

Vision Grants

The Spencer Foundation invests in research to improve education, broadly conceived. There is a critical need for innovative, methodologically and disciplinarily diverse, large-scale research projects to *transform education systems for equity*. Importantly, we believe that ambitious research must begin with the challenges, problems, and opportunities in education systems. To stimulate research that addresses this need, the Spencer Foundation seeks to provide 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 on equity; drawing on research across disciplines and methods; reliant on meaningful and equitable collaboration with practitioners, policymakers, communities, and other partners; and focused on transforming educational systems.

The Vision Grants program funds the *collaborative planning* of innovative, methodologically diverse, interdisciplinary research on education that contributes to transforming education systems for equity. Vision Grants are *research planning grants* to bring together a team, for 6 to 12 months, to collaboratively develop ambitious, large-scale research projects focused on transforming educational systems toward greater equity. This program takes as core that visionary, interdisciplinary, and collaborative research projects require time, space, and thoughtfulness to incubate and plan. Vision Grants are \$75,000 total. Different from many of Spencer's other programs, the 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. Teams are encouraged to reflect on the people who need to be involved *from the beginning of the research design process*, and how evidence from the eventual research study/studies could be used to actually transform systems. Vision Grant proposals should identify the system(s) targeted for transformation and the specific levers the team thinks need to be engaged in order to work toward systems transformation.

Proposals should also explicitly identify:

- 1) a research topic and initial thoughts about scope and methodological approach of the study,
- 2) the plan for impact, identifying the levers for systems change that will likely be engaged
- 3) the collaboration process, and
- 4) a team that will lead to a fully fleshed out research plan by the end of the grant period.

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 is designed for large-scale research projects that transform education systems for equity.

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. The Spencer Foundation does not award grants directly to individuals. 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).

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. However, the projects proposed in a Vision Grant proposal and in another Spencer grant program proposal must be distinct. *Please note that this restriction marks a change in policy from the first four cycles of the Vision Grants program.

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.

Note: All awarded Vision Grantees will have the option to apply for a Transformative Research Grant, with awards to carry out the planned research projects (budgets up to \$3.5M). In addition to considering the development of a proposal for the Transformative Research Grant program, Vision Grant Awardees are also eligible to submit a proposal to other Spencer Foundation grant programs.

Restrictions

PIs and Co-PIs **may not** be part of more than one Vision Grant proposal (funded and/or in review). Additionally, a PI or Co-PI cannot be part of a Transformative Research Grant and apply for another Vision Grant, even if the topic is distinct.

*Please note that these restrictions mark a change in policy from the first few cycles of the Vision Grants program.

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 12 months in duration.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Can a PI or co-PI be eligible for a Vision Grant if they already have another active Spencer grant?

A: Yes. PIs and/or Co-PIs may be involved with another Spencer funded grant or proposal as PI and/or Co-PI, in addition to being named as a PI and/or Co-PI on a Vision Grant proposal.

Q: Can the same person be part of multiple Vision Grants proposals as a PI or Co-PI?

A: No. The same person cannot be the PI or Co-PI on multiple Vision Grants proposals. Note that this marks a policy change from what the Foundation allowed in earlier cycles of this program.

Q: How large should Vision Grant teams be? Who should be represented on teams?

A: Project teams should decide on the scope and scale of their Vision Grant teams given the research project being planned and developed. We do expect teams to be interdisciplinary and/or multi-method. We also expect collaborations with practitioners, policymakers, young people, educators, non-profit organizations, governments, or communities (this list is not exhaustive—these are only examples). Although we understand that teams might choose to add collaborators as part of the Vision Grant planning process, at the time of submission we expect proposals to name specific collaborators across sectors who have already agreed to participate.

Q: What are typical budget line items for a Vision Grant project?

A: Please see the Budget and Budget Justification section under How to Apply above, where we provide details about the budget, including budget categories.

Q: Are indirect costs allowed for Vision Grants?

A: No. The Spencer Foundation does not allow indirect costs for budgets that are \$75,000 or less. Please see the Applicant Information and Policies section of the website for additional information: <https://www.spencer.org/resources/Applicant-Information-and-Policies>

Q: How are Vision Grants different from a research project that could be submitted to other Spencer grant programs?

A: Vision Grants are planning grants. They are designed to provide project teams with the time, space, resources, and scaffolding to plan a large-scale study or program of research and impact for systems transformation toward equity. Different from Spencer's other research funding programs, the proposal should not be a fully fleshed out research plan. Proposals should identify a topic or focus with the potential for transformative impact, initial ideas about a potential study design and methods, as well as a process and a team that will lead to a fully fleshed out research plan by the end of the grant period.

Q: How is the Vision Grants program different from Spencer's Research-Practice Partnership grant program?

A: The scale and scope of Vision Grants is different from those that would be appropriate for the Research-Practice Partnerships Program. We expect Vision Grant teams to be working toward transforming educational systems for equity; equity-oriented transformative systems change is the goal. While Research-Practice Partnerships also involve collaboration, these partnerships need not be as focused on *transformative systems change* outcomes. Additionally, Vision Grants are planning grants, and the program is designed to create and nurture strong and impactful collaborations – both existing and newly formed – with a variety of partners across geographies, institutions, disciplines, methodological traditions, policy and practice. Together, partners work toward imagining and designing innovative research project(s)/program of research that disrupt(s) and transform educational systems. This is unlike Spencer's Research-Practice Partnership grant program where we fund partnerships that are required to have a history of working together, propose to conduct a specified set of research and praxis-oriented activities that they will accomplish during the course of the grant, and leverage theoretical and analytic frameworks that may or may not be multi-method or multi-disciplinary.

Q: Can Vision Grant proposals include time and resources for developing partnerships/ relationships/community between researchers, practitioners, policy advocates, etc.?

A: Yes. We expect that Vision Grant proposal budgets will include time and resources for the development of partnerships and relationships. Please see the Budget and Budget Justification section above for additional information.

Q: How broadly should we think about education systems being targeted for change? How is Spencer envisioning “large scale transformation”? Are there particular topics or issues that Spencer is interested in for the Vision Grant?

A: Vision Grants are field initiated like Spencer’s other grant programs, meaning that we do not dictate particular topics or issues that we want Vision Grant teams to address. Vision Grant teams have complete freedom to propose planning grants about critically important topics and issues situated in systems that need to be transformed for equity. However, as part of our [Initiative on AI and Education](#), we have designated additional funds within the Vision Grant program for work focused on AI. Please also see the Program Statement section for other areas of special encouragement and a few example project ideas to help concretize what we mean by systems transformation (and please keep in mind that these are only examples). Please also explore the Transformative Research Program section of the Spencer website for descriptions of Vision Grants that have received funding.

Q: How long are Vision Grant awardees eligible to apply for the Transformative Research Grant?

A: Vision Grant grantees are eligible to apply for a Transformative Research Grant for up to three years after their Vision Grant is completed.

Q: If awarded a Vision Grant, are Vision Grantees required to submit a proposal to the Transformative Research Grant program?

A: No. Vision Grants are planning grants to support teams in imagining and creating methodologically and disciplinarily diverse, collaborative research projects designed to reimagine education systems for equity. Funded Vision Grant teams may apply for a Transformative Research Grant, or they may apply for other Spencer Foundation grant programs if those are a better fit. There is no requirement to apply for future funding.

Q: How many Vision Grant proposals will be awarded each cycle?

A: We expect to award 10 Vision Grants during each cycle of the program, plus several grants focused on the intersection of AI and Education. There will be two Vision Grant cycles per year.

Q: Do PIs have to be located in a university to be eligible?

A: No, PIs and/or Co-PIs do not need to be located in a university to be eligible for a Vision Grant. As we note under Eligibility: 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. The Spencer Foundation does not award grants directly to individuals.

Q: Are resubmissions allowed?

A: Yes. Like Spencer's other grant programs, we accept resubmissions of Vision Grants.

Q: Do you accept proposals from outside the United States?

A: Yes, we accept proposals from outside the U.S. Additionally, project teams do not have to include a U.S.-based scholar(s) or other U.S.-based partners. Application materials must be submitted in English and project budgets must be in U.S. dollars.

Q: When is the earliest that projects could begin?

A: Project timelines should not begin until 7-8 months after the proposal deadline to allow for the time it takes for the review process.

Q: Who will review Vision Grant proposals?

A: A panel of senior scholars and other senior partners (e.g., practitioners, policymakers, leaders of community-based organizations, etc.) who have extensive

experience designing and collaborating on research projects aimed to transform systems toward equity will review Vision Grant proposals to support the Spencer Foundation as we make our funding decisions.

Q: Are there types of work that you do not fund in the Vision Grants program?

A: Across all Spencer grant programs, and Vision Grants are no exception, we do not fund activities like program evaluation, capital campaigns, the creation or maintenance of research centers, or scholarships. In addition, we are not looking for planning grants where the research design is already fleshed out and the team is seeking funding for pre-study activities such as the design of study instrumentation and securing IRB approval and permissions.

Deadlines

Applications Open

June 4, 2025

Intent to Apply Form Deadline

August 13, 2025, 12:00 PM Noon (Central/Chicago Time)

Full Proposal Deadline

September 17, 2025, 12:00 PM Noon (Central/Chicago Time)
