



CORNERSTONE

Learning for Living

Request for Proposals Revised Spring 2025

The *Cornerstone: Learning for Living* initiative aims to revitalize the role of the humanities in general education. The deadline for the next application cycle is **December 1, 2026**.

Rationale

The humanities are essential for the health of American civic life. Yet on many campuses of higher education, the humanities have been languishing, with declining numbers of students choosing to major in the humanities, declining enrollments by non-majors in many humanities courses, and widespread demoralization of humanities faculty.

The future vitality of the humanities will depend largely on what happens in general education, the prescribed portion of a student's work that falls outside their chosen major. General education is the place in the undergraduate curriculum where students, who now overwhelmingly pursue pre-professional areas of study, should engage with challenging and inspiring works of literature, art, and philosophy—works that raise the sort of questions they are otherwise unlikely to encounter in their undergraduate career, and at a moment in their lives when they are open to confronting humanistic questions as part of their education.

General education should give students an opportunity to broaden their understanding of the world and themselves, while strengthening the skills to read closely, write clearly, speak with confidence, and contend with differing viewpoints and perspectives—all capacities cultivated by the humanities that are crucial for the “participatory readiness”¹ of citizen-leaders of our democracy.

At many institutions, the impersonal and incoherent character of general education, typically structured around distribution requirements, minimizes opportunities for genuine engagement with deep and difficult questions raised by the humanities: about the role of government; the power of words and symbols; the burden of our history for people of color, the responsibility of individuals for the

¹ American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2013). *The Heart of the Matter: The Humanities and Social Sciences for a Vibrant, Competitive, and Secure Nation*. https://www.amacad.org/sites/default/files/publication/downloads/hss_report.pdf

welfare of others; the problem of ambiguity even in the realm of science—to name just a few.

Further, such an approach to general education encourages a “check the box” attitude that undermines the value proposition of staying in college, particularly for low-income and first-generation students who face pressure to enter the workforce prematurely. A serious effort to make general education more coherent and attentive to student concerns is needed to reduce attrition, which often occurs after the first year of college when students have typically encountered a “grab bag” of disconnected introductory coursework. The humanities are essential for redesigning general education so that students of all backgrounds may see the salience of their coursework for the issues and questions they care about and how domains of knowledge are interconnected—as are the problems they will be tackling in the real world—all while building skills in communication and critical analysis that are prized in the workplace and beyond.

Worse, the disconnected, incoherent, and chaotic approach to general education that too often prevails on college campuses is a missed opportunity to build community and connection in an era characterized by isolation and political polarization. Students in college today report dramatically high levels of anxiety, depression, and other mental health problems. Improving the transition to college so that young people can more readily cultivate relationships with their peers and their professors should be a priority at all institutions. To this end, engagement with a common set of readings in their first year provides students with a sense of shared purpose and frame of reference to connect with one another inside and outside the classroom. Such a first-year curriculum that features at least some common elements also harnesses diversity in all its forms—by race, immigration status, sexual identity, and other forms of difference—to strengthen learning in the classroom as students of varying backgrounds grapple together with common issues through shared readings, listen to their peers, and come to see that there can be no singular response to big human questions.

The *Cornerstone: Learning for Living* initiative is inspired by a successful program model developed at Purdue University, which has helped students in pre-professional majors strengthen critical thinking and communication skills, reversed the decline in credit hours at Purdue’s College of Liberal Arts, and raised morale and teaching opportunities for humanities faculty.

Students who embark on the Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts (CILA) certificate program take a two-semester “Transformative Texts” sequence in their first year under the mentorship of tenure-track faculty. At least half the reading assignments in all sections of this sequence are drawn from a faculty-created and continually revised list of roughly 200 major works—with a resulting degree of commonality

that helps create a sense of belonging and intellectual community for students while also allowing faculty the freedom to design syllabi aligned with their own interests.

Students subsequently take thematically organized clusters of courses that complement the technical course load typically required of STEM and other pre-professional majors, who dominate undergraduate enrollments at many institutions. Most CILA courses satisfy existing general education distribution requirements and represent no detour from the path to timely graduation, a particular concern for students in highly prescribed degree programs. The program model is also flexible enough to meet the practical challenge of serving a significant share of the undergraduate student body.

Two curricular components of the Cornerstone program model are especially notable. First, gateway courses aimed at incoming students that are anchored in a common set of transformative texts help build intellectual community among students as well as faculty through a common learning and teaching experience. Studying such texts—whether ancient or modern—that have transformed the world and that continue to have the power to transform individual lives under the mentorship of faculty gives students a strong start to their time in college. Gateway courses anchored in consensus lists of such texts help counter the centripetal forces that can make the college experience feel desultory and disconnected. Such courses create a framework that allows students to make better-informed curricular decisions as they proceed through college, and provide a repository of skills and perspectives on which they draw throughout their formal education and beyond.

Second, thematically organized clusters of courses that bring humanistic inquiry to problems in business, health, engineering, and other technical fields help students appreciate that technical problems cannot be addressed exclusively through technical solutions. Such clusters also provide a purposeful and coherent path rather than a menu of unrelated options for completing the general education requirements. Engagement with the humanities inspires students to reflect on their values, instills a love of learning, and enriches their lives.

Goals

The *Cornerstone: Learning for Living* aims to reinvigorate the role of the humanities in general education, and in doing so, expose a broad array of students to the power of the humanities; help students of all backgrounds build a sense of belonging and community; strengthen the coherence and cohesiveness of general education; and increase teaching opportunities for humanities faculty.

This initiative is dedicated to the proposition that transformative texts—regardless of authorship, geography, or the era that produced them—perform a democratizing function in giving students the analytical tools and historical awareness to

interrogate themselves as well as the culture and society by which we are all partially formed. Such texts give students access to a wide range of lived experiences and form the basis for creating a common intellectual experience that fosters a sense of community.

Balancing commonality with faculty choice in syllabi needs to be thoughtfully negotiated within each institution as it strives for both. Faculty recognize the value of shared texts across sections, but they also expect some degree of freedom in designing their own syllabi and time to build a workable consensus with one another on which texts work best and are essential to teach.

Providing thematically organized pathways that link the humanities to students' professional aspirations helps make general education more compelling and coherent. Such pathways help students see the salience of humanistic thinking from the outset of their undergraduate careers, combats the perception that the humanities are irrelevant for their future work, and encourages them to complete their coursework and stay on the path to graduation.

Revitalizing the place of the humanities in general education can also help to secure the future of the humanities professoriate. It has become clear that humanities departments, which at many institutions are shrinking relative to their counterparts in other fields, must find new ways to ensure that the humanities remain a vital aspect of undergraduate education. Teacher-scholars in humanistic fields will need to reallocate their time to engage non-majors in introductory General Education while also pursuing their more specialized teaching and research. Ensuring that general education programs are anchored in the humanities provides faculty with the opportunity to reclaim their vocation as teachers and to teach the kinds of works that attracted them to academia in the first place. Committing to General Education should not be regarded as a drain on humanities departments but as a way to renew their vitality and ensure their future.

Eligibility

This funding opportunity is available to regionally accredited private not-for-profit and public institutions of higher education. The *Cornerstone: Learning for Living* initiative welcomes the participation of a diverse array of institutions—community colleges, liberal arts colleges, regional comprehensive institutions, and research universities.

Award Types

Implementation grants of varying amounts, up to \$300,000 over 24 months, will be made to each funded project participating in this initiative. The size of the implementation grant award will be based on the scope of the project. Planning

grants up to \$25,000 over 6-12 months are strongly encouraged to lay the groundwork for successful curricular reform and faculty professional development.

Criteria for Project Proposals

Institutions will be selected based on the design and scale of their proposed programs. Selection criteria for both planning and implementation requests are described in further detail below:

- **A faculty-led and faculty-owned initiative**

The success of the Cornerstone initiative depends on the level of commitment of a broad array of faculty coordinating their efforts across departments. Although the support of senior leadership is essential, it is the faculty's responsibility to ensure that the curriculum is thoughtfully designed and well delivered, and to monitor the impact of curriculum and pedagogy on student learning. Accustomed to seeing themselves as a community of scholars, faculty members are encouraged by way of this initiative to view themselves also as a community of teachers who seek to stimulate, challenge, and inspire students of all backgrounds through humanistic inquiry. Funded projects are expected to involve significant participation from tenure-track humanities and other liberal arts faculty. This initiative is committed to diversity in the faculty who teach in the funded program and to diversity in the texts they teach.

- **A common intellectual experience anchored in transformative texts for incoming students**

Participating institutions are expected to embed transformative texts in a gateway course (or courses) aimed at incoming undergraduate students that engage them in enduring human questions and cultivate their written and oral communication skills. Such gateway courses should build intellectual community among students of all backgrounds through a shared academic experience. We place a strong emphasis on "primary works" of literature and philosophy (e.g., novels, essays, poems, and speeches) from a variety of traditions for scaffolding the common intellectual experience in courses designated as the gateway to the program supported under *Cornerstone: Learning for Living*. The readings should span a range of time periods that help students see how texts are in conversation with one another, help them answer a big question from multiple perspectives, and enable them to trace the treatment of a human problem (e.g., freedom and slavery, individualism and responsibility, law and morality) over time. Images, films, or music may be included on a limited basis. The readings on syllabi for sections of the gateway course (or courses) should be drawn from a consensus list of transformative texts developed collaboratively by faculty. Commonality in readings across sections of the gateway course(s) may be achieved by faculty through a range

of faculty-determined policies, such as a set number or percentage of readings drawn from a consensus list; common designated texts for each week or unit of the semester, with other readings selected from a consensus list; or a standardized reading list across all sections.

- **Coherent pathways through general education**

Participating institutions are expected to create coherent pathways through general education that link the humanities to students' professional aspirations and provide social, cultural, and ethical context for their thinking about the fields they will enter after college. This may be achieved through thematic clusters of courses, guided pathways, certificates, or other tactics.

- **Student reach, particularly for STEM and other pre-professional majors**

Projects funded under this initiative should be designed to benefit a significant share of the undergraduate student body. The curricular components of the Cornerstone program model may be adapted and delivered in a variety of curricular formats: a certificate program that fulfills general education requirements; integrating core texts into existing courses that meet distribution requirements; mandatory first-year seminars or student success courses for incoming students coupled with intensive advising to develop tailored pathways through general education; or most ambitiously, using transformative texts and questions as a unifying mechanism to develop a coherent general education program for all students. All of these curricular formats have the potential to reach a significant proportion of the undergraduate student body.

- **Sustainability**

Major curricular redesign requires alignment with institutional priorities and strategic plans, attention to academic governance procedures, and reallocation of institutional resources. The factors that contribute to longer-term sustainability may vary campus to campus, but they are as important as the actual implementation of curricular redesign. For example, proposed curricula needs to be designed in such a way that it will meet internal standards for academic review and can be delivered by the prevailing configuration of tenure-track faculty. Grants are made in the expectation that once the formal grant period ends, should the piloted programs be successful, the costs associated with supporting those efforts will be absorbed by the participating institutions.

- **Assessment**

Successful proposals will include clearly articulated goals and appropriate means of assessment. They will seek to evaluate effects of curricular redesign

both on student learning and faculty practices, and to use what they learn to inform ongoing improvement. There may be a follow-up study three to five years after the conclusion of the grant period in order to assess the longer-term outcomes of the funded project.

- **Dissemination**

Active dissemination efforts will be important in order to spread the effects of the knowledge gained by grantees and practices to interested and influential audiences. Project leaders and participants will be expected to join periodic grantee convenings and other professional development workshops sponsored under the initiative to share lessons learned with their peers and to support each other in the challenging work of curricular redesign that brings the humanities from the periphery to the center of general education. These convenings are conceived not as burdensome obligations but as opportunities for intellectual and professional renewal.

Use of Grant Funds

Planning grants may be used to cover such expenses as compensation for faculty members on the planning team and travel to annual faculty professional development institutes and other similar professional development opportunities. Planning grants provide support for faculty at participating institutions to achieve the following:

- Establish criteria for inclusion of works of literature and philosophy and generate a consensus list of transformative texts, along with a policy for how texts from the consensus list will be used across sections of the gateway course, with an eye to creating a common intellectual experience for students
- Design coherent pathways through general education
- Lay the curricular groundwork for the proposed program, including achieving any necessary approvals by the appropriate academic governance committees
- Engage the leadership and faculty of professional schools, where appropriate, so the program is accepted as part of their majors' degree plans
- Establish a clear strategy for faculty professional development and scale-up, particularly to ensure there are enough sections of the course(s) designated as the gateway to your program to ensure a significant share of the incoming undergraduate student body participates in a common intellectual experience
- Whenever possible, pilot courses featuring transformative texts during the planning period

Implementation grants provide support for institutions to enact concrete plans for comprehensive and sustainable curriculum development or redesign efforts.

Examples of use of grant funds for implementation include:

- To provide one-time stipends for faculty time committed to developing their readiness to teach in core-text based courses; course releases to design and implement general education pathways; and other similar expenses likely to arise in a major curricular reform effort
- To defray the cost of outreach to academic advisors who help guide students in their course enrollment, particularly at large institutions where academic advising is usually carried out by professional staff instead of faculty

Submission Process

Requests for grant support will be considered following a two-stage application process. First, we ask that prospective grantees share brief concept papers, whether they are interested in planning or implementation support. After review of the concept papers, a limited number of applicants will then be invited to submit full proposals.

The concept paper should provide a sketch of the project, with an eye towards meeting the criteria discussed above for faculty-led curricular reform and longer-term sustainability. The concept paper should be 3-5 pages in length. Please begin the concept paper with a 200 word abstract that includes project goals and how the project is aligned with the RFP's call for establishing a common intellectual experience anchored in transformative texts for a significant share of the incoming student body and coherent pathways through general education. Please indicate the type of grant (planning or implementation) that is of interest and the requested award amount. All concept papers should list two co-PIs who are tenured or tenure-track faculty and include a provisional list of faculty members who are interested in teaching with transformative texts. (Institutions that do not have traditional tenure should name faculty who have renewable multi-year appointments.) In addition, please include a provisional list of texts that you are contemplating as the basis for developing the common intellectual experience for your gateway course or course sequence. There is no need to include a budget at the concept paper stage.

Interested applicants may wish to refer to this [toolkit](#) that distills lessons learned in setting up a Cornerstone program. For additional details, please see [this list of frequently asked questions](#).

Timeline

Concept papers for planning and implementation awards must be submitted by **December 1, 2026** to proposals@teagle.org. Applicants will receive status notifications by February 2027. Applicants who are invited to submit proposals will be expected to finalize their applications by early April 2027. Work supported by

the grant may begin as early as summer 2027.

Contact Information

Please contact Loni Bordoloi Pazich, program director for institutional initiatives at the Teagle Foundation, at bordoloi@teagle.org with questions about *Cornerstone: Learning for Living*.