

REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS:**Rigorous Impact Evaluations of Student Success Programs and Practices in Higher Education**

(Submissions are accepted on a rolling basis; there is no deadline.)

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. The Higher Education initiative seeks to identify and scale effective practices that improve student success and address equity gaps in higher education. 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. We support research to uncover the most effective programs and practices that will pave the way for success among all students, especially those underserved by the current system. In recent years, a number of high-quality, randomized controlled trial (RCT) evaluations have identified several programs with the potential to substantially increase student success and address equity gaps. Arnold Ventures works to continue building the evidence base and to secure policies and investments to scale up what works.

This Request for Proposals—a joint effort of AV's Higher Education and Evidence-Based Policy initiatives—seeks grant applications to conduct rigorous impact evaluations of programs and practices (“interventions”) to promote college success in the United States that fall into one of three tiers:

- (i) The intervention is backed by promising prior evidence suggesting it could produce sizable impacts on important student success outcomes (*e.g.*, student learning, persistence, degree or certificate completion, job placement, post-college earnings, and debt burden);
- (ii) The intervention is widely adopted in practice, but has not yet been rigorously evaluated and its impacts on key student success outcomes are thus largely unknown; or
- (iii) The intervention is growing in use and likely to become widely adopted, but has not yet been rigorously evaluated.

Whenever possible, Arnold Ventures has a preference for funding randomized controlled trials (RCTs).

We will also consider certain rigorous quasi-experimental designs that can credibly demonstrate a causal relationship when random assignment is not feasible, as discussed under “study design” below.

Our ultimate goal in this effort is to build credible evidence about “what works” to improve student success outcomes and, in particular, **to increase the number of interventions rigorously shown to produce important improvements in outcomes including but not limited to student learning, persistence, degree or certificate completion, job placement, post-college earnings, and debt burden.** The field recognizes a few gold-standard programs such as ASAP and Bottom Line; however, we recognize the need to identify other effective interventions to support student success in higher education. For the purposes of this RFP, such interventions may be broadly defined and, for example, may include programs that target high school students or others not currently enrolled in college, so long as the proposed study will measure the outcomes of interest listed above.

II. Application Process and Selection Criteria:

A. **We ask applicants first to submit a letter of interest (maximum three pages). Applicants whose letters are reviewed favorably will be invited to submit a full proposal (maximum six pages).** There is no deadline for submitting a letter of interest; applicants may submit a letter at any time via email to StudentSuccessRFP@arnoldventures.org. We will notify applicants within approximately one month whether they are invited to submit a full proposal (full proposals must be invited). Applicants may use their own format, with single or double spacing, and an 11-point font or larger. The page limit does not include attached letters or other documents specifically requested in this Request for Proposals.

B. **Letters of interest and full proposals will be reviewed jointly by the AV Higher Education and Evidence-Based Policy initiatives, based on the selection criteria below.** Review teams have substantive expertise in higher education and rigorous impact evaluations.

C. **Selection Criteria:**

We ask applicants to address the following four criteria in both the letter of interest and the full proposal. The full proposal should provide more detail (*e.g.*, on the study design) than the letter of interest, and address any questions or issues identified by AV in its invitation to submit a full proposal.

➤ **PROMISING OR WIDELY-ADOPTED: Is the applicant proposing to evaluate an intervention that falls into one of the following three tiers?**

(i) **The intervention is backed by promising prior evidence suggesting it could produce sizable impacts on student success outcomes of clear policy importance**, including, but not limited to, student learning, persistence, degree completion, job placement, post-college earnings, and debt burden. For example, we specifically encourage applications seeking to replicate findings from prior impact evaluations that are especially promising but not yet conclusive due to study limitations—*e.g.*, short follow-up period, single-site study design, or well-matched comparison groups but not randomization. (Please provide full citations to the relevant prior studies as an attachment to the letter of interest.) As a threshold condition for “promising” evidence, applicants should show that the intervention can be or (preferably) has been successfully delivered under real-world implementation conditions.

(ii) **The intervention is widely adopted in practice with significant taxpayer investment, but has not yet been rigorously evaluated and its impacts on key student success outcomes are thus largely unknown.**

(iii) **The intervention is growing in use and likely to become widely adopted with significant taxpayer investment, but has not yet been rigorously evaluated.**

Appendix A contains illustrative examples of four interventions that we believe meet the “promising” or “widely adopted” criteria and would be excellent candidates for funding.

➤ **STUDY DESIGN: Is the applicant’s proposed research design valid?** In other words, does the proposed study have a sufficiently large sample (as shown through a power analysis) and other elements needed to generate credible evidence about the intervention’s impact on one or more targeted outcomes of high policy importance as outlined above? We strongly encourage designs

that measure outcomes in both the short and longer term to determine whether the intervention produces effects on outcomes which constitute meaningful improvement in people’s lives such as degree or certificate completion and post-college earnings. Reviewers, in assessing an applicant’s proposed design, will use [Key Items to Get Right When Conducting RCTs of Social Programs](#) as a reference.

Applicants, as part of their discussion of this criterion, should specify the study’s primary outcome(s) of interest; how they will measure the outcome(s) and over what length of time; and what analyses they plan to conduct (*e.g.*, any subgroups to be examined, regression methods to be used).

While we generally seek to fund RCT evaluations, we will also consider submissions for rigorous quasi-experimental evaluations **if the applicant can make a convincing case that an RCT is not feasible**, and—per the “Experienced Researcher” criterion below—can demonstrate their experience carrying out a well-conducted quasi-experimental evaluation by providing at least one, and not more than two, reports from prior comparable quasi-experiments. In such cases, we ask applicants—in addition to addressing the design elements above (*e.g.*, sizable sample, important outcomes, extended follow-up)—to show that the proposed study adheres closely to the design features empirically shown to increase the likelihood of a valid quasi-experimental finding, as described in this [document](#).

- **EXPERIENCED RESEARCHER: Does the applicant’s team include at least one researcher in a key substantive role who has previously carried out a well-conducted RCT or quasi-experimental study (as applicable)?¹** A well-conducted RCT is characterized, for example, by low sample attrition, sufficient sample size, close adherence to random assignment, and valid outcome measures and statistical analyses. To address this criterion, we request that applicants submit at least one or two, reports from prior rigorous impact evaluation studies of comparable design to the proposed study that the researcher played a substantive role in conducting. (Please send the full study report(s) as an email attachment to the letter of interest.) Reviewers will rely primarily on these reports in assessing this selection criterion, using [Key Items to Get Right When Conducting RCTs of Social Programs](#) as a reference.

We recognize the need to expand and diversify the pool of researchers with RCT and quasi-experimental design experience, and are committed to reducing barriers to achieving this goal. Thus we strongly encourage researchers who are new to rigorous impact evaluations, including those from groups historically underrepresented in the research community—such as researchers of color and women—to participate in this funding opportunity. We especially encourage researchers representing Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), and Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) to participate. Such individuals who do not meet the “experienced researcher” criterion themselves may still serve as a study’s lead researcher as long as they partner with a colleague who does meet the criterion and will play at least a key advisory role in the study. (Prospective applicants are welcome to contact us for assistance in addressing this criterion; see contact information in section IV below.)

¹ The qualifying researcher does not necessarily need to have been the principal investigator on a well-conducted study, but would need to have played a substantive role in carrying one out.

- **FUNDING AND OTHER PARTNERS: Do funders of the intervention and any other essential parties agree to the study?** To verify such agreement(s), the reviewers will look for attached letters or other communications showing that the necessary parties (*e.g.*, funder and/or provider of the intervention) assent to the study, including random assignment. 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.

In the grants awarded under this Request for Proposals, we will generally fund the cost of the study, which may include research related costs to the implementing partner, but typically expect other parties to pay the cost of delivering the intervention to the treatment group. However, we may help support costs of intervention delivery in a limited number of grant awards where the case for an evaluation is particularly compelling—based, for example, on especially promising prior evidence. In these situations, AV funding support for intervention delivery would be limited to the amount needed to enable a sufficiently-sized evaluation to go forward. Applicants seeking such funding support should so indicate in their submission, and provide the compelling reason(s) for the request.

D. Other items to include in the letter of interest and invited full proposal:

1. **Applicants should specify the amount of funding requested**, and, for the full proposal only, attach a project budget that is consistent with AV's indirect cost policy (see Appendix B). We encourage the use of administrative data (*e.g.*, college records, National Student Clearinghouse, state employment and earnings data) to measure key study outcomes, wherever feasible, in lieu of more expensive original data collection. In addition, if the applicant proposes any implementation research to complement the evaluation, we suggest streamlined approaches that do not greatly increase the overall study cost. If additional funding from other sources is needed to carry out the study, we request that the applicant's budget show (i) the total study cost, and (ii) the portion of that cost to be covered by AV; and include an attached letter or other communication showing that the additional funding will be in place prior to AV's grant award.
2. **Applicants should 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 an organization is not tax-exempt and wishes to apply, please contact Jessica Taketa (see contact information below).
3. **Applicants should briefly address how their study meets recognized ethical standards for research with human subjects.**
4. **Applicants invited to submit a full proposal will be provided with a standard AV budget template and asked to provide additional administrative and budget details on the project, following the template.**

III. What To Expect in the Grant Agreement: We will ask awardees, as a condition of their award, to –

- **Pre-register the study** and, prior to commencement of the study, make public the research and analysis plan described in their proposal.

- **Provide us with brief phone or email 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 impact findings at appropriate intervals.** These reports should make it easy for readers to see the study's main results and gauge their credibility (*e.g.*, by showing the similarity of the treatment and control groups in pre-program characteristics, the amount of sample attrition, and the statistical significance of the impact findings).

- and -

- **Make their datasets and related materials (*e.g.*, survey instruments, code used to clean and analyze datasets) publicly available** to the extent allowed under any confidentiality/privacy protections.

[Note: The above list previews the main items in the grant agreement, but is not an exhaustive list of the conditions of the award.]

IV. **Questions?** Please contact Jessica Taketa (jtaketa@arnoldventures.org).

APPENDIX A:

Illustrative Examples of Higher Education Interventions Meeting the Criteria for Promising Prior Evidence or Widespread or Likely to Become Widespread Adoption

Please note that these are illustrative examples of programs and not a comprehensive list

Promising Prior Evidence

- ***InsideTrack College Coaching*** is a program that provides individualized student mentoring for college students, designed to prevent them from dropping out of school. A large, well-conducted, multi-site RCT found a modest, near-significant increase in degree completion (35% program vs. 31% control; $p < .10$) at 4-year follow-up.² A successful replication would provide strong confidence that expansion of this intervention, with faithful adherence to its key features, would produce important improvements in degree completion and college persistence.
- ***College Forward*** is an advising program that provides one-on-one college advising by trained AmeriCorps volunteers that begins in high school and continues through college. An ongoing, multi-site RCT has so far found a significant increase in college enrollment (65% program vs. 58% control) and persistence into the third year of college (45% T vs. 33% C) at 3-year follow-up.

Widespread or Likely to Become Widespread Adoption:

- ***Guided Pathways*** is a widely used movement that seeks to streamline a student's journey through college by providing structured choice, revamped support, and clear learning outcomes—aiming to help more students achieve their college completion goals. As of spring 2018, more than 250 community colleges had committed to using the guided pathways approach.³ There are four main practices: 1) mapping pathways to students and goals 2) helping students choose and enter a program pathway 3) keeping students on path; and 4) ensuring that students are learning. Guided Pathways has not yet been evaluated in a well conducted RCT to assess its impact on student success outcomes.
- ***Summer Bridge Programs*** are used by many colleges and universities to ease the transition to college and support postsecondary success by providing students with the academic skills and social resources needed to succeed in a college environment. These programs occur in the summer “bridge” period between high school and college. Although the content of summer bridge programs can vary across institutions and by the population served, they typically last 2–4 weeks and involve (a) an in-depth orientation to college life and resources, (b) academic advising, (c) training in skills necessary for college success (e.g., time management and study skills), and/or (d) accelerated academic coursework.⁴

² [Evidence Summary for InsideTrack College Coaching](#)

³ [What We Are Learning About Guided Pathways. Part 1: A Reform Moves From Theory to Practice \(columbia.edu\)](#)

⁴ [WWC Intervention Report: A summary of findings from a systematic review of summer bridge programs.](#)

APPENDIX B:
Arnold Ventures Indirect Cost Policy
Effective February 1, 2018

I. Purpose of Policy

Arnold Ventures (“AV”) requires that any restricted resources awarded by AV to an organization be primarily dedicated to the costs necessary to accomplish the purpose of a grant. 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 indirect costs that are not directly created as result of project activities. The purpose of AV’s Indirect Cost Policy (the “Policy”) is to:

- i. Define a cost allocation framework that can be applied consistently across all projects and partners
- ii. Provide guidance, definitions, and examples to allow grantees to classify costs accurately

II. Application of Policy

AV’s project-specific budget template, which is completed by the grantee and reviewed by AV, is used to classify expenses and apply this Policy. Each new grant request received by AV will be independently reviewed for compliance and approved subject to the provisions set forth herein. Please review section III and IV of this Policy for the calculation, definitions and examples. However, please note AV maintains sole discretion to determine the approved classification of direct and indirect costs for each grant.

Universities and University-related Grantees

For institutions of higher education, including community colleges and university-related legal entities, the Policy is applicable to all grant funding that is restricted. The policy permits these grantees to receive an indirect cost rate of 15 percent (15%) of total modified direct project costs. Tuition remission expenses are allowed as direct costs but must be excluded from the direct cost base upon which the indirect cost calculation is made.

All Other Grantees

For all Other Grantees, the Policy is applicable to all grant funding that is restricted towards a specific project. The Policy does not apply to general operating grants and certain restricted grants, as advised by AV. The policy permits non-university grantees to receive an indirect cost rate of 20 percent (20%) of total modified direct project costs.

Outsourced Costs

If a project includes a sub-award or subcontract, this budget is also eligible for indirect cost recovery within its respective budget, subject to this Policy and caps noted above.

All outsourced costs must be excluded from the primary grantee’s direct cost base for the indirect cost calculation. Please review section III and IV of this Policy for the definition and examples of outsourced costs.

III. Calculation & Definitions

Indirect Costs = Modified Direct Costs x Indirect Cost Rate

Indirect Costs:

Grantee expenses incurred for a common or joint organizational purpose benefitting more than one project and not exclusively attributable to or created for the specific project funded by AV. This includes “direct allocable” expenses.

Direct Costs:

Grantee expenses directly created by and exclusively incurred as a function of the specific project funded by AV.

Outsourced Costs:

Costs paid by primary grantee to other organizations or individuals in support of a project.

Modified Direct Costs:

Direct Costs less Outsourced Costs and Tuition Remission, as applicable

Indirect Cost Rate:

15% or 20%, as applicable

IV. Examples

Direct Costs

- Personnel expenses (salaries and federally required benefits) of internal grantee staff contributing directly to project-related tasks
- Travel expenses incurred by grantee directly related to project
- Materials and supplies directly incurred by project-related tasks

Indirect Costs

- Standard personnel expenses (salaries and benefits) for the following internal staff:
 - Executive Management (CEO, COO, CFO, Executive Director, etc.)¹
 - Central Operational Functions (Accounting, Administrative Support, Finance, Grants / Contract Management, HR, IT, Legal, etc.)
- Consultant expenses related to general operational functions (legal, audit, recruiting, fundraising, etc.)
- Equipment that can be used broadly by an organization for purposes aside from specific project (computers / laptops, telephones, office furniture)
- Rent and utility expenses
- General materials and supplies that can be used broadly by an organization for purposes aside from specific project (printing and postage, memberships and subscriptions, hardware and software, organizational insurance, etc.)
- Fiscal sponsor fee

¹ To the extent a member of an executive management team contributes to a 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

Outsourced Costs

- Sub-awards or Subcontracts
- Consultants
- Data Purchases and Software Licenses
- Participant Incentives, Stipends, and Honorariums
- Other Fees paid outside of grantee organization (e.g., IRB, peer review, editing)