

Coalition of
Urban Serving Universities

USU Call for Proposals

Seeking Thought Leaders in Community-based Learning and AI Innovations

The Coalition of Urban Serving Universities (USU), with support from Google.org, **is seeking proposals from university thought leaders and innovators with expertise in community-based learning (CBL) to explore and expand the use of artificial intelligence (AI) to scale and scope CBL. Up to ten case study proposals will be accepted to receive a $3,500 honorarium to contribute to a case study collection, participate in a year-long working group with other experts, and receive priority for additional opportunities to fund a CBL project that uses AI as a tool to enhance and expand the impact of CBL initiatives.**

Background & Purpose

While traditional internships have long been the standard for career readiness, overwhelming demand from students and employers has created a need for scalable new approaches. One promising option is career-focused community-based learning (CBL). Utilized throughout the P-20 educational pipeline, CBL is a model of work-based learning that represents a range of pedagogies, methods, and programs that connect the content of the classroom with the surrounding community. CBL at the postsecondary level often maintains an emphasis on employment meta-competencies, career-transferable success skills, entrepreneurship, civic leadership, and/or industry-specific training.

One of the challenges of CBL is scalability and sustainability of these initiatives that tend to be niche programs, "pet projects," or experimental initiatives within courses and curricula. Further, evidence indicates that CBL and work-based learning tend to be clustered in certain majors and disciplines.

The place-based mission of urban-serving universities (USUs), strong relationships with regional industries, and deep ties to employers in their local economies make them uniquely suited to lead an initiative to explore and scale career-focused CBL as an alternative and complement to traditional internship opportunities. As such, the **Coalition of Urban Serving Universities (USU)** strives to engage USU membership to elevate current and aspirational practices of CBL and to explore the integration of AI as a tool for efficiency, effectiveness, and scaling of these efforts.

A First Step: Exploring Community-based Learning & AI in Practice

This project is a first step in a larger agenda of research and practice to explore how AI can create efficiencies, enhance the scope and scale of CBL initiatives, and broaden this pedagogical approach to new departments and majors.

Scope & Incentives

The Coalition of Urban Serving Universities (USU), with support from Google.org, **seeks to partner with up to ten USU institutions to serve as thought leaders and engage in the following activities** to fill this need in higher education practice and scholarship:

- **Prepare a submission for a new case study collection** to highlight successful and innovative community-based learning (CBL) initiatives at public urban-serving research universities and explore how AI has, or could, enhance the scalability, sustainability, and transferability of these efforts.
- **Participate in a working group** of representatives from campuses included in the case study collection to facilitate a larger discussion and clarify a research and best practice agenda to integrate AI tools for effective and efficient use in CBL initiatives, thus developing more equitable college-to-career pathways for a diverse pool of postsecondary students. The working group will host in-person convenings in association with:
    - the 2027 USU Spring Meeting (currently scheduled for April 13-14, 2027 in Washington, DC), and
    - the 2027 APLU Annual Meeting (currently scheduled for October 31-November 2, 2027 in San Diego, CA).

Incentives to participate in this project include:

1. Institutions or programs that are selected will receive a **$3,500 honorarium** to help defray the resource investment associated with the preparation and publication of the case study and facilitate participation in the working group, such as covering travel to two in-person meetings and a discounted registration rate for the APLU Annual Meeting.
2. The long-term goal of this work is to advance to a second phase of the project with additional funding where USU member institutions would apply for awards to implement AI-enhanced CBL to expand the scope, scale, and reach of this pedagogical approach into a learning system. **Institutions that are selected for the case study collection and participate in the working group may be eligible for priority consideration for a future financial award to implement an AI-enhanced CBL strategy.**

Examples & Definitions

Community-based learning

The operational definition of **community-based learning** for the current project is:

> Within the context of higher education, community-based learning (CBL) is a **teaching and learning initiative or strategy** that integrates academic objectives and classroom instruction with structured real-world service, research, or experiential activities that mutually benefit the community, the campus, and the students. It involves students working alongside community partners, industries, and employers to address identified needs, apply theoretical knowledge to practical problems, reflect on the experience to deepen understanding, and develop students' workforce skills and career pathways, particularly with regional partners. In short, CBL connects academic instruction with meaningful and mutually beneficial engagement in the local community.

Under the umbrella of this definition, topics may include, but are not limited to:

- Career-focused community engagement initiatives
- Career-focused service-learning
- Classroom coaches/instructors from business and industry
- Client-based projects, including capstones and culminating experiences
- Community-based co-ops, internships, and/or returnships
- Community-based pedagogy in classes and curriculum
- Fieldwork
- Innovation hubs
- Locally-based workforce development
- Supervised practice models
- Undergraduate research focused on local industries or issues

Artificial Intelligence

The operational definition of **artificial intelligence** for the current project is:

> Artificial intelligence (AI) describes computer systems that **perform cognitive tasks usually associated with human intelligence**, such as perceiving, learning, reasoning, and interacting with the environment. AI systems use inputs and data to produce outputs such as content, predictions, suggestions, or actions. For the purposes of this project, AI may be used as a tool or platform to create efficiencies, scalability, sustainability, and easily updated models for CBL. Further, AI can enhance transferability to other courses, curricula, and majors. This broad definition allows for many creative uses of AI in CBL initiatives.

Submission Guidelines

This case study collection aims to highlight successful and innovative community-based learning (CBL) initiatives at public urban-serving research universities and explore how AI has, or could, enhance the scalability, sustainability, and transferability of these efforts. Eligible initiatives, including pilot programs, need to have existed for at least two semesters and have metrics and data to illustrate impact. USU aims to include a diversity of institutional examples and may limit awards to one per institution.

Case studies submissions should be approximately 2,500-3,000 words, excluding tables and figures, and follow this template:

I. Institutional Context and Student Population Profile (approximately 300 words)

We will publish your institution's student enrollment, retention and graduation rates, basic student demographics, and campus information as part of the case study. This information will be pulled from the APLU Member Dashboard that compiles data from IPEDS and other national data sources.

As a complement to these metrics, please include a narrative describing the unique nature of your institution containing (but not limited to) the following information:

- Unique statistics, qualities, or history of your institution especially as it relates to community-based learning. This may include:
  - Your campus, community, and/or department culture
  - How your organization operates
  - The students you serve
  - Place-based opportunities as an urban-serving university
  - The institution's relationship with community-based organizations or industries in your city, etc.

II. Problem Statement and Description of Initiative (approximately 1,000 words)

In this section please include:

- The impetus for creating the community-based learning initiative (e.g., institutional or student challenge, opportunity, need, etc.)
- Please describe the community-based learning initiative
- Title of program
- Length of time offered at your institution
- Connection of the program/initiative to larger institutional objectives
- Major goals/objectives of the program (e.g. is it targeted at specific populations or directed at specific transition points or needs in the community)
- Administrative home and descriptions of cross-functional, interdepartmental partnerships
- Key community partners
- Program specifics (e.g., what are the program elements)

III. Current or Potential Role of AI in the Community-based Learning Initiative (approximately 750 words)

In this section, please include a narrative description of one of the following:

- **Current AI practices:** Ways that AI **has been used** in the content of the community-based learning initiative **and can be expanded** to advance the goals, impact, scale, and/or sustainability of the CBL initiative as well as transferability to other courses, programs, or majors.

-OR-

- **Potential integration of AI:** Ways that AI **could be** used in the content of the community-based learning initiative or to advance, **or further advance**, the goals, impact, scale, and/or sustainability of the CBL initiative as well as transferability to other courses, programs, or majors.

IV. Outcomes of Initiative and Evidence of Impact (approximately 500 words)

In this section, please include:

- The method you used to collect data (e.g. National Survey Data, institutional data, etc.)
- Outcomes & Supporting Data
  - If data is quantitative, highlight key findings that impact campus practice. A limited number of tables and figures can be included to illustrate findings.
  - If assessment data is qualitative, identify major themes that inform the work. Select quotes, document excerpts, observational records, and/or other relevant data.

V. Implications for Practice: Lessons Learned and Innovative Discoveries & Opportunities (approximately 500 words)

In this section, please include:

- How did this initiative advance student learning and institutional impact?
- What lessons were learned?
- What steps are being taken to continue the current success and expand the scope of this initiative?
- Share any innovative discoveries or opportunities identified through this work.

Submit a Case Study

Complete the CBL-AI case study submission form. Case studies will be accepted through December 15, 2026.

Submit a case study here >>

Timeline & Submission Process

To submit a case study, complete the CBL-AI case study submission form. Case studies will be accepted through December 15, 2026. Only complete submissions, adhering to these guidelines, will be considered for selection. Selection of an institution for inclusion in the case study collection also commits the institution for participation in the working group for the project.

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Review Process:

Submissions are reviewed by members of the USU staff and external reviewers. Submissions will be reviewed based on submission requirements; relevance to topic; quality of writing; level of impact toward the identified need as demonstrated through data, metrics, and writing; uniqueness of program or initiative; and interest and applicability to other urban-serving institutions. Submission review will be completed no later than March 1, 2027.

Acceptance:

Upon acceptance of the case study, USU will enter a memorandum of understanding with the author(s). Anticipated publication date for this volume is November 2027.

Questions?

If you have questions about the publication, the guidelines, or the appropriateness of your initiative, we encourage you to attend or watch the recording of the informational webinar hosted by USU on this process on October 27 at 3:00pm Eastern Time. For additional inquiries please contact Jenna Seabold, USU Project Manager, at usuprojectmanager@aplu.org.

Consider attending this free, informational webinar -

Community-based Learning and AI Innovations: Call for Proposals Discussion

Tuesday, October 27 | 3:00 PM EST

Register here >>

Publication and Working Group Timeline:

- Case studies due December 15, 2026
- Case studies and working group selection announced by March 1, 2027
- Author edits throughout spring and early summer 2027
- Working group convening: 2027 USU Spring Meeting, April 13-14, 2027 (Washington, DC)
- Galley proof reviews early Fall 2027
- Publication release & working group convening: 2027 APLU Annual Meeting, October 31-Nov 2, 2027 (San Diego, CA)

For more information, please contact:

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