

# STEP

Sector Training Evidence-Building Project

## Request for Proposals

Accepting proposals for action-oriented research projects that build evidence on the **key elements of effective sector programs** and how they can be strengthened or scaled, and for projects that **generate evidence on the effectiveness of sector programs that have not been rigorously evaluated**.

## Overview

For many learners from low-income backgrounds, sector programs can offer a flexible, affordable, and accessible pathway to employment and increased earnings. Sector programs train job seekers for high-quality employment in specific industries and occupational clusters that demonstrate strong local demand and opportunity for career advancement. The most successful sector programs share several common features, including strong employer relationships, thoughtful recruitment and enrollment of marginalized groups to ensure program fit, and a variety of supports to help participants complete the training and secure post-program employment.

Existing evidence shows that sector programs can lead to better employment opportunities with higher earnings for individuals with low incomes. But only a few programs have been shown to do so,<sup>1</sup> and it is unclear what is driving the effectiveness of those programs. New evidence on the critical elements of sector programs, and how successful models operate and for whom, will help more sector programs effectively serve more and different types of job seekers with low incomes.

The Sector Training Evidence-Building Project (STEP) seeks to fund research projects that will produce **new evidence on the key elements of effective sector programs and generate evidence on the effectiveness of sector programs that have not been rigorously evaluated**. STEP is supported by funding from Ascendium Education Group and managed by MDRC.

### ABOUT MDRC

[MDRC](#), a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization founded in 1974, conducts rigorous studies of programs and policies that affect people with low incomes, actively disseminates lessons to policymakers and practitioners, and works directly with programs and agencies to help improve their effectiveness.

### ABOUT ASCENDIUM EDUCATION GROUP

[Ascendium Education Group](#) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization committed to helping people reach the education and career goals that matter to them. Funded by guaranty services and other operations, Ascendium Education Philanthropy invests in organizations seeking to increase the number of learners who succeed in postsecondary education and workforce training as critical pathway to upward mobility, regardless of economic background, race, rurality or history of incarceration. Ascendium's work identifies emerging innovations and reforms, validates their effectiveness, and expands proven strategies to promote large-scale, systemic change.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Fein, David and Samuel Dastrup. 2022. *Benefits that Last: Long-Term Impact and Cost-Benefit Findings for Year Up*. OPRE Report 2022-77. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; Kanengiser, Henry and Kelsey Schaberg. 2022. *Employment and Earnings Effects of the WorkAdvance Demonstration After Seven Years*. New York: MDRC; and Roder, Anne, and Mark Elliot. 2021. *Eleven Year Gains: Project QUEST's Investment Continues to Pay Dividends*. New York: Economic Mobility Corporation.

## The Opportunity

This Request for Proposals (RFP) invites partnerships between researchers and nonprofit sector program providers to apply for grants to build evidence on the key elements of sector programs and the effectiveness of sector programs that have not been rigorously evaluated. We expect to award 6-8 projects as part of this effort and expect these projects will range from \$250,000 to \$2 million and last 3-5 years.

### STEP Research Questions

STEP seeks to build new evidence on sector programs related to research questions in two main areas. Applicants are invited to propose projects with one or more research questions that fall in these areas.

1. What are the **key elements** needed to implement or expand access to effective sector programs, including the program components, target populations, or approaches to scaling or strengthening overall program models?
2. What is the effectiveness of **sector programs that (i) have not been rigorously evaluated and (ii) can expand understanding of the sector model**, including programs targeting less common occupations and industries, serving specific target populations, or adapting to serve more job seekers?

See more information on the two areas of research questions, as well as example research questions that fall within each area, [here](#).

### STEP Priorities

STEP has three priorities it is elevating across projects that are funded. Project alignment with all three of these priorities will be considered by MDRC when reviewing applications and selecting projects.

STEP Priorities		
Inform how to increase the reach of effective sector programs	Have an equity focus	Be relevant to the broader workforce development field
We are looking for projects that will build evidence on how sector programs can effectively serve more or different types of job seekers, the barriers to, and facilitators of, sector programs' expansion, or how to improve the strength of existing sector programs for key populations	A project can have an equity focus related to the diversity of the project team, the types of research and analysis methods used (e.g., participatory research methods or subgroup analyses), the research questions proposed, the sector program's target population (e.g., rural populations, populations with a history of incarceration, or other populations that have been underrepresented to date in sector training), or another dimension	By relevant, we mean that project findings—in addition to informing practice by the provider partner—will fill an evidence gap and can be used by other sector programs or the field to improve practice

## Applicant Eligibility

We invite applications from partnerships between researchers and sector program providers. Together, these partnerships should seek to build new evidence that is relevant to the provider partner and to the broader field of sector program providers, researchers, and policymakers.

Though researchers and providers *must* collaborate on the application, the lead applicant will be the researcher: an individual researcher, research organization, or research team. The lead applicant will formally submit the application and will be the party responsible for receiving and managing grant funds (if awarded), including the sub-granting of any eligible pass-through funds to the provider partner. More details on expectations for the researcher and provider can be found in the “expected commitment of selected grantees” section below.

To be eligible for funding through the project, applicants must meet the following criteria:

1. The **research team** must have one or more people who have prior experience with at least one of the project’s proposed methodologies.
2. The **sector program provider** being evaluated must:
  - Meet the project’s general definition of a sector program (see Box 1)
  - Be run by a nonprofit organization—the nonprofit organization may work with other organizations (including technical and community colleges, for-profit organizations, and public agencies) to offer some services, but these other types of organizations are not eligible to be the lead sector program provider partner for STEP
  - Target and serve people with low incomes (see Box 2)
  - Primarily serve adults (age 18 and older)
  - Focus on increasing participants’ earnings as a key program outcome
  - Have program data (at a minimum, data on enrollment and training completion) that is readily accessible

### Box 1. How does STEP define a “sector program”?

Sector programs eligible for STEP are those that:

1. Provide training for jobs in specific high-growth or high-demand industries that results in a credential, license, or certification
2. Employ thoughtful recruitment and screening processes
3. Provide support services, offer career readiness and soft skills training, and help place people in occupations for which they are trained and that could plausibly and meaningfully improve their earning potential
4. Have deep connections to employers and knowledge of the target industry

Sector programs should meet most, if not all, of these criteria.

NOTE: Pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs are not eligible for STEP.

### **Box 2. What does STEP mean by “low income”?**

STEP does not have a strict definition of “low income.” Applicants will be asked to provide the definition that makes sense for the sector program they are evaluating. The definition may be based on participants’ wages or income; a defined measure such as the Federal Poverty Level or living wage; a proxy measure such as being eligible for means-tested federal programs like SNAP or TANF or being Pell-eligible; or another measure that makes sense in the sector program’s context.

While not eligibility requirements for applicants, we are interested in and committed to investing in project teams that include:

- A diverse set of perspectives, professional experiences, and backgrounds;
- Researchers who are newer to the field—meaning researchers (people or organizations) who are newer to engaging in research on sector programs or who are from groups historically underrepresented in the social policy research community, such as researchers of color; and
- Individuals with lived experience or prior professional experience working with the populations targeted by the sector program being studied.

Similarly, while not eligibility requirements for sector programs and sector program providers, we are interested in programs and providers that are well-positioned to be supported by an evaluation. For example:

- Sector program providers that are or have been involved in other evaluation efforts, have strong relationships with the research team they are partnered with for this project, or have well-developed data infrastructure; and
- Sector programs that aim to improve employment outcomes, have been operating for at least a few years, measure and assess participants’ participation and employment-related outcomes, readily adapt to industry and employer input, or have well developed screening and supportive services offerings.

## Funding Tracks

Applicants can propose projects in one of two tracks, depending on the proposed research design. We provide anticipated funding ranges for each track below but are open to funding projects with budgets that fall below the stated lower threshold.

	TRACK A	TRACK B
<b>Anticipated funding range</b>	\$250,000 to \$750,000	\$1 to \$2 million
<b>Project length</b>	Up to 3 years	Up to 5 years
<b>Research methods</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implementation research (qualitative or quantitative)</li> <li>• Non-experimental designs (e.g. outcome studies or pre/post studies)</li> <li>• Secondary data analyses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experimental designs</li> <li>• Rigorous quasi-experimental designs (e.g. studies with a comparison group)</li> </ul> <p>(*Priority will be given to randomized controlled trials and projects that also include implementation research)</p>

## Additional Project Requirements for Track B Projects

Grantees selected for projects in Track B will be required to collect and report on data capturing participants' earnings, either at their initial job after completing the program or in the longer-term. Earnings data should come from an administrative data source (e.g., state unemployment insurance wage data), or a survey administered by the research team or an external partner (not administered by the sector program provider). Earnings data collected by the sector program provider should not be the project's main source of data on earnings.

Grantees in Track B are encouraged, but not required, to measure additional outcomes as well, particularly outcomes around job quality (e.g., benefits and hours), and non-financial indicators of potential career advancement (e.g., learned new skills on the job or promotions). Grantees are also encouraged to collect data from additional sources.

## Application and Selection Process and Stages

This section provides details on what applicants can expect as their proposed research project moves through our review process. The two main stages of the application process are 1) submission of a letter of interest (LOI) and, if invited, 2) submission of a full proposal.

In addition, there is an optional "pre-stage" in which interested but unpaired researchers and organizations running sector programs can seek a partner with whom to move forward in the process. More information on this "pre-stage" is provided below.

## Key Dates

The table below shows the key dates and steps involved in the RFP process. MDRC and Ascendium reserve the right to modify the timeline to accommodate appropriate review and consideration of submissions. Applicants will be notified of any such modifications.

<b>RFP release and promotion</b>	September 30, 2024	STEP RFP released
	October 9, 2024	Informational webinar at 2-3pm ET
<b>Optional pre-stage Applicant self-matching</b>	October 21, 2024	Deadline for unpaired sector program providers and researchers to submit project summaries for matching
	October 25, 2024	MDRC distributes project summaries that were submitted to all sector program providers and researchers that submitted one
<b>Stage 1 Letter of interest</b>	November 15, 2024	Letters of interest due by 11:59pm ET
<b>Stage 2 Full proposal</b>	Week of December 16, 2024	Finalists selected and invited to submit a full proposal
	Week of January 6, 2025	Meetings with finalists to discuss LOI and full proposal process
	February 14, 2025	Full proposals due by 11:59pm ET
<b>Notification of award</b>	Late March 2025	Selection outcome and award notifications sent
	May 2025	Projects begin

### ■ Optional Pre-Stage: Finding a Partner

If you are an interested sector program provider or researcher, but do not have a partner for a research project, MDRC will help facilitate access to interested providers and researchers through an **optional** pre-stage. Providers and researchers already partnered do not need to participate in this stage of the process.

Unpaired providers and researchers are invited to submit a short summary (2-3 paragraphs or around 500 words) of a research project idea, along with a description of their interests, their skills, and what they are looking for in a partner. Submissions must be sent to [STEP@mdrc.org](mailto:STEP@mdrc.org) **by 11:59pm ET on Monday, October 21, 2024.**

Applicants should include the following information in their summary to facilitate matching:

- Name of organization, name(s) of main contact(s), and contact information
- Summary of expertise and skills held by applicant and what they are seeking in a partner

## SECTOR TRAINING EVIDENCE-BUILDING PROJECT (STEP)

- Summary of idea for research project, what applicant expects to learn from their research project, and how the findings, lessons, and insights will advance the field

MDRC will compile all submitted project summaries and share them via email with everyone who submitted one **on Friday, October 25, 2024**. Unpaired applicants can review the summaries, identify potential partners that are best aligned with their interests and needs, and reach out to discuss partnering together to submit an LOI. It is up to those who submit summaries to identify and reach out to potential partners.

A few notes about this optional stage:

- Submissions will not be reviewed for eligibility or assessed for alignment with the project. MDRC will simply compile all submissions and distribute them to submitters.
- Decisions about who to partner with and whether to submit an LOI are up to the sector program providers and researchers who participate in this stage.
- Ideas submitted during the matching stage are not binding—unpaired applicants can refine or change their ideas once paired.
- Participation in this stage does not guarantee a match.
- Participation in this stage will not improve or reduce chances of invitation to submit a full proposal.

### ■ Stage 1: Letter of Interest (LOI)

All applicants must complete a letter of interest (LOI), regardless of whether they participated in the optional pre-stage. The LOI will establish applicants' eligibility for STEP and request information about their proposed research project, including the sector program provider and the sector program being studied, the composition of the research team, and the project's alignment with STEP's priorities and goals.

The selection team will review your LOI and work with Ascendium to determine if the project meets the eligibility criteria and is aligned with STEP's goals, research questions, and priorities. Applicants must submit their LOI **by 11:59pm ET on Friday, November 15, 2024**.

The LOI can be accessed and completed [here](#).

#### ***What is included in the LOI***

The full set of questions you will be asked as part of the LOI can be found [here](#).

When filling out the LOI, you will also be asked to submit an example of prior work one of your team members has done that used your proposed methodologies. It does not need to be a published memo, report, or journal article. You will also be invited to submit an optional letter of commitment from the sector program provider to the research team. Both must be emailed to [STEP@mdrc.org](mailto:STEP@mdrc.org) **by 11:59pm ET on Friday, November 15, 2024**.



**LOI scoring and selection**

For projects that are determined to be eligible, LOIs will be scored using a rubric with the following categories:

1. Research team experience, including experience designing and implementing proposed methodologies and knowledge of or experience with research on workforce development, training programs, or programs targeting people with low incomes.
2. Organization and sector program readiness for evaluation, based on one or more of these factors:
  - a. For organizations operating sector programs: evaluation experience, data infrastructure, or related factors.
  - b. For sector programs proposed for evaluation: time in operation, participation and employment outcomes, how the program aims to improve employment outcomes, responsiveness to employer or labor market changes, or related factors.
3. Strength of research design, assessed on likelihood the proposed research design will be feasible to implement and answer the proposed research questions.
4. Overall fit with STEP priorities, assessed on strength of alignment with project priorities, including having an equity focus, informing how to increase the reach of sector programs, and producing relevant findings.

Results of the rubric scoring will be taken into consideration by MDRC and Ascendium in the selection of projects. However, scores and rankings are not binding and are only one element that will be used in the decision-making process. MDRC and Ascendium reserve the right to evaluate LOIs in the context of the overall applicant pool by selecting a diverse group of projects that will collectively contribute to the field.

**Expected partner roles at LOI stage**

Research team	Sector program provider
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete and submit LOI (as lead applicant)</li> <li>• Submit example of prior work using your proposed methodologies done by one or more of your team members</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide support in completing and reviewing LOI</li> <li>• Optionally, submit letter of commitment to research team along with LOI</li> </ul>

**■ Stage 2: Full Proposal**

Based on the LOI scoring and selection process, the MDRC and Ascendium selection team will invite applicants whose projects most align with STEP’s goals to submit full proposals. MDRC will also schedule meetings with invited applicants. During this meeting, MDRC will answer any questions you have about the full proposal stage. MDRC may also ask questions or make specific requests related to your LOI and full proposal. Individuals from both the research team and the organization running the sector program being evaluated should attend the meeting.

## SECTOR TRAINING EVIDENCE-BUILDING PROJECT (STEP)

Invited applicants will be asked to provide more detailed information on their projects in their proposals and to submit a project budget, along with bios and resumes for key team members. More information will be shared with applicants who are invited to submit full proposals.

Full proposals must be sent to [STEP@mdrc.org](mailto:STEP@mdrc.org) by **11:59pm ET on Friday, February 14, 2025**.

### ***Expected partner roles at full proposal stage***

Research team	Sector program provider
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Attend meeting with MDRC to discuss full proposal stage</li></ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Draft and submit full proposal (as lead applicant)</li><li>• Complete and submit budget template and justification</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provide support in completing and reviewing full proposal</li><li>• Submit letter of commitment to research team (if not submitted during LOI stage)</li></ul>

### **■ Notification of Award**

Based on the full proposal, the MDRC and Ascendium selection team will select grantees to participate in STEP. MDRC will notify applicants whether or not their proposal was selected for STEP in late **March 2025**. MDRC will then work with each selected grantee to develop a memorandum of understanding to take effect in **May 2025**.

## Budget Guidance

Projects can be submitted in one of two tracks, with differing anticipated budget ranges and project lengths:

TRACK A	TRACK B
Small grants, anticipated range of \$250,000 to \$750,000 for up to 3 years	Large grants, anticipated range of \$1 to \$2 million for up to 5 years

Projects may not exceed the upper end of the budget threshold ranges. We are open to funding projects with budgets that fall below the lower end of the budget threshold ranges for each track.

During the LOI stage, applicants will be asked to provide an estimate of the total project budget, along with an estimate of how much will go to the research team and how much to the sector program provider.

Applicants invited to submit full proposals will be asked to provide more detailed budgets along with budget narratives with cost details. The MDRC review team may request reasonable modifications to the budget between the submission of the LOI and the full proposal.

Project budgets can include direct and indirect costs for the duration of the grant and together should not exceed the maximum grant amounts outlined above. Project funds may be used to support a range of research activities, including:

- Project management and partnership activities necessary for project success

## SECTOR TRAINING EVIDENCE-BUILDING PROJECT (STEP)

- Program implementation costs related to the research (e.g., sample recruitment, data collection and sharing)
- Research implementation
  - Research planning (e.g., writing an analysis plan for pre-registration)
  - Data collection (including quantitative and qualitative data)
  - Data analysis
- Public deliverables (e.g., conference presentations, working papers, briefs, or reports)
- Travel (with summary of the purpose and justification)

## Expected Commitment of Selected Grantees

Selected grantees will be expected to complete the activities below as part of their projects. This information can be used for budget planning. More information on these activities will be provided to selected grantees.

Grantees	Activity	Research team	Sector program provider
All	Enter into a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with MDRC	Lead	N/A
All	Enter into partnership agreement, data sharing agreement, or memorandum of understanding with partner	Partner	Partner
All	Submit annual progress reports to MDRC	Lead	Contributor
All	Attend progress check-ins with MDRC two times per year	Participant	Participant
All	Participate in a community of practice with MDRC and other grantees to advance cross-project learning and successes  (*Applicants should anticipate participating in one virtual meeting per year, for a total of 3-4 meetings during the grant)	Participant	Participant
All	Disseminate project findings publicly—this can be through a written document (a brief or report) or through another means (like a conference presentation or video)	Lead	Contributor or reviewer
Track B only	Write and publicly register a project pre-analysis plan	Lead	Contributor or reviewer