

## REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS:

### Building Rigorous Evidence on Effective Student Support Strategies in Online Postsecondary Education

September 1, 2021

#### I. Overview:

Arnold Ventures (AV) is a nonpartisan philanthropy whose core mission is to invest in evidence-based solutions that maximize opportunity and minimize injustice. This Request for Proposals (RFP) seeks grant applications to build the evidence base on effective student support strategies for students enrolled in online postsecondary programs, either fully-online or in hybrid modalities. As a first step, we are requesting initial letters of interest by October 11, 2021 (please see more details below).

We are committed to improving the return on investment in higher education for students - especially those who have been historically underserved - and for taxpayers. Even as access to higher education has significantly expanded, we still struggle to help students complete their credentials and secure a strong return on their investments. Colleges need sound evidence to identify ways to support students' financial, social, and academic needs. As part of our work in higher education, we support research to uncover and scale up the most effective programs and practices that will pave the way for success among all students.

#### *RFP Objectives*

Our ultimate goal in this RFP is to build a base of credible evidence about “what works” for students enrolled in online higher education programs. Online enrollment has steadily grown over the past decade: in fall 2018, 5.7 million students - more than a third of undergraduates - enrolled in at least one online education course, while 2.3 million enrolled exclusively online. If done effectively, online options could expand access for students who require flexible scheduling or lack in-person options, such as adult students and rural students.

But much of the evidence suggests that many students who enroll online are less likely to complete college and earn lower grades, and particularly those students who are traditionally underserved and less academically-prepared.<sup>1</sup> There is also relatively limited evidence on effective supports for online students - such as advising or other wraparound services - to help improve outcomes, even as institutions and other stakeholders have begun to develop promising strategies.

#### *Project Scope*

AV has committed **up to \$2 million** for research studies that identify and hone promising student success interventions for students enrolled in online education to set the stage for larger-scale, rigorous randomized controlled trial (RCT) evaluations. We are primarily interested in innovative student

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<sup>1</sup> See Protopsaltis & Baum (2019), “Does Online Education Live Up to Its Promise? A Look at the Evidence and Implications for Federal Policy,” [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330442019\\_Does\\_Online\\_Education\\_Live\\_Up\\_to\\_Its\\_Promise\\_A\\_Look\\_at\\_the\\_Evidence\\_and\\_Implications\\_for\\_Federal\\_Policy](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330442019_Does_Online_Education_Live_Up_to_Its_Promise_A_Look_at_the_Evidence_and_Implications_for_Federal_Policy).

supports that promote success among online students, such as novel advising or coaching strategies. To be clear, this RFP is intended to support efforts to refine or adapt programs to support students enrolled in online in advance of rigorous evaluation, as opposed to foundational research to study online learning patterns or to design interventions from the ground up.

We are seeking to support the following types of projects through this RFP:<sup>2</sup>

- *Feasibility studies* that set up a prospective evaluation and consider whether it would be productive (e.g., assessing program maturity and variation in implementation, identifying potential sites to participate, refining research methodology)
- *Rapid-cycle evaluations* that refine program models and provide preliminary evidence of impact
- *Well-conducted quasi-experimental design (QED) studies* that can provide a reliable assessment of the program's impact at lower cost before conducting a full-scale RCT<sup>3</sup>
- *Pilot randomized controlled trials (RCTs)* that provide a test run for a fully-powered RCT—for instance, the pilot study might have a lower sample size or only produce short-term results—by laying important groundwork (e.g., testing data collection, assessing program fidelity) and offering preliminary evidence of impact

We will prioritize research that adapts the most effective in-person comprehensive support and advising interventions, as well as particularly promising new practices specific to online education, with a focus on solutions that have the potential to scale up quickly. We will pay particular attention to models that promise to improve outcomes among historically underserved populations across both 2- and 4-year settings, including low-income students, students of color, and adult students. As we discuss in more detail below, we are seeking to prioritize support for research, so are only open to funding a limited proportion of direct program delivery costs.

#### *Commitment to Racial Equity and Diversity*

Promoting diversity and equity in research practice is a key facet of AV's mission of maximizing opportunity and minimizing injustice. While racial disparities persist across the higher education system, we recognize that there are too few researchers of color leading studies that are intended to result in successful outcomes for students of color. We are committed to funding work conducted by research teams that are diverse.

In addition, AV's commitment to building the field of scholarship means that applicants should propose teams that include early-career researchers and scholars with meaningful and active roles in the work. AV also equally welcomes new potential partners and existing grantee partners to apply to this RFP.

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<sup>2</sup> If applicants believe that the evidence base for a prospective model merits a full-scale RCT evaluation at this stage, please reach out directly to Kelly McManus ([kmcmamus@arnoldventures.org](mailto:kmcmamus@arnoldventures.org)), Director of Higher Education.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of quasi-experimental design methods that we believe are most likely to produce valid estimates of a program's impact, please see the Appendix, "Which Comparison-Group ("Quasi-Experimental") Study Designs Are Most Likely to Produce Valid Estimates of a Program's Impact?"

## II. Selection Criteria

Under the project scope discussed above, AV will consider letters of interest and proposals under four selection criteria:

**1. Prospective impact.** Is the applicant proposing to implement an intervention that:

- Involves a model with clearly defined program elements (e.g., duration of the treatment, principles for student engagement)? (The proposed project may also clarify or hone the program elements to be included in a prospective full-scale RCT evaluation.)
- Targets key recognized outcomes of postsecondary success, such as student learning, persistence, completion, time to completion, job placement, and post-college earnings?
- Is supported by compelling logic, informed by the most relevant and rigorous evidence available, that the intervention could produce sizable impacts on student success? We will prioritize research on practices that have already demonstrated compelling evidence of impact in some format through as rigorous an evaluation as possible. For example, applicants could propose to test an intervention that combines the most promising elements of past effective models; describe the connection between the intervention's elements and top barriers to student success; and/or propose to assess an adaptation of an intervention that improved outcomes in a rigorous experimental evaluation in another setting, such as adapting a 2-year intervention to a 4-year setting.
- Is likely, or directly designed, to improve outcomes for historically underserved populations, including low-income students, students of color, and adult students?
- Is cost-effective and could feasibly be scaled to other programs and institutions in the future?

**2. Study design.** Does applicant's proposed study:

- Explicitly outline core research objectives and lay out a strategy to prospectively, if successful, transition from this project to an RCT (including a statement of provisional approval from key participants)?
- Consider the delivery of the intervention in a real world context?
- Clearly document the key elements of the intervention (including the program model, training, supervision, and cost)?
- Clearly document the predetermined population that will receive the intervention and the setting(s) in which the intervention is delivered as well as the size of the sample?
- Measure—or demonstrate it is possible to accurately measure—both proximal outcomes to assess whether the intervention affects the behaviors it is intended to change (e.g., credit enrollment and accumulation, program participation), as well as ultimate outcomes (e.g., degree completion)?

**3. Research team.** Does the applicant's team include all parties needed to conduct a feasibility study that can transition to a full-scale RCT, including:

- An experienced practitioner or institutional leader who has successfully implemented an innovative intervention in a real world setting, with documented adherence to the intervention's key elements?

- One or more researchers who have previously conducted implementation studies and documented key elements of a program model for use in replication studies, and a consultant/advisor who has carried out a well-conducted quasi-experimental design (QED) or RCT and who will help the team to design the feasibility study so it can flow seamlessly into a more rigorous evaluation?
- Personnel familiar with necessary administrative data who can assist researchers in accessing and understanding the data, if such data will ultimately be needed to measure outcomes?

**4. Scope of funding request.** Will the applicant's proposed project:

- Use the funds requested in the most cost-efficient way to achieve the proposed research objectives? (While we do not have a specific funding amount or maximum amount in mind given project scopes may vary, information about past grants of similar scope funded under the AV higher education portfolio are available on our website.<sup>4</sup>)
- Evaluate an intervention whose delivery is primarily paid for by another funder, and does that funder (and/or other essential parties) agree to the study? (While AV may contribute funds towards intervention delivery, we expect such delivery to be primarily paid for by other funders and will prioritize funding for core research costs. To verify that the necessary funding and other commitments are in place, we will look for attached letters or other communications showing that the funders and/or other necessary parties assent to the study.<sup>5</sup>)

### **III. Timeline and Application Materials**

This table includes the full timeline for the RFP and application materials deadlines:

Stage	Date
Deadline for applicants to submit letter of interest (maximum 3 pages)	Deadline: October 11, 2021
AV notifies applicants on a rolling basis whether they are invited to submit a full proposal	By November 17, 2021
Deadline for invited applicants to submit a full proposal	December 20, 2021
AV notifies applicants whether they have been selected for an award	March 2022
Grants are awarded	April - May 2022

Under this timeline, we expect that projects funded under this RFP would start, at earliest, on May 1, 2022, and we are open to start dates through the end of 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Available at: <https://www.arnoldventures.org/grants-search?amount=100000%253A499999&topics=Higher%2520Education>

<sup>5</sup> Such agreement(s) may be tentative at the time the letter of interest is submitted, but should be finalized before submission of the full proposal. We especially encourage agreements in which the necessary parties not only assent to the study, but also provide a credible description of how they or others would use the study findings to inform program or policy decisions.

### *Letter of Interest (LOI)*

As a first step, we request that applicants submit an initial letter of interest by October 11, 2021. Please submit the letter and any attachments by email to [onlineRFP@arnoldventures.org](mailto:onlineRFP@arnoldventures.org).

Please limit letters of interest to 3 pages or less (not including attachments); applicants may use their own format with single or double spacing, and a font size of 11 or higher. In the letter of interest, please address these core questions:

- Directly address each of the selection criteria above; to be clear, we recognize that applicants may not have fully finalized all aspects of the Study Design criterion at the LOI
- Specify the amount of funding requested, and if feasible, any major cost components; if additional funding from other sources is needed to carry out the study, please describe 1) the total study cost and 2) the portion of that cost to be covered by AV, and please attach a letter or other communication showing that the additional funding will be in place prior to AV's grant award
- Include a brief discussion of the anticipated project timeline; while we do not have a hard requirement for project durations, we expect most projects will be at most 2 years and prospectively shorter in order to transition to a prospective follow-on RCT

And please also:

- Confirm that 1) an appropriate practitioner/institutional leader has agreed to participate in the study, and 2) that a data source has agreed to provide the research team with access to administrative data necessary measure study outcomes (please attach letters or communications reflecting these arrangements)
- Briefly address how the study meets recognized ethical standards for research with human subjects
- Specify the proposed recipient of the grant award, which we generally expect to be a tax-exempt organization (e.g., nonprofit organization, university, or governmental unit); if your organization is not tax-exempt and is interested in applying, please contact Kelly McManus (see contact information below)

### *Proposal*

AV will review letters of interest on a rolling basis and will invite full proposals by November 17, 2021, at the latest. At that time, AV will share feedback to inform the proposal. While we do not have a page length restriction for the full proposal, we strongly prefer concise submissions.

At this stage, we also ask that applicants complete two additional documents (available in advance on request):

- A full project-based budget subject to AV's indirect cost policy (this policy is included in full in the appendix below); we also ask that in the full proposal narrative, you share a preliminary

estimate or prospective range of the anticipated cost for a prospective follow-on RCT evaluation, in the event the initial project is successful

- Complete a research methodology appendix for the project (e.g., describing data sources, research design)

#### **IV. What to Expect in the Grant Agreement**

As a condition of the grant award, we ask that grantees:

- Pre-register the study on the Open Science Framework (OSF) website (<https://osf.io/>) and, prior to the commencement of the study, upload a copy of the research and analysis plan in their proposal. For more details on AV's preferences for pre-registration, please see this overview: [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1uA0MOTQdmZvTs8cYy\\_tnvtllvUtlWdZ2M0hKnaPP-tU/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1uA0MOTQdmZvTs8cYy_tnvtllvUtlWdZ2M0hKnaPP-tU/edit?usp=sharing)
- Provide AV with brief updates on the study's progress on a periodic basis, and before making any key decisions that could materially affect the study's design or implementation.
- Submit concise reports on the findings at appropriate intervals. These reports should make it easy for readers to see the study's main results and gauge their credibility.
- Make their datasets and related materials (e.g., survey instruments, code used to clean and analyze datasets) publicly available on the OSF site. Applicants will be asked to do this within one year of the last data collection, and only to the extent allowed under any confidentiality/privacy protections. If anonymization/de-identification would make data sharing possible, please add a brief section in the proposal discussing whether extra time and/or funding is needed.

#### **V. Questions**

For any questions, please contact Kelly McManus, AV Director of Higher Education ([kmcmamus@arnoldventures.org](mailto:kmcmamus@arnoldventures.org)).



**Arnold Ventures  
Indirect Cost Policy  
Effective February 1, 2018**

**Policy Purpose**

Arnold Ventures (“AV”) requires that any resources awarded by AV to an organization be dedicated to the costs necessary to accomplish the purpose of a grant.

**Direct & Indirect Cost Definitions**

AV permits grantees to request funding for all of the direct costs associated with a project, including salaries and federally required benefits for employees, travel, meetings and conferences, data access fees, and payments to third-party consultants and sub-grantees that are directly attributable to or created specifically for the purpose supported by a particular grant. Moreover, AV also recognizes that in order to successfully accomplish the purpose of a grant, grantees often need additional financial support to cover a portion of their indirect costs. AV’s Indirect Cost Policy (the “Policy”) defines indirect costs as organizational costs incurred for a common or joint purpose benefitting more than one project and not exclusively attributable to or created for the project supported by a particular AV grant. Please see Appendix A for examples of indirect costs covered under this Policy.

**Allowable Indirect Cost Rates**

The Policy permits institutions of higher education, including community colleges, to receive an indirect cost rate of 15 percent (15%) of total direct project costs; all other organizations (e.g., non-profit, governmental, for-profit, etc.) may receive an indirect cost rate of 20 percent (20%) of total direct project costs.<sup>1, 2</sup>

**Requirements**

For each grant proposal, grantees must provide: (i) a project budget, (ii) a corresponding budget narrative that clearly outlines and defines<sup>3</sup> the total direct project costs, and (iii) fringe rate calculation detail for all personnel allocated to the project within the project budget.

Each new grant request received by AV will be independently reviewed and approved subject to the provisions set forth in this Policy. AV maintains the sole discretion to determine the approved classification of direct and indirect costs for each grant.

Please contact Ruchi Agrawal, AV Finance Manager, at [RAgrawal@arnoldventures.org](mailto:RAgrawal@arnoldventures.org) with any questions regarding this Policy.

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<sup>1</sup> Grants with the primary purpose of providing general operating support are not subject to this Policy.

<sup>2</sup> Third-party consulting or subcontract expenses, sub-awards, data acquisition, and tuition (if applicable) shall not be included as part of the total direct project cost base for the indirect cost calculation.

<sup>3</sup> Please review AV’s Budget Template for additional guidelines.



## Appendix A Examples of Indirect Costs

The examples listed in this Appendix A are for general guidance. The list is not exhaustive, and AV, in its sole discretion, will make the final determination on the approved classification of direct and indirect costs for each grant.

Expense Type	Indirect Expense Examples
<b>Personnel</b>	Executive Management ( <i>e.g.</i> , CEO, COO, CFO, Executive Director, etc.), Central Operational Functions ( <i>e.g.</i> , Accounting, Administrative Support, Grants Management, HR, IT, Legal, etc.) <sup>4</sup>
<b>Consultants</b>	Contracted work for general operational functions ( <i>e.g.</i> , legal work or audits)
<b>Travel and Accommodations</b>	Any travel not required to achieve the grant's purpose; accommodation costs over and above the market rate for a specific area
<b>Equipment</b>	Equipment that can be used by an institution for other purposes or projects ( <i>e.g.</i> , computers, telephones, office furniture)
<b>Rent</b>	Office space rental and utilities associated with central operational functions ( <i>i.e.</i> , rent expenses incurred whether or not the subject grant is awarded)
<b>Other</b>	All materials and supplies used for more than one purpose or project, printing and postage costs, memberships and subscriptions, hardware and software programs for general operational functions, organizational insurance, etc.

Note: Direct and indirect costs awarded to grantees may only be used for charitable, educational, and/or scientific purposes as such purposes are generally defined by those authorities interpreting the provisions of Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, and may not be used to carry on propaganda, influence legislation, fund any political campaign, influence the outcome of any election, carry on any voter registration drives, or violate any applicable local, state, federal, or foreign law.

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<sup>4</sup> To the extent members of an executive management team are contributing to the project beyond their normal role as an organizational leader, a grantee may request a direct allocation with a corresponding justification explaining the additional contributions of such individuals.