities to build fellows' and public agency or nonprofit organization's capacity.



#### NOTE

Format your structured abstract and narrative as follows: 12-point Times New Roman font, single-spaced text with a line space between each paragraph, numbered pages, and 1-inch margins on all sides. Tables, references, and appendices are not counted toward the page limits.

## 7. Narrative

*Twenty-five pages maximum. Describe the planning period, institutional partnership, joint research agenda and research plan, capacity building activities, and changes in institutional policies and practices.*

### **Planning Period (if applicable):**

- The Institutional Challenge Grant includes up to \$60,000 to support a planning period of up to nine months during the first year. The planning period activities are intended to advance the partnership and its related grant activities.
- Describe the length, objectives, and activities proposed for the planning period. This includes details about the process for refining protocols for partnering, readying the organizations for the joint work, and advancing the research agenda and selection of fellows. Also describe the value of these planning activities for the rest of the grant.

### **Institutional Partnership:**

- Provide a rationale for the selection and inclusion of the public agency or nonprofit organization, as well as the nature of their current relationship with the research institution. We encourage partners that are situated in close geographic proximity, with a demonstrated commitment to the local/regional setting.

**i** NOTE

Joint work is challenging, time intensive, and requires intention and formal structure (Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2013; Dugery & Knowles, 2003; Trotter, Laurila, Alberts, & Huenneke, 2014). The proposal needs to describe the collaboration and relationship-building process and articulate the plan for working together, including the type and frequency of activities that will cultivate trust and deepen relationships, strategies for communicating, and processes for using the research. A strong application makes it evident that the public agency or nonprofit organization is significantly invested in and has co-defined the proposed work, and that they will interact regularly with the university fellows, provide input on the interpretation of the findings, and have compelling plans for using the research.

The plan for joint work needs to demonstrate mastery of the literature on the challenges and strategies of collaborative work to promote the use of research evidence (Oliver, Innvar, Lorenc, Woodman, & Thomas, 2014; DuMont, 2015; Hunter, 2017; Tseng, 2017). Therefore, in your narrative, provide a strong justification for how the proposed plan will offset differences in institutional cultures and reward systems, ensure equal voice in the agenda setting, and overcome operational barriers for both the university and the nonprofit or public agency. Successful applications discuss potential challenges to research-practice partnerships and how the current partnership is prepared to address those challenges proactively. Prior work on the use of research evidence offers helpful suggestions for initiating and advancing meaningful partnerships and establishing long-term collaborations (Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2013; Farrell, Penuel, Coburn, Daniel, & Steup, 2021; Henrick, Cobb, Penuel, Jackson, & Clark, 2017; Palinkas, Short, & Wong, 2015). Further, there should be a theory of action and clear articulation of how the evidence produced by the partnership will be used (Tseng, 2017).

To the extent possible, include memoranda of understanding and/or other documents that articulate the partnership goals, roles, governance, principles for working together, and timelines. It may also be appropriate to reference data sharing agreements. These documents may be refined during the planning period, but we anticipate that successful applicants will have worked out the initial agreements before submitting the proposal.

Well-established partnerships with strong institutional support will need to make a convincing case that the award will add value to the existing work. Newer partnerships, meanwhile, will need to show promising initial evidence that the partners have worked together successfully in the past and have the potential to sustain a long-term collaboration.

### **Related Resources:**

- [The Next Big Leap for Research-Practice Partnerships: Building and Testing Theories to Improve Research Use](#)
- [How School and District Leaders Access, Perceive, and Use Research](#)
- [Research-Practice-Policy Partnerships for Implementation of Evidence-based Practices in Child Welfare and Mental Health](#)
- [What is the Conceptual Use of Research, and Why is it Important?](#)

### **Joint Research Agenda to Reduce Youth Inequality**

- The partnership must conduct research that examines programs, policies, or practices to reduce inequality in the outcomes of young people ages 5-25 in the United States. The research questions must be relevant to the local organization, while also informing theory and extending prior and concurrent research. The proposed research agenda must:
  - Identify a specific inequality in youth outcomes, and show that the outcomes are currently unequal by engaging with the extant literature on the causes and consequences of inequality. We are especially interested in research to reduce inequality in academic, social, behavioral, or economic outcomes.
  - Make a convincing case for the dimension(s) of inequality the study will address. We prioritize studies that aim to reduce inequalities that exist along dimensions of race, ethnicity, economic standing, sexual or gender minority status, language minority status, or immigrant origins.
  - Articulate how findings from your research will help build, test, or increase understanding of a program, policy, or practice to reduce the specific inequality that you have identified.
- Articulate a detailed research agenda that: 1) states the specific hypotheses and/or research questions to be addressed, 2) presents a clear and specific theory of change, 3) provides a detailed discussion of how the design of the study addresses the theory of change, and 4) describes the methods in enough detail so that reviewers may judge rigor and feasibility. In the description of research methods, attend to the sample/case definition and selection procedures; the research design; key constructs, measures, and data sources; and procedures for data collection. Include the data analysis plan for addressing the hypotheses and/or research questions. Please see the application review criteria (p. 18) to help anticipate the level of detail expected.

## OUR INTEREST IN REDUCING INEQUALITY

Our focus on reducing inequality grew out of our view that research can do more than help us understand the problem of inequality—it can generate effective responses. As described above, research is more likely to play this important role when it is co-developed in partnerships between researchers and practitioners or policymakers. The Foundation welcomes descriptive studies that clarify mechanisms for reducing inequality or elucidate how or why a specific program, policy, or practice operates to reduce inequality. We also welcome intervention studies that examine attempts to reduce inequality. We support studies from a range of disciplines, fields, and methods. Available online, [resources for applicants to our program of research grants on reducing inequality](#) may be especially helpful when preparing your research agenda.

### **Selected Resources:**

- [Letters of Inquiry to Propose Research on Reducing Inequality: Identifying the Lever for Change](#)
- [Shifting the Lens: Why Conceptualization Matters in Research on Reducing Inequality](#)
- [Proposing Research on Reducing Inequality: Is Your Study a Fit?](#)

### **Changing Institutional Policies and Practices**

- Describe the specific barriers to engaged scholarship that exist at your institution and show how the proposed plan for institutional change addresses those barriers. Carefully consider the alignment of your research institution's policies and practices with the nature and demands of partnership research. Note that the plan for institutional change may be university-wide or centered within a school or college.
- Provide a compelling plan to alter or introduce policies, practices, or incentives to encourage strong researchers to conduct joint work with public agencies or nonprofit organizations. Initial strategies might include course releases, reductions in service obligations, seed money to support partnership work, forums that showcase the work, distinguished appointments, and training to help researchers become more effective partners. Our expectation is that change strategies will focus primarily on incentivizing and rewarding faculty-level researchers.
- Engage deeply with the question of how your institution can do more to value the work of research-practice partnerships and those engaged in partnering. Propose a plan that is bold, feasible, and specific to the barriers to engaged scholarship at your institution. Finally, show reviewers that the institution is committed to continuing these significant efforts beyond the award period.

## **Enhancing the Capacity of the Partners to Collaborate and Use Research**

- Describe how the research institution will invest in and enhance the capacity of the public agency or nonprofit organization to use research evidence. State the ways that the grant will increase routine and beneficial uses of research in deliberations and decisions relevant to youth, which go beyond a single instance of evidence use and, instead, aim toward the nonprofit organization's or agency's ability to make research-informed decisions in the future.
- State the ways that the research institution will increase routine and beneficial uses of research in deliberations and decisions relevant to youth, which go beyond a single instance of evidence use and, instead, aim toward the agency's ability to make research-informed decisions in the future.
  - Strong applications include strategies aligned with existing literature on the organizational conditions that facilitate the use of research evidence. For example, funds may be used to support a research staff person, data infrastructure, routine access to research expertise on agency priorities, or staff development to improve use of research (Farrell & Coburn, 2017; Frisch, 2016).
- Clearly delineate the learning objectives, primary responsibilities, and rationale for all fellows.
  - Researchers at the mid-career stage have established skills and expertise, influence, and job security. They also have ample time left in their careers to sustain long-term relationships. A mid-career professional from the public agency or nonprofit organization may also serve as a fellow to enhance their capacity to be a critical consumer and user of research.
- Provide the specific methods the partners will use to recruit fellows and the criteria by which fellows will be selected. If you have already identified potential fellows, describe how their skills and expertise match the activities in the project.
- For selecting new mid-career fellows, the criteria for selecting fellows must be clear, rigorous, and well-suited for the research-practice partnership and its research projects. We want to know how applicants will ensure that fellows' expertise and scholarship are relevant to the proposed research, and how applicants will ensure that fellows have the requisite skills to engage in a successful partnership.
- Include a plan for how your institution will support the research fellows in gaining a deep understanding of the policymakers' and practitioners' needs and systems. All fellows must commit to a minimum of half-time status for at least a six-month period. The arrangement should provide ample opportunity to establish meaningful relationships between the fellow and the public agency or nonprofit organization, and to conduct the research and support the use of the findings. Also include plans for orienting and training the fellows. Well-designed plans will reflect consideration of the burdens and benefits for both partners. Be sure to describe the amount of time allotted and specify whether research fellows will be embedded in the practitioner organization (Frisch, 2016; Petersilia, 2008) or maintain separate working spaces (Coburn, Penuel, Geil, 2013).



## THE CO-DEFINED RESEARCH AGENDA

For the research institution, co-designing research means actively engaging representatives from the community organization or public agency in the research process. In some cases, this may mean that specific details of the proposed studies are not yet finalized as the time of application. How can applicants provide specific and compelling details about the research plan, such that the Selection Committee is able to evaluate the rigor of the work? To balance this tension, for example, you may describe previous work with the agency partner and how those plans exemplify potential future work; discuss relevant research plans from the literature that illustrate potential directions for joint research with the partner agency; or explain separate research plans for a handful of possible directions that will grow out of the planning period. In all cases, be sure to provide a detailed description of the methods, inclusive of the sampling framework, research design, data sources, data collection procedures, and analysis plan for at least one candidate project. This will make it possible for the committee to judge the quality and relevance of the partnership's efforts

### **Mid-career Fellows**

For established models of selection criteria for mid-career fellows, you may find candidate eligibility information for high-profile mid-career development awards such as the [NSF Mid-Career Advancement Award](#) and the [NIH KO1 Award](#) useful.

## **8. Partnership Agreement**

- This document articulates the partnership goals, key roles, governance, principles guiding joint work, and timelines, and must be signed by both the principal investigator at the research institution and the partnership leader at the public agency or nonprofit organization. Resources on building partnerships and samples of memorandums of understanding and working agreements can be found on the Foundation's research-practice partnerships website: [rpp.wtgrantfoundation.org](http://rpp.wtgrantfoundation.org).

## **9. Endorsement of the application from the research institution**

- This letter must come from the appropriate institutional office (e.g., university dean, provost, vice chancellor for research) and demonstrate support for the PI, partnership, research project(s), and changes in institutional policies and practices. The letter must also confirm the institution's commitment to provide a match of one full-time equivalent fellow for one year and the presence of sufficient resources to carry out the proposed work. Strong letters explicitly spell out how the university will engage in institutional change to support community-engaged research-practice partnerships.

## **10. Endorsement of the Application from the Public Agency or Nonprofit Organization**

- This letter must come from the appropriate institutional office (e.g., agency leader, director, or executive) and demonstrate support for the leader of the partnership within the agency or organization. The letter must also confirm that there are sufficient resources within the organization to carry out the proposed work. This attachment should be uploaded by the PI.

# Application Review Criteria

*Applications will be reviewed against the following criteria:*

## **Planning Period (if applicable)**

- Activities for the planning period will strengthen the partnership.
- Activities advance the research agenda, selection of fellows, and capacity building plans.
- The public agency or nonprofit organization will receive at least half of the dollars available for planning.

## **Institutional Partnership**

- The rationale for partnering provides compelling evidence that the research institution and the public agency or nonprofit organization can grow an existing partnership that will work together effectively.
- The plan for partnering demonstrates mastery of the literature on the challenges and strategies for collaborative work to promote the use of research evidence.
- Activities for building or strengthening the partnership will deepen trust and relationships.
- There is evidence that the public agency or nonprofit organization is invested in the partnership, will interact regularly with the fellows, and has strong plans for using the research.
- The partnership is likely to be sustained after the award ends.

## **Joint Research Agenda to Reduce Inequality in Youth Outcomes**

- The long-term research agenda (including one or more research projects) aligns with the Foundation's focus on reducing inequality in youth outcomes by:
  - Identifying the dimension(s) of inequality and youth outcomes the research will address.
  - Articulating how findings from your research will help build, test, or increase understanding of a program, policy, or practice to reduce the specific inequality that you have identified. The research questions and findings are likely to significantly advance the public agency or nonprofit organization's efforts to reduce inequality in youth outcomes.

- The narrative clearly articulates the specific hypotheses and/or research questions the partnership will address.
- The research plan reflects rigorous methods that are aligned with the research questions or hypotheses.
- The sampling and data collection plans (e.g., plans for case selection, sampling, and/or measurement) are clear and provide a rationale for how the approach is well-suited to address the research questions or hypotheses.
- The quantitative and/or qualitative analysis plan demonstrates awareness of the strengths and limits of the specific analytic techniques and how they will be applied in the current case.
- The methods, time frame, staffing plan, and other resources are realistic.
- Plans to interpret and use the research findings in policy or practice decisions are convincing, feasible, and aligned with the literature on improving the use of research evidence.
- Plans for broader dissemination are likely to amplify study findings and their use.

### **Changing Institutional Policies and Practices**

- The application provides a thoughtful discussion of specific barriers to incentivizing and rewarding faculty participation in research-practice partnerships at the research institution and offers a plan for overcoming those obstacles.
- Assurances are compelling that the research institution will provide the necessary funding, alter policies, and/or enact new practices to attract, support, and reward strong investigators to conduct partnership research.
- The plan for institutional change is feasible given the resources and time frame.
- The application demonstrates a commitment to sustain the institutional changes beyond the conclusion of the award.

### **Developing the Capacity of the Mid-Career Fellows and Partners**

- The capacity-building plan for the public agency or nonprofit organization significantly extends the organization's ability to access, conduct, and integrate high-quality research evidence into their work.
- Capacity-building activities for the public agency or nonprofit organization leverage the empirical literature on strategies for mobilizing research for use in practice or policy. The capacity-building plan for the research fellows significantly extends the fellows' skills as effective partners to policymakers and practitioners.

- The application includes a rich description of the activities and expertise of the mid-career fellows. If fellows are identified, the application should include their short cv or resume. If they are not yet identified, the application should explain how the criteria for selecting fellows will ensure that the fellows possess the relevant expertise to carry out the proposed work and can effectively communicate what is learned to the broader research community and to change makers in other state or local settings.
- Financial support for two of the full-time equivalent mid-career fellows comes from this grant while support for the third full-time equivalent fellow will come from the university. The application includes written assurances that the research institution will provide support for the equivalent of one full-time mid-career fellow for one year.
- All fellows commit a minimum of half-time status for at least a six-month period. Summer may count toward the half-time appointment.

# Application Review Process

Review occurs in the following stages: Staff screen the 4-page abstracts, brief CVs, and, if warranted, full applications to determine whether they fit with the primary objectives of the award and potentially meet other Selection Criteria. If a proposal is declined at this stage in the process, feedback about the application is limited.

Next, the Institutional Challenge Grant Selection Committee reviews the remaining applications. Each application receives detailed reviews by at least two Committee members, and these reviews are shared with applicants. The Committee then chooses finalists, and the university PI and co-PI from the public agency or private nonprofit organization are invited to submit a written response and to attend an interview in New York City with the selection committee. The interview for the 2026-2027 competition will be held on January 29, 2027; the Foundation will cover airfare, meals, and hotel costs associated with the trip. During the interview, finalists have the opportunity to respond to Committee members' reviews and highlight the value of the grant for their partnership. Following the interviews, the Selection Committee chooses at least one Institutional Challenge Grant recipient. The application is presented for approval by the Board of Trustees at its March meeting.

## **Post-Award Review**

- A program report will be required from the principal investigator 30 days prior to the end of the planning period. This report should describe the progress of the planning period, announce identified fellows, update the partnership agreement(s) (if necessary), and confirm that the planning period funds were disbursed equally between the research institution and partner public agency or nonprofit organization.
- Thereafter, annual program and financial reports are required from the principal investigator and their institutions. Final reports are due at the conclusion of the award. The lead from the public agency or nonprofit organization must also complete annual and final program reports.
- Annual program reports describe work during the past year and facilitate the Foundation's grants management activities. Grants are assigned for post-award review to a member of the Foundation's Senior Program Team. Team members review program reports in order to: 1) find opportunities to link grantees to other scholars, policymakers, and practitioners working in relevant areas; 2) provide technical assistance, advice, or other resources to support the work; and 3) assist grantees with communication and dissemination efforts.



## Institutional Challenge Grant Selection Committee

**Elaine Allensworth**

Lewis-Sebring Director of the Consortium on School Research, University of Chicago

**Marc Atkins**

Emeritus Professor of Psychiatry and Psychology, University of Illinois at Chicago

**Leah Bricker**

Director of Programs, Spencer Foundation

**Ana Mari Cauce\***

Professor of Psychology, President Emeritus, University of Washington

**Timothy Eatman**

Inaugural Dean of the Honors Living-Learning Community, Professor of Urban Education, Rutgers University – Newark

**Kara Finnigan**

*Selection Committee Chair*

Professor, Marsal Family School of Education, University of Michigan

**Adam Gamoran**

President, William T. Grant Foundation

**Tiffany Graydon\***

Director of Workforce Development and Education, Focus:HOPE

**Carolyn Heinrich**

Professor of Public Policy and Education, Vanderbilt University

**Christine James-Brown**

Former CEO, Child Welfare League of America

**Elizabeth Moje**

Dean, Marsal Family School of Education, and George Herbert Mead Collegiate Professor of Education, University of Michigan

**Ritu Khanna**

Chief of Research, Planning, and Assessment, San Francisco Unified School District

**Rebecca A. London\***

Professor of Sociology, Faculty Director of Campus + Community, University of California, Santa Cruz

**Sumie Okazaki**

Professor of Counseling Psychology, New York University

**Jody Rosentswieg**

Director, Strategic Initiatives, Bezos Family Foundation

**Stephanie J. Rowley**

Dean and William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of Education, School of Education and Human Development, University of Virginia

**Nathaniel Schwartz\***

Director of Applied Research and Professor of Practice, Annenberg Institute for School Reform, Brown University

**Robert Sellers\***

James S. Jackson Distinguished University, Professor of Psychology, Professor of Education, University of Michigan

**Mark Soler**

Former Executive Director, Center for Children's Law and Policy

**Laura Tach\***

Professor of Public Policy and Sociology, Cornell University

**Gautam Yadama\***

Professor and Dean, Boston College School of Social Work

\*One year appointment for 2025-26

**Standing, left to right:** Tiffany Graydon, Leah Bricker, Marc Atkins, Rebecca London, Robert Sellers, Laura Tach, Carolyn Heinrich, Sumie Okazaki, Nathaniel Schwartz, Kara Finnigan, Gautam Yadama, Ritu Khanna, Stephanie J. Rowley, Timothy Eatman, Christine James-Brown  
**Seated, left to right:** Jody Rosentswieg, Mark Soler, Adam Gamoran, Elaine Allensworth  
**Not pictured:** Ana Mari Cauce, Elizabeth Moje

## Appendix A: Application Checklist

**We recognize the application requirements are extensive. Please use this checklist to make sure you have completed all required elements.**

- Structured abstract (4 pages)
- Proposal narrative (no more than 25 pages)
- Budget grid in application record
- Budget justification narrative
- Budget form for planning period
- Short cv/resume for PI (university lead)
- Short cv/resume for co-PI (nonprofit organization or public agency lead)
- Short cv/resume for mid-career fellows, if known
- Partnership agreement
- Letter of endorsement from university
- Letter of endorsement from nonprofit organization or public agency
- IRS tax-exempt status determination letter (for university)

## Appendix B: Awarded Grants

### 2025

#### **Improving Postsecondary Educational Outcomes for Transition-Age Youth in Foster Care**

Deborah Ehrental and Christian Connell, Pennsylvania State University; Laval S. Miller-Wilson, Pennsylvania Department of Human Services, Office of Children, Youth and Families

#### **New Orleans Youth Equity Collaborative: A Research Practice Partnership to Reduce Youth Firearm Violence**

Katherine Theall, Tulane University; Troi Bechet, Center for Restorative Approaches; Lerone Crayton, New Orleans Public Schools

#### **Promoting Innovative and Vital Opportunities for Transformation (PIVOT): A Prosecutor-Led Community Based Diversion Program for Youth and Young Adults to Reduce Ethno-Racial Inequality**

Jennifer Perillo, University of New Mexico; Lisa Broidy, University of New Mexico; Jennifer Padgett Macias, State of New Mexico First Judicial District Attorney's Office

#### **Improving Outcomes for English Learners and Students with Disabilities in Indiana**

Marcus Winters, Boston University; Anna Shults, Indiana Department of Education

### 2024

#### **Using Implementation Science to Reduce Health Disparities in Youth & Families: A University-Federally Qualified Health Center Partnership**

Kristina Gordon, University of Tennessee-Knoxville; Parinda Khatri, Cherokee Health Systems

#### **The Delaware Early Literacy Research-Practice Partnership: Catalyzing Educational Equality**

Elizabeth Farley-Ripple, University of Delaware; Monica Gant, Delaware Department of Education

#### **Advancing the Social and Economic Mobility of Black Male Youth and Young Men**

Mary McKay, Washington University in St. Louis; Brandon Williams, Boys & Girls Club of St. Louis; Valerie Patton, Greater St. Louis Foundation; Cheri D. Lilly-Tillis, Fathers and Families Support Center

**Strengthening a Holistic, Community-Based Pre-Collegiate and Collegiate Support System to Enhance College Matriculation, Persistence, and Success among Latinx Students in East San José, California: Preparing Racially Minoritized Students for College During Uncertain Times**

Pedro Nava, Santa Clara University; Brittany Alvarez, Latino Education Advancement Foundation; Sherry Segura, The Foundation for Hispanic Education

**2023**

**Bridging Institutions to Close Youth Opportunity Gaps**

Ben Allen, University of Virginia; Daphne Keiser, Albemarle County Public School

**Disrupting Inequalities Along the Path to College and Career: A Partnership between Metro Nashville Public Schools and Vanderbilt University**

Sean Corcoran, Vanderbilt University; Matthew Nelson, Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools

**Strategic Partnership for Advancing Research Knowledge and Leadership for Equity (SPARKLE)**

Decoteau J. Irby, University of Illinois, Chicago; Devin McFarland Swartley, Chicago Board of Education; and Allison Tingwall, Chicago Public Schools

**Restoring Justice and Reimagining Research: Building Community to Disrupt the Cycle of Violence and Enhance Research-Practice Partnerships**

Becky Pettit, University of Texas at Austin; Courtney Robinson, The Excellence and Advancement Foundation

*(Received a continuation grant in 2026)*

**2022**

**Focus: Mental Health: A Stress and Workforce Development Intervention Promoting Racial and Economic Justice Among Youth**

Enrique Neblett, School of Public Health, University of Michigan; Tiffany Graydon, Focus: HOPE

*(Received a continuation grant in 2025)*

**University Research Partnerships to Reduce Educational Disparity in College Towns: Building a Model in Tallahassee, FL**

Nicole Patton-Terry, School of Teacher Education, Florida Center for Reading Research, Florida State University; Michelle Gayle, Leon County Schools

*(Received a continuation grant in 2025)*

**Reducing Inequities in Postsecondary Debt and Repayment through a Multi-Sector Research-Practice Partnership**

Thomas Vicino, Andrew Young School of Policy Studies, Georgia State University; Cheryl Watson-Harris, Achieve Atlanta

*(Received a continuation grant in 2025)*

## 2021

### **Enhancing Nursing Capacity to Understand and Address the Needs of Native American Youth on the Fort Belknap Reservation**

Teresa Brockie, Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing; Karen King, Fort Belknap Indian Community, Fort Belknap Tribal Health Dept.

*(Received a continuation grant in 2024)*

### **Youth and Undergraduate Transformation to Harness Community Change (YOUTH-C2)**

Regina Langhout, University of California, Santa Cruz; Yvette Brooks, United Way of Santa Cruz County

*(Received a continuation grant in 2024)*

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

Alicia Modestino, Northeastern University, School of Public Policy and Urban Affairs; Allison Vernerey, Department of Youth Engagement and Employment, City of Boston

*(Received a continuation grant in 2024)*

## 2020

### **The Impact of Upstream Prevention of Homelessness on Youth Educational and Developmental Outcomes**

Gautam Yadama, School of Social Work, Boston College; Sarah Bartley, United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley

*(Received a continuation grant in 2023)*

### **The Northwestern-Evanston Education Research Alliance: Designing for Equity and Excellence in Education**

Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy, School of Education and Social Policy, Northwestern University; Pete Bavis, Superintendent, Evanston Township High School District 202; Angel Turner, Assistant Superintendent of Schools, Evanston/Skokie District 65

*(Received a continuation grant in 2026)*

### **Understanding and Intervening in Inequities in Chronic Absenteeism and its Consequences Among High School Students**

Emily Ozer, School of Public Health, University of California, Berkeley; Devin Corrigan, San Francisco Unified School District

*(Received a continuation grant in 2023)*

## 2019

### **Mind the Gap: Partnering to Narrow Denver's Achievement Gaps by Retaining Top Teachers**

Mimi Engel, School of Education, University of Colorado, Boulder; Jolene Gregory, Denver Public Schools

*(Received a continuation grant in 2022)*

### **Raising Academic Achievement in Under-Performing Schools through Improved Management: A Research-Practice Partnership\*\***

Gustavo Bobonis, Dept. of Economics, University of Toronto; Damarys Varela Velez, Puerto Rico Dept. of Education

*(Received a continuation grant in 2022)*

## 2018

### **Protecting Vulnerable Families and Children in the Crosshairs of the Opioid Epidemic: A Research-Practice Partnership\***

Rachel Dunifon, Cornell University; Anna Steinkraus, Cornell Cooperative Extension, Tompkins County

*(Received a continuation grant in 2021)*

## Appendix C: Useful Links

---

### Resources for Applicants

<https://wtgrantfoundation.org/funding/institutional-challenge-grant/applicant-resources>

*Topics Include:*

- Applicant Guidance
  - Annotated Excerpts of Successful Proposals
  - Research-Practice Partnerships
  - Research on Reducing Inequality
- 

### Frequently Asked Questions

<https://wtgrantfoundation.org/funding/institutional-challenge-grant/faq>

- Eligibility and the Application
  - The Research-Practice Partnership
  - Staffing and the Fellows
  - Institutional Shifts
  - Research Agenda on Reducing Inequality
  - The Budget
- 

### Awarded Grants

[https://wtgrantfoundation.org/the-library?\\_sft\\_format=grants&\\_sft\\_program=institutional-challenge-grant](https://wtgrantfoundation.org/the-library?_sft_format=grants&_sft_program=institutional-challenge-grant)

## References

- Coburn, C.E., Penuel, W.R., & Geil, K.E. (2013). *Research-practice partnerships: A strategy for leveraging research for educational improvement in school districts*. William T. Grant Foundation. <http://wtgrantfoundation.org/library/uploads/2015/10/Research-Practice-Partnerships-at-the-District-Level.pdf>
- Dugery, J. & Knowles, J., eds. (2003). *Pew partnerships for civic change*. The Pew Charitable Trusts.
- DuMont, K. (2015). *Leveraging knowledge: Taking stock of the William T. Grant use of research evidence portfolio of grants*. William T. Grant Foundation. <http://wtgrantfoundation.org/library/uploads/2015/09/Leveraging-Knowledge-Taking-Stock-of-URE.pdf>
- Farrell, C.C., & Coburn, C.E. (2017). Absorptive capacity: A conceptual framework for understanding district central office learning. *Journal of Educational Change*, 18, 135-159.
- Farrell, C.C., Penuel, W.R., Coburn, C.E., Daniel, J., & Steup, L. (2021). *Research-practice partnerships in education: The state of the field*. William T. Grant Foundation. [http://wtgrantfoundation.org/library/uploads/2021/07/RPP\\_State-of-the-Field\\_2021.pdf](http://wtgrantfoundation.org/library/uploads/2021/07/RPP_State-of-the-Field_2021.pdf)
- Frisch, N. (2016). Examining the success of an embedded criminologist partnership. *Translational Criminology*, 10, 24-27.
- Henrick, E.C., Cobb, P., Penuel, W.R., Jackson, K., & Clark, T. (2017). *Assessing research-practice partnerships: Five dimensions of effectiveness*. William T. Grant Foundation. <http://wtgrantfoundation.org/library/uploads/2017/10/Assessing-Research-Practice-Partnerships.pdf>.
- Hunter, B. (2017). *A piece of action: Three district leaders on fostering research use*. William T. Grant Foundation. [http://wtgrantfoundation.org/library/uploads/2017/12/Fostering-Research-Use\\_Billy-Hunter\\_WTG\\_2017.pdf](http://wtgrantfoundation.org/library/uploads/2017/12/Fostering-Research-Use_Billy-Hunter_WTG_2017.pdf).
- Oliver, K., Innvar, S., Lorenc, T., Woodman, J., & Thomas, J. (2014). A systematic review of barriers to and facilitators of the use of evidence by policymakers. *BioMed Central*, 14(2), 1-26.
- Palinkas, L.A., Short, C., & Wong, M. (2015). *Research-practice-policy partnerships for implementation of evidence-based practices in child welfare and child mental health*. William T. Grant Foundation. [http://wtgrantfoundation.org/library/uploads/2015/10/Research-Practice-Policy\\_Partnerships.pdf](http://wtgrantfoundation.org/library/uploads/2015/10/Research-Practice-Policy_Partnerships.pdf)

- Trotter, R.T., Laurila, K., Alberts, D., & Huenneke, L.F. (2014). A diagnostic evaluation model for complex research partnerships with community engagement. The partnership for Native American Cancer Prevention (NACP) model. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 48, 10-20.
- Tseng, V. (2017). *The next big leap for research-practice partnerships: building and testing theories to improve research use*. William T. Grant Foundation. [http://wtgrantfoundation.org/library/uploads/2017/12/Next-Big-Leap\\_Vivian-Tseng\\_WTG\\_2017.pdf](http://wtgrantfoundation.org/library/uploads/2017/12/Next-Big-Leap_Vivian-Tseng_WTG_2017.pdf).
- Tseng, V. & Gamoran, A. (2017). *Bringing rigor to relevant questions: How social science research can improve youth outcomes in the real world*. William T. Grant Foundation. [http://wtgrantfoundation.org/library/uploads/2017/05/How-Social-Science-Research-Can-Improve-Youth-Outcomes\\_WTG2017.pdf](http://wtgrantfoundation.org/library/uploads/2017/05/How-Social-Science-Research-Can-Improve-Youth-Outcomes_WTG2017.pdf)



60 East 42nd Street, 43rd Floor  
New York, NY 10165  
212.752.0071

[wtgrantfoundation.org](http://wtgrantfoundation.org)