

CRITERIA AND INSTRUCTIONS

AI TRANSFORMATION LEARNING GRANTS

Call for Institutional Concepts

Responses Due: Friday, September 11, 2026 by 5:00pm PDT/8:00pm EDT



AI Innovation – Learning from Institutions Pursuing Bold Ideas

Artificial intelligence is creating new opportunities for broad-access colleges and universities to redesign how they support students, operate administrative functions, and deliver teaching and learning. While many institutions have begun experimenting with artificial intelligence tools, far fewer are pursuing the broader and deeper organizational changes required to realize meaningful institutional transformation.

The Gates Foundation is seeking to fund approximately up to eight broad-access institutions that are actively imagining and pursuing bold AI ideas. We are less interested in institutions adding AI to what they already do than in those using this moment to reimagine what their institution could become for the students it serves. Through modest learning grants, the Gates Foundation aims to understand how these institutions are approaching AI transformation by capturing timely insights that can inform our future strategy.

Grant Opportunities

The Gates Foundation anticipates making awards of **\$150,000 - \$200,000** for up to eight participating institutions for a learning grant that will run from **Fall 2026 through Summer 2027**. The grants are intended to help support AI transformation efforts by creating the capacity needed to capture and share meaningful insights through reflection, documentation, and evidence collection.

Recognizing that institutional transformation unfolds over many years, we are interested not only in the work institutions expect to undertake during this learning grant, but also in the longer-term vision they are pursuing. We are particularly interested in learning from institutions that are asking ambitious questions about the future of their institutions and are prepared to make meaningful progress toward that vision.

Selected institutions will participate in periodic learning conversations with Gates Foundation staff and will be asked to share institutional artifacts and other evidence throughout the grant period. These institutional insights will primarily inform the Foundation's ongoing strategy development related to AI transformation, though we plan to share a collection of non-sensitive insights with the field.

We invite interested institutions to review the Narrative Questions, Frequently Asked Questions, and Selection Criteria on the following pages to inform their Concept Submissions.

Key Dates

Milestone	Date
Call for Institutional Concepts Released	August 7, 2026
Final Date for Questions Submission	August 21, 2026
Responses Posted to Questions	September 1, 2026
Concept Submissions Due	September 11, 2026, by 5:00pm PDT/8:00pm EDT
Institutions Notified	October 2, 2026
Learning Grant Launch	November 2, 2026
Learning Grant Period	Fall 2026 – Summer 2027

Narrative Questions

1 Institutional Context and Vision

Describe the long-term transformation your institution is pursuing over the next five to ten years. What future are you working toward, what opportunities or challenges are driving this transformation, and how is artificial intelligence influencing or accelerating your vision? We are interested in how AI is prompting your institution to rethink how it operates, supports students, teaches, or fulfills its mission—not simply how AI will be implemented.

Please also describe your institution’s current stage of organizational readiness for this work, including the organizational strengths you will build upon and the key capabilities you expect to develop over time.

The Gates Foundation recognizes that institutions are at different stages of readiness and does not expect mature capabilities across every dimension.

Response length: Up to 750 words

2 Proposed AI Transformation Effort

Describe the transformation effort your institution expects to pursue during the learning grant period as an important step toward your broader institutional vision. Include how this plan for AI transformation stands apart from the field. The Gates Foundation seeks to learn from institutions in their active pursuit of bold, innovative ideas even if the vision is not yet fully realized.

Rather than providing a detailed implementation plan, please describe:

- the transformation work you anticipate undertaking over the next year;
- the key areas you plan to address immediately during the learning grant period;
- the role AI is expected to play;
- the organizational changes you hope to achieve; and
- why this work represents an important learning opportunity.

The Gates Foundation intentionally seeks a diverse portfolio of transformation efforts. Proposed work may focus on student support, operations, teaching and learning, administrative modernization, workforce transformation, governance, data modernization, or other institution-wide priorities.

Response length: Up to 600 words

3 Technical Environment and Transformation Strategy

Describe the technical environment that will support your transformation effort and how you expect it to evolve over time. Please describe, as appropriate:

- Your primary enterprise systems (e.g., SIS, LMS, CRM, ERP, data platforms)
- Your institution's approach to data architecture, interoperability, and technical integration
- Whether your strategy includes efforts to standardize, centralize, or otherwise modernize institutional data to better support AI-enabled workflows and decision-making
- The role AI is expected to play within your broader technical environment
- Technology partners, vendors, or internally developed capabilities that may support this work
- The technical questions or uncertainties your institution hopes to answer through this effort

The Gates Foundation is interested in institutions pursuing a range of technical approaches and maturity levels. At the same time, it has a particular interest in learning from institutions using or exploring approaches that strengthen shared data foundations and enable AI to operate across institutional systems and functions.

Response length: Up to 750 words

4 Learning Questions and Opportunity

A primary purpose of this initiative is to generate practical insights that inform the Gates Foundation and the field's understanding of AI-enabled institutional transformation.

What are the three to five most important questions your institution hopes to explore through this work?

These should be genuine questions that your institution is seeking to answer through its transformation efforts rather than predetermined outcomes. We are particularly interested in understanding the questions institutions are asking as they navigate AI-enabled transformation and the lessons that emerge along the way.

Applicants may wish to consider questions related to:

- organizational readiness and change management;
- leadership and AI governance;
- data modernization, interoperability, and technical architecture;
- AI-enabled student support and institutional operations;
- implementation within a state system or multi-campus environment;
- scaling AI-enabled transformation; or
- other topics where meaningful lessons may emerge.

Please briefly describe why these questions are important to your institution and how your proposed transformation effort creates an opportunity to explore them.

Response length: Up to 500 words

5 Learning Grant Commitment

Participating institutions will serve as learning partners throughout the initiative.

Describe your institution's willingness and capacity to participate in a structured learning process, including:

- 4 – 5 learning conversations with Gates Foundation and project staff;
- sharing implementation experiences, institutional artifacts, and documentation;
- supporting development of a case study;
- and timely sharing of lessons learned throughout the grant period.

The Foundation values candid reflection throughout the transformation process and recognizes that important learning often comes from unexpected challenges as well as successful outcomes.

Response length: Up to 300 words

6 Leadership Team

Describe the individuals who will lead this work.

Please explain why this team is well positioned to guide institutional transformation and how executive leadership will remain engaged throughout the initiative.

Response length: Up to 250 words

Frequently Asked Questions

Who should apply?

Bold thinkers, strategic visionaries, and action-oriented leaders who are pursuing an aspirational vision of the future and understand that AI transformation is more than implementing a chat bot. We are especially interested in leaders who are using AI as an opportunity to rethink how their institution fulfills its mission over the long term.

We are looking for institutions that want to harness a more comprehensive vision for the potential of AI to include reimaged business practices, innovative teaching, real-time holistic support services, and architecting the digital infrastructure that positions their institution for the future. Specifically, we are looking for:

- Broad-access higher education institutions—including community colleges, public regional universities, minority-serving institutions, and other institutions serving large numbers of students from historically underserved backgrounds
- Institutions actively pursuing organizational, technical, and operational changes using artificial intelligence as a strategic lever for scaling change, supporting equitable outcomes, and improving institutional operations and service delivery

Institutions do not need to be at the same stage of AI transformation. The Gates Foundation welcomes concepts from institutions that are beginning their transformation journey as well as those further along, provided they have a clear vision, action orientation, committed leadership, and a willingness to engage as learning partners.

What do we mean by AI Transformation?

We are looking for bold institutions that want to change how they work to deliver on their mission. We loosely define transformation as addressing more than the surface layer of technical, operational, process, and policy changes needed to produce equitable outcomes for students. This involves more than standing up a technology as a discrete intervention. The Gates Foundation is interested in a broad range of transformation efforts in which artificial intelligence plays a central role in redesigning and scaling innovation in institutional operations, student support, teaching and learning, or administrative processes.

Examples may include, but are not limited to:

Institutional operations: Unified data strategies, data and technology modernization, institution-wide AI strategy implementation, governance and organizational redesign

Student support: AI-enabled student advising and support, financial aid transformation, student success operations

Teaching and learning: AI-enabled tutoring and learning support, adaptive learning pathways

Administrative processes: Institutional workflow redesign, administrative process modernization

The Foundation intentionally seeks a portfolio of institutions pursuing different approaches. There is no expectation that all participating institutions focus on the same functional area or implementation model.

Does our institution need sophisticated data infrastructure to apply?

The Foundation recognizes that institutions are at different stages of digital maturity.

While advanced technical infrastructure is not required, the Foundation is particularly interested in understanding how institutions are approaching shared data foundations, interoperability, and technical architecture as part of broader AI-enabled transformation efforts.

What funding is available?

The Gates Foundation anticipates selecting approximately up to **eight institutions** to receive awards of approximately **\$150,000 - \$200,000** each.

Funding is intended to provide flexible support for AI transformation activities and may be used for activities such as planning, staffing, implementation, professional development, stakeholder engagement, technology, documentation, evaluation, and other activities that advance the institution's transformation goals.

Additional budget guidance will be provided to selected institutions during the proposal development process.

What are the learning expectations?

Participating institutions will serve as learning partners throughout the initiative.

While each institution will pursue its own AI transformation priorities, all participants will contribute to a shared learning agenda designed to improve understanding of how broad-access institutions successfully adopt and scale AI-enabled transformation.

Participating institutions should anticipate activities such as:

- Participating in 4 – 5 learning conversations with Foundation staff and partners.
- Sharing selected planning documents, implementation artifacts, and other materials that help illustrate their transformation journey.
- Documenting lessons learned.
- Engaging in light lift activities to support the Foundation's development of case studies, presentations, or other dissemination activities intended to benefit the broader field.

What is the Gates Foundation hoping to learn?

The Foundation hopes to better understand how broad-access institutions successfully pursue AI-enabled transformation and how we might engage strategically to support those efforts at scale.

Areas of interest include, but are not limited to:

- How leadership, governance, and organizational readiness influence transformation.
- How institutions approach data, interoperability, and technical infrastructure.
- What implementation strategies appear most effective.
- What policies and critical practices support AI transformation efforts.
- What barriers institutions encounter and how they overcome them.
- Which lessons are broadly applicable across institutions.

Collectively, these insights will help inform future Foundation investments, strategic priorities, and field-facing resources.

How will institutions be selected?

Applications will be reviewed holistically.

The Foundation expects to select a cohort of institutions representing a diversity of institutional contexts, transformation strategies, organizational maturity, and AI implementation approaches.

Selection criteria are described in the following section.

Selection Criteria

Applications will be reviewed holistically. The Gates Foundation anticipates selecting approximately up to eight institutions that collectively represent a diverse portfolio of institutional contexts, transformation approaches, and learning opportunities.

Successful applicants are not expected to have fully mature AI capabilities or predetermined answers. Rather, the Foundation seeks institutions that are actively pursuing meaningful transformation and are well positioned to generate timely insights that can inform the Foundation's strategic learning agenda.

Applications will be evaluated using the following considerations:

Bold Vision and Strategic Integration of AI to Support Institutional Transformation

Applicants demonstrate a compelling vision for institutional transformation and the role that AI can play in achieving it.

Work intentionally integrates AI within a broader institutional strategy to support not only the implementation of new technology, but also the organizational, operational, and human conditions necessary for successful transformation. Applications should demonstrate thoughtful consideration of the leadership, governance, change management, policies, and workforce readiness required to ensure faculty, staff, and students are prepared to effectively engage with AI-enabled experiences.

Successful applications will demonstrate a transformation strategy that extends beyond technology implementation alone.

Contribution to the Gates Foundation's Learning Agenda

The proposed transformation effort represents a meaningful opportunity to generate practical insights that can inform the Gates Foundation's understanding of AI-enabled institutional transformation.

Applicants should demonstrate how their proposed work, institutional context, and anticipated learning are likely to contribute evidence, experiences, and early lessons that advance the Foundation's strategic learning agenda. The Foundation is particularly interested in institutions pursuing meaningful organizational transformation—not simply implementing new technology—and that can provide timely insights into the opportunities, challenges, and decisions that emerge during implementation.

Institutions are not expected to have predetermined answers or fully developed approaches. Rather, the Foundation seeks institutions whose work is likely to generate useful learning that can inform future strategy, investments, and field-facing supports.

Institutional Commitment

Institutional leadership demonstrates a clear commitment to the proposed transformation effort and to creating the conditions necessary for meaningful progress during the learning period.

The Gates Foundation is interested in institutions where executive leadership is actively engaged, appropriate cross-functional stakeholders are involved, and sufficient organizational support exists to generate meaningful learning over the course of the grant.

Organizational and Technical Context

Applicants provide a clear understanding of their current organizational and technical environment, including the opportunities and constraints that will shape their transformation journey.

The Gates Foundation seeks a range of institutional contexts—including different levels of organizational readiness, technical maturity, governance approaches, and AI experience—that collectively provide opportunities to better understand how these factors influence institutional transformation.

Commitment to Knowledge Sharing

Applicants demonstrate a willingness and capacity to share insights from their transformation efforts throughout the learning period.

Selected institutions will be expected to participate in periodic discussions with Gates Foundation staff, respond to targeted learning requests, share relevant artifacts and documentation, and contribute to the development of institutional case studies. The Foundation values timely, candid reflection on both progress and challenges so that lessons can inform ongoing strategy development during the initiative.

Portfolio Diversity

Final selections will consider the overall composition of the learning cohort. The Foundation intends to assemble a portfolio of institutions representing diverse:

- Institutional types and student populations
- Stages of organizational and technical maturity
- AI use cases and transformation priorities
- Leadership and governance approaches
- Technical environments and implementation strategies
- Anticipated learning opportunities

As a result, applications will be evaluated both on their individual merits and on how they contribute to the overall learning goals of the cohort.

Submission Instructions

Please submit the completed Concept Submission Form as a single PDF no later than **September 11, 2026 by 5:00pm Pacific Daylight Time / 8:00pm Eastern Daylight Time** based on the timestamp of receipt of the submission email.

Submission email:

AILearningGrants@gatesfoundation.org

Subject line:

AI Institutional Transformation Learning Grant – Concept Submission – [Institution Name]

Applicants will receive confirmation upon receipt of their submission.

Please submit any questions to the Gates Foundation submission email by August 21. Gates Foundation staff will provide global responses, published to AILearningGrants.org, by September 1.

Selected institutions may be invited to participate in a follow-up conversation with Gates Foundation staff before final funding decisions are made.