ALFRED P. SLOAN
FOUNDATION

Exemplary Pathways to STEM Graduate Education

Grants up to $500,000 will be awarded to U.S. higher education institutions and organizations working in partnership to advance access and opportunity in STEM graduate education.

Submission Deadline:	**June 1, 2026**	
Informational Webinars:	April 2, 2:00-3:00pm ET	Register here
	April 15, 2:00-3:00pm ET	Register here

Background and Overview

The Higher Education Program at the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation is seeking to invest in new and established partnerships between STEM undergraduate and graduate programs that seek to identify and remove longstanding, systemic barriers to STEM master's and doctoral degrees **with attention to programs that serve undergraduate students enrolled in nonprofit public and private four-year broad access institutions, two-year colleges, or baccalaureate and special focus institutions with strong access missions (see page 4 of this document for more details). We are especially interested in undergraduate partner institutions whose enrollment consists of at least 40% Pell Grant recipients.**

Core to the mission of the Foundation is the belief that original research and education in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) drives our nation's health and prosperity and necessitates the talent of our entire citizenry. Science and law affirm that people of all backgrounds are individually unique, and no group is inherently superior. So, when we see disparities in educational experience by group membership,[1] we must identify the root causes and—with attention to relative severity—effectively remove barriers and enable all talent to thrive. National data show that those who are low-income/wealth or first in their family to graduate from college are disproportionately affected by the many barriers that exist within STEM higher education. The same has been shown for Black, Indigenous, and Latine individuals, women, individuals with disabilities, and those from rural communities. A particular institution's data may reflect significant barriers for students within its service area from these or other backgrounds.

[1] Group-based barriers are barriers that individuals experience based on their societal identity, experience, background, and/or viewpoint group, such as socioeconomic/wealth, first generation, disability, religious, racial, ethnic, gender, ideology, or other group.

Sloan welcomes letters of inquiry (LOIs) from institutions that:

1. Demonstrate an overarching commitment through meaningful action toward addressing all significant barriers to STEM graduate education within their own programs and contexts in the fields of **astronomy, biology, chemistry, computer science, data science, Earth sciences, economics, engineering, marine science, mathematics, physics, and/or statistics,**[2] and

2. Have created, or demonstrate a commitment and capacity to create, partnerships that meaningfully address the most significant barriers in their programs in the above fields (within the institution's comprehensive commitment and action to meaningfully address all significant barriers).

LOIs are due no later than June 1, 2026, by 5:00pm EDT.

Successful projects will leverage longstanding inter-institutional relationships, while expanding relationships to new kinds of institutions that might not have been engaged but are sources of prospective talent, such as community colleges, less research-intensive institutions, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and Tribal Colleges and Universities, among others. Projects will engage the expertise of institutional partners—and the unique experiences of their faculty and students—to model effective systems and practices that provide students who are already thriving the opportunity to continue to thrive, eliminate unfair barriers that have impeded others, and assure fair access, opportunities, and competition for all talent. Such an approach requires that institutions consider the aggregate of their programs and efforts and the ways in which a Sloan-funded project would complement them. We expect our grantees to pursue their efforts with attention to relevant legal parameters and without considering racial/ethnic group membership when selecting students to participate.[3]

Objectives

The objectives of this funding program are to invest in the development and enhancement of educational pathways from undergraduate programs to STEM master's and doctoral degree programs for U.S. citizens and permanent residents by, among other things:

- Supporting mutually beneficial partnerships between faculty and staff across institutions in ways that leverage their unique and ongoing record of contributions and expertise in cultivating STEM talent.

[2] The Foundation does not support the health sciences, biomedical sciences, or medical research. For more information, see https://sloan.org/grants/apply#tab-what-we-do-not-fund.

[3] Sloan has a strong record of support for elevating our grantees' understanding of federal non-discrimination law and emphasizing our expectation that they will adhere to it in all their Sloan-funded and related activities.

- Enhancing the quality and availability of undergraduate STEM education and research experiences that support the academic and non-academic preparation of students for graduate education.

- Providing students with strong mentoring, advising, and sponsorship by faculty and (near) peers such that students gain the confidence, subject matter expertise, and skills needed to compete for graduate school entry.

- Supporting activities that reflect principles of *intentionality*[4] applied to all students—those who are already thriving and those who are affected by unfair barriers—to ensure that promise is recognized and all talent can thrive.

- Laying the groundwork and creating models for long-term investment in transparent and accessible undergraduate-to-graduate education pathways for all talent by other foundations, government agencies, and higher education institutions.

As a part of establishing seamless pathways, projects need to address policies, processes, and practices that create and reinforce existing barriers to student access and success in graduate education. These efforts could include (but are not limited to) examining, redesigning, or strengthening undergraduate curriculum, community college transfer policies and support, undergraduate research opportunities, graduate student recruitment and graduate admission policies and processes, mentoring practices, or other gatekeeping (or gateway) structures to and through STEM graduate education. Since the barriers to such pathways do not end once students are admitted to graduate programs, the Foundation is looking for evidence that projects will promote and enhance existing efforts to reduce and eliminate policies, procedures, and institutional climates and cultures that prevent students from successfully attaining a STEM graduate degree. Also important are the evaluation metrics and processes employed for continuous improvement.

Institutional Eligibility

Institutions/organizations eligible as partners for the grant awards include:

- Nonprofit two- and four-year colleges and universities
- Nonprofit college and university systems or consortia

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[4] As defined by a report from the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *intentionality* drives the creation of programs, practices, and policies that are tailored to recognize and address student differences across multiple dimensions (academic, financial, and social) and do so with mindfulness of each person's context (i.e., relative opportunities and barriers and how they are navigated) to assess promise. Intentionality takes into account student needs, as well as student strengths and attributes; in other words, students are not viewed as problems to fix but talent to cultivate (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2019. *Minority Serving Institutions: America's Underutilized Resource for Strengthening the STEM Workforce*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. https://doi.org/10.17226/25257). The concept of intentionality can be and is intended to be applied to ALL talent in developing exemplary pathways.

- When in partnership with at least two nonprofit colleges/universities:
    - Professional societies and associations
    - University-affiliated research centers or laboratories
    - Members of the business/industry community
    - Nonprofit organizations
    - Federal research labs or other agency partners

While we are open to supporting a wide array of partnerships, we do **require that grant activities focus on supporting pathways for undergraduate students from:**

- **Nonprofit public four-year broad access institutions** (defined as four-year public institutions that accept at least 80% of applicants)
- **Two-year colleges** (inclusive of associate and associate/baccalaureate institutions as defined by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education)
- **Baccalaureate colleges** (as defined by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education) **with strong access missions**
- **Special focus: arts and sciences** institutions (as defined by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education) **with strong access missions**
- **Special focus: technology, engineering, and sciences** institutions (as defined by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education) **with strong access missions**

We characterize **"strong access missions"** by open access or high undergraduate acceptance rates or enrollment of a significant number of low-income and first-generation college students (relative to one's peer group). **We are especially interested in undergraduate partner institutions whose enrollment consists of at least 40% Pell Grant recipients.**

Proposers can articulate how their institution is a fit for this funding opportunity in the narrative Letter of Inquiry (see page 8 of this document). If you're not sure if your institution is a good fit, please reach out to highered@sloan.org with the subject line, "Exemplary Pathways."

Investigator Eligibility

Lead investigators from submitting and partner institutions should be at the full, associate, or assistant professor level, a department chair, or in an administrative role with high connectivity to academic positions. Such individuals should come from nonprofit two- or four-year institutions or organizations that serve higher education professionals or institutions. Given the importance of access and student success expertise at the undergraduate partner institution, the Foundation **strongly prefers submissions in which the lead PI is based at that institution**.

We encourage LOIs with multiple co-PIs, with one PI's institution designated to receive the grant award and then issue subcontracts to the partner institutions. This is not a limited submission opportunity; however, because our funds are finite, **we require that no individual be a lead PI on more than one project** (although a lead PI for one project may also be a co-PI on a second project).

Grant Types and Amounts

Three types of grants will be funded:

Planning Grants ($75,000)

Planning grants will support work between two or more institutions that are seeking to set the stage for the establishment of a partnership or set of partnerships, but which first require an assessment of the need and timing for partnership activities. Projects must demonstrate a clear roadmap to partnership through a well-defined set of planning activities, including conducting internal reviews of existing barriers to student success. Planning grants should result in concrete outcomes that lay the foundation for successful partnerships (e.g., memorandums of understanding or similar agreements, strategy documents, or short- and long-term timelines of activities). **Planning grants are no more than $75,000 to support 1 year of work.**

Seed Grants ($250,000)

Seed grants will support work between two or more institutions that are seeking to build upon or formalize an established partnership or set of partnerships by launching one or more pilot activities. These projects should include a plan to assess the viability and effectiveness of pilot activities. **Seed grants are no more than $250,000 to support 1-2 years of work.** Obtaining a planning grant is not required to apply for a seed award.

Implementation Grants ($500,000)

Implementation grants will support work between two or more institutions that are seeking to augment or scale an already well-established partnership or set of partnerships. Such projects will have evidence of their effectiveness, or potential effectiveness, in widening educational pathways. **Implementation grants are no more than $500,000 to support 2-3 years of work.** Obtaining a seed grant is not required to apply for an implementation award.

Project Activities

Awards will be considered for activities that include but are not limited to:

- Strengthening students' academic and research success
- Providing strong mentorship through individual and team mentoring models
- Building sustainable social and academic support networks for students
- Supporting faculty research and other collaborations across partner campuses
- Identifying and eliminating institutional norms, policies, and practices that are detrimental to serving all talent well
- Dismantling systemic barriers to include all talent through transformative practices and policies

For all grant types, the cultivation of undergraduate research opportunities is especially encouraged.

The following are some **examples** of the types of activities that we envision supporting. We welcome many other types of activities as well. **This list is by no means exhaustive.**

- The **creation of formal structures (e.g., dual-degree programs, 2+3 programs, or 4+1 programs) that open pathways to graduate programs**. Requiring deep collaboration of faculty at both institutions, such programs provide opportunities for students to earn bachelor's degrees at their home institution and graduate degrees or other learning opportunities at the partner institution.

- Cross-institutional support for students through the **creation of formal mentorship, advising, and sponsorship programs and activities that involve research exposure or training**. This support may include team mentoring and advising approaches that consist of more than one faculty member, one or more professional staff members, or (near) peer mentors.

- **Faculty-to-faculty collaboration across institutions**, both in terms of joint research activities (especially research that can include student participation) and joint course design and course offerings.

- **Cross-institutional summer and academic-year outreach programs** that invite students to engage in research and other academic experiences that prepare them for graduate study. Such programs may also include advising and mentoring on preparing the most competitive application for graduate admission.

- **Student support networks dedicated to individual or small groups of students** so that each student has a cadre of trusted advisors and advocates to whom they can turn when (or before) academic, social, and financial pressures become barriers to success.

- **Intensive, hands-on laboratory experiences and mentorship in business, industry, or university labs** that increase students' skills and confidence as STEM researchers.

- **Collaborative curricular development that fills gaps or increases the availability of courses** to students at the undergraduate partner institution, or the transformation of existing curricula at partner institutions to be more supportive of all students.

- Design and implementation of programs and policies **that make more transparent what it takes to be competitive for graduate school entry** and the tools and skills needed for success once there.

- **Faculty development in areas such as strong mentoring and advising, outreach and recruitment, or admissions (re)design** that reflects effective and legally sustainable criteria for expanding access to graduate education (e.g., admission practices that enable consideration of all quantitative and qualitative criteria that the program, in consultation with faculty, has deemed relevant to student success in the program and contributions to the field).

Partnership Structures and Approaches

Proposed partnerships between two or more institutions are expected to demonstrate many of the following characteristics. This list is by no means exhaustive.

- Clear evidence of planned or existing collaboration among STEM departments, programs, or schools in ways that are mutually beneficial across all parties—with the undergraduate partner institution taking a lead role in defining the project strategies, policies, and interventions. Financial resources should therefore also be concentrated at the undergraduate partner institution.

- A primary focus on advancing research and other experiences for students from undergraduate programs who may not otherwise have access to such opportunities paired with the creation of experiences for students and faculty to collaborate across all participating institutions for across-the-board benefits.

- Potential to secure additional financial support and in-kind contributions from other funding sources (e.g., federal agencies, private philanthropies, or institutional support) to sustain the initiative once Sloan Foundation support expires.

- Evidence of support from institutional leadership, including but not limited to, the president/chancellor, provost, academic deans, and department chairs. For non-college/university partners, evidence of support from organizational leadership.

- Commitment to data collection, analysis, and reporting to evaluate the efficacy of the project.

Sloan expects the design and implementation of all projects that it funds to satisfy the design parameters and requirements of actual federal law, as established by the Constitution, federal statutes and courts, including the U.S. Supreme Court. We understand that some states may impose greater restrictions than federal law allows and encourage proposers to briefly explain their relevant context and how they can achieve the objectives of the Exemplary Pathways initiative within it. We also expect that the projects we fund will be part of a broader set of efforts to provide fair access, opportunity, and competition for all talent in the relevant fields at participating institutions.

Submission Timeline and Instructions

Submissions should be submitted electronically via this website no later than June 1, 2026, by 5:00pm EDT. Decisions will be announced by August 10, 2026. If invited, full planning and seed grant proposals will be due October 5, 2026.[5] Implementation grant proposals will be due November 1, 2026.

[5] Invited proposals will follow Sloan's Grant Proposal Guidelines for Non-Research Projects available on the Foundation's website.

Planning and seed grant projects can start as early as December 1, 2026, while implementation grant projects can start April 1, 2027.

Questions about the call for LOIs can be sent to highered@sloan.org with the subject line, "Exemplary Pathways."

Submission Components and Instructions

Complete submission packets must include the following components as indicated at https://apsloan.smapply.io/prog/2026_call_for_letters_of_inquiry_exemplary_pathways_to_stem_graduate_education

1. **A 1-page Sloan Foundation Proposal Cover Sheet**, summarizing key project details. Planning and Seed grant projects should have a proposed start date of **December 1, 2026**. Implementation grant projects should have a proposed start date of **April 1, 2027.** The Cover Sheet is available at https://sloan.org/proposal-cover-sheet.

2. **A narrative Letter of Inquiry no more than seven (7) pages in length (excluding budget table, budget justification, references, PI CVs, and any appendices), in 11-point font, double-spaced.** Submissions should address the following questions, with the below categories serving as section headings and the questions serving as guidance for what to address in each section. **The bulk of the narrative should be devoted to barrier removal activities.**
    a. **Background**
        i. How is each partner well-positioned to advance the objectives of the Exemplary Pathways initiative given their institutional mission and context, educational offerings, excellence in the related disciplines, support of student success, and other areas relevant to the proposed activities and overall project? For the undergraduate partner, how does your mission specifically seek to advance educational access and opportunity for the students you serve (i.e., how is your institution a good fit for this funding opportunity)?

    b. **Barrier Identification**
        i. What are the greatest barriers to students' pursuit of graduate education between the partnering undergraduate campus(es)?
        ii. What is your current practice or plan to collect data on systemic practices, policies, or standards that contribute to the creation of these barriers?
            1. Do you/are you able to collect and report disaggregated student data? Depending on barriers identified in the relevant fields at your institution, this might include disaggregation by income/wealth, first-generation status, geography, race/ethnicity, gender, or ability. The sole purpose is to identify all significant and the most severe barriers to graduate education as experienced by students in your programs' service areas.

c. **Barrier Removal**
    i. What are the nature, scope, and timing of the barrier removal activities for the proposed project? Please indicate which activities may be new and which are continuing or building upon existing work. How do you know these activities are the right ones given your project's objectives?
        1. For Planning Grants: How will you go about identifying the right barrier removal activities?
    ii. How are your activities not only seeking to eliminate barriers to opportunities for individual students, but also transforming the environment (climate and culture norms) to better serve such students beyond the life of this project, while also continuing to provide students who are already thriving the opportunity to keep doing so?
        1. For Planning Grants: How will you ensure that your activities do the above?
    iii. How does the project and its activities fit into a larger suite of efforts (e.g., existing or planned initiatives or programs) to include all talent (those already thriving and those affected by all significant barriers) in the relevant disciplines at your institution(s)?
    iv. How will you know if each activity is successful?

d. **Partnerships**
    i. What is the history of collaboration with participating institutions, or with similar institutions? Alternatively, or in addition, how does the project build upon or otherwise expand the scope of the participating institutions' joint endeavors?
    ii. How will the project ensure mutual benefits across the participating institutions?

e. **Project Team**
    i. How is the project team well-suited for this project and for the level of collaboration being proposed?
    ii. Please include in the response a project management plan delineating partners, capabilities, roles, tasks, and a timeline that references the above proposed activities. The timeline can be included as an appendix.

f. **Additional Sources of Support**
    i. What other sources or networks of support can the project leverage to ensure its success within the institution's overall commitment to access and opportunity in STEM? What other resources might the project leverage?[6] Letters of support are not required.

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[6] Note that for *invited proposals*, PIs will be expected to address the total financial and support resources available to execute the project and their institution's/program's/department's other efforts to advance a comprehensive

For previous or current Exemplary Pathways grantees **ONLY**, please also attach no more than 1-2 pages (these do not count against the overall page limit) outlining:

g. **Project History**
   i. What successes stand out, how did you evaluate them, and what were the main factors that directly contributed to these successes? How will you build upon them if funded again?
      1. Without detailing any past selection criteria that would no longer legally[7] apply, what successes and challenges learned from previous pathways support could contribute to the design of a project funded by an Exemplary Pathways award, considering the current federal and (your) state context?
   ii. What barriers or challenges has your team faced, and how have or will you overcome them?
   iii. How has the project ensured mutual benefits across the participating institutions? How will it continue to ensure mutual benefits moving forward?
   iv. How has the project contributed to changes in systems, norms, or cultures in the respective programs or departments?
   v. Is there anything else you'd like to share that is pertinent to the proposed project?

3. **A Budget Table and Budget Justification** for the proposed project, with sub-awards to collaborating institutions indicated where appropriate. The budget table document is available on the forms section of the Sloan website: https://sloan.org/grants/apply#tab-grant-forms. The Budget Justification (1-2 pages) should provide additional detail on expenses cited on the budget form (i.e., how the proposer arrived at these numbers). **Please align your headings in the budget justification with those in the budget form.**

   Allowable expenses will generally include:
   a. For faculty: salary plus benefits for time spent on project or for course buy-out.
   b. For administrative or research staff: salary plus benefits based on project time commitment.
   c. For graduate students, postdoctoral researchers, or undergraduate students: salary/stipend plus benefits based on project time commitment.
   d. Program expenses: mentorship activities, conducting collaborative research, faculty training, advisory committee or speaker honoraria, participant stipends, social activities (e.g., food/beverage), travel, and other expenses.

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commitment to provide students who are already thriving the opportunity to continue to thrive, eliminate unfair barriers that have impeded others, and assure fair access, opportunities, and competition for all talent.

[7] This includes Sloan awards made before the Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard/UNC U.S. Supreme Court decision in 2023.

e. Workshop and research expenses: travel, meals, lodging, conference fees, room rentals, speaker stipends, audio-visual equipment, dissemination, and other expenses.
f. Indirect overhead expenses: capped at 20% of direct costs.

4. **References/Bibliography List** formatted in any widely used style (e.g., Chicago, APA, etc.)

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

Review Process

Sloan Foundation staff and advisors will review LOIs in June and July 2026. As part of the assessment of LOIs, **reviews will be focused on six key categories**: (1) evidence of mutually beneficial partnership, (2) activities rooted in institutional data or understanding of all significant barriers to graduate educational pathways, and how a Sloan Exemplary Pathways project would fit within that context to help address the most significant barriers, thereby freeing resources to remove other barriers, (3) a well-defined plan for barrier removal activities rooted in sound practice or the prevailing literature, (4) evidence of a systemic change approach that seeks to include all talent, (5) strong team qualifications and makeup with clear faculty-to-faculty collaboration and buy-in, and (6) likelihood of the project's success and sustainability given all these factors.

Exemplary Pathways Partnership Program Learning Community

Exemplary Pathways grantees are expected to join the **Exemplary Pathways Partnership (EPP) Program** community of learning and practice. Funded by Sloan, EPP is an initiative of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) and is designed to amplify grantee strengths, bridge potential gaps, and reduce barriers to success. Grantees work together to co-create solutions, share relevant knowledge and insights, and build capacity within and across project teams.

The EPP community provides grantees with evidence-informed resources through expert-led sessions, seminars, and workshops. Grantees convene on a regular basis through:

- **Quarterly Cohort Sessions** – where participants share progress, address pain points, exchange ideas and insights, and connect with other teams during a facilitated discussion within their respective cohort
- **Monthly Share, Solve, and Learn Sessions** – where participants discuss barriers and promising/best practices, as well as insights around a specific content area (e.g., student training, institutionalization of initiatives, funding, and succession planning)
- **Annual In-Person Meeting** – where AAAS hosts an in-person meeting for the EPP grantee teams to strengthen relationships between the teams, catalyze information sharing, and discuss hot topics (travel and accommodations are covered by AAAS for three members of your team)
- **Expert Designed and Customized Courses** – where EPP teams have access to AAAS courses addressing relevant topics such as grants management strategies and other best practices. This includes periodic general directional guidance from EducationCounsel on law-attentive policy and design approaches in the form of webinars.

The community is intentionally designed to (1) reduce feelings of isolation as you tackle your project, (2) spark new friendships and potential future partnerships, (3) and gather your collective knowledge and insights to foster learning and support your success. The time commitment for engaging in the EPP program and community is an **average of 90 minutes/month over a 12-month period.**

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 access and opportunity in 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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