



# NEW ENGLAND BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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## REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS

### New England Prison Education Collaborative (NEPEC) Accelerator Grants

Year 1 (2025)

#### Overview

The New England Prison Education Collaborative (NEPEC), with support from Ascendium Education Group, is pleased to release this Request for Proposals (RFP) for the inaugural round of NEPEC Accelerator Grants. In Year 1, NEPEC is prepared to award five Accelerator Grants to five eligible postsecondary institutions located across the New England states of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont.

Each awardee will be working to increase Pell-eligible postsecondary programming within the state where they are located. This could include institutions with active Pell-eligible Prison Education Programs (PEPs) but also those at various stages in the development of such programs. Taken together, the five projects funded by these five inaugural Accelerator Grants will meaningfully advance NEPEC's mission to help actualize a future where every incarcerated person in New England has access to high-quality, workforce-aligned, equitable postsecondary opportunities with a diverse range of educational pathways. At the core of each funded project will be an unshakable commitment to holistic student support for learners at every step along the intake-to-reentry continuum.

#### Definitional Note:

There are a variety of educational programs that postsecondary institutions offer to students who are incarcerated. This RFP will use the following definitions of terms:

- **Prison Education Programs (PEPs)** are defined in statute; specifically, Title 34 CFR Part 668 Subpart P.
  - PEPs must go through a specific multi-step approval process, culminating in the United States Department of Education updating the educational institution's Program Participation Agreement. After the entire process is complete, a program can operate as a PEP and can administer Pell to eligible students who are incarcerated.
- **Emerging PEPs** are programs that are somewhere on the path to PEP approval or programs that have a concrete plan to begin that path.

- Programs that are designated as Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites are a special subtype of emerging PEPs.
- **Higher Education in Prison (HEP)** is traditionally used as an umbrella term to refer to postsecondary programming within carceral facilities.
  - This term encompasses many different higher education projects that may or may not be credit bearing. Many of these programs use philanthropic, institutional, or governmental funds to offer courses.
    - For the purposes of this RFP, HEPs do *not* administer federal financial aid to students enrolled in their programs.

***To be considered, applications for the first round of Accelerator Grants must fall under at least one of the following eligible activities:***

- A New England postsecondary institution seeking support for an **emerging PEP** that will meet an established need within the ecosystem for postsecondary programming in prison in its state.
- A New England postsecondary institution seeking support to expand an existing **PEP** with a track record of initial success to a new facility to meet an established need within the ecosystem for postsecondary programming in prison in its state.
- A New England postsecondary institution that is seeking support for an **emerging PEP** or the expansion of an existing **PEP** that relies on—or will rely on—partnership with one or more additional postsecondary institutions. This collaborative model for programming will be carried out to meet an established need within the ecosystem for postsecondary programming in prison in the applying institution's state.
- A New England postsecondary institution seeking to transform a privately funded **higher education in prison (HEP) program** into a **PEP** by completing the multi-phase federal approval process.
- A New England postsecondary institution with an **emerging PEP** or an existing **PEP** that is seeking support for implementing a comprehensive reentry strategy—or meaningfully expanding an existing one.

No institution will be awarded more than one Year 1 Accelerator Grant.

An RFP for future rounds of Accelerator Grant funding will be released in the same general time frame in 2026 and 2027. Receiving an award in Year 1 will not preclude an institution from applying for funding in a subsequent award cycle. The NEPEC Higher Education Working Group, whose efforts and expertise shape this Year 1 RFP and what the inaugural round of Accelerator Grants incentivizes, is interested in supporting the most impactful work being done in the region and the group's members acknowledge the real need for resources to continue momentum beyond Year 1.

## **Grant Amount**

Applicants will be asked to submit proposals for funding in the amount of \$100,000 for use over the course of 12 months, beginning in August 2025. Proposals should demonstrate how the funds will markedly accelerate the applying institution's progress towards one of the five activities NEPEC is incentivizing with this inaugural round of Accelerator Grants.

## **Eligibility**

Any public or private-not-for-profit (independent) postsecondary institution within New England that is seeking to carry out one of the five activities listed in the "Overview" section above is eligible to apply for a Year 1 NEPEC Accelerator Grant. Institutions will be asked as part of their proposal, to identify where in the Prison Education Program approval process the postsecondary program at the center of their project is (including if the program has not yet initiated the first step in that process).

## **Funding Requirements**

Institutions receiving Accelerator Grant funding will be required to:

- Participate in an August 2025 session with fellow awardees to collaboratively develop meaningful metrics for assessing the success of their project.
- Report on project progress and spending-to-date in an interim and final report due to the NEPEC Team on December 31, 2025 and September 30, 2026, respectively.
- Send a representative to the February 2026 NEPEC Summit where the event program will feature a panel that will spotlight each of the five Year 1 Accelerator Grant awardees and the projects being carried out with the support of these funds to an audience of stakeholders from across the region. Awardee travel and lodging will be covered for this occasion.
- Certify, in the grant agreement, that they have the financial capability to demonstrate that the grant funds allocated to them have been spent on the approved grant-funded project and tracked by budget category.

## **Required Application Materials**

- **Proposal Form:** The applying institution must complete all sections of the proposal form linked [here](#).
- **Project Budget Spreadsheet:** The applying institution must download the template linked [here](#) and create a project budget spreadsheet that details its proposed allocation of the Accelerator Grant funds across the approved spending categories, for which definitions are included in Tab 2 of the template.
  - The applying institution will be asked to submit a "Budget Narrative" within the proposal form.

- **Letter of Institutional Support:** The applying institution must include a letter from its president or an authorized institutional official, to ensure that what is proposed is in alignment with strategic priorities for the institution.
- **Letter of Correctional Support:** The applying institution must include a letter from its state's Department of Corrections (DOC) expressing support for the proposed project.<sup>1</sup>

### **Submission Instructions**

A complete application will consist of 1) a proposal form submitted via Microsoft Forms; 2) a project budget spreadsheet; 3) a letter of institutional support; and 4) a letter of correctional support. Items 2, 3, and 4 will be submitted via email to [nepec@nebhe.org](mailto:nepec@nebhe.org). Only complete applications will advance to the stage of substantive review. Where relevant, supplemental documents can be included as additional attachments to the institution's emailed submission of required items 2, 3, and 4.

***All materials must be submitted by 5 P.M. EDT on June 6, 2025.***

### **Disbursement of Funds**

Awardees will be notified by email by 5 P.M. EDT on July 14, 2025. This will be done through outreach to the project lead for the applying institution, as identified by applicants through the proposal form. Notification will include a grant agreement signed by the President and CEO of the New England Board of Higher Education. Disbursement of funds will be contingent upon a signature on the grant agreement from the project lead at the applying institution, which will signify the formal acceptance of this grant funding and the terms that govern the spending and reporting of the same.

### **Accelerator Grant Timeline**

RFP Release	April 30, 2025
Informational Webinar	May 6, 2025
Proposal Deadline	June 6, 2025
Awardees Notification	July 14, 2025
Funding Disbursement	July 21, 2025

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<sup>1</sup> The NEPEC Team and members of the Higher Education Working Group understand that the pace of bureaucracy can present challenges in the context of work like this. While submitting the Letter of Correctional Support with the other components of the grant proposal is preferred, applying institutions will have until 5 P.M. EDT on Wednesday, June 18, 2025, to secure any outstanding application components. The hope is that this buffer time will allow all applying institutions to secure the required letter from their state's Department of Corrections.

Reporting Deadlines	Interim Report - December 31, 2025 Final Report - September 30, 2026
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### Proposal Evaluation Rubric

CRITERIA	DESCRIPTION	*SCORE *
<b><i>Project Alignment</i></b>	The proposal is for a project that falls under the heading of one of the five activities that NEPEC is incentivizing with this inaugural round of Accelerator Grant funding.	
<b><i>Implementation</i></b>	The proposal contains a sufficiently detailed plan with a feasible timeline for executing the proposed project that demonstrates awareness of the complexities of expanding programming opportunities in a correctional context.	
<b><i>Quality, Access, and Affordability</i></b>	The proposal demonstrates a commitment to delivering high-quality educational programs and/or reentry services that are accessible and affordable. It reflects an understanding of the barriers incarcerated learners face, the challenges of teaching within a correctional environment, and outlines strategies to ensure equitable and meaningful participation and context-specific faculty and staff development.	
<b><i>Potential Impact</i></b>	The proposal provides evidence of significant anticipated outcomes for incarcerated learners in the applying institution's state. Outcomes could include overall increases in student access to	

	postsecondary programming; expansion of programming to new facilities; the filling of key statewide ecosystem gap(s).	
<b><i>Demonstrated Need</i></b>	The proposal outlines a compelling rationale for how the funds will markedly accelerate applicant's progress towards one of the five activities NEPEC is incentivizing with this inaugural round of Accelerator Grant funding.	
<b><i>Financial Sustainability</i></b>	The project budget spreadsheet and the corresponding budget narrative, contained within the proposal form, speak to the applying institution's plan for sustaining the work of the proposed project beyond the Accelerator Grant funding period.	

In evaluating proposals, reviewers will award an additional point to applications that:

- Integrate into the proposal meaningful collaboration with a reentry-focused community-based organization or nonprofit and include an additional letter of support from leadership at that collaborative entity.
- Demonstrate that the program at the center of this application provides, or has plans to soon provide, robust trauma-informed training for both faculty and staff who are supporting students enrolled in the program.