



NEW ENGLAND BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS

New England Prison Education Collaborative (NEPEC) Accelerator Grants

Year 2 (2026)

Proposal deadline extended to 5 P.M. ET on Friday, June 5, 2026

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 second round of NEPEC Accelerator Grants. In Year 2, NEPEC is prepared to award four Accelerator Grants to four 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 support the mobility of credits earned in Pell-eligible postsecondary programming within carceral facilities in the state where they are located or across state lines within the New England region. This could include institutions with active Pell-eligible Prison Education Programs (PEPs) but also consortia of higher education institutions working together to provide a postsecondary education pathway. Taken together, the four projects funded by these four 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 postsecondary opportunities. At the core of each funded project there 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.
 - *Note: Second Chance Pell sites are only eligible for funding if they have received a letter of extension from the United States Department of Education allowing them to continue operating as a PEP through the end of the 2026 calendar year.*
- **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 second round of Accelerator Grants must fall under at least one of the following eligible activities and the applying institution must be an existing or emerging PEP¹:

- A New England postsecondary institution—or a consortium of institutions—with an approved PEP seeking support for the **creation or reconstruction of a transfer pathway**—including pathways that leverage stackable credentials to accelerate momentum and provide greater flexibility and more academic options for students, which ensures the mobility—including applicability— of academic credits earned during incarceration.
- A New England PEP that is seeking support for the **creation of a reverse transfer pathway**, enabling currently or formerly incarcerated students who made progress toward an associate degree prior to transferring to a four-year degree pathway to transfer credits earned at the four-year institution back to their community college to complete the associate degree requirements.
- A consortium of New England postsecondary institutions seeking to create a **multi-state transfer agreement**, allowing for the mobility of credits earned in carceral facilities across state lines.
- A New England PEP seeking support to **train staff in their academic services office** on how to assess transcripts from people who are returning from incarceration.

¹ Please note that if the application is for a consortium of institutions, then *only the anchoring institution* (i.e., the applicant) must be an existing or emerging PEP.

- A New England PEP that is seeking support for implementing a comprehensive **credit for prior learning (CPL) or prior learning assessment (PLA) process**—or meaningfully expanding an existing one.

No institution will be awarded more than one Year 2 Accelerator Grant.

An RFP for the next round of Accelerator Grant funding will be released in the same general time frame in 2027. The NEPEC Higher Education Working Group, whose efforts and expertise shape this Year 2 RFP and what the second 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 2.

Institutions that received an award in Year 1 are eligible for funding in this award cycle. Similarly, receiving an award in Year 2 will not preclude an institution from applying for funding in a subsequent award cycle.

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 2026. 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 second 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 2 NEPEC Accelerator Grant. Institutions must be an existing or emerging (i.e., currently in the approval process) PEP. To verify this, institutions will be asked as part of their proposal to provide both the contact information for their institution’s financial aid officer and a letter from the New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE) that communicates that a **substantive change** for additional site(s) of instruction has been approved.

Funding Requirements

Institutions receiving Accelerator Grant funding will be required to:

- Participate in a series of technical assistance sessions led by ITHAKA S+R, beginning with a kickoff session in October 2026.
 - The applying program(s) will need to form project teams to participate in these sessions. Applicants will be asked to list the anticipated members of their team in the proposal form linked in the subsequent section.
- Report on project progress and spending-to-date in an interim and final report due to the NEPEC Team on December 31, 2026, and September 30, 2027, respectively. 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 and Project Budget:** The applying institution must complete all sections of the proposal form and project budget linked [here](#) and [here](#), respectively.
- **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.
- **Contact Information for Institution's Financial Aid Officer:** The applying institution must provide the contact information for their postsecondary institution's financial aid officer in order to confirm the program's PEP status.
- **Letter of Approval from NECHE:** The applying institution must include a letter from the New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE) indicating they have received approval from the accreditor to provide instruction at the additional location(s) referenced in the grant proposal.

Submission Instructions

A complete application will consist of 1) a proposal form; 2) a project budget; 3) contact information for the institution's financial aid officer; 4) a letter of institutional support; 5) a letter of correctional support; and 6) a letter of approval from NECHE. Only complete applications will advance to the stage of substantive review. Where relevant, supplemental documents can be uploaded as additional attachments to the institution's submission of required items.

All materials must be submitted by 5 P.M. ET on Friday, June 5, 2026.

Disbursement of Funds

Awardees will be notified by email by 5 P.M. ET on July 14, 2026. 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

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| RFP Release | April 30, 2026 |
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| Informational Webinar | May 6, 2026 |
| Proposal Deadline | *Deadline Extended* June 5, 2026 |
| Awardee Notification | July 14, 2026 |
| Funding Disbursement | July 21, 2026 |
| Reporting Deadlines | Interim Report - December 31, 2026 Final Report - September 30, 2027 |

Proposal Evaluation Rubric

| CRITERIA | DESCRIPTION | *SCORE * (0-3) |
|--|---|---------------------------|
| <i>Project Alignment</i> | The proposal is for a project that falls under the heading of one of the five activities that NEPEC is incentivizing with this second round of Accelerator Grant funding. | |
| <i>Implementation</i> | 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. | |
| <i>Quality, Access, and Affordability</i> | The proposal demonstrates a commitment to delivering high-quality educational programs with robust credit mobility and/or transfer pathways. It reflects an understanding of the barriers incarcerated learners face, the challenges of teaching within a correctional environment, and outlines strategies to ensure meaningful participation and context- | |

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|---------------------------------|---|--|
| | specific faculty and staff development. | |
| Potential Impact | 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 transfer pathways; the filling of key statewide ecosystem gap(s). | |
| Demonstrated Need | 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 second round of Accelerator Grant funding. | |
| Financial Sustainability | The project budget 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 year-long Accelerator Grant funding period. | |

In evaluating proposals, reviewers will award one additional point to applications that are well-written, organized, and clear with consistent formatting and no grammatical or typographical errors.