Sector Training Evidence-Building Project

Frequently Asked Questions

This document provides answers to questions received during the STEP webinar held on October 11, 2024, as well as questions submitted to STEP@mdrc.org.

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BUILDING KNOWLEDGE TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

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Finding a partner

1. **If we submit our project summary for your help with finding a research partner by the October 21st deadline, will we be tied to using a research partner that your team suggests? Is it okay for us to pursue both of those avenues, and then determine which of the partners we find makes the most sense?**

   Ideas submitted by researchers or nonprofit sector program providers for the optional pre-stage are not binding — submitters can refine or change their ideas following submission. Additionally, upon review of submissions, submitters can decide not to contact anyone on the list to inquire about partnership; they may decide to partner with an entity not on the list that they have identified independently.

2. **How can the nonprofit find a researcher/team to partner with and submit the applicant for us?**

   A nonprofit can find partners independently, through their own networks.

Applying to STEP

3. **Are researchers or sector program providers limited in the number of applications they can submit — both overall or by track?**

   No, there is no limit on the number of submissions. Applicants — the researcher/research team and the sector program provider — are able to submit or be included in multiple submissions, both within and across tracks.

4. **What happens if you originally apply for one track, but it is later identified that the other track is a better fit for your project?**

   In the LOI survey, applicants should select the track they believe best fits their project. MDRC will advise applicants if we think the project fits better in the other track as part of the proposal stage (if the applicant is selected for this stage).

5. **How do you define key staff for the research team?**

   STEP does not have specific requirements for key staff for the research team. Key staff will depend on the project and may include a project director, project manager, principal investigator, implementation or impact lead, or other staff that are critical to the successful implementation of the research project.

Eligibility

6. **Are there restrictions on the geographic regions where researchers/research teams or sector program providers must be located?**

   Eligible partnerships (researcher and nonprofit sector training program) must be based and operate in the United States.

7. Does the lead applicant have to be the research partner?

Yes, the lead applicant must be a researcher, not the sector program provider.

8. Are replication trials — for example, evaluations of programs that have already been evaluated in one RCT but are in need of a replication trial in another site to see if the effects can be reproduced — eligible for STEP?

Yes, replication trials are eligible for STEP. One of STEP's research questions is around understanding the effectiveness of proven models in different contexts or with key target populations, which this type of project could fall under.

9. Are entirely retrospective studies — meaning studies of a program that is not currently running — eligible for STEP?

A study of a program that is no longer in operation is unlikely to be funded. That said, retrospective studies are eligible for STEP — for example, studies doing secondary data analysis only. These projects should apply under Track A. We encourage applicants that are proposing retrospective studies to ensure the project aligns with STEP's priorities.

10. Are sector programs that have been involved in previous evaluations — including randomized controlled trials — eligible for STEP?

Yes, sector programs that have been previously evaluated are eligible for STEP. We ask that applicants review the RFP for guidance on any new research that may be proposed, to ensure alignment with STEP's priorities and goals.

One of STEP's main research questions is around building evidence on the key elements of effective sector programs. Projects should be designed to build new evidence that is relevant to the provider partner and to the broader field of sector program providers, researchers, and policymakers.

11. Is a public-private/nonprofit partnership eligible for STEP?

STEP applicants must consist of a lead researcher (public or private), either an individual or an organization, paired with a sector program provider, which must be a nonprofit organization, that generally meets the eligibility of a sector program (see RFP, page 4).

12. When you say nonprofit providers, does that include community colleges and universities (or their associated foundations)? Or are you referring to community-based organizations? Is, for example, a university that offers a sector program (separate from degree programs) in a particular industry eligible for STEP?

We are referring to community-based organizations. Community colleges and their associated foundations, college systems, and universities are not eligible to be the main sector program provider in the STEP partnership.

A community-based sector program provider may work with other organizations (of any type, including community colleges and universities) to offer some services, including training.

13. **With the understanding that nonprofit university systems are ineligible, are nonprofit service providers that are funded by university research foundations eligible for STEP?**

    Yes, a nonprofit sector program provider that meets STEP eligibility and receives funding from a university research foundation is eligible for STEP.

14. **Are intermediaries eligible to serve as sector program providers in STEP?**

    Yes, intermediaries — meaning national organizations that manage or oversee numerous local sites implementing sector programs with the same model — that partner with a few of their local affiliates are eligible for STEP. This assumes the local affiliates are implementing sector programs aligned with STEP's definition.

15. **Can a research team partner with multiple nonprofits that are delivering services regionally through a single state-wide program?**

    Yes, a research team can partner with multiple nonprofits that are delivering services through a state-wide program. The relationship between the various organizations in the partnership should be described in the LOI.

16. **If a nonprofit sector program provider partners with a workforce development board to implement sector-focused programs that are funded (in part) by the WDB, are they eligible for STEP?**

    If the nonprofit meets the definition of a nonprofit sector program provider (see RFP, page 4), they are eligible to apply for STEP (with a research partner). It does not matter where a nonprofit service provider gets its funding.

17. **The RFP states that the sector program provider being evaluated must "primarily serve adults (age 18 and older)." Are providers that serve a combination of adults and others eligible? If so, is there an expectation for the proportion of program participants who are adults?**

    STEP research project must focus on adults aged 18-years of age and older. A sector program would still be eligible if it also targets people who are younger than 18, but the focus of the research project for STEP should be on adults in the program, and adults should be a substantial and not a niche population served by the provider.

18. **Can you provide more context for the decision to exclude pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs from STEP eligibility?**

    Apprenticeships are a specific workforce training model with a specific set of requirements that is not the focus of this initiative. Ascendium is committed to and will continue to invest in apprenticeship efforts, but not through STEP.

19. **Can the nonprofit sector program provider use their internal researcher or research team? Can the research team be from the sector program provider organization?**

    No, the researcher or research team must be external to the nonprofit sector program provider. Internal research teams can support the project but are not eligible to be the lead applicant or researcher.

20. Does the research partner need to be a 501c3?

No, the 501c3 requirement only applies to the sector program provider, not the researcher.

21. Is a public university research team that has a 501c3 fiscal agent eligible? Is there an expectation that researchers are currently affiliated with an institution of higher education?

Yes, a research team from a public university is eligible. There are, however, no expectations about the affiliation of researchers or a requirement that researchers be affiliated with institutions of higher education.

Research methods and requirements

22. If a project will use an RCT design to test service delivery strategies within a program, does the primary outcome have to be post-program earnings or is an interim outcome allowed?

Projects using a randomized controlled trial (RCT) design will be in Track B and are required to look at post-program earnings as an outcome. Projects may also look at other outcomes, including interim outcomes such as training completion. Selected projects will be asked to write and post pre-analysis plans that document decisions about the project, including the primary outcomes.

23. For a randomized study (or any other study), is there a minimum required sample size or program scope? Are there any requirements other than methodology we should keep in mind when preparing an LOI?

STEP does not have a minimum sample size for projects in either track. It is up the applicant to propose sample sizes that are feasible to attain and sufficient to generate reliable evidence on the research questions proposed.

STEP also does not have any requirements for the scope of projects in either track. We ask that applicants propose a scope that will allow them to generate evidence and answer the proposed research questions.

24. For Track B projects using an RCT design, must the earnings impacts for the full study sample be measured and the findings published within the five-year timeframe? Or, if the expected timeframe for the project exceeds five years, can a project measure interim outcomes during the five years and earnings after this point?

Track B projects using an RCT design must measure earnings impacts. This can be earnings at initial job placement post-training or earnings longer-term.

Given that it can take considerable time for earnings outcomes to be available, we are open to projects that last beyond the five-year timeframe, as well as projects that are only able to measure short-term earnings as part of STEP. Applicants are encouraged to discuss the timeline for their projects — including the expected enrollment, follow-up, data collection, and reporting periods — in their submissions.

25. Can outcomes for Track A projects focus on certification, certification paths, or a college degree intended to facilitate future employment? Or must outcomes for Track A projects focus on employment outcomes?

There are no requirements on outcomes for Track A projects. Applicants are encouraged, however, to look at earnings as one of the (either post-training or longer-term) outcomes examined. Applicants should also highlight the outcomes that will be most relevant to their work and will answer their proposed research questions.

26. For a comprehensive study that includes an RCT design paired with implementation research, would we apply for Track B to fund the RCT and tTack A to fund the connected implementation research?

No. This type of comprehensive study would be supported by Track B funding alone. As noted on page 6 of RFP, for Track B projects, priority will be given to studies that center RCT designs *and* that also include implementation research.

Project funding, budgets, and allowable expenses

27. Are there any restrictions on indirect costs, overhead rates, or fees?

No, there are no restrictions or caps on indirect costs, overhead rates, or fees. The degree to which budgets are allocated to a project's direct versus indirect expenses will be taken into consideration in deciding which projects to ultimately fund. As a potentially helpful point of reference, Ascendium's guidelines specify an indirect rate of up to 15 percent.

28. In the webinar it was stated that most of funds should go to the researcher. What is the allowable share of funds that can be used to support the sector program provider?

We are not identifying a specific proportion of funding that can be used to support the sector program provider. In the LOI, applicants should provide budget estimates that break down costs for the researcher separate from the sector program provider. Funding for the sector program provider should be sufficient to implement the activities required to fulfill the scope of the STEP research project. See question 28 for more information on budget requirements at the LOI and full proposal stages.

29. What costs are allowed to be allocated to the sector program provider to support program staff associated with the research or the program itself? Can resources be provided to sector program providers to offer the services that are being evaluated or are the resources only for evaluation-related support activities? Does the grant support staff salaries outside of the researcher, including administrative support?

Project funds may be used to support a range of research activities, including:

- Project management and partnership activities necessary for project success
- Program implementation costs related to the research (e.g., sample recruitment, data collection and sharing, etc.)
- 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)

Project funds may be used to support staff salaries outside of the researcher if the staff are involved in performing research-related activities. Because STEP is funding research projects, project funds may not be used to cover the costs of implementing direct services to participants, including regular ongoing program expenses.

30. Can STEP award funds be used for respondent payments (e.g., incentives for completing surveys or other data collection activities)?

Yes, project budgets can include costs related to respondent incentive payments.

31. If a program is funded either annually or uses blended funding, and does not think it can guarantee a certain number of people will be served or a certain set of services will be offered over the three- to five-year STEP period, how should this be discussed in the application?

We are aware that funding changes can affect programs and suggest that applicants describe what they think will happen in the years covered by their proposed STEP project. If the project is selected and the program encounters an unexpected change, the sector program provider can work with their research partner and MDRC to make adjustments to their budget.

32. What is the total amount you anticipate funding across all STEP grantees?

We anticipate funding six to eight projects, with estimated project budgets between $250,000 and $2 million each.

33. Are the funding ranges provided in the RFP total amounts or yearly amounts? Are they the total amount for both partners?

The ranges are the amounts of funding, for both partners, for the duration of the proposed research project.

34. Is there a preferred budget shell? Is the budget submitted for the project overall or for each partner?

For the LOI, applicants are asked to provide an estimate of the overall budget amount and a breakdown of how much will go to the researcher/research team and how much will go to the sector program provider. Applicants that are invited to submit full proposals will be given a budget template to complete, which will require more detailed information about project costs, both overall and for each partner.

35. Can pass-through funding be shared with multiple organizations that are delivering the program, including 501c4s or other types of organizations, to offset project costs?

Yes, pass-through funding can be shared with multiple organizations, as long as the funding is for study-related activities. However, the main sector program provider in the STEP partnership must be a 501c3 organization. There are no requirements for the organizational type of program partners of the 501c3.

36. Is it acceptable to leverage other funding sources in addition to STEP funding to support Track A or B research activities?

Yes, applicants are allowed to blend STEP funding with additional funding secured by the researcher or sector program provider. However, STEP will only fund a project that has already secured the additional funding.

37. What will the eventual contract types/structure be? Will these be professional services agreements, and will these be T&M, FFP, or other format?

Agreements between selected applicants and MDRC will be structured as fixed-price contracts.

Other

38. Can you confirm MDRC is not playing the role of the researcher in STEP? What role is MDRC playing?

MDRC will not participate as a researcher in any STEP project. MDRC is managing and facilitating the implementation of STEP, beginning with the review of LOIs and proposals, to dispersing grant funds. MDRC will also lead the community of practice among selected grantees.

39. Can you provide a couple examples of sector programs and the nonprofit organizations that provide them?

We encourage applicants to review the RFP to see STEP's definition of sector programs and the examples of prior evaluations of sector programs (shown in the footnote on page 2).

40. Is there any preference for sector programs to be industry-focused vs. addressing a single occupation? Are sector programs that train for a single occupation, rather than a broad range of occupations or industries eligible? Can a program target multiple occupations within a single industry or across industries in the same study?

Eligible sector programs may target a single occupation, multiple occupations, an industry overall, or multiple industries. We are interested in funding research on sector programs that have deep connections to employers and a knowledge of the industries and occupations they target.

41. Can you give additional examples of an equity focus?

Equity is a priority of STEP. 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 analysis), 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.

42. I wonder if funding multiple projects for building a strong evidence base means that part of the evaluation criteria will be how it matches with either previously funded projects or projects to be funded as part of this cycle?

The evaluation criteria will consist of 1) research team experience, 2) sector program provider and sector program readiness for evaluation, 3) strength of research design, and 4) overall fit with STEP priorities. See page 9 of the RFP for more information about each criterion. Projects will be evaluated individually as well as in the context of the overall applicant pool, with the goal of funding a diverse group of projects that will collectively contribute to the field. Applications are invited from those who have and those who have not received prior funding.

43. When discussing partnerships, how important is that weighted in assessing the proposal?

At the LOI stage, we will be ensuring that the researcher/research team and sector program provider have both agreed to enter into a partnership if selected for STEP. More information on the partnership will be requested from applicants who are invited to submit full proposals.