Request for Proposals

Transforming Institutions to Increase Student Success:
A collaborative technical assistance and learning opportunity
for APLU Powered by Publics Institutions

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Section 1: Call for Leadership Partners

1.1 Overview

As one of 13 leading higher education organizations receiving funding through the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) Intermediaries for Scale investment program, the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities has been collaborating with content experts in fundamental areas key to increasing student success (including academic advising, high-quality digital learning, academic readiness, and college affordability), to develop a model for delivering strategic technical assistance to member institutions in 2021. Data and experience indicate that student success outcomes improve, particularly for low-income, first-generation, students of color, and other underserved student populations, when institutions take a campus-wide approach to transforming these fundamental areas.

APLU is pleased to announce an opportunity for a select group of Powered by Publics institutions to work together, with APLU and partnering higher education leaders and experts in the field to receive customized programming, professional development, and other technical assistance supports and resources designed to build capacity to support student success. We are seeking institutions that are deeply committed to the success of underserved students in their state and are eager to learn and try innovative approaches. This effort seeks to identify and deliver high-quality, in-depth technical assistance in priority areas that will have a lasting impact on an institution’s ability to improve student success outcomes.

Fourteen institutions will be selected through a competitive review process and will work together from March 15, 2021 through July 31, 2022. This cohort will first embark on a holistic needs assessment of current policies, practices, and campus culture. This information, along with key student success data metrics, will be used to inform the identification and delivery of customized programming, professional development, and technical assistance that prioritizes institutional context, supports identified needs, and integrates into existing student success strategies. Examples of technical assistance and resources may include: support for implementing policy and practice changes related to college readiness; digital learning strategies and curriculum redesign; gateway course reform; customized professional development for faculty and advisors; guidance for implementing a comprehensive advising system, direct support for faculty implementing blended learning models, and other services to be developed by content expert partners based on identified campus needs. Provision of these resources will be facilitated by APLU and provided by content experts within the broader network of this initiative with funding support from Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Background

Launched in 2018, Powered by Publics is APLU’s largest-ever collaborative effort to advance equity and increase the number of graduates with baccalaureate degrees nationwide. The initiative is convening 125 universities and state systems across 49 states to form 14 “transformation clusters.” These clusters formed a sophisticated community of peers sharing information and strategies concerning the efficacy of current degree completion work and the common barriers facing underrepresented students. Each cluster is focused on solving different pieces of the student success puzzle. Cluster institutions work
collaboratively to improve policies and practices to remove barriers, eliminate the achievement gap, prepare students to thrive in the 21st century workforce, and collectively increase the number of degrees they award. The clusters are advancing collaborative work in thematic areas of affordability, holistic student supports, and teaching and learning.

The project’s overarching goals are as follows:

- Produce hundreds of thousands more graduates by 2025 with an emphasis on underrepresented minority, low-income, and first-generation students.
- Cut in half the achievement gap by 2025 for underrepresented minority, low-income, and first-generation students while increasing access.
- Share key data, learning, and effective practices to drive innovation and transformation across the higher education sector.

To reach these goals, Powered by Publics is guided by four strategic priorities:

1. Taking explicit action to pursue educational equity for low-income, first-generation, and students of color.
2. Committing to transparency by sharing data and monitoring progress toward equity goals.
3. Developing common opportunities for cross-cluster learning, sharing, and collective action in the thematic areas of Affordability, Holistic Student Supports, and Teaching & Learning.
4. APLU and its partners committing to invest in institutional capacity through grants and technical assistance.

This new initiative advances strategic priorities three and four.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation selected APLU as one of 13 leading higher education organizations to receive funding through the Foundation’s Intermediaries for Scale investment program that will serve transforming colleges and universities as connectors, advisors, and strategists.

APLU was selected for the association’s commitment to and experience supporting institutions as they reduce college success disparities by race and income; promote continuous learning and improvement through the use of data; and identify, implement, and evaluate significant campus-wide changes in policy and practice.

APLU is using funds from the grant to launch this opportunity for 14 Powered by Publics institutions to receive technical assistance, customized programming, professional development opportunities and other resources designed to increase institutional capacity to support student success.

Participating institutions will have the opportunity to receive technical assistance aligned to our learning hub topic areas of holistic student success, teaching and learning, and affordability. Through our learning hub structure, we will be able to elevate effective practices, professional development and programing supports that are providing the greatest impact to all Powered by Publics institutions.
The Work

APLU will use the Request for Proposal process to select 14 Powered by Publics institutions to receive access to these services. Successful institutions will demonstrate deep commitment to equity, serve as leaders, and exhibit readiness to reflect on institutional needs to innovate, evolve, and change to better serve students.

Participating institutions will work together to:

- Participate in needs assessment activities, including but not limited to the Institutional Transformation Assessment (ITA) tool and the Postsecondary Data Partnership.
- Analyze needs assessment results with APLU, cohort institutions, and content experts to identify customized programming, professional development, and other technical assistance supports and resources to address identified needs.
- Use APLU’s Student Journey Framework as a guide to strategically organize, understand and communicate how technical assistance and other capacity supports collectively support the broader student success strategic goals of each institution. (Please see Section 1.2 Benefits for more information.)
- Engage with cohort institutions, APLU and other partners around DEI concepts, strategies for elevating student voices, building inclusive relationships, using data to understand equity challenges and progress, and managing change.
- Share learning with peers within the broader Powered by Publics clusters network.
- Share data through the Postsecondary Data Partnership and have access to the dashboards produced from the data collection. The PDP will also support the Powered by Publics Core Data Metrics.

The first phase of engagement, from March through August of 2021, will be dedicated to needs assessment and data collection to inform the identification and provision of customized technical assistance and resources. The culmination of the first phase of this work will be presented during the 2021 APLU Annual Meeting, November 14-16, 2021.

The second phase, from September 2021 through July 2022, will focus on delivering customized technical assistance and capacity supports to cohort institutions and tracking and evaluating the impact of these supports with a focus on the impact on equity challenges.

1.2 Benefits

Selected institutions will receive a broad package of strategic and valuable core benefits, including:

- $15,000 stipend to cover expenses related to participation.
- Funded travel for two team members from each institution to attend the APLU Annual Meeting.
- Support in adopting and implementing policies and practices designed to improve student outcomes. This will be facilitated through cohort learning and direct support from APLU in collaboration with content experts in areas such as advising, high-quality digital learning, academic readiness, and affordability.
• **Provision of up to three free technical assistance opportunities from content experts and capacity partners participating in the BMGF’s Postsecondary Success Strategy.** These services will be customized to meet the needs of each institution and may range from low-touch (webinars) to high-touch (in-person consultations and workshops) based on need.

• **Full support implementing the Institutional Transformation Assessment (ITA) needs assessment tool (Required).** Cohort members will have the opportunity to utilize the Institutional Transformation Assessment (ITA) tool, which will include a facilitated sensemaking meeting to convene cross-campus stakeholders. The ITA is a web-based assessment tool that helps universities understand institutional strengths and areas for improvement with the goal of building capacity to better support students on campus and develop an action plan for reaching the institution’s student success goals. The tool was developed by BMGF and successfully piloted by APLU with 14 institutions during Fall 2019.

• **Full support for participation in the Postsecondary Data Partnership (PDP) dashboards (Required).** The PDP is a nationwide effort, managed by the National Student Clearinghouse, to help colleges and universities gain a fuller picture of student progress and success outcomes, meet various reporting requirements, and identify where to focus their resources. Members will share key data through the PDP and gain access to customized dashboards to improve data capacity and transparency on campus. The PDP is based on the idea that better data leads to actionable insights that informs decisions to support student success.

• **National recognition and promotion as student success leaders.** Each selected institution will play a vital leadership and mentor role in their Powered by Publics transformation cluster, sharing what they learn from the needs assessment, data tools, and technical assistance they will have access to as members. APLU’s Public Affairs team will regularly champion and promote the work of the campuses in the cohort through various communications channels and platforms. Finally, cohort members will be invited to present their work at the APLU Annual Meeting and potentially other convenings.

• **Full access and support related to APLU’s Student Journey Framework.** This framework helps universities see the undergraduate experience through a student’s perspective, allowing them to place student success interventions in context while working toward solutions and measuring impact. The framework encompasses the totality of the student’s journey through undergraduate education, from initial interest and application to successful transition to the workforce (or graduate school, or military service). Students may pass through multiple entry and exit points as they transfer in and out of institutions, pause their education for a brief time, or return to higher education many years later. By taking into consideration students’ needs at each phase of the journey and how those needs may differ by demographic, we can connect student barriers with the most effective solutions. The framework also includes metrics for measuring impact on student outcomes, as well as core capacities the university must invest in to ensure broader success (e.g., data and analytics, strategic finance, leadership).

• **Opportunity to co-create new student success solutions with peers.** Benefits include free programming, professional development and technical assistance, and the opportunity to build from the experience of these services to design new solutions with peers. The cohort will serve in much the same way as a laboratory for innovation, using the services provided to create value on their campuses and in their peer groups. APLU will support the scale of these innovation efforts.
by synthesizing and elevating what we learn about effective supports to all PxP institutions through publications, meetings, and other learning products that emerge from this collaboration.

APLU and partners will publicly highlight and promote the work of this cohort and individual campuses through a variety of methods and venues. Moreover, as current members of Powered by Publics, the cohort will share what they learn with their transformation clusters, achieving greater scale across the higher education sector.

1.3 Expectations

Selected institutions will commit to the following:

- Forming a dedicated cross-campus team to participate in this collaborative work. This project is designed to take a holistic, campus-wide approach to student success. For this reason, each institution should form a team representing student success leadership (i.e. academic affairs, student affairs, IT, Institutional Research, centers for teaching and learning) and any other representatives whose engagement is essential to having a cross-campus impact on your campus. This work will include meetings with institution teams from other cohort institutions, the APLU project manager, service providers and consultants, two 1-2 day campus visits (one in Summer/Fall 2021 and the other in Spring 2022 – potentially virtual due to Covid-19 related health risks), presentations and convening at the APLU Annual Meeting and other national meetings, and regular phone calls and email correspondence with APLU and other cohort members.
  - Estimated time commitment for campus teams: 1 hour per month, plus 2-3 hours of pre-work and follow up offline. One 8-hour in-person meeting (potentially virtual due to Covid-19 restrictions) each November, plus travel time.

  - Estimated time commitment for campus teams participating in needs assessment: 1 hour per participant to complete the needs assessment survey, 5-6 hours for a facilitated sensemaking meeting and 2-3 hours of follow up discussion with leadership.

- Submitting student and course data to the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) Postsecondary Data Partnership (PDP) on a semi-annual basis. Selected institutions will sign a Data Sharing Agreement with the NSC that outlines how the data will be shared. Data will not be used for commercial purposes, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation will not use data to make funding decisions. Institutions will use dashboards produced by NSC to analyze their data.
  - Estimated time commitment for Institutional Research staff: estimated from 80-250 hours over a 2-3-month period to construct the cohort and course data files, submit data, and review dashboards. Leadership may also spend 3-4 hours reviewing the dashboards and participating in follow up discussions.

- Engage in technical assistance and professional development services.
Estimated time commitment: Time on task will vary based on the depth of engagement, duration, audience and intended outcomes. Services will be tailored to meet the needs of institutions and could range from 5-7 hours over the course month for faculty to participate in webinars or trainings to 80-100 for a team to participate in a revision or implementation of a new policy or practice over the course of a year.

- Participating in the Student Achievement Measure (SAM) [www.studentachievementmeasure.org](http://www.studentachievementmeasure.org). SAM is a transparency initiative where higher education institutions track multiple cohorts of students across institutions to create a more complete picture of undergraduate student progress and completion within the higher education system.

- Estimated time commitment for Institutional Research staff: Less than 8 hours. However, if you submitted data to the Core Data Metrics, the data are automatically rolled into SAM, reducing your time commitment to less than one hour to verify the data.

- Sharing learning from this experience through the Powered by Publics cluster infrastructure.

APLU will commit to providing the following:

- Delivery and administration of the Institutional Transformation Assessment (ITA), including on-campus facilitation of a group sensemaking meeting with cross-campus stakeholders.
- Technical assistance to aid submission of cohort and course data files to the Postsecondary Data Partnership (PDP) and facilitation of external technical assistance from the National Student Clearinghouse and other partners.
- Support in identifying and facilitating the delivery of technical assistance services customized to meet institution needs, including serving as liaison with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, technical assistance providers/content experts and partner organization as needed to procure up to three services per institution, ensure successful delivery, and evaluate effectiveness.
- Facilitating and coordinating cohort learning and technical assistance delivery, including but not limited to procurement, contracts, invoicing, scheduling, event planning, meeting facilitation, feedback and evaluation, and other administrative tasks.
- Engaging with cohort institutions and other partners to analyze and elevate DEI concepts, develop strategies for elevating student voices, building inclusive relationships, using data to understand equity challenges and progress, and managing change to create equitable learning environments.
- Communications support for synthesizing and disseminating lessons learned, provided by APLU’s Office of Public Affairs.

1.4 Outcomes

Our vision is a public four-year higher education sector that actively pursues equity and student-centered transformation. We believe that the institution is the unit of change, and that “a transforming
institution continually builds its capacity to achieve equitable student outcomes at scale.”¹ Long-term desired outcomes include:

1. Increasing awareness of successful and promising transformation strategies among campus leaders and communities.
2. Informing key campus-level decisions about scalable change options and strategies supporting student success.
3. Supporting transformation by providing guidance and resources for adopting, implementing, evaluating, and sustaining changes in policy and practice.
4. Building connections across colleges, universities and other supporting organizations to accelerate and streamline learning and sharing of promising practices.
5. Elevating equity as a core value of higher education and moving universities from thinking about programs and projects as solutions to taking a systemic approach to change.

Section 2: Eligibility and Selection Criteria

To qualify to apply for this cohort opportunity, applicants must be current APLU members as well as current members of Powered by Publics. Proposals, including responses to the selection criteria questions and additional information requested, should be no longer than 5 single-spaced pages (12-point font), not including appendices or attachments.

Applications will be scored based on the following criteria:

**Institutional Readiness for Transformation (40%):** We seek to identify institutions that are ready, willing, and able to reflect on their own institutional needs and to innovate, evolve, and change as part of this cohort experience. Evidence of institutional readiness will include high-level leadership commitment and engagement in institutional change, ability to collect and analyze data, willingness to share results and lessons learned, and the engagement of a cross-campus team.

**Commitment to Equity (30%):** We are seeking institutions that have identified and begun to address systemic causes of inequity in higher education, including but not limited to: social inequality, income inequality, neighborhood segregation, institutional racism, culture and climate, and misaligned institutional policies and incentives. Strong candidates will have begun to recognize these systemic causes, identified levers for change within the scope of a campus’s control, and have made publicly visible commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion. We invite applicants to share information about their prior and planned equity work in their responses.

**Methods for Identifying Student Success Needs (20%):** Institutions should share the methods currently used at their campuses to assess and identify students’ needs. It is our intent to use the information captured by the ITA needs assessment tool alongside evaluation of student need to customize the technical assistance and professional development delivered to meet the need of institutions. We seek information from campuses about how to improve the processes for identifying student needs.

**Student Populations Served (10%):** One of the goals of APLU’s Powered by Publics is to cut in half the achievement gap for underrepresented minority students by 2025; similarly, the Bill & Melinda Gates

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¹ Source: FrontierSet.org (2018)
Foundation seeks to eliminate equity gaps for underrepresented racial/ethnic minority and low-income students. Applicants with the potential to make large strides toward eliminating these equity gaps will be given preferential consideration. Evidence of this potential may include serving large numbers of students from the target populations, and for this reason minority-serving institutions are strongly encouraged to apply, as well as those serving high percentages of Pell recipients.

Section 3: Submission of Proposals

Selection Criteria Questions: In the proposal, each applicant should address each of the four priorities mentioned in the selection criteria by answering the questions in the sections below (Sections 3.1 – 3.4).

3.1 Institutional Readiness for Transformation – 40%

Question 1: How does your institution currently use data to assess progress toward student success objectives? Describe what data are collected and how frequently? Who uses data at the institution and how is it incorporated into decision-making at leadership levels?

Question 2: Has your institution used the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s Institutional Transformation Assessment in the past? If not, would you be willing to pilot this tool on your campus? How has your institution approached institutional self-assessment and needs assessment to date?

Question 3: Does your institution currently participate in the Postsecondary Data Partnership (PDP)? If not, would you be willing to participate and submit data in Fall 2020 and Spring 2021? (A sample data sharing agreement is included in the Appendix.)

Question 4: Which representatives from your campus will participate as part of your institutions’ team in this initiative? Why have you selected these individuals? Provide an example of how your institution has built a cross-campus team in the past to support a student success effort (you may use your Powered by Publics team as an example).

3.2 Commitment to Equity – 30%

Question 5: How does your institution define equity? If your institution has an equity statement or other public evidence of your commitment, please copy it here or provide a link.

Question 6: How do you plan to operationalize your institution’s commitment to equity? Include in your response, if possible, what types of resources and support provided through the BMGF and APLU could aid your institution in this effort.

Question 7: Describe how root causes (social inequality, income inequality, neighborhood segregation, institutional racism, culture and climate, misaligned institutional policies and incentives) have created barriers to success for students on your campus and how your institution sought to address these root causes?
3.3 Methods for Identifying Student Success Needs – 20%

**Question 8:** How does your institution currently identify student success needs? How does your institution capture student voice in this assessment? Identify areas where the institution can better support those needs. Who on campus is involved in making these decisions? What data are used?

**Question 9:** What additional resources (e.g., technology, expertise, content knowledge, other products and services) would help your institution support students more effectively, and how would you use them?

3.4 Student Populations Served – 10%

APLU’s aim is to assemble a diverse cohort of institutions that together serve a significant number of students from populations that we seek to impact, and that present significant potential to close equity gaps. We will review most recent IPEDS data and Powered by Publics Core Data Metrics submitted in 2020.

**Question 10:** Please indicate if you submitted data to the Core Data Metrics. If so, we will use your previously submitted data as part of your application. If not, please provide us with the enrollment, retention and degrees awarded and graduation rates for the Pell eligible and minoritized populations on your campus.

**Question 11:** Please indicate if your institution is currently classified as a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) or Minority-Serving Institution (MSI) or emergent in either of these categories.

3.5 Additional Information

In your response, please also include the following:

1. Name, title, and contact information (email and phone) for a primary point of contact regarding your application
2. The names and titles of other core staff that will serve on your campus’ team if your institution is selected.
3. A brief letter or email of support from your institution’s president/chancellor, describing how participation in this opportunity will strengthen campus student success efforts and anything leadership hopes to learn or gain from participation.
4. *If applicable,* please indicate your membership or participation (or intended participation) in any of the following other Intermediaries for Scale: (This has no bearing on the selection process.)
   - American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU)
   - Complete College America
   - Frontier Set
   - E3 Alliance
   - Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities
3.6 Proposal Format and Delivery

Proposals, including responses to the selection criteria questions and the additional information requested should be no longer than 5 single-spaced pages (12-point font), not including appendices or attachments. No budget justification is required. Please send one electronic copy (Word or PDF) to Lynn Brabender at lbrabender@aplu.org no later than 8:00pm Eastern Time (5:00pm Pacific Time) on Friday, February 19, 2021.

If you have any questions during the proposal process, please feel free to contact Lynn Brabender, Associate Director for the Center for Public University Transformation, directly by email lbrabender@aplu.org or phone at (202) 478-6078.

3.7 Proposal Review Process

Proposal review will be conducted by an internal review committee, including members of our Powered by Publics National Advisory Council. The proposal review committee will provide recommendations to APLU for institutional selection. The final review of recommendations will be made by the APLU President.

3.8 Proposal Timeline

The anticipated timeline is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RFP Announced and Application Period Opens</td>
<td>January 11, 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informational Webinar #1</td>
<td>January 22, 2021 at 1:00 pm Eastern Time</td>
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<tr>
<td>Informational Webinar #2</td>
<td>February 10, 2021 at 2:00 pm Eastern Time</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deadline for Proposals</td>
<td>February 19, 2021 at 8:00pm Eastern Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proof of Scale Cohort Announced</td>
<td>March 15, 2021</td>
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</tbody>
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3.9 About the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU)

APLU is a research, policy, and advocacy organization dedicated to strengthening and advancing the work of public universities in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. With a membership of 244 public research
universities, land-grant institutions, state university systems, and affiliated organizations, APLU's agenda is built on the three pillars of increasing degree completion and academic success, advancing scientific research, and expanding engagement. Annually, member campuses enroll 5.0 million undergraduates and 1.3 million graduate students, award 1.3 million degrees, employ 1.3 million faculty and staff, and conduct $49.2 billion in university-based research.

3.10 About the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s Intermediaries for Scale Investment

For more than a decade, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and its partners have been working closely with a diverse set of colleges and universities seeking to make changes that will help many more students – especially low-income and first-generation students, students of color, and working adults – achieve their educational goals. Prior initiatives such as Completion by Design and the Frontier Set have shaped the Foundation’s Postsecondary Success Strategy – in particular, the need for partners that can connect campuses with each other and with experts and resources, and that can help guide institutions through adopting, implementing, evaluating, and sustaining changes in policy and practice.

Through a highly selective five-phase RFP process, the Foundation selected 13 organizations (out of 200 that submitted letters of interest), including APLU, as Intermediaries for Scale grant awardees that will serve transforming colleges and universities as connectors, advisors, and strategists. The 13 organizations have demonstrated commitment and experience in supporting institutions as they reduce college success disparities by race and income; promote continuous learning and improvement through the use of data; and identify, implement, and evaluate significant campus-level changes in policy and practice. Collectively, these groups work with or represent nearly three-quarters of the nation’s public two- and four-year institutions.

The intermediaries have been tasked to work within four priorities:

- **Increase awareness** of colleges’ and universities’ efforts to transform themselves to become more student-centered.
- **Inform campus-level decision-making** (and decision-makers) about options, opportunities, and risks related to adopting and implementing policies and practices designed to improve student outcomes.
- **Support transformation efforts** by providing guidance on changing policies and practices and measuring the impact and effectiveness of those changes.
- **Build connections** among colleges and universities and supporting organizations to promote timely and efficient exchange of best practices and lessons learned.
3.11 Additional Terms and Conditions

The right is reserved, as the interests of APLU may demand, to revise this RFP prior to the date set for receiving proposals. Such revisions, if any, will be announced by amendment to this solicitation. Copies of such amendments, as may be issued, will be furnished to all institutions. If the revisions are of such a nature as to mandate material changes in information requested, the date set for receiving proposals may be postponed by such number of days as, in the opinion of APLU, will enable the institutions to revise their proposals. In such cases, the amendment will include an announcement of the new date for receiving proposals.

APLU may cancel this RFP, in whole or in part, at any time before signing a contract. Issuance of this RFP creates no obligation on the part of APLU to make an award.

APLU will not pay any costs that an institution may incur in responding to this RFP, including those associated with proposal preparation and demonstrations. APLU assumes no liability for costs or damages incurred by the institution during or resulting from this RFP.

APLU reserves the right to accept or reject any or all proposals, in whole or in part, received as a result of this RFP, or to negotiate separately with any sources whatsoever in any manner necessary to serve the best interests of the Proof of Scale cohort.

There will be no public opening of the proposals. Proposals will not be returned to institutions.

Participation in the RFP process is the institution’s sole decision. Although APLU intends to adhere to the process as stated herein, it reserves the right to modify the process, requirements, and/or timetable. The RFP should not be construed as a contract to purchase services, and APLU shall not be obligated in any manner until a written agreement has been duly executed, prior to the commencement of any work. Submission of a proposal will be considered acceptance of these terms and conditions.

APLU may terminate this RFP at any time for any reason whatsoever and is not obligated to accept the prescribed number of participants or any at all. Institutions not selected will not be entitled to a debriefing. Prior to the proposal closing date, a submitted proposal may be withdrawn by an institution by sending written notification to Lynn Brabender at lbrabender@aplu.org.