

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs): Expanding High-Quality Work-Integrated Learning Grant Opportunity

To complement the *Expanding High-Quality Work-Integrated Learning* [RFP](#) and [application](#), below is a list of answers to common questions BHEF staff has received about this work-integrated learning (WIL) project.

Funder: [Ascendium Education Group](#)

Deadline: September 15, 2026 at 11:59pm

Grant Period: November 2, 2026 – October 31, 2028

General Questions

Q: Can an institution submit more than one proposal, or name more than one WIL model within a single proposal?

A: No — each institution submits one proposal and pilots exactly one of three WIL models, all designed for smaller employers and a wide range of learner circumstances. The three WIL model options are as follows:

- 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.

Q: What makes an institution a strong fit for this initiative?

A: This initiative tends to be a strong fit for institutions that are:

- Committed to expanding WIL — building toward creating work-integrated learning at scale
- Serving learners with limited access — with 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 their region or sector
- Ready to engage and follow through — with the leadership will and staff capacity for data-informed planning and change management, alongside peer learning

Applicants are not expected to arrive with all the answers or with their challenges already solved. This initiative is designed to help your team diagnose where you currently stand, align around a plan, and build momentum from there — the process is as much a part of the work as the outcome.

Q: Is this a competitive grant?

A: Yes, this is a competitive application process, and we do expect to receive more applications than we can support at this time.

Q: Can an institution apply to both the Institutional Capacity Expansion Lab (ECMC) and Expanding High-Quality WIL (Ascendium) initiatives?

A: The Business-Higher Education Forum is currently running two concurrent initiatives. Institutions are not expected to participate in both initiatives during the upcoming application cycle. A new cohort of the Institutional Capacity Expansion Lab will launch in September 2027, and depending on an institution's participation in Expanding High-Quality WIL and its ongoing needs, BHEF may consider institutions participating in both initiatives beginning next fall.

Q: When will award decisions be announced?

A: Awardees will be notified this fall prior to the start of the grant period, and a public announcement will follow.

Q: The grant mentions in-person Communities of Practice. Are travel details available?

A: This grant will include two in-person Community of Practice gatherings in addition to the planned bi-monthly virtual sessions. Planning for these events are underway, and details and scheduling will be shared with grantees in a timely manner to allow for planning.

Q: Can institutions partner with third-party platforms?

A: Yes, institutions can partner with third-party platforms.

Q: Are electronic signatures acceptable on the application?

A: Yes. Electronic signatures are acceptable for all required signatures on the proposal.

Eligibility

Q: Is an institution with a mature apprenticeship program, but no shorter-term WIL/internship program, eligible to apply?

A: Yes. Institutions in this position remain eligible to apply — testing what works across institutions at different starting points is one of BHEF's goals for this initiative.

Q: Rural institutions are mentioned as an eligible institution type. How does BHEF define that categorization?

A: BHEF applies a broad definition of "rural-serving" and does not require institutions to meet a specific benchmark. If your institution considers itself a rural-serving institution (RSI), simply include a brief explanation in your application.

Leadership & Team Requirements

Q: Is a campus president required to be involved in the project?

A: A cabinet-level leader is required to be involved, though it may be the president, provost, vice president, or other similar executive-level representative. BHEF believes lasting impact happens when top-level leadership aligns with grassroots innovation, so we encourage applicants to think carefully about team composition and cross functional support.

A strong team typically pairs executive sponsors with divisional or departmental leadership (deans and directors across academic and key support services such as student success, industry partnership, career services offices, etc.), and the core faculty who will design and deliver the experience day to day.

Q: Are there specific requirements for who leads the project day-to-day?

A: No, there are no strict requirements dictating who serves as the project lead. The key criterion is capability: the lead should have the skills and experience needed to effectively complete and conduct the project. Beyond that, we don't mandate a specific title, role, or background.

Q: Does every member of the team need to attend convenings?

A: The goal is for every team member to be actively engaged in convenings, since these gatherings are a key opportunity for collaboration and alignment across the project. We also recognize that scheduling conflicts and other commitments may prevent everyone from attending each session. One hundred percent full attendance is not a strict requirement. What matters most is that the team maintains consistent representation and that members stay connected to the project's progress, even if they need to miss a convening.

If the team expects a key staff member, including a cabinet-level leader, to be unavailable during part of the grant period (for example, due to extended leave), please detail a contingency plan in your application, or reach out to WIL@bhef.com with any questions.

Employer Partnerships

Q: The RFP prioritizes partnerships with "small- and mid-size" employers. Is there a specific definition or threshold (e.g., employee count or revenue) for what qualifies as small- or mid-size?

A: BHEF defines small- and mid-size employers as those with 500 employees or fewer.

Q: Are nonprofits eligible as employers?

A: Yes, nonprofits are welcome to be employer partners.

Q: Are applicants required to name three (3) business partners on the application?

A: No, this is not required. However, BHEF would like to understand your current employer engagement and relevant activities as well as your vision and plan to reach employers through this project.

Program & Pilot Design

Q: Is there a preference for working with a single department versus a small cohort of 2–3 departments?

A: BHEF does not have a strict preference between the two approaches. The initiative aims to reach approximately 1,200 learners across the full cohort of institutions (roughly 100 learners per institution). Applicants should consider how many students they can realistically and meaningfully reach, as this may be a factor in award decisions — but the priority is choosing the structure that is most doable and sustainable for your institution, rather than defaulting to a larger scope.

Q: Is the target learner population restricted to either undergraduate or graduate students?

A: The program is not limited to either undergraduate or graduate students, but we do encourage applications that would expand access to WIL to underrepresented learner populations.

Q: The initiative aims for approximately 100 learners per institution. If an institution's proposal cannot realistically reach that number, is the institution disqualified, or is this a scoring consideration only?

A: Institutional context and opportunity for impact are worth 20% of the score within the rubric. BHEF is committed to supporting 1,200 students by the end of the grant; thus, an institution's ability to support this impact goal will play a significant role in scoring and evaluation.

Q: Will the student data this project collects require any Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval?

A: Student data will be de-identified and used only for internal program evaluation; it will not be used for human subjects research. Institutions should not need to pursue IRB approval to participate.

Q: Is it acceptable to test the project on a smaller basis, such as with a single course?

A: Yes, testing on a smaller basis may be appropriate. However, if you plan to do it for only one course, your application needs to show a reasonable way that the project can be scaled after the grant period is over. Also, please provide a plan for how this project will contribute to the overall grant-wide goal of reaching 1,200 learners and developing 36 employer partnerships.

Q: Does the project need to be credit-bearing?

A: No, credit-bearing is not required.

Q: What makes a strong proposal and/or project?

A: We welcome applications from a wide range of institutions, and we're looking for an honest, thoughtful account of your current activities, capacity, and vision for the program. Strong proposals come from a dedicated team with the expertise and time to commit to the work, along with a genuine willingness to learn and grow through the process.

When reviewing proposals, we're primarily looking for clear answers to two questions: why this program is the right fit for your institution at this time, and how the initiative advances your institution's broader goals. That might mean better serving specific learners or employer populations, testing a model you wouldn't otherwise have the capacity to pilot, or expanding work-integrated learning (WIL) into new programs and pathways.

Available Funds & Budget

Q: What is the level of funding available?

A: Selected institutions will receive up to \$65,000 to implement their proposals. Earlier documents may have contained a slight discrepancy, which has been corrected. \$65,000 is the correct maximum award amount.

Q: Are indirect expenditures included in the budget?

A: The budget allows for some expenditures (up to 15% of the \$65,000) that indirectly support the project, such as shared facilities or hard-to-calculate administrative costs. Funds may not be used for the following, regardless of how they are categorized: 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; or activities unrelated to the selected WIL model.

Q: Who covers the cost of in-person convenings?

A: Applicants should cover the cost of in-person convenings in their applicant budget. Expect to travel twice and assume the location will be a major metro area to factor in estimated costs.

Q: Can funding be used for student stipends?

A: Yes, funding can be used for stipends for students in the budget. Please find other allowable and nonallowable uses of funds on pages 5-6 of the [RFP](#).

Q: When and how are the funds disbursed to selected institutions?

A: We will have a payment schedule that will be outlined in the grant agreements.

Have additional questions? Email WIL@bhef.com and our team will be happy to help.