

REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS

Causal Research to Improve Outcomes for Part-Time Students



**HIGHER
EDUCATION**





Arnold Ventures Overview

Arnold Ventures (AV) is a philanthropy dedicated to improving the lives of Americans through evidence-based policy solutions that maximize opportunity and minimize injustice. We focus on improving systems where outcomes are falling short, incentives are misaligned, and the time is right for change. To advance this mission, we invest in rigorous research to strengthen the evidence base on what works to improve outcomes for individuals, families, and communities, and to inform policy and practice at scale.

AV's Higher Education team seeks to fund rigorous, causal research on programs, policies, and practices that improve student outcomes and deliver stronger returns on investment for students and taxpayers. Our work focuses on strengthening the evidence base on effective student success models and aligning policy and funding incentives to support their adoption and scale.

The Opportunity

Students who enroll part-time represent a substantial share of the undergraduate population, yet their outcomes lag far behind those of full-time students. Students who begin college part-time persist and complete credentials at much lower rates and are disproportionately likely to be working adults, student parents, caregivers, older learners, and students from historically underserved backgrounds.

Enrollment intensity is fluid, but for many students, part-time enrollment reflects structural constraints related to work, caregiving, finances, and institutional design rather than a short-term choice. As a result, a substantial share of students cannot enroll full-time, even when doing so would improve their likelihood of completion.

Over the past decade, rigorous evidence has demonstrated that comprehensive, structured support models — most notably [CUNY's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs \(ASAP\)](#) — can significantly improve completion rates for full-time community college students. However, these models rely heavily on full-time enrollment and therefore do not reach students who face structural constraints.

A critical gap remains in the evidence base on how to design and scale similarly effective approaches for students who cannot attend full-time. Despite the scale and importance of this population, the evidence on what works to meaningfully improve completion and labor market outcomes remains limited. Colleges, systems, and policymakers are experimenting with a range of strategies, but lack rigorous evidence to guide decisions about which approaches should be scaled, institutionalized, or supported through policy and funding reforms.

Purpose of the RFP

This RFP seeks to fund rigorous causal research that builds the evidence base on effective programs and policies for part-time students and identifies scalable, cost-effective approaches to improve completion and labor market outcomes. Findings should generate actionable insights to inform institutional practice, system-level decision making, and state policy, with the goal of improving outcomes and maximizing return on investment for students and taxpayers.

POPULATION OF INTEREST

Because enrollment intensity is fluid, proposals do not need to limit eligibility to students who are enrolled part-time at baseline. Instead, studies should focus on interventions that primarily serve or are expected to meaningfully impact students who are more likely to enroll part-time, including:

- Adult learners (age 25+)
- Student parents and caregivers
- Working adults

Interventions may serve mixed-enrollment populations, so long as the proposed study is clearly designed to improve outcomes for these populations.



RESEARCH PRIORITIES AND ILLUSTRATIVE QUESTIONS



This RFP will fund studies that estimate the causal impacts of programs, policies, or practices on postsecondary and labor market outcomes. While AV is open to a range of topics, we prioritize the following areas and provide examples and illustrative questions to guide proposals.

Applicants are not expected to address all questions, and proposals may focus on related topics that align with the goals of this RFP.

INSTITUTIONAL AND PROGRAMMATIC STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT COMPLETION

We are interested in institutional practices and program designs that reduce structural barriers and enable steady progress toward completion for students balancing competing demands.

Examples may include, but are not limited to:

- Accelerated or compressed course formats (e.g., 7-8 week terms)
- Block or predictable scheduling models that enable students to balance work and coursework
- Bundled or structured support models adapted for students attending less than full-time
- Supports that directly reduce time and caregiving constraints, such as access to childcare, transportation, or other enabling services

Illustrative questions include:

- Which specific instructional, scheduling, program design, or advising strategies — or combinations of these strategies — produce the largest improvements in persistence and credential completion for students who are more likely to enroll part-time?
- How do impacts vary across institutional contexts and key student subgroups, and what implications do these differences have for targeting, scalability, and policy design?
- To what extent are observed impacts driven by specific program components, the bundling of multiple supports, or broader institutional reforms and implementation conditions?
- What are the costs of these approaches relative to their impacts, and which models appear most cost-effective and scalable?

CAREER ALIGNMENT, EMPLOYER PARTNERSHIPS, AND WORKFORCE-CONNECTED PATHWAYS

We are interested in interventions that strengthen the connection between postsecondary education and labor market outcomes for students who must balance education with work and other responsibilities.

Examples may include, but are not limited to:

- Employer-connected degree or upskilling programs that integrate work and academic progression
- Career-aligned advising models that connect program selection to labor market outcomes
- Structured academic and career pathways that support steady progression for working learners

Illustrative questions include:

- How do employer-connected programs, career-aligned advising models, or workforce-integrated pathways affect credential completion and labor market outcomes?
- Which features of employer or workforce partnerships (e.g., predictable scheduling, cohort models, tuition support, paid work-based learning) are most effective for enabling degree completion?
- How do career-aligned advising and structured pathways influence persistence, completion, and postsecondary transitions?



POLICY AND SYSTEMS-LEVEL APPROACHES

We are interested in reforms that operate at the system, state, or interagency level and can be implemented or scaled through policy.

Examples may include, but are not limited to:

- State or system-level financial aid reforms that better support part-time enrollment (e.g., flexible aid structures, year-round aid, banded tuition models, credit for prior learning / competency-based models)
- Policies or interventions that increase access to public benefits (e.g., SNAP, childcare subsidies) through streamlined eligibility, data-sharing, or embedded application support
- System-level reforms to course availability and scheduling that reduce structural barriers to completion
- Funding models that reward educational institutions based on students' steady progression

Illustrative questions include:

- How do specific state or system-level policy changes, such as financial aid design or course scheduling requirements, affect persistence and credential completion for students who enroll part-time?
- What is the causal impact of interventions that increase take-up of existing public benefits (e.g., SNAP, childcare subsidies), including approaches such as streamlined eligibility, data-sharing, or embedded application support?
- Which policy design features (e.g., eligibility criteria, benefit levels, delivery mechanisms) most influence effectiveness, scalability, and cost-effectiveness of these interventions?

OUTCOMES OF INTEREST

Primary outcomes should focus on educational completion, such as:

- Degree attainment (e.g., associate or bachelor's degree)
- Program completion (e.g., completion of a defined course of study or pathway, including non-degree programs where applicable)

Measures of progress toward completion, such as credit accumulation or term-to-term persistence, may be included as intermediate outcomes but should not serve as the sole or primary outcomes of the proposed study.

Secondary outcomes may include:

- Employment, earnings, or other labor market outcomes
- Program or institution-level outcomes relevant to scalability or cost-effectiveness

Where feasible, proposals should measure outcomes over a sufficiently long follow-up period to assess whether initial impacts persist.

Study Design and Eligibility

This RFP will support rigorous causal research only. Eligible designs include:

- Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs)
- Quasi-Experimental Designs (QEDs) with credible identification strategies, such as:
 - › Difference-in-differences
 - › Regression discontinuity
 - › Instrumental variables
 - › Natural experiments





Design requirements:

- Proposals must be capable of estimating causal effects.
- Studies that rely primarily on matching or selection on observables as their identification strategy are not eligible.
- Applicants should clearly articulate the intervention, comparison condition, outcomes, identification strategy, and threats to validity.

Both student-level and program-, institution-, or policy-level interventions will be considered.

DATA, PARTNERSHIPS, AND FEASIBILITY

AV encourages (but does not require):

- Use of high-quality administrative data, including postsecondary records and, where feasible, workforce or earnings data (e.g., UI wage records).
- Partnerships between academic researchers, research organizations, and evaluators working in close collaboration with institutions, systems, or state agencies.

Strong proposals will demonstrate:

- Clear plans to secure data access and data-sharing agreements
- A realistic timeline and evidence of implementation feasibility
- Adequate statistical power to detect policy-relevant effects

Selection Criteria

Proposals will be evaluated based on two primary criteria:

1. Policy Relevance

a. Competitive proposals will:

- i.** Address a clear policy or institutional decision problem
- ii.** Identify the decision makers who would use the evidence
- iii.** Articulate how findings could inform scaling, funding, or policy design
- iv.** Situate the study within the existing evidence base and explain its contribution

2. Study Design and Rigor

a. Competitive proposals will:

- i.** Present a well-specified and credible causal design
- ii.** Clearly describe the intervention, outcomes, and timeline
- iii.** Demonstrate feasibility and appropriate sample size
- iv.** Commit to research transparency and integrity (e.g., pre-registration, pre-analysis plans)

b. Additional considerations may include:

- i.** Cost and potential ROI (encouraged, not required)
- ii.** Subgroup analyses, where feasible (encouraged, not required)

Funding Parameters

- AV does not expect to fund intervention delivery costs under this RFP.
- Budgets should be appropriate to the scope, design, and timeline of the proposed study.



Application Process and Timeline



This RFP will follow a two-stage application process.

STAGE OF APPLICATION PROCESS	DATE
Deadline to receive letters of interest (LOI)	June 14, 2026
Notification of invitation to submit a full proposal	July 2, 2026
Deadline for invited applicants to submit a full proposal	August 16, 2026
Notification of funding decisions	December 31, 2026

How to Apply

Applicants must submit an LOI via email to PTstudentsuccessRFP@arnoldventures.org by June 14, 2026. Applicants invited to submit a full proposal will receive additional instructions. **Applicants must use the LOI template provided [here](#).**

In addition to the LOI, please also share the following (this will not count towards the LOI page limit):

- **Study team overview:** Applicants should outline the project team in 1-2 pages, including an overview of roles and responsibilities for key project members.
- **Budget request summary:** Applicants should specify the amount of funding requested from AV, reflecting the project timeline and the study scope, and include an approximate project budget that is consistent with AV's [cost policy](#). While a formal budget is not required at the LOI stage, applicants should discuss the anticipated drivers of project costs (e.g., personnel time, data acquisition, travel, and administrative costs).

Frequently Asked Questions

The Education team will oversee this RFP. If you have any questions, you are welcome to email Jessica Taketa at jtaketa@arnoldventures.org with any questions or [book](#) a time to chat with her.

- **Do proposed interventions need to serve only part-time students?**
 - › No. Interventions may serve mixed-enrollment populations, but proposals should clearly demonstrate how the study is designed to improve outcomes for students who are more likely to enroll part-time.
- **Can we submit more than one proposal?**
 - › Yes, applicants may submit multiple proposals, provided each addresses a distinct research question or intervention.
- **Will AV fund program implementation or service delivery costs?**
 - › No. AV does not expect to fund intervention delivery costs under this RFP. Funding should primarily support research-related activities.
- **Are descriptive or correlational studies eligible?**
 - › No. This RFP is limited to causal research. Studies that rely primarily on descriptive analysis or selection on observables will not be considered.



- **Are partnerships with institutions or state agencies required?**

- › Partnerships are not required but are strongly encouraged. Competitive proposals will demonstrate access to relevant data and a clear plan for implementation.

- **Is there a maximum budget?**

- › There is no set maximum budget. Requested funding should be well-justified and aligned with the scope, design, and timeline of the proposed project. Budgets will be assessed based on overall value and feasibility.

- **Are for-profit institutions eligible to apply?**

- › Yes. For-profit institutions are eligible to apply, though reporting requirements may differ if a grant is awarded.

[Arnold Ventures](#) is a philanthropy that supports research to understand the root causes of America's most persistent and pressing problems, as well as evidence-based solutions to address them. By focusing on systemic change and bipartisan policy reforms, AV works to improve the lives of American families, strengthen communities, and promote economic opportunity.