

## **Learn and Serve America STEM Initiative FAQ**

### **Budget**

#### **Could you define in-kind match support?**

In-kind match support is defined as the value of a non-cash contribution to the program. Examples would be equipment, supplies, and the value of goods and services directly benefiting the program.

#### **Can we apply under more than one Learn and Serve America funding category (e.g., higher education and K-12)?**

Yes. However, if multiple applications propose similar activities, it may impact funding.

#### **Where can I find information related to the use of administrative costs?**

See pages 20-21 of the 2009 Learn and Serve America School-Based STEM Initiative Grant Application Instructions for guidance.

#### **What criteria should be used when developing a budget?**

Cost effectiveness and how the budget supports your proposal should be the basis for budget development.

#### **What is the required match?**

School-based applicants must match with cash or in-kind contributions at least 10% of the project's total costs for year one, 20% for year two, 30% for year three, and 50% (meaning dollar for dollar) each year after three years. School-based applicants who previously received Learn and Serve America funds must match on a dollar-for-dollar basis.

#### **Could you delineate how we can leverage other funding?**

Learn and Serve America requires matching funds to make sure that your program is not totally dependent upon Learn and Serve America money. Applicants should work with their organizations as well as their community partners to make plans to support budget items necessary to continue a high-quality program. When programs achieve success, this helps demonstrate to others (e.g., foundations, community members) its value and could lead to additional financial or human resource support.

#### **May we use CNCS program funds to match Learn and Serve America programs?**

No. You cannot use CNCS funds (Learn and Serve America, AmeriCorps, National Senior Service Corps) to match Learn and Serve America programs. However, you may be able to use other federal money as a match. Check with the federal agency to see if it is possible.

#### **How can our organization determine whether it received three or more years of CNCS funding?**

If the legal applicant records show that Corporation for National and Community Service funding supported the applicant for three or more years, the applicant must provide at least a 50% match. If you cannot determine whether CNCS has funded your organization

for more than three years, please contact Bonnie Janicki at [bjanicki@cns.gov](mailto:bjanicki@cns.gov) in the Corporation's grants office.

**Must grantees require subgrantees to provide the same match we provide?**

No. However, it is a best practice to encourage subgrantees to match their awards since this leads to program sustainability.

**Should budget worksheets used to determine each budget line item be submitted?**

No. The budget worksheets are tools to help you calculate the line items.

**Would supplies for training and technical assistance go under supplies?**

Yes.

**What is the difference between "equipment" and "supplies"?**

If the acquisition cost is \$5,000 or more per unit, it is considered equipment. If it is less than \$5,000, it is considered supplies. Purchases of equipment are limited to 10 percent of the total Learn and Serve America share.

**The school-based program guidance indicates that staff salaries may be prorated between Section I: Program Operating Costs and Section II: Implementation. Does that refer to my time?**

This can refer to the project director's time and other staff members' time if they are working on Learn and Serve America activities related to both operating and implementation costs.

**What is the matching requirement for school-based applicants?**

Applicants must match, with cash or in-kind contributions, at least 10% of the project's total costs for year one of the grant, 20% for the second-year continuation, and at least 30% for the third-year continuation. Applicants who have received Learn and Serve America funding for more than three years must provide at least 50% of the total program costs (a minimum of a dollar-for-dollar match) for each year. The sources(s) may be federal (non CNCS), state, or local (public or private). In the case of federal sources, the funds of another agency may only be used as match if the other agency permits such use.

**What are subgrantee matching requirements?**

There is no required match for subgrantees. However, applicants should encourage subgrantees to match their grant awards since this leads to sustaining local programs.

**What percentage of funding should go to subgrantees? How many subgrants should be funded?**

There is no required percentage and no required number of subgrants per grant. However, we encourage a smaller number of larger subgrants as opposed to many small subgrants.

## **eGrants**

### **Where can I find help with eGrants?**

If there are problems, you can call the eGrants help desk at 1-888-677-7849. The help desk is open from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Eastern, Monday through Friday. Or you can contact them by email ( eGrantshelp@cns.gov ).

### **Who can create an eGrants account for an organization?**

Work within your organization to find out who is best to set up an eGrants account. Once the account is set up, the organization may permit others to sign on and authorize the application.

### **The eGrants system at the National Science Foundation has a failsafe mechanism that prompts applicants when something is done incorrectly. Is the same system in place at CNCS?**

Yes, there is a verification mechanism, which is another advantage eGrants provides. It identifies most submission errors before an application is submitted. However, it does not include a spell check function. Remember that once the application is sent, you cannot get it back.

### **Is the CNCS eGrants system like the Department of Education (DOE)?**

There are some differences. The Federal government is moving toward serving the public online and the eGrants system is part of this move. CNCS, the National Science Foundation, and the Department of Education are three Federal agencies offering an eGrants application system to the public.

### **What is the character limit for a Learn and Serve America application narrative?**

Learn and Serve America applicants may submit a maximum of 41,000 characters (including spaces) for the proposal narrative. If the proposal narrative text entered exceeds 41,000 characters, you will not be able to submit the application.

### **Can you periodically save what you enter in the eGrants system and return at another time to add information or complete the application?**

Yes. eGrants allows applicants to save periodically. We suggest that applicants type information in a word processor and paste this information into the application when it is complete and accurate.

## **Evaluation**

### **What is the difference between performance measurement and evaluation as defined by the Corporation for National and Community Service?**

Performance measurement is an ongoing process, designed to capture progress towards meeting results. Performance measurement is systematic, continuing (at least annually) and internal, that is, usually designed and implemented by the program staff and stakeholders.

The Corporation defines evaluation as in-depth, rigorous studies that measure the particular impact of national and community service programs. While performance measurement and evaluation both include systematic data collection and measurement of progress, evaluation uses scientifically-based research methods to systematically investigate the effectiveness of programs by comparing the observed program outcomes with what would have happened in the absence of the program. Evaluation studies estimate the impacts of programs by comparing the difference between the outcomes for individuals receiving a service or participating in a program to the outcomes for similar individuals not receiving a service or not participating in a program.

### **What resources are available to help me develop and track performance measures?**

Learn and Serve America has worked with Project STAR to develop guidance on performance measurement. It is available on the Learn and Serve America web page that includes the application guidance

[www.servicelearning.org/nslc/perf\\_measurement/index.php](http://www.servicelearning.org/nslc/perf_measurement/index.php) . In addition, publications from the United Way of America (<http://www.unitedway.org/outcomes/>) and the Kellogg Foundation ( <http://www.wkkf.org/Pubs/Tools/Evaluation/Pub770.pdf> , PDF, 1.12 MB) provide an overview of outcome-based evaluation, including an introduction to performance measurement, steps for measuring program outcomes, examples of outcomes and outcome indicators for various programs, and the resources needed for measuring outcomes.

### **Where can I get help in developing an independent evaluation?**

Please visit the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse for evaluation resources. In addition, to assist CNCS programs in their evaluation efforts, Project Star has created a User's Guide to Evaluation for National Service Programs.

The Corporation also encourages programs to partner with organizations and individuals in your local area who can provide evaluation assistance. For example, many programs have successfully partnered with local higher-education institutions that are routinely engaged in evaluating the effectiveness of programs.

### **How can I pay for an independent evaluation?**

Programs may request funds for evaluation in their application. Just as with performance measures, we encourage programs to seek evaluation funds from a variety of organizations.

**How should I go about accessing local resources, such as evaluation professionals at colleges and universities?**

Local resources can be helpful for program applicants in responding to the performance measurement section of the application. Suggested institutions to contact for assistance include universities/colleges, research firms, or other community organizations that may be using a local resource for their performance measurement/evaluation. Keep in mind that choosing the "right" local resource that will meet your needs is critical. Identify the specific tasks you would like the local resource to assist you with (e.g., instrument development, data analysis). We recommend that you stay involved in the performance measurement process throughout your program year. In other words, don't pass the entire task of performance measurement to your local resource. You may not get what you need in the end. The cost of having the local resource assist you is another issue to bear in mind. The cost will depend on the amount of effort you would like the local resource to assume. The more involved you are in your performance measurement, the less your local resource will need to do, reducing costs. One resource that discusses budgeting and planning for an evaluation is: W.K. Kellogg Foundation. (1998). W. K. Kellogg Foundation Evaluation Handbook. Battle Creek, Michigan: Collateral Management Company. Chapter Five of this document, on page 54, states, "Generally, an evaluation costs between 5 and 7 percent of a project's total budget." This document also describes a process (and provides a worksheet) for figuring out an appropriate budget for evaluation. This document can be downloaded from <http://www.wkkf.org/Pubs/Tools/Evaluation/Pub770.pdf> (PDF, 1.12 MB).

**How should programs with many distinct service activities carry out a "rigorous evaluation of program outcomes," which might prove complicated and expensive undertaking?**

For programs with many distinct service activities, programs should select activities for rigorous evaluation that best reflect the overall mission of the program and the service activities carried out. The specific circumstances of the applicant and the program will be considered when evaluating applications.

**Is there a preference for external rather than internal evaluations?**

This depends on the organization and its capacity. Some internal evaluations can be very useful tools for improving programs. Be sure the evaluation relates to the program and shows how the program has used this information to improve.

**How important is it that evaluations on past service-learning programs be mentioned?**

You should mention relevant information regarding evaluations in the program narrative under Organizational Capacity.

**If a community partner has completed an assessment, can this be mentioned?**

Yes, as long as it is relevant to your application.

## **Funding**

### **Will renewals be at level funding?**

This is likely but depends upon appropriations and the number of programs renewed.

### **Is the grant award based upon reimbursement?**

The grant award is not based upon a reimbursement practice but it is the preferred method. Grantees may receive advance payments of Grant funds; the amount of advance payments requested by the Grantee must be based on actual and immediate cash needs in order to minimize federal cash on hand. Additional guidance is provided in the provisions of the award.

### **Is the overall intent of Learn and Serve America funding to provide training or is it to support service activities?**

Learn and Serve America funding can be used to support both kinds of activities. Please refer to the application materials.

### **Who is eligible for this funding?**

Only state education agencies, tribes, and Grant-Making Entities (non-profit organizations that can make subgrants in two or more states) are eligible to apply.

### **Is it possible for small nonprofits to compete for Learn and Serve America School-Based funding?**

Yes, if you are a grantmaking entity that makes grants in two or more states. It is not necessary for grantmaking entities to be large organizations. We fund only grantmaking entities in order to reach more than one state through our limited Learn and Serve America resources.

### **What number of states must collaborate to qualify as a GME?**

Two or more states.

### **Can a 501(c)3 organization that has partnerships with schools become a GME?**

Yes. See the above definition for GMEs.

## **Miscellaneous**

### **Where can we find information on what Learn and Serve America has funded?**

You can access information on Learn and Serve America programs by visiting the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse at [www.servicelearning.org](http://www.servicelearning.org).

### **Can attachments or hyperlinks be included with an application?**

No. If this information is important, a summary should be included in the proposal.

### **Will we be notified by Learn and Serve America whether we are funded or not?**

Applicants funded will be notified. Applicants not funded will also be notified and may request additional information by making a written request to Learn and Serve America.

### **We would like to apply for two types of Learn and Serve America grants. Will these two applications be reviewed for similarities?**

At the staff level, applications will be compared. If the activities/models are similar it may diminish chances for funding. Learn and Serve America has a very limited amount of funding available so relative quality among applications, statutory funding requirements, and preferences addressed in the guidelines will be considered by staff.

### **Who will score the Learn and Serve America applications? Will each application be read by more than one person?**

Applications will be read by more than one reviewer. Applications are selected by using an extensive, multi-stage process that will include peer review panels, Corporation staff review, and approval from the Corporation's Chief Executive Officer. During the peer review process, Learn and Serve America uses outside experts, including community service practitioners, educators, administrators, former national service participants, and specialists in the areas of environment, public safety, education, and other human needs, to evaluate the quality of applications. The peer review panels will rank the applications. Avoid using abbreviations or lingo that may not be familiar to outside reviewers. During the Learn and Serve America staff review, we determine the relative quality among applications but also consider statutory funding requirements and preferences addressed in the guidelines.

### **Is there a minimum or maximum number of youth participants required?**

No. The applicant should show how the proposed number of youth participating strengthens the proposal.

### **What is service-learning?**

The definition is in our law and can be found in the NOFA (Notice of Funding Availability) announcement. Service-learning is an educational method that is conducted in and meets the needs of a community; is coordinated with an elementary school, secondary school, institution of higher education, or community service program and with the community; helps foster civic responsibility; is integrated into and enhances the academic curriculum of the students, or the education components of the community

service program in which the participants are enrolled; and provides structured time for the students or participants to reflect on the service experience.

**How do factors like geography and experience as a previous grantee fit into the selection criteria?**

Quality is more important than geography, but geography is a criterion. Previous grantees must show evolution and growth; they should not ask support for more of the same.

**How do we document strength of community partners if we cannot use attachments or tables?**

You will need to do so through the narrative such as in the organizational capacity section.

**Do we need references with the application?**

We cannot accept footnotes or attachments. If you want to cite a specific study, write this into the narrative.

**Are there any program models that you can share?**

We suggest that you go to the Service Learning Clearinghouse ([www.servicelearning.org](http://www.servicelearning.org)) site and check for best practices, models, curricula, etc.

**Can a local school district apply for a formula grant?**

No. Learn and Serve may accept applications from state education agencies, tribes, and Grantmaking entities only in our School- and Community-Based programs.

**Performance Measurement**

**Do all performance measures have to be addressed? Must each have an output, intermediate outcome, and end outcome? Does that mean a minimum of nine performance measures?**

Only if you are recommended for funding. The K-12 Program Coordinator for Learn and Serve America will work with applicants who are recommended for funding to create performance measures. This negotiation will result in a complete set of performance measures for each of the three program categories: 1) needs and service activities; 2) strengthening community to support service-learning, and 3) participant development. A complete set of performance measures includes at least one output, one intermediate outcome, and one end outcome. Therefore, a minimum of nine performance measures is required.

**What is the time frame for reporting on outputs, intermediate-outcomes and end-outcomes?**

At a minimum, programs are required to report on outputs at the end of year one; outputs and intermediate-outcomes at the end of year two; and outputs, intermediate-outcomes and end-outcomes at the end of year three. Programs may choose to exceed these minimum requirements and report results when they are available.

**How will the Corporation use the information grantees submit on performance measurement?**

The Corporation's emphasis on performance measurement is part of a government-wide movement toward greater accountability. In accordance with the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993, all federal agencies are required to develop performance plans and goals for their programs, link those plans and goals to budgeting and funding activities, measure program performance, and report on the results.

The main purpose of performance measurement is to strengthen Learn and Serve America programs and foster continuous improvement. Performance measurement allows a program to clarify its purpose and goals, identify how specific services and program components contribute to achieving a desired result, document the actual results and impacts of program activities, and improve program performance by identifying program successes and areas for improvement.

**What does performance measure accountability mean?**

Clear performance measures allow you and your partners to know what the program goals are. They articulate clear expectations of what will be accomplished. If a program is not meeting their performance measures over time, the Corporation may adjust your budget or, in severe cases, discontinue your funding.

**Do subgrantees need performance measures?**

Yes. It will enable them to set goals and recognize their progress toward those goals.

**If we succeed in applying and receive and Learn and Serve America grant, would we be expected to change our performance measures in years two and three?**

Not necessarily since we ask applicants to provide performance measures based upon a three-year period. We realize that programs may need to adjust these measures during this period so it is possible to negotiate changing these measures throughout the grant period.

**Program Design**

**Must subgrants go exclusively to middle schools?**

Providing STEM-based service-learning opportunities to middle school students is a priority of Learn and Serve America for the 2009 competition. One criterion by which reviewers will assess proposals is the extent to which applicants are responsive the Application Instructions and the Notice of Funding Opportunity, including the following language from the Notice of Funding Opportunity, "the applicant must describe a school-based service-learning program for middle school students."

**What does Learn and Serve America mean by "STEM"?**

STEM is an acronym for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics and usually refers to education in one or more of these disciplines. In this grant competition,

we are funding service-learning projects in which middle school students use STEM knowledge and skills to address community problems. Projects should help students both apply and deepen their understanding of content standards in at least one STEM discipline.

**Do K-12 projects funded by Learn and Serve have to originate in a course?**

No. You may propose to support out-of-school time service-learning projects in non-formal educational settings as long as STEM standards are addressed.

**We would like to include as part of our Learn and Serve America application a partnership with AmeriCorps. Is this allowed?**

Yes, however you cannot use Corporation dollars from one program to match dollars in another program. Learn and Serve America encourages applicants to collaborate with other Corporation programs since it improves their ability to meet program goals. If you are applying for grants from a variety of programs, you cannot make the success of your program dependent upon receiving a grant through another competition.

**Is there anything an applicant should do if applying for the first time?**

All applicants must demonstrate they have the knowledge and capacity to run the program. Check in with local schools or higher education institutions (many collaborate or are looking at ways to collaborate with community-based organizations) to find out what partnerships exist. This can avoid reinventing the wheel and give you an opportunity to strengthen what may exist. Become familiar with the Corporation website and its programs as well as the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse and its resources as well as the Resource Center on the Corporation website.

**With an emphasis on civic involvement, what prohibitions exist on registering to vote? Must Learn and Serve America applicants exclude lobbying as part of the program?**

CNCS has restrictions on legislative lobbying and partisan politics and the Office of General Counsel provides guidance to programs on "Restrictions on legislative lobbying and partisan politics" on its website. This guidance includes one general rule for national and community service programs and participants funded by the Corporation. They may not participate in (1) any efforts designed to influence legislation or (2) partisan political activities. Any deviation from this rule may jeopardize a program's funding as well as undermine public confidence in national and community service.

**Our institution is trying to develop citizens of the world. Can Learn and Serve America grants entertain work that is international in nature?**

We would like to use what is learned through an international collaboration to improve programs locally. The legislation of the Corporation does not allow Learn and Serve America to fund international programs. However, you can apply what your program learns from the international collaboration to a Learn and Serve America program.

**What number of CNCS's strategic initiatives should we focus on?**

At least one.

**If we are targeting more than one state with different needs, how should we reflect those needs in the narrative?**

The narrative should state clearly the needs that will be addressed through the program. This would include needs appropriate for all states involved.

**Is the focus more on urban or rural communities?**

Neither. We plan to support the best applications.

**May we pre-select our subgrantee sites for the next three years?**

Yes.

**Are MOUs (memorandums of understanding) to be included in the application?**

No. Applicants considered for funding must make sure their subgrantees provide appropriate MOUs or contracts with their partners.