



# **Request for Proposals**

## **Expanding High-Quality Work-Integrated Learning**

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## I. Grant Introduction

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The Business-Higher Education Forum (BHEF) invites postsecondary institutions to apply for *Expanding High-Quality Work-Integrated Learning*, a national initiative funded by Ascendium Education Group. This initiative is designed to help institutions design, pilot, and scale employer-engaged work-integrated learning (WIL) models that expand opportunity and improve outcomes for all learners.

Rapid technological change and evolving employer expectations have increased demand for graduates with both academic preparation and workplace experience. Yet many learners lack access to high-quality work-integrated learning opportunities. This initiative seeks to help institutions expand employer-engaged learning models that improve learner outcomes while strengthening employer talent pipelines.

Despite growing momentum, many institutions and employers are exploring new approaches to expand WIL opportunities at scale. Demand for traditional internships, co-ops, and apprenticeships continues to outpace available opportunities, creating a need for additional high-quality WIL models that can reach more learners and employers. With most large employers already operating WIL at scale, small- and mid-sized employers are less engaged in WIL, but critical to expansion of opportunities.

This initiative seeks to address those challenges directly. BHEF will build a cohort of up to 12 institutions to pilot and evaluate three WIL models that are well-suited to smaller employer partners and a wide range of learner circumstances:

- **Micro-internships** — short-term (up to 40 hours), paid, professional assignments offered by employers who provide direct supervision and support.
- **Industry-led project-based learning or capstone courses** — an academic course that embeds a business-partnered experiences and allows learners to apply classroom knowledge to workplace-relevant challenges. Learners are often supervised by faculty and engage directly with partnered-businesses' staff for mentorship and to present their work.
- **Virtual internships** — structured paid work experiences in an employer's digital environment, using online tools for communication and collaboration, with a typical duration of one semester or summer-long.

Selected institutions will receive funding and structured implementation support from BHEF, including coaching, tools, and peer learning opportunities. In exchange, institutions commit to piloting a WIL model with fidelity, participating in an independent evaluation, and contributing lessons learned to BHEF and the broader field. Together, this work will generate the evidence, tools, and field-ready resources needed to help institutions and their employer partners expand access to high-quality WIL—sustainably and at scale.

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## II. Program Priorities and Objectives

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**The theory of change advanced by this initiative is: Right-sized, high-quality WIL models—designed with small- and mid-size employers and institutions at varying stages of WIL development in mind—can expand inclusive access to career-connected learning, improve learner outcomes, strengthen employer’s talent pipelines, and catalyze sustainable, system-level change.**

BHEF will work with up to 12 institutions to test three WIL models that are flexible, employer-responsive, and designed to be implemented within existing institutional capacity while building the systems, partnerships, and expertise needed for long-term success. Institutions will pilot one of the three eligible WIL models described in Section I. Pilots will launch at the departmental or divisional level, with the goal of building toward institution-wide adoption.

By the end of the overall grant period, BHEF aims to:

1. Equip 12 postsecondary institutions with the diagnostic tools, quality frameworks, coaching, and peer learning needed to design and pilot high-quality WIL models aligned to their institutional context and student population
2. Engage at least 36 employer partners (3 or more per institution), with priority to small- and mid-size businesses new to or growing their WIL engagement
3. Enable at least 1,200 learners (approximately 100 per institution) to participate in a piloted WIL model during the grant period, with measurable gains in workplace skills and career readiness
4. Generate a replicable evidence base on WIL model effectiveness—by model type, learner population, and employer context—to inform broader adoption across the field
5. Disseminate practical tools, case studies, and frameworks through BHEF’s WIL Innovation Center to accelerate adoption beyond the 12 participating institutions

## III. Eligibility

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BHEF welcomes applications from two- and four-year postsecondary institutions across the United States. Preference will be given to BHEF network members.

### Eligible Applicants

Eligible applicants must be accredited public or nonprofit postsecondary institutions, including:

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

### Ineligible Applicants

The following are not eligible to apply:

- For-profit postsecondary institutions
- Systems offices (individual campuses within a system may apply)

- Institutions that have already implemented a mature, institution-wide WIL strategy with demonstrated scale

**This initiative may be a strong fit for your institution if you are:**

- Committed to expanding WIL and are building toward an institution-wide strategy
- Serving meaningful proportions of Pell-eligible, first-generation, working, rural, or other learners who have limited access to career-connected experiences
- Positioned to partner with small- and mid-size employers in your region or sector
- Ready to engage in data-informed planning, change management, and structured peer learning with the leadership will and staff capacity to follow through

Participating institutions will not be expected to have all the answers at the outset. They will be equipped through this initiative to diagnose their current state, align leadership around a shared vision for expanding WIL, embed quality markers into pilot design, and build sustainable momentum with employer partners.

## **IV. Technical Assistance and Institutional Support**

Participating institutions will receive a structured package of support from BHEF during the grant period including:

- Assessing current WIL options available to learners and identifying opportunities to increase inclusive participation of learners and employers based on research and best practices.
- Customizing WIL model design to fit specific learner and employer needs, grounded in BHEF’s Work-Integrated Learning Innovation & Quality Framework.
- Consultation on wraparound and operational support for learners and employers, to ensure institutions maintain a holistic lens and develop sustainable models.
- Guidance on employer outreach and partnership strategies, faculty engagement, marketing and recruitment of learners, and data systems.

Participating institutions will be asked to collect and share data as part of the initiative. This includes:

- Baseline available data collected during onboarding: current learner participation in WIL (disaggregated by target student populations), availability and types of WIL offerings, and the status of employer partnerships
- Administrative records on learner participation in the pilot WIL program, including counts disaggregated by target student populations identified in the institution’s proposal
- Employer partnership information, including employer size, sector, and the nature of their engagement in the pilot
- Learner and employer surveys administered by BHEF’s independent evaluator at the end of the pilot period and six months later, for which institutions will support participant outreach and response

BHEF and its evaluator will provide all survey instruments, define evaluation metrics, and establish reporting schedules. Institutions will be responsible for submitting administrative participation data and supporting survey administration and participant outreach.

Throughout the implementation phase, each institution will be paired with BHEF staff for regular 1:1 coaching and support meetings. These conversations are designed to help project teams navigate implementation, access technical assistance, share emerging insights, and identify opportunities to strengthen and scale their work. At the conclusion of the grant period, BHEF will conduct reflection and learning interviews with each institution's project team—including the executive sponsor—to document outcomes, capture lessons learned, explore sustainability strategies, and inform resources for the broader field.

In addition, participating institutions will participate in a bimonthly Community of Practice (COP). This will bring together project teams and employer partners from participating institutions to build a shared foundation and accelerate progress. Additionally, BHEF will host two in-person convenings. These forums will:

- Align participants around essential quality standards, design principles, and implementation challenges.
- Provide a space to co-create practical solutions, exchange promising practices, and deepen cross-institutional and employer partnerships.
- Offer access to national experts who can stretch thinking and spark innovation.

## V. Available Funds & Allowable Uses

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**Number of awards:** Up to 12 institutions will receive awards. Institutions may only submit one proposal.

**Award range:** Up to \$65,000 per project. Sub-grants provide support to participating institutions to design, implement, and support evaluation of their selected WIL model.

**Grant period:** November 2, 2026–October 31, 2028

### Allowable Uses

- Faculty release time or stipends to support WIL course design, employer engagement, and pilot supervision
- Staff time for WIL program coordination, employer outreach and relationship management, and learner recruitment and support
- Technology and platform costs directly related to delivering or administering the WIL model (e.g., project management tools, virtual internship platforms, learning management system integrations)
- Learner supports, including stipends for micro-internship participants, transportation assistance for in-person project engagements, and other direct costs that reduce participation barriers
- Data collection and evaluation support
- Travel costs for institutional team members to attend in-person BHEF convenings
- Supplies and materials directly related to pilot design and delivery

- Other costs directly related to WIL pilot design, implementation, or evaluation that do not fit the categories above, subject to prior written approval from BHEF

## Unallowable Uses

Funds may not be used for:

- General institutional operating costs or overhead not directly attributable to the WIL pilot
- Capital expenditures, equipment purchases, or construction
- Lobbying, political activities, or advocacy
- Tuition, fees, or financial aid for students
- Activities unrelated to the design, implementation, or evaluation of the selected WIL model
- Any cost not approved in the institution’s sub-grant budget

## VI. Award Criteria & Proposal Scoring

BHEF will select institutions through a competitive, rubric-based review process designed to ensure a cohort that is diverse in institution type, geography, size, and student population, and that is collectively positioned to generate meaningful and generalizable evidence on WIL model effectiveness. Applications will be reviewed by a panel of BHEF staff and external reviewers with experience in work-integrated learning, higher education capacity-building, and workforce development. All reviewers will be trained on the rubric and will complete independent scores before calibrating as a group.

Each application will be scored on a 100-point scale using the rubric below. Reviewers will assign scores based on the strength of evidence provided in the proposal narrative, the budget narrative, and any supporting materials submitted.

Criterion	Points Available	Key Considerations
WIL Model Selection and Pilot Design	20	<i>Is the model choice well-justified? Is the pilot design feasible, specific, and grounded in employer context?</i>
Institutional Context and Opportunity for Impact	20	<i>Is there a clearly articulated opportunity to expand or strengthen WIL participation and outcomes?</i>
Inclusive Access and Learner Population	15	<i>Are commitments to expanding access for learners specific and tied to institutional data?</i>
Employer Partnership Plan	10	<i>Are employer relationships identified or plausible? Is there a clear plan for employer engagement and support?</i>
Capacity and Sustainability	20	<i>Is the team cross-functional and appropriately led? Are sustainability plans specific and credible?</i>
Implementation Timeline	10	<i>Does the proposal account for academic calendars, governance and other factors</i>

Budget Clarity and Appropriate Use of Funds	5	<i>that may impact implementation during the grant period?</i>  <i>Is the budget clearly tied to WIL activities? Are costs reasonable and allowable?</i>
TOTAL	100	

To make institutional selection decisions, reviewers will apply the following scale:

- Excellent (90–100% of points): Response is specific, evidence-based, compelling, and demonstrates strong institutional capacity or commitment
- Good (70–89%): Response is clear and credible but may lack specificity or depth in one or more areas
- Adequate (50–69%): Response addresses the criterion but is vague, general, or relies on assertions without supporting evidence
- Weak (below 50%): Response is incomplete, unclear, or does not adequately address the criterion

## VII. Resources for Proposal Development

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BHEF is committed to supporting strong applications from diverse institutions. We recognize that the proposal process can be a burden, and we have developed the following resources to help applicants submit competitive proposals.

### Information Sessions

BHEF will host virtual information sessions for prospective applicants prior to the proposal deadline. Sessions will include an overview of the initiative, a walkthrough of the RFP requirements, and a live Q&A with BHEF staff. A Frequently Asked Questions document will be posted and updated on BHEF’s WIL Innovation Center after the information sessions.

- July 16, 1-2pm ET, [register here](#)
- August 5, 2-3pm ET, [register here](#)

### BHEF Research and Tools

Applicants are encouraged to familiarize themselves with BHEF’s publicly available WIL research and tools, which provide context for the initiative and may strengthen proposals. Key resources include:

- [WIL Diagnostic Tool & Instructions \(2026\)](#)
- [Defining and Delivering Quality in Work-Integrated Learning \(2026\)](#)
- [Expanding Internships: Harnessing Employer Insights to Boost Opportunity and Learning \(2024\)](#)
- [Forging Partnerships to Align Education & Industry for the Workforce of Tomorrow \(2024\)](#)

For all questions related to this RFP, please contact: [wil@bhef.com](mailto:wil@bhef.com). *BHEF will do its best to respond to all inquiries within three business days.*