



Expanding High-Quality Work-Integrated Learning

Information Session for Prospective Applicants · A national initiative from BHEF, funded by Ascendium Education Group

Presented by BHEF Work-Integrated Learning Team

Sessions: July 16 & August 5, 2026

The Business-Higher Education Forum is a national network connecting pioneering corporate and higher education leaders to identify emerging skills and **co-develop pathways that address talent gaps.**



Our mission is to build the inclusive higher education paths that align to the workforce of future by:



Increasing the number of learners and earners completing with high-value skills, credentials aligned to employer needs



Expanding access and adoption of work-integrated learning models that inclusively connect and prepare talent



Scaling and implementing with regional networks and leaders

TODAY'S SESSION

Agenda

01 Welcome & Overview

03 The Three WIL Models

05 Support, Funds & Selection

07 Q&A

02 About the Initiative

04 Eligibility & Fit

06 Key Dates & How to Apply

A degree alone no longer guarantees a career

The economy is changing fast — new technology, shifting demographics, and emerging industries — and graduates face an increasingly competitive labor market. Employers consistently name **skills and work experience** as their top hiring priorities, and high-quality WIL is how students build them.

FOR STUDENTS

Develop in-demand **skills**, **persist** through higher education, and **secure employment** — while signaling those skills to future employers.

FOR EMPLOYERS

Reduce **hiring costs**, increase **retention**, and build reliable talent pipelines connected directly to their needs.

BHEF DEFINES WIL BROADLY — LIFELONG, EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING, ANYTIME AND ANYWHERE

Job shadowing

Project-based learning

Capstone courses

Micro-internships

Bootcamps

Hackathons & challenges

Internships

Co-ops & apprenticeships

THE CHALLENGE

High-quality WIL is hard to scale

Three barriers keep quality WIL from reaching the learners and employers who would benefit most.

PROBLEM 01

Research gaps on newer models

Internships and apprenticeships are proven — 90% of apprentices stay employed and earn ~\$300K more over a lifetime. But far less is known about **micro-internships and project-based learning** : which models fit which learners, structures, and employers.

PROBLEM 02

A supply-and-demand gap

In 2023, most students who wanted to intern couldn't — a largely solvable logistical challenge. Over half of employers say university partnerships could help them scale.

8.2M wanted to intern
3.6M secured one · 4M+ got none

PROBLEM 03

Solutions built only for the well-resourced

Today's at-scale models serve large employers and well-resourced universities. Yet **small- and mid-size employers and local colleges** — the true workhorses serving underserved learners — lack right-sized models.

This initiative exists to close those gaps — right-sizing high-quality WIL for the employers and institutions that most communities actually depend on.

Which initiative fits your institution?

BHEF is running **two complementary initiatives**. This session covers Initiative 02 — here's how it compares.

INITIATIVE 01 · ECMC FOUNDATION

Institutional Capacity Expansion Lab

Build the leadership alignment, institutional infrastructure, and employer partnerships needed to embed work-integrated learning as a core part of the student experience, supported by a strong foundation in change leadership and implementation coaching.

\$10,000

sub-grant per team

6 × 2

institutions · cohorts

Aug 14

apply by (2026)

BEST FIT FOR

Institutions ready for **institution-wide change** with some existing capacity — eager to convene a cross-functional leadership team.

ELIGIBILITY BHEF network member institutions only

INITIATIVE 02 · ASCENDIUM

THIS SESSION

Expanding High-Quality WIL

Test shorter-length WIL to expand partnerships with employers — including small and mid-size businesses — and serve a broader learner population.

\$65,000

sub-grant per pilot

Up to 12

institutions

Sep 15

apply by (2026)

BEST FIT FOR (BASED ON FUNDER PRIORITIES)

Community colleges, regional publics, and rural-serving institutions **testing a specific WIL model** with small- and mid-sized employer partners.

ELIGIBILITY BHEF members & partners — strong preference to members



Deciding? Choose the **Lab** if your priority is aligning leadership and building WIL capacity across the institution. Choose **Expanding WIL** if you're ready to pilot a concrete model with employer partners now. The two are not mutually exclusive.

The Initiative

Grant introduction, program priorities, and the models you can pilot

ABOUT THE INITIATIVE

Expanding access to employer-engaged learning

BHEF will build a cohort of **up to 12 institutions** to design, pilot, and scale employer-engaged work-integrated learning (WIL) models that expand opportunity and improve outcomes for all learners.

WHY NOW

- Demand for internships, co-ops, and apprenticeships continues to outpace available opportunities.
- Small- and mid-sized employers are less engaged in WIL — yet critical to expanding access.
- Right-sized, high-quality models can reach more learners and strengthen employer talent pipelines.

THE EXCHANGE

Selected institutions receive funding and structured implementation support. In return, they commit to:

- Piloting a WIL model with fidelity to quality
- Participating in an independent evaluation
- Contributing lessons learned to the field

Three WIL models to pilot

Each institution pilots **one** model — all designed for smaller employers and varied learner circumstances.

1

Micro-internships

Short-term (up to 40 hours), paid professional assignments offered by employers who provide direct supervision and support.

2

Industry-led project & capstone courses

Academic courses that embed business-partnered experiences, so learners apply classroom knowledge to workplace challenges with faculty and employer mentorship.

3

Virtual internships

Structured, paid work experiences in an employer's digital environment using online collaboration tools — typically one semester or summer.

Pilots launch at the departmental or divisional level, building toward institution-wide adoption.

OBJECTIVES

Program goals by the end of the grant

12

Institutions equipped

With diagnostic tools, quality frameworks, coaching, and peer learning.

36+

Employer partners

3 or more per institution, prioritizing small- and mid-size businesses.

1,200

Learners reached

~100 per institution, with measurable gains in workplace skills.

→ Generate a **replicable evidence base** on WIL effectiveness
— by model type, learner population, and employer context.

→ Disseminate **practical tools, case studies, and frameworks**
through BHEF's WIL Innovation Center.

Eligibility & Fit

Who can apply — and who's a strong match

ELIGIBILITY

Who can apply

Open to two- and four-year postsecondary institutions nationwide. **Preference is given to BHEF network members.**

ELIGIBLE APPLICANTS

Accredited public or nonprofit institutions, including:

- Community colleges and other two-year institutions
- Regional public universities and four-year broad-access institutions
- Independent (nonprofit) colleges and universities
- Rural-serving institutions
- Minority-Serving Institutions — HBCUs, HSIs, Tribal colleges, and others

NOT ELIGIBLE

- For-profit postsecondary institutions
- Systems offices (individual campuses may apply)
- Institutions already running a mature, institution-wide WIL strategy at demonstrated scale

This initiative may be a strong fit if you are...

Committed to expanding WIL

Building toward creating work-integrated learning scale.

Serving learners with limited access

Meaningful proportions of Pell-eligible, first-generation, working, rural, or similar learners.

Positioned to partner with employers

Able to engage small- and mid-size employers in your region or sector.

Ready to engage & follow through

Data-informed planning, change management, and peer learning — with leadership will and staff capacity.

Support, Funds & Selection

What you receive, what's funded, and how proposals are scored

What participating institutions receive

COACHING & DESIGN	COMMUNITY & CONVENINGS	TOOLS & GUIDANCE
• Baseline analysis of current WIL offerings and learner participation and identify opportunities to increase inclusive access • Benchmark current industry partnership practices and identify key improvement areas • Support to assess current WIL and design models grounded in BHEF's WIL Innovation & Quality Framework • Regular 1:1 coaching with BHEF staff throughout implementation	• Bimonthly Community of Practice with peer institutions and employer partners • Two in-person convenings with access to national experts	• Guidance on employer outreach, faculty engagement, learner recruitment, and data systems • Consultation on wraparound and operational supports for learners and employers • Customized outcomes report

Participating institutions **collect and share data** — baseline, participation, and employer information — and support surveys administered by BHEF's independent evaluator.

AVAILABLE FUNDS

Funding & allowable uses

Up to 12

awards · one proposal per institution

Up to \$65,000

per project sub-grant

Nov 2026 – Oct 2028

grant period

ALLOWABLE USES

- Faculty release time / stipends for WIL design and supervision
- Staff time for coordination, employer outreach, and learner support
- Technology & platform costs (project management, virtual internship platforms, LMS)
- Learner supports — stipends, transportation, barrier-reducing costs
- Data collection & evaluation support, convening travel, and supplies

UNALLOWABLE USES

- General operating costs or overhead not tied to the pilot
- Capital expenditures, equipment purchases, or construction
- Lobbying, political activities, or advocacy
- Tuition, fees, or financial aid for students
- Activities unrelated to the selected WIL model

Assemble your team

BHEF gathers **cross-functional institutional teams** to conduct project planning and implementation — **5–8 members**, depending on institutional size, spanning leadership to faculty.

CABINET-LEVEL LEADER • REQUIRED

President, Provost, or Academic Vice President

ACADEMIC & STUDENT-FACING LEADERS

Deans and departmental / divisional directors across academic programs, career services, student success, and industry partnerships

KEY FACULTY

Course- and program-level innovators who will design and deliver the WIL experience

5–8 members per team,
by institutional size

WHY IT MATTERS

Lasting impact comes when top-level leadership aligns with grassroots innovation — creating the greatest potential for success, scale, and sustainability.

SELECTION

Award criteria & proposal scoring

A competitive, rubric-based review by BHEF staff and external reviewers — scored on a **100-point scale**.

WIL Model Selection & Pilot Design

Institutional Context & Opportunity for Impact

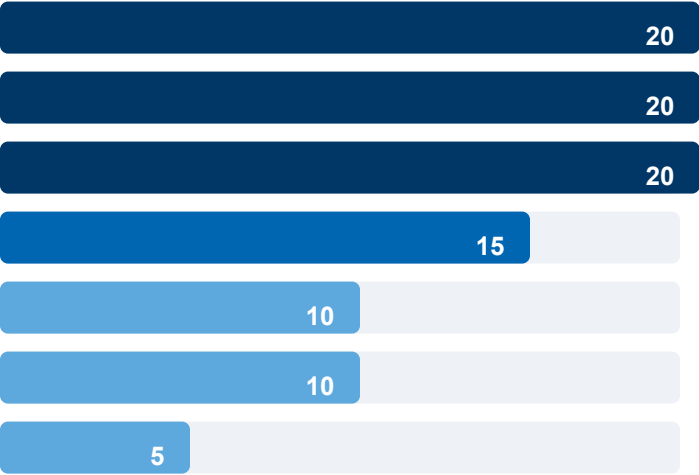
Capacity & Sustainability

Inclusive Access & Learner Population

Employer Partnership Plan

Implementation Timeline

Budget Clarity & Appropriate Use of Funds



You won't be expected to have all the answers at the outset. The initiative equips teams to diagnose their current state, align teams, and build sustainable momentum.

TOTAL 100 points

GET STARTED

Key dates & how to apply

MARK YOUR CALENDAR

Sept 15, 2026	Proposals due by 11:59PM
Nov 2, 2026	Grant period begins (through Oct 31, 2028)

A Frequently Asked Questions document will be posted and updated on BHEF's WIL Innovation Center after the sessions.

PREPARE A STRONG PROPOSAL

Review BHEF's publicly available WIL research and tools:

- WIL Diagnostic Tool & Instructions (2026)
- Defining and Delivering Quality in Work-Integrated Learning (2026)
- Expanding Internships (2024)
- Forging Partnerships to Align Education & Industry (2024)

Questions? wil@bhef.com · responses within ~3 business days

Questions?

We look forward to your proposals.



QUESTIONS ABOUT THE RFP? / WIL@BHEF.COM

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