



REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS

Evaluation of ARC's Education and Workforce Development Projects

Open Date: July 1, 2021
Proposal Due Date: August 9, 2021
Selection Date: September 15, 2021
Contract Period: October 1, 2021 – September 30, 2022

I. Overview of Request for Proposals

The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) invites proposals from qualified consultants to assess the extent to which ARC's education and workforce development grants have contributed to the achievement of ARC's strategic goals.

ARC funds approximately 500 grants a year, approximately 20% of which include investments that support educational opportunities and institutions. Education and workforce development grants support skill development and workforce training for students and adults with the aim of creating a seamless system enabling Appalachians to succeed in existing industries, expanding options for workers transitioning into different sectors, and encouraging innovation for future opportunities.

This program evaluation will examine roughly 450 grants that closed between fiscal years 2015 through 2019, representing around \$60 million in ARC funding. The projects primarily focused on providing equipment or funding operations to support educational achievement and attainment, career and technical education, and workforce training. These projects aimed to serve over 250,000 students and approximately 21,000 workers and trainees during this time period.

This evaluation will include quantitative analysis of the grant portfolio, input from grantees, and if possible, input from grantee beneficiaries. Critical questions for this evaluation include the following:

- What were the goals of the projects?
- What approaches did the projects use to meet these goals?
- What types of institutions received the grants and what are the characteristics of their beneficiaries?
- What specific outputs and outcomes were projects designed to achieve, and to what extent did projects meet their performance goals?
- To what extent were project-related activities sustained beyond the period covered by the ARC grant?

- What changes did grant beneficiaries (i.e., grantee clients) experience as a result of these projects?
- What factors influenced projects' successful implementation and sustainability?
- What challenges/barriers to success did projects face and how were they addressed?
- Are there common factors among grantees who met performance targets and those who did not?
- What impacts do grantees report the pandemic has had on the communities they serve?
- What impacts has the pandemic had on education and workforce grantees' ability to serve their communities/beneficiaries?
- What changes have education and workforce grantees already implemented and what changes are they planning to implement, in response to evolving needs/opportunities that emerged from the pandemic?

In addition, ARC is considering its role in fostering equity in the context of several internal and external initiatives, and this evaluation serves as an opportunity to hear feedback from education and workforce grantees on questions around equity. ARC also anticipates that findings related to the above questions may help further inform next steps in addressing ongoing improvements to our grant performance measurement system.

Required deliverables include the following:

- Final report with an executive summary that includes key findings and recommendations. A final report and presentation to ARC staff must be completed within 12 months of the project's start. A Microsoft Word file and an Adobe PDF file must be submitted on completion of the project.
- Electronic versions of all relevant databases compiled during the study, including all raw data, edited datasets, and results of statistical analyses. This will include an Excel spreadsheet formatted for uploading updated grant performance data to ARC's grants management database.

II. Background

About Appalachia

The Appalachian Region (the Region), as defined in ARC's authorizing legislation, is a 205,000 square-mile region that follows the spine of the Appalachian Mountains from southern New York to northern Mississippi. It includes all of West Virginia and parts of 12 other states: Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. Forty-two percent of the Region's population is rural, compared with 20% of the national population.

The Appalachian Region's economy, which was once highly dependent on extractive industries, has become more diversified in recent times and now includes larger shares of manufacturing and professional services, among other industries. Appalachia has made significant progress over the past five decades: Its poverty rate, which was 31% in 1960, fell to 15.2% over the 2015–2019 period. The number of high-poverty counties in the Region (those with poverty rates greater than 1.5 times the U.S. average) declined from 295 in 1960 to 110 over the 2015–2019 period. In 2019, the number of Appalachian adults ages 25 and over with at

least a high school diploma had risen more than two percentage points since 2014, to 87%. The Region's high school completion rate is now almost equal to that of the country.

These gains have transformed the Region from one of widespread poverty to one of economic contrasts. Some communities have successfully diversified their economies, while others still require basic infrastructure such as roads, health clinics, and water and wastewater systems. The contrasts are not surprising in light of the Region's size and diversity—the Region extends more than 1,000 miles from southern New York to northeastern Mississippi, and is home to more than 25 million people.

III. About the Appalachian Regional Commission

The Appalachian Regional Commission is a regional economic development agency serving 420 counties across the Appalachian Region. Established by an act of Congress in 1965, the Commission is composed of the governors of the 13 Appalachian states, as well as a federal co-chair appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate. Annually, the group of governors elect one governor to serve as the states' co-chair. To strengthen local participation, ARC works with the Appalachian states to support a network of multicounty planning and development organizations, or local development districts (LDDs), throughout the Region. Seventy-three LDDs cover all 420 counties in the Region. The LDDs help identify needs of local communities, assist with participation in ARC programs, and at times serve as pass-through entities or fiscal agents to local grantees.

ARC's current mission is to innovate, partner, and invest to build community capacity and strengthen economic growth in Appalachia to help the Region achieve socioeconomic parity with the nation. ARC funds projects that address the five goals identified in the Commission's strategic plan:

1. Invest in entrepreneurial and business development strategies that strengthen Appalachia's economy.
2. Increase the education, knowledge, skills, and health of residents to work and succeed in Appalachia.
3. Invest in critical infrastructure—especially broadband; transportation, including the Appalachian Development Highway System; and water/wastewater systems.
4. Strengthen Appalachia's community and economic development potential by leveraging the Region's natural and cultural heritage assets.
5. Build the capacity and skills of current and next-generation leaders and organizations to innovate, collaborate, and advance community and economic development.

Each year, ARC provides funding for approximately 500 projects in the Appalachian Region in areas such as business development, education and job training, telecommunications, infrastructure, community development, housing, and transportation. These projects create thousands of new jobs, improve local water and wastewater systems, train the Region's workforce, assist local communities with strategic planning, and provide entrepreneurial assistance to emerging businesses.

Additional information about the Appalachian Regional Commission can be found at www.arc.gov.

IV. About ARC's Education and Workforce Grants

Education is a key component of the business and entrepreneurial ecosystem and is often an economic driver. However, Appalachia lags the nation in the proportion of adults with a bachelor's degree or more (25% compared with 32% for the nation). Investments by ARC and its partners aim to connect education, workforce, and business interests to prepare the Region's students to succeed in existing and emerging sectors, as well as to create new opportunities for workers transitioning to new employment in high-growth, high-demand sectors.

ARC investments support educational opportunities and institutions, by both laying the foundation and by connecting skill development and workforce training with local and regional business interests and opportunities. ARC investments also support workers who are overcoming challenges such as substance abuse. The goal is to create a seamless system enabling Appalachians to succeed in existing industries, expand options for workers transitioning into different sectors, and encourage innovation for future opportunities. These efforts must begin with strong educational programming and institutions and ensure that all students have the basic skills, as well as the soft skills, needed for productive employment or entrepreneurship.

This program evaluation will examine roughly 450 grants that closed between fiscal years 2015 through 2019, representing around \$60 million in ARC funding. The projects primarily focused on providing equipment or funding operations to support educational achievement and attainment, career and technical education, and workforce training. These projects aimed to serve over 250,000 students and approximately 21,000 workers and trainees during this time period.

V. Scope of Work

The goals of this evaluation are to assess the extent to which ARC's education and workforce development grants have contributed to the achievement of ARC's strategic goals, to highlight promising practices among grantees, and to provide ARC with a set of recommendations for improving implementation of education and workforce development grants.

This project aims to achieve the above goals by summarizing grant portfolio data, collecting updated grant performance data from past grantees, and collecting additional feedback from past grantees, including qualitative input on their experiences with grant implementation, impacts of the pandemic, and considerations for fostering equity. To the extent possible, ARC is also interested in direct feedback from grantee beneficiaries/clients. ARC does not have contact information for grantee beneficiaries, and we recognize that some grantees may not be able to share such information. In other cases, especially workforce development projects, beneficiaries may have given consent to be contacted.

Proposals should include an outline of the data collection and analysis to be conducted, a work plan, and a schedule for reports and deliverables. The final report will address the following questions:

Description of the grant portfolio

- What were the goals of the projects?
- What approaches did the projects use to meet these goals?
- What types of institutions received the grants, and what are the characteristics of their beneficiaries?

Grant performance

- What specific outputs and outcomes were projects designed to achieve, and to what extent did projects meet their performance goals?
- To what extent were project-related activities sustained beyond the period covered by the ARC grant?
- What changes did grant beneficiaries (i.e., grantee clients) experience as a result of these projects?

Factors of successes and challenges

- What factors influenced projects' successful implementation and sustainability?
- What challenges/barriers to success did projects face and how were they addressed?
- Are there common factors among grantees who met performance targets and those who did not?

Impact of pandemic

While the evaluation will focus on the performance of grants that closed prior to the start of the pandemic, ARC is also interested in hearing from education and workforce development institutions about impacts of the pandemic that may affect future grantmaking considerations.

- What impacts do grantees report the pandemic has had on the communities they serve?
- What impacts has the pandemic had on education and workforce grantees' ability to serve their communities/beneficiaries?
- What changes have education and workforce grantees already implemented and what changes are they planning to implement, in response to evolving needs/opportunities that emerged from the pandemic?

Equity

ARC is considering its role in fostering equity in the context of several internal and external initiatives:

- President Biden's [executive order](#) states that "agencies must recognize and work to redress inequities in their policies and programs that serve as barriers to equal opportunity."
- ARC has recently completed an evaluation of its grant performance measurement system, which included a series of recommendations to help ARC be a leader in fostering equity. These recommendations will be available prior to the start of the education and workforce evaluation.
- ARC's ongoing 2022–2026 [strategic planning process](#) is actively exploring questions around equity. Recommendations from this process will be available prior to the start of the education and workforce evaluation.

This current evaluation is an opportunity to gather feedback from education and workforce grantees, and if possible, their beneficiaries, on questions around equity, particularly in relation to recommendations and guidance from the above initiatives; for example:

- Expanding the definition of underserved populations and places in Appalachia and setting goals for reaching them throughout grantmaking activities and impacts.
- Improving marketing materials and diversifying outreach to reach grantees serving underserved populations and places.
- Targeting and prioritizing projects that propose to do more to advance equity and actively mitigating the impact of bias on grantmaking decisions.
- Adopting additional performance measures to track equitable distribution of project awards, benefits, and improvements.

Grant performance measurement

ARC is at the beginning stages of prioritizing recommendations and next steps from the recently completed evaluation of ARC's grant performance measurement system. Some of these recommendations align with recommendations made in ARC's [last evaluation of education and workforce grants](#).

ARC anticipates that findings from the new evaluation of education and workforce grants may help further inform next steps in addressing our grant performance measurement. We are interested in any additional evaluation findings that relate to the prior sets of recommendations, especially in the areas of:

- Refining measures to more holistically capture grant outputs and outcomes
- Operationalizing outcomes and impacts that are more difficult to measure but still related to achieving ARC's mission and strategic goals
- Aligning processes, resources, and expectations for tracking longer-term grant outcomes

Recommendations

The final report should include strategic, actionable recommendations, for both ARC and the local communities and institutions that are implementing education and workforce projects, related to the following topics:

- Implementation of education and workforce grants
- Guidance and resources provided by ARC to applicants and grantees throughout the grant lifecycle
- Assessing grant performance
- Fostering equity

The scope of work should be informed by ARC's previous program evaluations, especially the [2012 evaluation of education and workforce projects](#), and the forthcoming 2021 evaluation of ARC's performance measurement practices.

VI. Methodology

The successful applicant will develop a feasible methodology to complete the scope of work within the given timeframe. Methodology should include the following:

- Quantitative analysis of a portfolio of roughly 450 education and workforce development projects funded by ARC that closed between fiscal years 2015 through 2019.
- Framework for gathering and analyzing quantitative and qualitative data from grantees (may include surveys, focus groups, interviews, site visits, and/or other methods).
- Framework for completing at least 10 case studies to highlight promising practices and/or innovative approaches to fostering equity or to addressing challenges. Specific attention should be given to best practices in communities that are rural, economically distressed, or otherwise underserved.

Proposals may offer other methodological approaches as needed.

VII. Technical, Management, and Cost Proposal Contents

A. Technical Proposal

This section should not exceed 15 pages, not including the abstract, accompanying resumes, and organizational background materials.

1. *Summary Abstract (300 words)*

In this section, provide a brief abstract of the proposal by summarizing the background, objectives, proposed methodology, and expected outputs and results of this project.

2. *Methodology*

Describe the approach or methods intended to accomplish all the tasks specified in this RFP. The proposal should identify the tasks in this project that will require participation by ARC staff. Further, the proposal should identify specific information needs, including sources, procedures, and individual research tasks that may need to be performed by ARC staff. Finally, the proposal should identify any difficulties that may be encountered in this project and propose practical and sound solutions to these problems.

3. *Project Work Plan and Milestones*

The proposal should describe the phases into which the proposed work can be logically divided and performed. A schedule of milestones and deadlines should be specified for the completion of various work elements, including surveys, focus groups, interviews, analyses, written progress reports, preliminary drafts for review, and final report. Regular check-in meetings with ARC staff are also required. Please note: It is the responsibility of the contractor to provide line editing of the final report/deliverable. Contractors should budget accordingly.

4. *Key Personnel*

Personnel performing the work must be described in this section, including the number of people and their professional classifications (e.g., project director, meeting facilitator, analyst, business consultant, writer, line editor, etc.). Brief resumes of the education and relevant experience of all key personnel are required. The selected contractor will be required to

furnish the services of those identified in the proposal as key personnel. Any change in key personnel is subject to approval by ARC.

B. Management Proposal

1. Business Management Organization and Personnel

Furnish a brief narrative description of the organization, including the division that will perform the proposed effort, and the authority responsible for controlling these resources and personnel.

2. Staffing Plan

A staffing plan is required that describes the contractor's proposed staff distribution to accomplish this work. The staffing plan should present a chart that partitions the time commitment of each staff member to the project's tasks and schedule. In addition, the proposal should include a detailed description of activities for key project-related personnel and anticipated deliverables. Finally, the proposal should identify the relationship of key project personnel to the contracting organization, including consultants and subcontractors.

3. Relevant Prior Experience

The proposal must describe the qualifications and experience of the organization and the personnel to be assigned to the project. Information provided should include direct experience with the specific subject-matter area and must provide examples (via web links and/or printed materials) of the three most similar projects undertaken by the applicant's organization and the extent to which performance goals were achieved. Provide client organization names and addresses, names of contact persons, and email addresses and telephone numbers for reference.

4. Contract Agreement Requirements

This section of the proposal should contain any special requirements that the contractor wants included in the contract.

C. Cost Proposal

The contract awarded for this project will be a FIRM FIXED-PRICE CONTRACT, with a total budget not to exceed **\$250,000**. Payments shall be made on a monthly or quarterly schedule (depending on contractor preference). The contract terms shall remain firm during the project and shall include all charges that may be incurred in fulfilling the terms of the contract.

Proposals must contain all cost information, including direct labor costs (consistent with the staffing plan), labor overhead costs, travel, estimated cost of any subcontracts, other direct costs (such as those for databases), total direct cost and overhead, and total cost and fee or profit.

Proposals should include a plan for a kickoff meeting, regular check-in meetings, and a final presentation of key findings and recommendations to all staff. We anticipate these meetings to be conducted virtually. However, proposals should include travel costs if applicable. ARC policy on allowable indirect overhead costs for university-based contracts is to permit universities to charge the same rates charged to their own state agencies. ARC will honor indirect rates as suggested by the contractor. However, be aware that a lower indirect rate may be more competitive in the selection process.

VIII. Proposal Submission

Proposals are due on or before 5:00 p.m. Eastern Time on August 9, 2021.

Please send proposals as one Word or PDF file to:

Regina Van Horne
Program Evaluator
Division of Research and Evaluation
Appalachian Regional Commission, Washington, DC
202-884-7754
rvanhorne@arc.gov

Additionally:

- Submissions must be sent via email.
- Responses or unsolicited amendments will not be accepted after the closing date and time.
- Requests for time extensions past any deadlines will not be considered.

IX. Proposal Evaluation

ARC will select contractors through a competitive process based on the following criteria:

- A complete, clearly articulated study design and technically competent methodology
- Thorough and feasible plan for collecting data
- Qualifications and relevant prior experience evaluating education and workforce development grant programs
- A credible management proposal for staffing, and the capability to carry out and support the project in a timely fashion
- Cost effectiveness of the proposal

It is anticipated that the contractor will be selected by September 15, 2021, for an estimated contract start date of October 1, 2021, and completion date of September 30, 2022.