Call for Letters of Inquiry

Institutional Support for Open Source Software in Research

Grants of up to $750,000 over two years will be awarded to U.S. higher education institutions to launch university Open Source Program Offices (OSPOs)

Submission Deadline: February 15, 2023

The Technology program at the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation supports research, training, community-building, and technological innovation in order to foster advances in the production and dissemination of scientific knowledge. The program is currently soliciting Letters of Inquiry from Principal Investigators at U.S. research institutions to launch Open Source Program Offices (OSPOs). A small number of full proposals will be invited from submissions received in response to this Call. Grant amounts are expected to be up to $750,000 over a two-year period. Successful Letters of Inquiry will offer a clear vision for a long-term institutional support ecosystem for open source software - and the university faculty, students, research software engineers, and staff who build and maintain it - beyond the funding period.

Background

We believe that better institutional support for open source practices can accelerate and sustain the development of software and other research outputs within universities through a number of mechanisms. Robust documentation and clear project governance can substantially lower barriers to the contribution to and maintenance of individual projects, and lower barriers for students, postdocs, and faculty to continue engaging with a project as they move from one institution to another. Adoption of institution-wide version control platforms can generate metrics to inform research funding across labs and other organizational teams, while support for open source can provide a competitive advantage for external funding. Finally, open source can offer a complementary path to conventional technology transfer, in which public goods created within the university find new adoption and fuel innovation beyond an institution's walls.

Since 2020, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation has been helping universities establish Open Source Program Offices (OSPOs) as a strategy to institutionalize support for open source software in research and beyond. Drawing inspiration from a model that is increasingly common in technology companies, a university OSPO is an organizational construct with dedicated staff who coordinate and support open source activity. While anchored in the norms and practices of open source software, an OSPO can also support other kinds of open source work (including but not limited to hardware, data, and models).

To date, Sloan has approved grants to support six university OSPOs – to [Johns Hopkins University](#), [Rochester Institute of Technology](#), [University of Vermont](#), [University of California Santa Cruz](#), [Saint Louis University](#), and most recently [Carnegie Mellon University](#). Each of these grants combines funding for core capacity to launch an OSPO with targeted funds for a specific programmatic activity that would leverage the distinct resources, culture, and strategic priorities of the respective institution. A key deliverable of each grant will be a "playbook", and we hope that the eventual library will be of use to universities interested in launching their own OSPOs. The Foundation is also supporting [OSPO++](#) to coordinate community-building activities for this nascent network.

The intention of this Call is to identify a broadly diverse set of higher education institutions which are well-positioned to create or build on existing institutional structures to support open source practices. Successful grantees will establish organizational roles and structures that are sustained beyond this funding, and serve as inspirational exemplars for other universities and research institutions.

Example allowable activities and budgets

When developed within a university, an OSPO model can offer services including but not limited to:

- Training and mentoring faculty and students to grow local software efforts into healthy, community-driven open source projects
- Coordinating open source internship and curricular experiences for students
- Improving understanding of how best to contribute to existing projects
- Documenting the value of open source work
- Matchmaking between project needs and software engineering capacity
- Facilitating relationships with other academic units such as technology transfer, research computing, and the library

Acceptable budget lines include:

- Salaries and benefits for staff
- Administrative expenses, including potentially a coordinator or director
- Internship program expenses
- Funds for community-building and engagement (workshops, talk series, working groups, etc.)
- Small incentives for collaboration such as seed grants and student fellowships
- Expenses for dissemination of lessons learned and best practices

Following this two-year grant, and assuming successful achievement of identified goals, the Foundation will consider requests for two additional years of tapering support to facilitate transitions to other funding.

Eligible institutions include non-profit two-and four-year institutions, institutional systems or consortia of institutions, and university-affiliated research centers or laboratories. We request only one letter of inquiry per institution. Submissions from diverse teams led by women and Black, Indigenous, and Latina/o/x individuals are strongly encouraged.

Submission Components

Letters of Inquiry must include:

- The Principal Investigator's title and contact information and the names, affiliations, and titles of other key members of the project, if any
- A narrative (maximum three pages in length) of your institution's vision of how faculty, students, and staff can be supported in their open source software-driven discovery across disciplines, including:
    - where the OSPO would sit organizationally
    - the proposed team and management structure
    - how the OSPO would engage with faculty and students
    - how the OSPO would prioritize focus given finite resources
    - the unique characteristics of the university that could be enhanced or leveraged to make the OSPO successful
    - resource commitments that would augment or support the OSPO during and beyond the funding period
- A high-level tabular budget and justification up to $750k (inclusive of up to 20% overhead) outlining salary lines and other expense categories. For ideas on how to construct a budget and narrative, view the [Sloan Foundation template](#).
- A brief list (no more than one page) of faculty on your campus who would be early collaborators and/or a list of open source software projects that are maintained or substantially developed by faculty and staff at your institution

Letters of Inquiry must:

- Be no more than 5 pages in total, including all components above
- Be in an 11-point font
- Have 1-inch margins
- Include page numbers

Submission Instructions

Submissions are due no later than February 15, 2023 by 5:00pm ET.

Materials must be integrated into a single PDF document and sent by email to ospo@sloan.org with the following subject heading: "OSPO LOI - [Lead PI Last Name] - [Institution Name]".

We expect to invite full proposals from among the LOI submissions by **March 8**, with full proposal drafts due **April 5th**. We expect to invite up to five full proposals for consideration. Invited full proposals will be further reviewed by a set of subject matter experts, and proposers will then be asked to prepare a response to reviews. Final award decisions for invited proposals are expected in **June 2023**.

Questions about the Call for LOIs can be sent to technology@sloan.org with the subject heading, "OSPO LOI".

About the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation

The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation is a nonpartisan not-for-profit, grantmaking institution dedicated to improving the welfare of all through the advancement of scientific knowledge. Established in 1934 by Alfred Pritchard Sloan Jr., then-President and Chief Executive Officer of the General Motors Corporation, the Foundation makes grants in four broad areas: direct support of research in science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and economics; initiatives to increase the quality and diversity of scientific institutions and the science workforce; projects to develop or leverage technology to empower research; and efforts to enhance and deepen public engagement with science and scientists.

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