Notice of Solicitation of Applications

for the

Appalachian Collegiate Research Initiative

Questions concerning this Notice of Solicitation of Applications (NOSA) must be received by email to ACRI@arc.gov no later than 12:00 p.m. ET on **March 20, 2026**. ARC reserves the right not to answer questions received after that time.

Applications are due on or before 5:00 p.m. ET
April 10, 2026

ACRI@arc.gov

Summary

The Appalachian Regional Commission ("ARC") is seeking applications from colleges and universities ("institutions") in and near the Appalachian Region to participate in the Appalachian Collegiate Research Initiative ("ACRI"). As part of the ACRI, each participating institution offers at least one for-credit course during the Fall 2026 Semester in which students address the question: How do we support community economic development to help build a better future and close the economic gap between Appalachia and the rest of the nation?

Administered by East Tennessee State University Center of Excellence for Appalachian Studies and Services, the ACRI engages students from up to 16 colleges and universities in place-based learning experiences where they practice community economic development firsthand. Following completion of their community-based research project, the ACRI provides a forum where students share their work with peers, ARC administration and staff, and invited guests, including community partners and university administrators.

Through this model, the ACRI directly invests in one of Appalachia's most valuable resources: its future leaders. By promoting student engagement with Appalachian communities, fostering leadership development, and bringing students, faculty, and leaders together to share their ideas, this project directly supports ARC's mission to "Innovate, partner, and invest to build community capacity and strengthen economic growth in Appalachia."

Scope of Work

Each institution must work with a local community partner or partners within the Appalachian Region to identify an applied research project that addresses critical challenges and/or opportunities that affect that community's economic development. The faculty director will then develop a community-based student project that addresses the community challenge and/or opportunity and is designed to help the community build a strong future.

Additionally, the faculty director will work with the local community partner(s) to identify an investment need related to the applied research project that may be addressed with up to $2000 from the subaward.

In addition to providing students an invaluable experience, the ACRI also offers them – and the community partners they're working with – firsthand knowledge of ARC and its work in the Region. Because the intent of the Appalachian Collegiate Research Initiative is to forge partnerships between the colleges and their communities, as well as to immerse students in those communities, community partners cannot be part of the college or university.

ARC will accept multiple applications from an institution, but no more than one application from an institution will be selected for participation. ARC encourages interested faculty to work with others at their institution to develop their application. Interested faculty may also collaborate with other institutions to jointly develop a project with their community partner(s). If institutions are working together, they must apply together. There is not an increased budget for the subaward of multiple institutions that apply together.

Proposed projects must meet the guidelines, goals, and outcomes identified below and must include concrete deliverables. **Projects must go beyond collecting folklore, ethnographic fieldwork, and volunteer or service-learning activities; they must exhibit demonstrable impact of the ability of the students, the institution, the community partner, and/or the community to promote economic development.**

Students and faculty will convene in Washington, D.C. on December 4-5, 2026, to share their community-based projects. The ACRI Symposium will consist of the following activities: a fifteen-minute formal presentation of project outcomes by the students from each participating institution; opportunities for discussion and questions; participation in poster sessions; open time for students and faculty to visit the offices of governmental representatives; and a planning meeting of faculty directors and ARC officials to discuss the project, its outcomes, and future strategies.

Following the Symposium, each participating institution will submit a final report on the project outcomes by May 31, 2027. Final reports must document how the project met all required guidelines, goals, and outcomes stated in the application and Scope of Work.

Project Goals

The ACRI is designed to accomplish the following goals in support of the ARC mission and strategic plan.

1. To promote student research projects that focus on Appalachian communities, preferably in one or more of the [ARC-designated Distressed or At-Risk counties](). These projects must involve direct, active participation and engagement with the community. For continuity of projects and relationships, some institutions will work with the same community for more than one year. Occasionally, some communities may be selected because they constitute distressed populations within counties that are not formally labeled as distressed or at-risk.
2. To provide opportunities for students, most of whom are Appalachian natives and/or residents, to experience various parts of the Region and the work of the ARC.
3. To provide opportunities for students to develop leadership, civic engagement, and communication skills.

4. To increase student and community awareness of the mission, vision, and work of the ARC and the goals of its strategic plan.
5. To promote projects that address one or more of the goals of ARC's strategic plan. ARC also sets forth specific objectives that support each of the goals, which may be found in the [ARC Strategic Plan](). While all ACRI applications will support Goal 5, ARC encourages projects that also specifically address Goals 1-4, including the following issues: substance abuse recovery, business development and entrepreneurship, broadband and technology, and workforce development.
   - **Goal 1: Building Appalachian Businesses**
     Strengthen and diversify the Region's economy through inclusive economic development strategies and investments in entrepreneurship and business development.
   - **Goal 2: Building Appalachia's Workforce Ecosystem**
     Expand and strengthen community systems (education, healthcare, housing, childcare, and others) that help Appalachians obtain a job, stay on the job, and advance along a financially sustaining career pathway.
   - **Goal 3: Building Appalachia's Infrastructure**
     Ensure that the residents and businesses of Appalachia have access to reliable and affordable utilities and infrastructure in order to successfully live and work in the Region.
   - **Goal 4: Building Regional Culture and Tourism**
     Strengthen Appalachia's community and economic development potential by preserving and investing in the Region's local, cultural heritage, and natural assets.
   - **Goal 5: Building Community Leaders and Capacity**
     Invest in the capacity of local leaders, organizations, and communities to address local challenges by providing technical assistance and support to access resources, engage partners, identify strategies and tactics, and conduct effective planning and project execution.
6. To provide opportunities for students to share their work, develop leadership skills, and build professional networks through a presentation to civic groups, elected officials, and/or at a regional or national conference.

Project Outcomes

Projects are expected to have a demonstrable impact on community economic development and community building through development of student leadership and active partnerships. Therefore, each project should address the question: What changes do you expect to occur in the community because of this project? Final reports from each institution should document evidence of the project's impact through quantitative and/or qualitative data. Such evidence might include:

- Development or growth of active partnerships between communities and institutions of higher education in the Region.

- Feedback from community partners, community leaders, or other community members.
- Feedback from student participants.
- Development of plans, priorities, or recommendations that the community may utilize in promoting economic development.
- Community projects, initiatives, events, or other actions and deliverables that are the direct or indirect results of the students' work, or those that are significantly impacted by the students' work.

Learning Outcomes

Each institution must offer a for-credit academic course in the Fall 2026 Semester that includes an approved community-based project. Each course must support the broad learning objectives of the ACRI which are to help students to (a) develop leadership, communication, and civics skills; (b) gain firsthand experience in asset-based community development; and (c) increase student and community awareness of the mission and work of ARC and the goals of its strategic plan. Though each course will be different, depending on its academic discipline and the community challenge it addresses, each course must include the following core requirements:

- Students will engage in fieldwork with at least one community partner during the semester (some institutions may choose to work with multiple partners). The project cannot be strictly classroom-based.

- Students will create a poster summarizing their project and present it at the annual ACRI Symposium.

- Students will make a formal oral presentation on their project accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation at the annual ACRI Symposium. All students who attend the conference must participate in the oral presentation.

- Students will make a final oral presentation on their project to their community partner(s).

- In addition to the presentation to the community partner(s), students must participate in <u>at least one</u> of the following presentation options:

  o Make a presentation to at least one additional civic organization or to elected officials within the community (this presentation can take place at the same time as the final presentation to the community partner described above).

  o Participate in a poster session or panel discussion or present a complete session at the Appalachian Studies Association's Annual Conference in spring 2027.

  o Make a presentation on the project at another relevant regional or national conference.

Subaward Budget Information

Institutions selected to participate will receive a subaward of a maximum of $8500. There is no requirement for institutional match for this subaward. However, if your budget exceeds $8500, the additional funds will need to be made up by the institution.

Subaward agreements for selected schools will be administered by ETSU.

Expenses Allowed

- Travel to community partner events/meetings
- Supplies (such as creation of the poster) not to exceed $400.00 without prior authorization from ETSU
- Travel to the ACRI Symposium in Washington, DC, including:
    - Mileage/Airfare
    - Hotel Rooms
    - Hotel Parking
    - Per Diem to cover meals not provided at the conference
    - Metro Passes
    - Admission fees for approved group events (plays, exhibits, etc.)
- Travel to other conferences where the students will present ACRI research/posters
- $2000 Community Partner Investment (If your community investment is less than $2000, your total subaward will be reduced by that amount.)

Expenses Disallowed

- Salaries (faculty, support staff, student workers, etc.)
- Student travel to conferences where students are NOT presenting ACRI research/posters.
- Equipment, computers, etc. for students/institutions
- Food (receptions, open houses, etc.) that is not related to travel

Community Partner Investment

The $2000 Community Partner Investment must relate to the research project and must address a clearly defined community need.

- Examples of things funds can be used for:
    - Equipment
    - Supplies
    - Physical Assets (i.e. park benches, trail signage)
    - Technical Assistance
- Examples of things funds **cannot** be used for:
    - Honoraria
    - Travel
    - Operational Expenses

Note: Funds are limited, and selection is competitive. Waiving indirect costs to enhance an institution's participation in the program will likely place an application at a competitive advantage.

The faculty director will work with the local community partner(s) to identify an investment need related to the applied research project that may be addressed with up to $2000 from the subaward. If you have questions regarding the Community Partner Investment requirement, please contact ACRI@arc.gov.

Applications

The application should provide the following information:

Project Summary and Details

The application should summarize the institution's plan to work with their local community partner(s) and the community-based student project that addresses the community problem. It should also include:

- How the application aligns with Project Goals and ARC Investment Strategies;
- Community Partner Investment
- Project Outcomes, including projected positive impact on the community
- Learning Outcomes

Course Syllabus

The application should include a draft of the course syllabus (or syllabi if multiple courses are part of the application) that addresses how the class would approach the project and meet the stated objectives.

Letter(s) of Support

The application should include letters of support from community partners that will be participating in the project.

Budget

Institutions selected to participate will receive a subaward of a maximum of $8500. Applications should include a brief itemized budget describing how the institution would plan to use the subaward to fund the project.

Curriculum Vitae

Curriculum vitae of participating faculty should be included in the application. CVs should be no more than 3 pages.

Application Format

ARC desires to minimize submission of superfluous NOSA material. Therefore, responding institutions are instructed to organize their responses according to the format below. Please use this template for your application:

- The application narrative should not exceed 15 typewritten pages, not including CVs, tabbed by category. Font must be Times New Roman and can be no smaller than 10 typeset. Two to three (2-3) pages per section as follows:
    - Project Summary
    - Course Syllabus
    - Letter(s) of Support
    - Budget
    - Curriculum Vitae
- Pages should be numbered consecutively and identify the Institution on each.

Submission Procedures

The deadline for submissions in response to this NOSA is 5:00 p.m. ET, April 10, 2026.

Please submit a PDF copy of your response to ACRI@arc.gov.

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

Review and Evaluation Process

The Appalachian Collegiate Research Initiative team will review and evaluate the responses based on the following criteria:

- Application contains the requested information.
- Budget and utilization of funds.
- The institution's commitment to the Appalachian Region.
- The community partner(s) location within the ARC thirteen-state region.
- Demonstrated need and underlying rationale for the proposed project and its alignment to the ARC Investment Strategies.
- The alignment of the proposed project with the ACRI Scope of Work.
- The institution's connection to local economic development and ARC mission.

After review, ARC will select up to 16 institutions to participate in the Appalachian Collegiate Research Initiative. ARC plans to notify schools of their application status by May 8, 2026.