

Research on Advancing Rural Postsecondary Education

Request for Proposal

Deadline: July 14, 2024

About ECMC Foundation

ECMC Foundation is a national foundation whose North Star goal is to eliminate equity gaps in postsecondary completion by 2040 so that underserved learners have greater opportunity for social and economic mobility. The Foundation’s mission is to improve higher education for career success among underserved populations through evidence-based innovation. ECMC Foundation makes strategic grants and program-related investments to support both nonprofit and for-profit ventures, guided by a strategic framework which aims to advance systemic change by removing barriers to postsecondary completion; building the capacity of organizations, institutions and systems; and transforming the postsecondary ecosystem. Learn more about ECMC Foundation by visiting www.ecmcfoundation.org and our parent company, ECMC Group, by visiting www.ecmcgroup.org.

The Rural Impact Initiative

ECMC Foundation launched the [Rural Impact Initiative](#) in January 2024, building on nearly a decade of existing grantmaking in rural higher education. This initiative aims to enhance the field’s understanding of the unique opportunities, assets and challenges of rural postsecondary institutions and learners and to ultimately increase rural learners’ postsecondary completion rates and enhance the capacity of organizations, institutions and systems to support rural learners¹.

Background

Roughly [46 million Americans](#) live in what the U.S. Department of Agriculture designates as rural areas, yet federal policy and philanthropy have seemingly left rural America behind. Today, many rural communities experience persistent intergenerational poverty, face staggering unemployment rates, and continue to lack access to healthcare, broadband internet, and postsecondary education. Further, discussions surrounding postsecondary education often center urban and suburban contexts, while the data, experiences, assets, and needs of rural learners and institutions remain overlooked and insufficiently addressed. In turn, there is a clear need to better understand both rural learners and the institutions that serve them, and ultimately, articulate policies and practices that center rural learners. To this end, ECMC Foundation seeks to invest in research that will support policymakers, practitioners, and funders in identifying strategies to promote equity and success in rural postsecondary education, removing structural barriers faced by rural learners enrolled in higher education institutions and understanding the role of postsecondary institutions in rural development.

¹ ECMC Foundation uses “learners” rather than “students” to be more inclusive of adult learners enrolled in postsecondary education.

Request for Proposal

This request for proposal (RFP) invites researchers committed to producing knowledge about rural learners and rural postsecondary institutions to apply for grants of up to three years and \$450,000. ECMC Foundation expects to award up to seven grants that will begin on or after November 1, 2024.

Research projects selected for funding through this RFP will be those that examine one of three priority areas:

1. college experiences of rural learners with intersecting identities;
2. roles of rural postsecondary institutions; and/or
3. policies that affect rural postsecondary education.

Each of these priority areas are described in further detail in the section below.

These research priorities are guided by ECMC Foundation’s strategic framework and North Star as well as complementing ongoing research in rural education. By addressing these research priorities, we aim to advance knowledge, inform policy and ultimately improve outcomes for rural learners across the nation. Through collaborative efforts among researchers, policymakers, practitioners, funders and community stakeholders, we can work towards a more equitable and inclusive postsecondary education landscape that serves the needs of all learners, regardless of their geographic location.

Successful projects will demonstrate how research findings inform actionable strategies for practitioners; local, state and federal policymakers; and/or intermediary partners and funders in advancing the postsecondary success of rural learners.

Our Priority Areas

This RFP focuses on three priority areas, as guided by our expert advisory committee. All proposed projects should center research questions that address at least one of the three priorities.

Priority Area One: The College Experiences of Rural Learners² with Intersecting Identities

Rural learners are not monolithic and encompass a diverse spectrum of backgrounds, experiences, and aspirations. While rural communities share common characteristics such as geographic remoteness and limited access to resources, the needs and identities of rural learners are shaped by a multitude of factors including race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation and ability. Acknowledging and centering this diversity is crucial for designing inclusive educational interventions that recognize and address the unique challenges and strengths of rural learners. By embracing the complexity of rural identities and experiences, practitioners and policymakers can foster environments that honor the richness of rural communities and empower all learners to thrive academically and personally. ECMC

² ECMC Foundation recognizes the complexity with defining who is rural. We are open to any federal or state government definition of rural as well as learners who self-identify as rural.

Foundation considers intersecting identities to include but not limited to rural learners who also identify as: Alaska Native, Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Native Hawaiian, or South Asian; LGBTQIA+; low-income; first-generation; over age 25; immigrants and/or undocumented. Research in this focus area should center college experiences of rural learners through the lens of both rurality and any given intersecting identity as listed above.

Lines of Inquiry may include:

- Examining the longitudinal education trajectories of rural learners, including enrollment patterns, major selection, leading indicators of success, transfer pathways, and degree completion rates.
- Exploring the academic experiences of rural learners, including their engagement with coursework, interactions with faculty and peers, satisfaction with educational major, programs, and services, or distance learning programs.
- Identifying the support structures, programs, and services in promoting postsecondary success and well-being among rural learners.
- Assessing the career trajectories, employment outcomes, and economic impact of postsecondary education for rural learners and communities, including job placement rates and income levels.

Priority Area Two: The Roles of Rural³ Postsecondary Institutions

There is a clear need to better understand institutions that are located in rural communities and/or focused on serving rural learners. There are more than 1,000 rural-serving institutions and more than 500 rurally located institutions in the United States, serving more than four million learners, and there is a clear need to better understand these institutions in order to reach and support rural learners and communities. In recent years, many of these institutions have been threatened by low enrollment, possible mergers, lower financial support through state appropriations, and increases in staff turnover though oftentimes learners from rural communities are the most likely to attend these institutions. Rural postsecondary institutions, which are mostly regional comprehensive universities⁴ and community colleges and include several who hold status as minority serving institutions, can and do provide services that are responsive to their local cultural, geographic, and economic challenges. Moreover, these institutions are vital anchor institutions that contribute to their regions in terms of creating jobs; acting as arts and cultural centers; providing access to healthcare, broadband internet, and libraries; and valuing rural ways of life that have often been ignored by the higher education system writ large.

Lines of Inquiry may include:

- Identifying best practices and scalable interventions at rural postsecondary institutions (e.g., technology integration, flexible scheduling, financial aid, student support)

³ The [Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges \(ARRC\)](#) created an evidence-based metric for identifying rural-serving institutions that serve rural students and communities. The [Student Success Through Applied Research \(SSTAR\) lab](#) at UW Madison mapped rurally located institutions based on USDA's commuting zones and rural-urban continuum codes. We plan to use both frameworks for identifying rural postsecondary institutions. We recognize there will be overlap of postsecondary institutions within these designations.

⁴ Regional comprehensive universities are public institutions that are also anchor institutions that contribute to their region. Research indicates they are leaders in promoting upward mobility, educating 47% of all bachelor's-degree-seeking students, with higher proportions of first-generation and Pell-eligible students than their counterparts. 51% of regional comprehensive universities are also rural-serving institutions ([ARRC](#)).

services, infrastructure development, professional development) and assessing their effectiveness in meeting the needs of rural learners.

- Investigating the alignment between rural postsecondary programs and the needs of local and regional labor markets, focusing on skill development, internship opportunities, relevant curriculum, job placement and economic development.
- Studying the role of rural postsecondary institutions in partnership with K-12 schools, businesses, nonprofit organizations and community cross-sector collaborations (e.g., continuing education and professional development, community outreach and engagement, entrepreneurship support).
- Evaluating the benefits and challenges of postsecondary consolidation in rural areas, particularly related to geographic accessibility, transportation barriers, affordability and preservation of programs and services that meet the needs of rural learners.

Priority Area Three: The Policies Affecting Rural Postsecondary Education

Local, state and federal policies play a pivotal role in shaping the landscape of rural postsecondary education. Local policies may focus on funding allocations, infrastructure development, and partnerships with local industries to ensure relevance and accessibility. State governments wield significant influence over rural postsecondary education through funding mechanisms, regulatory frameworks and strategic planning initiatives. State policies often prioritize initiatives aimed at increasing college affordability, expanding access to financial aid, and promoting collaboration between institutions to maximize resources and educational opportunities. Finally, the federal government has more than 400 federal programs with targeted support for rural community and economic development, from agencies such as: Department of Education, Department of Agriculture, Department of Interior, Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Housing and Urban Development, Department of Labor and Department of Transportation.

Lines of Inquiry may include:

- Analyzing existing policies related to rural postsecondary education (e.g., funding mechanisms, regulatory frameworks, and local, state, and federal legislative priorities, federal resources) and identifying gaps and areas for improvement to inform future policy development efforts.
- Studying policies that promote community engagement and partnerships in rural postsecondary education and identifying policy levers to support effective partnerships and enhance community involvement in education.
- Investigating the challenges and opportunities associated with policy implementation in rural postsecondary education, and assessing the role of state and local agencies, institutions and stakeholders in translating policy goals into action.
- Exploring how existing incentives (i.e., loan forgiveness or repayment programs, housing subsidies, mentoring) attract and retain rural college graduates in their communities (including in high-demand fields such as healthcare, education, agriculture, or entrepreneurship).

Applicant Eligibility

Eligible applicants include nonprofit organizations registered as a U.S. 501(c)(3) or a 509(a)(1), (2), or (3) of the Internal Revenue Code, state government agencies, non-profit two- and four-year institutions and systems or their affiliated and supporting foundations, and university-affiliated research centers or laboratories. Applicants may also represent partnerships between research teams and organizations, including research-practice partnerships.

ECMC Foundation values the importance of having meaningful connections and relationships between research teams and the communities they study. Therefore, if the proposed project includes working directly with rural communities/institutions to collect data (e.g., qualitative interviews with rural students, leveraging privately held datasets from a rural institution/organization), applicants must have an *existing* relationship with a rural-serving or rurally located postsecondary institution or a rural community/region.

Additionally, we strongly encourage applications from project teams representing the following:

- Research led by individuals at postsecondary institutions that are rurally located and/or rural serving or in rural-centric organizations
- Researchers from historically underrepresented groups and/or from institutions that serve underrepresented groups, such as:
 - Minority-serving institutions, including historically Black colleges and universities, Tribal colleges and universities and Hispanic serving institutions;
 - Regional comprehensive institutions.

Process Timeline

June 13, 2024	RFP and Informational Video Released
July 14, 2024	Letter of Intent (LOI) due by 11:59pm PDT
July 30, 2024	Finalists invited to submit a full proposal
August 27, 2024	Full proposals due from applicants by 11:59pm PDT
September 3, 2024	ECMC Foundation sends feedback on full proposals to applicants
September 9, 2024	Final proposals due from applicants by 11:59pm PDT
End of October 2024	Finalists notified of final decisions

Application Process

The application process for this call consists of two phases: Invitations for Letters of Intent (LOIs) and invitations to submit a full proposal.

Phase 1: LOI

Interested researchers must submit an LOI that addresses the following requested sections and content.

- **Key Organizational Information**
 - Primary contact information

- Organizational information (including EIN, organization budget, and organization summary)
- Project Title
- Amount Requested from ECMC Foundation
- Total Project Budget
- Project start and end date. *Projects should have a proposed start date between November 1 and December 15, 2024.*
- Proposed duration of grant in months
- Name of Project Lead/Principal Investigator
- **Leadership Composition**
 - Race/Ethnicity and Gender of Organization’s Board Members, if known
 - Race/Ethnicity and Gender of Organization’s Executive Leadership, if known
- **Project Narrative.** A description of your proposed research and its importance to the field that addresses the following questions (1,250 words max):
 - How does the proposed project define rural as it relates to the unit of analysis?
 - What is the population, program, policy, and/or practice that the proposed research project examines?
 - What are the research questions and how do the questions respond to one or more of the priorities of this RFP?
 - How does the proposed research build evidence about programs, policies, and/or practices that improve outcomes for rural learners and/or rural postsecondary institutions?
 - How does the proposed project complement existing research and address knowledge gaps?
- **Proposed methodology.** A high-level overview of the methodological approach and brief rationale for why the proposed methods and research design are appropriate to address questions stated previously (750 words max).
- **Research outputs.** A brief narrative that addresses the following questions (500 words max):
 - Who is the intended audience of the research findings, and what is the relationship of this audience to practice, policy, or program activities?
 - What research deliverables (e.g., briefs, journal articles, etc.) will be produced and what dissemination strategies will be utilized to ensure findings/learnings are understandable and usable for the respective audiences?
- **Anticipated outcomes.** A brief narrative that addresses the following questions (750 words max):
 - What new learnings might your research produce that will benefit rural learners and/or rural postsecondary institutions?
 - How might your research be put into practice by local, state or federal policymakers, practitioners, intermediaries and/or funders? What actions might these stakeholders take?
 - How might this research inform programs, policies, and/or practices that may be implemented through organizations, institutions, systems, or states to advance success for rural learners?
- **Project team.** Describe your project team and include the following:
 - Names, organizational affiliation, and role on the proposed project

- Relevant qualifications for all team members, including education, training, and prior experience in the methods proposed
- Professional and/or personal experience in rural postsecondary education
- **Partnerships.** A description of the existing partnerships the project team has with rural institutions and/or communities and their level of commitment/support in engaging with the proposed project (250 words max).
- **Project estimated budget.** Provide a general breakdown (e.g., staff, consultants, travel, supplies, conferences, subgrants) of how you propose to spend the requested grant funding. Please include other funding sources, if applicable. *ECMC Foundation has indirect overhead costs capped at 10% of direct costs* (300 words max).
- **Reference page.** Please include the list of references you have cited throughout the proposal by providing the author name and a weblink to the source.

LOIs will be due by 11:59pm PDT on July 14, 2024 through ECMC Foundation’s [grant portal](#). An on-demand video describing the rural research RFP can be found [here](#). Please send any questions regarding the RFP to Stephanie Sowl at ssowl@ecmc.org. All submitted questions and responses will be added to an FAQ page, which will be updated by end of day June 24 and July 8.

Phase 2: Full Proposal

ECMC Foundation will invite selected researchers to submit a full proposal, building on information in the LOI. Instructions for expanding on the following topics will be shared with those invited to submit a full proposal.

- Project Activities and Project Timeline
- Dissemination Plan
- Plan for Overcoming Potential Barriers
- Grant Budget and Budget Narrative

Review and Selection Process

ECMC Foundation and an external Advisory Committee will consider several factors when evaluating LOIs and full proposals. Guiding questions during the review process will include:

- How does the proposed project relate to one or more of the three research priorities?
- Do the research questions align with the proposed methodology?
- Does the project fill an existing gap in the literature?
- How do the findings from this work translate to action?
- Does the intended audience for research findings align with key stakeholders in decision making?
- Is the project team’s composition and experience well-suited for this project?
- Is there evidence of commitment/support from rural institutions or communities to participate in the research project?
- Are the costs of the project in alignment with the proposed work?

Reporting and Collaborating Expectations

Selected partners will be expected to complete annual and final reports to capture progress, elevate challenges, and describe emerging findings. ECMC Foundation will be contracting with

an evaluation partner to conduct an implementation and outcomes evaluation of the rural initiative within which these funded projects would sit. It is expected that selected partners will be active participants in the evaluation.

ECMC Foundation anticipates working closely with selected partners to identify national conferences and relevant convenings to disseminate findings with key audiences during the grant period. Additionally, all research funded by ECMC Foundation must be open access, which we define as providing the public with continuous free access to research upon project completion or upon completion of any portion of a larger project. By introducing this policy, the Foundation intends to put research into the hands of those who need access to it the most.

Finally, ECMC Foundation seeks to create a collaborative community to share ideas and address challenges. Selected partners will be expected to engage in collaborative activities, including an in-person convening to take place November 19-20, 2024, in Minneapolis, MN. Participants will receive a stipend to support the cost of travel, which will be added to the grant.