ALFRED P. SLOAN FOUNDATION

Call for Letters of Inquiry

Social Science Research Projects on Energy Insecurity, Distributional Equity, and Just Transitions in the United States

Grants of up to $500,000 to be awarded for collaborative social science research projects on energy and distributional equity, led by early- and mid-career scholars

Submission Deadline: February 1, 2021

Overview

The Energy and Environment program at the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation supports research, training, networking, and dissemination efforts to inform the societal transition toward low-carbon energy systems in the United States by investigating economic, environmental, technological, and distributional issues. As one of its newly defined topic areas of interest, the Sloan Foundation's Energy and Environment program looks to advance timely, catalytic, rigorous, interdisciplinary social science research projects that examine questions related to energy insecurity, distributional equity, and just transitions in the United States, particularly those that introduce new scholars from various disciplines to these lines of inquiry. **Therefore, the Sloan Foundation is currently soliciting Letters of Inquiry for collaborative social science research projects led by early- and mid-career scholars examining critical and under-explored questions related to issues of energy insecurity, distributional equity, and just energy system transitions in the United States.**

A small number of full proposals will be invited from submissions responding to this Call. Grant amounts are expected to be up to $500,000 over a 2-3 year period.

Context

More research is needed to understand how forthcoming changes in the energy system might impact low- and middle-income populations, particularly historically marginalized racial and ethnic populations. Black, Latino/a, Indigenous, and other people of color face a wide range of energy equity and environmental challenges, such as disproportionately living in areas with lower air and water quality, having less access to clean energy technologies, and experiencing higher rates of energy poverty. This intersection of poverty and marginalization significantly enhances the vulnerability of these populations. Overall, low- and middle-income people and historically marginalized racial and ethnic populations face high levels of energy insecurity: nearly one-third of households report difficulties in paying their energy bills, and one-fifth have reported foregoing basic necessities, such as food or medical care, to cover energy costs. Many economically vulnerable communities, especially those that are historically marginalized, are often unable to participate in the societal transition toward low-carbon energy systems due to a variety of economic, social, and technological challenges. Furthermore, the potential for federal stimulus funding and the emergence of state-level net-zero policies necessitate that a solid evidence base be developed that can help include all members of society in these interventions.

There is a need to build on existing foundational research in this domain by expanding the empirical academic literature to advance our collective understanding of questions related to energy insecurity, distributional equity, and just transitions of the energy system in the United States. Such studies can help assess how current or planned policies, practices, and programs might be better designed to include economically and socially vulnerable populations in forthcoming energy transitions. Scholarship in this area is especially amenable to partnerships between academic researchers and various community, government, and industry stakeholders to ensure that novel research is generated, students are trained, networks are strengthened, and information is disseminated to inform decision-making. The intention of this Call is to be broadly relevant to a wide range of social science scholars, disciplines, and approaches that utilize and draw on a variety of conceptual frameworks, terminologies, and methodologies.

Projects involving advocacy or lobbying activities are out of scope and not eligible for consideration. Additionally, projects with a public health or biomedical component are out of scope for the Sloan Foundation and are not eligible for consideration.

Expected Research Team Structure

Proposed research projects are expected to demonstrate many of the following characteristics:

- Collaboration among scholars deploying a range of research methodologies and drawn from multiple social science disciplines, either within or across universities. Relevant disciplines and fields could include but are not limited to: political science, public policy, economics, anthropology, sociology, geography, and energy systems analysis, among others.
- Submissions from diverse teams led by Black, Latino/a, and Indigenous researchers and/or women are strongly encouraged. In particular, submissions from researchers based at Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), including Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), are strongly encouraged, either as lead primary investigators or in team member roles.
- Project leadership by early- and mid-career faculty at the Assistant or Associate Professor (or equivalent) levels.
- Undertaking original empirical data collection and analysis, or combining existing datasets in novel, innovative ways.
- Training of students (graduate students, postdoctoral researchers, or undergraduates) to enhance their attention to questions of energy, distributional equity, and just transitions. Racial and ethnic diversity in trainees is of special interest.
- Linking research to practice by engaging a wide range of stakeholders in helping to shape the scope and conduct of research and dissemination efforts used to inform decision-making. This includes collaboration with government, industry, community-level non-governmental organizations, professional societies, and other stakeholder groups with experience working on energy insecurity, distributional equity, or just transition issues.
- Potential ability to secure additional financial support, or in-kind contributions, from other funding sources, including foundations, universities, private sector, or government funders.

Sample Research Questions

Example research questions for examination include but are not limited to:

- What is the impact of various energy policies—such as tax incentives, clean energy targets, or procurement policies—on historically marginalized racial and ethnic populations or low- and middle-income populations who face high levels of energy insecurity or challenges related to distributional equity?
- What is the impact of clean energy workforce development strategies and programs on historically marginalized racial and ethnic populations or low- and middle-income populations?
- What can be learned about previous and ongoing interventions focused on addressing energy poverty and energy insecurity?
- Which policies or programs show evidence of helping to include historically marginalized racial and ethnic populations or low- and middle-income populations in the adoption of novel energy technologies?
- What can be learned about just transitions in the energy system by analyzing community-level or regional energy innovation practices and programs? What is the impact of various programs and practices across different urban or rural localities?
- How do historically marginalized racial and ethnic populations or low- and middle-income populations perceive various dimensions of the clean energy transition?
- What can be learned about how public participation processes help or hinder the prioritization of energy equity and just transition issues?
- What kinds of detailed, granular-level data can be collected and analyzed across scales to address these and related questions associated with energy poverty, distributional equity, and just transitions?

Eligibility

Lead investigators must be Assistant or Associate Professors, or in equivalent positions, based at United States universities or colleges. Researchers may participate in a maximum of two proposed projects. Senior researchers and non-U.S.-based researchers may participate in proposed projects and can receive funding as research team members, advisors, or collaborators.

As noted above, submissions from diverse teams led by women and/or Black, Latino/a, and Indigenous researchers are strongly encouraged, as are submissions from researchers based at Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), including Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), who are strongly encouraged to serve as lead primary investigators or in team member roles.

Submission Deadline

Submissions are due no later than Monday, February 1, 2021 by 5:00pm Eastern. Submission materials must be integrated in a single PDF document and sent by email to energy@sloan.org, with the following subject heading and document title: “ENERGY EQUITY LOI - Lead PI Last Name – Institution Name”.

Submission Components

Complete submission packets must include the following 6 components in the following order:

(1) A 1-page Sloan Foundation Proposal Cover Sheet, summarizing key project details. Projects should have a proposed start date of September 1, 2021. This document is available at: http://sloan.org/proposal-cover-sheet

(2) A Letter of Inquiry 4-5 pages in length (excluding budget table and other supplemental material), in 11-point font. Submissions should address the following questions, with each question serving as a section heading:

1. What is the core research question(s) and why is it important?
2. What are the current knowledge gaps that this research will address?
3. What are the team's qualifications and does it account for diversity, equity, and inclusion in its composition and in the conduct of the proposed research?
4. What is the proposed research methodology?
5. What will be the outputs from the research project and how will they be disseminated among various stakeholders?
6. What other sources of support can the project leverage?

(3) A Draft Budget Table for the proposed project. Total funding requests are allowed up to $500,000 over a 2-3 year period, with sub-awards to collaborating institutions indicated where appropriate. This document is available here on the Forms section of the Sloan website.

Allowable expenses will generally include:

i. For faculty: up to one-month summer salary per investigator per year, plus benefits, capped at $35,000 per investigator per year, based on project time commitment.
ii. For graduate students, postdoctoral researchers, or undergraduate students: salary/stipend, plus benefits, based on project time commitment.
iii. Tuition reimbursement: While it is the policy of the Foundation not to provide reimbursement for graduate student tuition, exceptions may be made to this policy in particular circumstances. Requests for graduate student tuition reimbursement are allowed up to a maximum of $12,000 per student per year, provided sufficient justification is provided.
iv. For project-related administrative and research staff: salary, plus benefits.
v. Research implementation expenses: data acquisition, conducting experiments, computation, hardware, advisory committee honoraria, and other research expenses.
vi. Dissemination and workshop expenses: travel, meals, lodging, conference fees, room rentals, speaker stipends, audio-visual equipment, and other dissemination expenses.
vii. Indirect overhead expenses, capped at 20% of direct costs.

(4) References/Bibliography List (no more than 2 pages)

(5) Brief CVs of key project leads and personnel (no more than 2 pages per person)

(6) Optional: Letters of Support from research partners, community stakeholders, data providers, or other collaborators (if available)

Review Process

Given the expected high volume of submissions, we will generally be unable to respond to questions for additional information related this Call for Letters of Inquiry.

A diverse review committee comprised of scholars and practitioners with expertise in energy insecurity, distributional equity, and just transitions will assess the submitted Letters of Inquiry. A small number of selected submissions will then be invited to prepare full proposals for consideration. Invited full proposals will be further reviewed by a diverse set of subject matter experts, and proposers will then be asked to prepare a response to reviews. Final award decisions are expected in the second half of 2021 and beyond.

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.

sloan.org | @SloanFoundation