



Vision Grants

VISION GRANTS



Application Deadlines:

Applications Open

June 4, 2026

Intent to Apply Form Deadline

August 12, 2026, 12:00 PM Noon (Central/Chicago Time)

Full Proposal Deadline

September 16, 2026, 12:00 PM Noon (Central/Chicago Time)

Program contact:

Jasmine Knetl

visiongrants@spencer.org

Learn More



The Spencer Foundation invests in research to improve education, broadly conceived. We know that rigorous research can play a critical role in identifying systemic inequities, evaluating what actually works, and guiding evidence-based changes that make education systems fairer and more inclusive. The Vision Grant program provides scholars and collaborators with the time, space, resources, and support to *plan* a large-scale study or program of research: geared toward real-world impact to make education systems more equitable; drawing on research across disciplines and methods; and developed through meaningful and equitable collaboration with practitioners, policymakers, communities, and other partners; and focused on transforming educational systems.

Program Statement

Vision Grants are *research planning grants* to bring together a team, for 12 to 18 months, to collaboratively develop ambitious, large-scale research projects focused on transforming educational systems toward greater equity. This program takes as core that the development of these kinds of research projects require time, space, and thoughtfulness to incubate and plan. Vision Grants are \$75,000 total.

The Vision Grants allow teams to generate ideas for collaborative scholarship that develops a new vision of what equitable educational systems can look like, consider which disciplines have taken up these issues previously (and why they have fallen short or encountered limitations), and foreground important ideas that will allow new and ambitious research to emerge. For example, previously funded Vision Grants have proposed research projects that:

- Develop a new policy, pedagogical approach, practice, or intervention, (e.g. implementing a competency-based assessment system across distinct district contexts)
- Work with communities, practitioners, and policymakers to co-design approaches that improve educational equity (e.g., building a coalition of legal and policy scholars, families, and district leaders to change school enrollment policies to address racial segregation).
- Build upon educational approaches or policies that have worked well in one setting, with the goal of studying them in a range of settings to better understand how, where, and with whom they work and why (e.g., developing a national network of community-based curriculum development projects in collaboration with community organizations, school districts, and educators to understand and build capacity for teaching about local history)

These are just examples. We welcome proposals that consider creative ways to understand and solve complex problems with the goal of reimagining and transforming education systems for equity.

Unlike many of Spencer's other programs, the Vision Grant proposal should not be a fully fleshed out research plan. Instead, this is an invitation to think forward about what research we need to transform education systems toward equity and then to envision how that systems-change will happen, utilizing research evidence. Vision Grant proposals should identify the system(s) targeted for transformation, and the specific levers the team thinks need to be engaged.

Note: While the Vision Grant program stands on its own to spark research ideas and collaborations, being awarded a Vision Grant is also a prerequisite for applying to our Transformative Research Grant program (TRG, \$3.5 million), which funds large-scale research projects that transform education systems for equity. However, there is no guarantee that funded Vision Grants will be awarded a TRG.

Vision Grant Cohort Learning Program

Once teams are awarded, we will bring together the cohort of Vision grantee teams to support their collaborative planning process and project development. The learning series, held in person in Chicago, is designed to engage participants in collective learning within and across teams and alongside Spencer Program staff.

Eligibility and Restrictions

Eligibility

Proposals to the Vision Grant program must be for planning research projects that study education and/or learning, broadly conceived, though they will more than likely include scholars and partners in other sectors and fields. Principal Investigators (PIs) and Co-PIs applying for a Vision Grant must have appropriate experience or an earned doctorate in an academic discipline or terminal degree in a professional field. While graduate students may be part of the research team, they may not be named the PI or Co-PI on the proposal.

The PI must be affiliated with a non-profit organization or public/governmental institution that is willing to serve as the administering organization if the grant is awarded. Examples include non-profit private or public colleges, universities, school districts, and research facilities, as well as other non-profit organizations with a 501(c)(3) determination from the IRS (or equivalent non-profit status if the organization is outside of the United States). The Spencer Foundation does not award grants directly to individuals.

PIs and Co-PIs may apply for a Vision Grant if they have another active research grant from the Spencer Foundation or if they have another Spencer grant proposal in review.

Proposals are accepted from the U.S. and internationally. All proposals must be submitted in English and budgets must be proposed in U.S. Dollars.

Restrictions

PIs and Co-PIs **may not** be part of more than one Vision Grant proposal (funded and/or in review).

Proposed budgets for this program are limited to \$75,000 total and may not include indirect cost charges per Spencer's policy.

The Vision Grant may not be longer than 18 months in duration.

How to Apply



Step 1: Submit an Intent to Apply Form

The Intent to Apply is not more than 200 words and has no impact on proposal review. It is a mechanism to assist Spencer's internal planning and program management. However, the Intent to Apply is required to submit a proposal to the Vision Grants program.

Intent to Apply Guidelines

Before you are given access to the full proposal application, the Intent to Apply must be submitted through an online application form following the guidelines below. The steps for registering and/or updating SmartSimple profiles and then submitting an Intent to Apply form are as follows:

Intent to Apply Form

To complete an Intent to Apply form, the PI should go to their Workbench and click the Apply button for the Vision Grants program. The draft form can be saved and returned to a later time if necessary. The draft form will be available on the PI's Draft Proposals list on their Workbench.

Intent to Apply Form Elements

Below is an overview of the application elements that the PI will be expected to complete. This information is not binding (i.e., project teams may change what they have submitted on the Intent to Apply form when working on the full proposal). However, it is helpful in determining the appropriate reviewers for your eventual full proposal and for internal evaluations of our grant programs.

- **Project Personnel** - As the person creating the draft application, the PI will automatically be assigned to the proposal as the Principal Investigator. For Co-PIs on the proposal, the PI will be asked to provide their names and organizations in this section.
- **Proposal Summary** - Information about the proposal is requested, such as the project title, estimated duration, the central topic(s), and a 200-word project summary.
- **Project Data** - Within the online application, we ask the PI to check off the appropriate options for the proposed Vision Grant in the following categories: disciplinary perspective, methods, topics, geographical scope, and contexts.
- **Submit the Intent to Apply Form** - Once the PI has completed the form, they should click the Submit button at the bottom of the page. The Full Proposal application form will now be available on their Workbench.

Reminder: The Intent to Apply form **must be submitted by noon central time** on the due date in order to submit a Full Proposal for the upcoming review cycle.

Step 2: Prepare and Submit a Full Proposal.

As a reminder, Vision Grants are \$75,000 for a duration of between 12 and 18 months. Vision Grants are intended to provide research planning grant support to teams of researchers, policymakers, practitioners, community members and/or other partners to develop thoughtful and rigorous studies and programs of research. Proposal elements are further specified below.

Like the Intent to Apply form, the Vision Grants full proposal must be submitted through an online application form following the guidelines below.

Vision Grant Proposal Elements

Below are the elements that Vision Grants teams are expected to submit.

Project Personnel

This section will automatically populate from the submitted Intent to Apply form. Teams can edit the text that appears in this section if they choose.

Proposal Summary

This section will also automatically populate from the submitted Intent to Apply form. Teams can also edit the text that appears in this section if they choose.

Proposal Narrative (2000 words)

The Vision Grant program is intended to provide support in planning and developing a study or program of research that is designed to transform education systems toward equity. However, because this is a planning grant, we do not expect that the full research project will already be planned out in the proposal. Thus, our focus will be on evaluating the *promise* of the research project that will be developed, and its potential to lead to transformative change for equity in education. The proposal narrative should include the following (uploaded as a PDF):

A description of the particular challenge or opportunity this research project seeks to address and its potential to be transformative. Include the following: What system(s) is the team ultimately seeking to transform (and why) and what levers will need to be engaged in order to transform that system(s) (and why)? What is innovative about the focus of the project? How is the project important to the field and to other partners? What have been prior constraints in this area or how will this project move beyond prior efforts to disrupt inequities or advance equity? Does the scope and scale of the project lend itself to transformative systems change, and are there sightlines to that transformation? Describe how this project has the potential to result in transformative change to education systems, and initial thoughts about *how* that transformation will be advanced.

An empirical rationale for the potential project. Although we anticipate that the empirical rationale may evolve over the course of the planning grant, we are interested in the project team's identification of relevant literatures, findings, gaps, and opportunities. We encourage the team to seek out a range of lenses and empirical bodies of work, and to explore across disciplines for empirical studies, conceptual frameworks, and theories that will initially guide the transformative research project design.

A description of the team. Conducting transformative research requires the engagement of a diverse set of expertise, methodological, disciplinary, and experiential, from the beginning of the research study planning process. We anticipate that teams will engage scholars across departmental and school affiliation and will include multiple partners across systems levels or sectors. Proposals should include descriptions of key leadership and team members and their expected contributions to the project. This includes a description of the expertise (conceptual, empirical, methodological, praxis/professional) that is represented on the team, and how the team is poised through this proposed research planning grant to further develop or draw on diverse conceptual and methodological approaches, as well as practice and policy-based experiences. This should include a description of researchers and other partners (students, families, educators, site/system leaders, policy experts, others). We realize that some team members might be added during a team's Vision Grant planning process. However, we are looking for proposals that at the time of submission name specific collaborators across partner groups who have already agreed to participate.

A process for collaborative work on developing the research design. This includes an overview of the processes the team will use to engage in collective thinking and planning of the research project/program of work. A key aspect of the process should be focused on how multiple partners will engage in the research design to ensure deep and equitable collaboration and impact. For example, how will the team develop relationships across partner groups and how will all team members be included in project development, routine practices, and project governance and structures as part of this planning grant? What are the activities the team will engage in and how will the work be structured over the lifetime of the planning grant?

The text should be double-spaced and in 12-point font. APA style is preferred. At the conclusion of the narrative, please include the word count in parentheses. The reference list should follow the narrative in the same PDF file and will not count toward the 2000-word limit.

Note: Tables and other figures can be included in the text of the proposal, where appropriate, provided they are used sparingly. The text contained in any tables and figures will not count toward the word limit. However, it is important that any tables or figures in the narrative portion of the proposal are explained or described.

AI Agreement and Disclosure - The Spencer Foundation has developed a [policy](#) outlining the responsible and ethical use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) technologies across the Foundation's operations, programs, and activities.

We have developed the policy guidelines to appropriately balance the potential benefits of artificial intelligence with the potential risks. While submitting your application to the Vision Grants program in SmartSimple, you will be asked to acknowledge that you have read, understood, and agree to comply with these guidelines.

Project Timeline

A project timeline should be uploaded as a PDF file and should indicate the proposed start and end dates of the project, as well as key project events and milestones. The project timeline may not exceed 1 page, and the text should not be smaller than 9-point font. The proposed project duration can be up to 18 months.

Budget and Budget Justification

The budget form is divided into the following categories and each category has a pulldown menu of the line item choices listed in parentheses below:

- **Salaries** (PI, Co-PI, Postdoctoral Research Assistant, Graduate Student, Researcher, Undergraduate Researcher, Other Research Staff, Other Staff, Supplemental PI Course Release, Supplemental Co-PI Course Release)
- **Benefits** (PI Benefits, Co-PI Benefits, Researcher Benefits, Other Staff Benefits, Tuition/Fees, Supplemental Course Release Benefits)
- **Other Collaborator** (Collaborators from Partner Groups, Consultants, Advisors)
- **Travel** (Project Travel)
- **Equipment and Software** (Equipment, Software)
- **Project Expenses** (Supplies, Communication, Transcription)
- **Learning and Professional Development** (Trainings, Team Building and Co-Learning Opportunities)
- **Other** (other costs not associated with the line items above)

Each expense for the project should be added and the budget narrative field should be completed, providing a description of that specific expense. Detailed guidelines are available within the application form.

Subcontracts: If the proposed Vision Grant will have a subcontract(s), a separate subcontract budget form will need to be completed for each subcontract involved. The subcontract form has the same categories and line item choices listed above.

Signature from Authorized Representative of the Administering Organization

This section of the application details the steps necessary to obtain the authorized signature for the proposal through the Adobe E-sign process. The PI is required to provide the Signatory's name, title, and email address; this is normally an administrative or financial person who has the authority to sign the proposal on behalf of the organization. **Note: The signature process must be completed by noon on the deadline date.** The applicant is responsible for making sure that the proposal is signed by the deadline. To do so, we recommend filling in the online application at least a week ahead of the deadline date. The Spencer Foundation is unable to accept late submissions.

Deadlines



Applications Open

June 4, 2026

Intent to Apply Form Deadline

August 12, 2026, 12:00 PM Noon (Central/Chicago Time)

Full Proposal Deadline

September 16, 2026, 12:00 PM Noon (Central/Chicago Time)

Online Application Portal



Sign up to our Newsletter

