

Stevens Initiative Grant Competition Proposal Feedback

The Initiative reviewed the proposals from the past two competitions from organizations that did not receive grants and is sharing a summary below of factors that were most commonly cited by the review committee. The guidelines and priorities of current or future Stevens Initiative award competitions may differ from those of past competitions. We hope this information is helpful as you refine your virtual exchange programs and plans, and we encourage you to carefully review the guidelines and priorities of each competition rather than solely relying on the information below in shaping your proposal.

General eligibility issues

- Proposing a program that is not virtual exchange or lacking US youth to MENA youth interaction
 - Some proposals lacked, or did not adequately demonstrate, that the program would include virtual exchange. The Stevens Initiative supports programs that use technology to connect young people in the United States and the Middle East and North Africa in sustained, facilitated, educational activities. Programs that do not foster direct connections between young people in these regions/countries are not eligible for funding.
 - Specifically, several proposals lack details, or in some cases any indication, that cross-cultural communication/collaboration activities would occur that would facilitate an authentic, mutually beneficial exchange between youth in the US and MENA. These proposals receive low review committee scores.
- Not addressing a competition's unique characteristics or specifications
 - Each call for proposals from the Initiative includes unique characteristics, specifications, and/or priorities. Some proposals receive low scores when it seems the organization is portraying an existing program as meeting the competition's goals, while other proposals get low scores because they seem to be engineered to show that a proposed program would meet all the competition's goals. Strong proposals make a clear and realistic case for how the proposed program is aligned with some Initiative goals. To be clear, in order to be considered for a grant, all proposals must meet all *requirements* (as opposed to goals or priorities) listed in the Call for Proposals.
- The applicant was not the organization leading the project
 - In some proposals, the applying organization seemed to be conducting significantly less work than one of its proposed partner organizations. This is

not a good match with the reporting and compliance obligations of Stevens Initiative award recipients.

- Requesting an ineligible amount of funding
 - Several organizations requested more than the allowed percentage of their previous year operating budget, which was a limit imposed by the Stevens Initiative to ensure that the proposed work and compliance and reporting requirements are feasible for the applying organization.
 - Some organizations requested an amount of funding that was more or less than the permitted range.
- Proposing an ineligible cost per participant
 - Most competitions outline explicit ranges for cost per participant with instructions for how those costs should be calculated and presented in a proposal. Proposals that include a cost per participant outside of the allowed range or do not clearly or adequately demonstrate this calculation are not successful.
- Not an eligible organization
 - U.S. organizations submitting a proposal must be tax-exempt non-profit organizations. If an entity that does not meet this criterion wishes to be part of a proposal to the Stevens Initiative, it must work with an eligible organization that would submit the proposal. In some cases, organizations work with a fiscal sponsor that is eligible; the fiscal sponsor would submit the proposal.
- Proposing unrealistic or ineligible program timelines
 - Several organizations submitted proposals with timelines that included program start dates that do not allow for necessary administrative and preparation activities to ensure a successful program. Other proposals included timelines with activities outside of allowed date ranges stated in the Initiative's call for proposals.

Size/scale

- The organization has not demonstrated adequate capacity
 - Some organizations seemed to lack the staff capacity to carry out the proposed work, given the scope or complexity of what was proposed and keeping in mind the expected deliverables and the compliance and reporting requirements for Stevens Initiative awards.
- The program grows too rapidly
 - Several proposals – especially those for new programs – envision faster semester-to-semester or round-to-round growth or larger youth participant

cohorts than seems feasible. Large funding requests are often not sufficient to deliver large projects or rapid growth; developing the many components of a successful virtual exchange – solidifying international partnerships, preparing the platform and technology, developing the curriculum, training educators or facilitators, instituting a monitoring and evaluation plan, and so on – takes time, even with adequate funding.

- The dispersion of locations is too broad
 - Several proposals have described reaching young people in over 10 countries in the Middle East and North Africa, or a similar number of locations across the United States. This design makes it very challenging to create uniformly strong implementing partnerships or to ensure adequate support for activities in each location. If the countries or states outlined were broad and with no backup or listed partners, the review committee would often question the feasibility of reaching all those places.
- The program reach is too small
 - Some programs seemed to operate on a small scale and use a model that is resource intensive, with no apparent plans to benefit from economies of scale. This issue seems to be common when programs try to adapt an in-person exchange program to a virtual exchange program, ignoring the comparative advantage provided by virtual exchange programs to increase access to more young people and decrease overall costs.

Plan/logistics

- Vague or complex program plan
 - In several proposals, the program details were too general and did not convey a clear, realistic plan for how the program would be structured and carried out. Several proposals did not outline the actual activities in which youth participants would engage during the program.
 - Several proposals included a variety of activities and modes of engagement that were not adequately explained or justified and would present challenges in implementation.
 - Multiple levels and phases of activity can make implementation a challenge. Delays in the planning stages would make it difficult for the following stages of the program to occur successfully.
 - Some programs proposed to use many technology platforms (e.g. five or more), possibly complicating the coordinator, educator, facilitator, and youth participant experience.
- Vague or unclear youth participant experience

- The youth participant experience – what it would be like to participate in the program, including specific activities and peer engagement – is not sufficiently clear from reading the proposal.
- Unequal participant experience
 - Several programs proposed programs with greatly unequal participant experiences in which, for example, participants on only one side of the exchange experience a far greater number of activities or partake in an end-of-program event. Programs can often be comprised of different activities for participants on each side of an exchange, but programs offering unequal programming have received low scores.
- Lack of information about partnerships
 - Several proposals did not list intended implementing partners in the Middle East or North Africa or in the United States. While full information about finalized partnerships was not required, often the lack of information raised questions about whether the program was feasible.
- Proposing inequitable partnerships
 - The Initiative believes that virtual exchanges are most successful when partnerships are equitable, mutually beneficial, reflect the needs and capacities of all partners, and reflect a spirit of collaboration. Some applicants do not demonstrate an effort to develop equitable partnerships, from the early stages of program design and proposal development, with their international partners (for example, not including partners abroad in the curriculum development, or proposing program activities that benefit only participants on one side of the exchange).

Topic/Subject

- Vague or overly broad topic
 - In several proposals, the topic of the exchange was vague or overly broad. The exchange proposed to cover several disparate topics, suggesting that the experience with each topic would not be sufficiently deep to lead to significant discussion or learning. Often, proposals included a set of key words (such as religion, women, environment, culture, education, etc.) without explaining the connection between the topics or what would be covered within these very broad topics in a concise and cohesive manner.
 - Several proposals describe methods (such as dialogue or project work) or intended outcomes (empathy, global learning) but do not explain which subjects will be covered through these methods or to achieve these outcomes. Empathy in particular was mentioned as the focus of several

proposals, without an explanation of the subjects that would be covered in order to help young people build empathy with their peers from other places and backgrounds.

- Some proposals indicated that the program will address one (or several) of the competition priorities (e.g. STEM) without adequate explanation of how the priority will be addressed.
- Overly specific topics or content
 - Several proposals included topics or content that was too narrowly defined or narrowly focused and did not allow for the development of global competencies, rather focusing on the development of competencies only within that academic subject. For example, a project that focused *only* on learning about global health without the inclusion of opportunities to develop global competencies through planned learning activities or collaboration, would receive a lower score from reviewers.
- Focusing on global competence as the main subject
 - Some proposals have described the content or subject focus of the virtual exchange program as global competence, social-emotional learning, or 21st century or digital literacy skills. To be clear, these are all valuable skills that the Stevens Initiative hopes programs will help young people develop. But they do not need to be the *only* topic of the program; virtual exchange programs can focus on a wide range of topics and invite young to communicate and collaborate on concrete activities related to many topics or subjects, and in the process build global competencies or other knowledge, skills, and abilities.
- Lack of curricular structure
 - Some proposals indicated that the program lacked curricular structure. While flexibility is an important ingredient of strong programs, a degree of structure helps educators, facilitators, and youth participants proceed through a meaningful exchange experience.

Funding

- Large funding request despite building on considerable existing assets
 - Some proposals referred to existing assets (curriculum, educators/facilitators, partnerships, technology platform, etc.) and did not justify the large requested budget – particularly for fixed costs – in light of these assets.
- Overstaffed projects

- Some proposals listed a large number of personnel relative to the work being proposed or did not adequately explain the roles and/or necessity of each personnel.
- Inadequately explained intention to develop technology
 - Some proposals emphasized using time and resources to build new technology or platforms. Proposals that include substantial investments in new technology need to demonstrate that there are no alternatives that currently exist or that can be adapted for virtual exchange implementation.
- Ignoring guidance on allowable or recommended costs
 - Many proposals do not reflect budgets that adapt to guidance provided by the Initiative in webinars, FAQs, and other resources about what costs are allowable included stipends paid to students, participation costs charged to students, among others.

Participants

- Participants are not described
 - Many proposals have failed to explain who the youth participants would be either in the United States or in the Middle East or North Africa, or in some cases, both regions. Some of these proposals seemed to lack an international youth exchange element entirely. Some made only general reference to one side of the exchange and do not seem committed to recruiting or providing a meaningful experience for young people from the other region.
- The appeal to participants or their need for the program is not described
 - In several proposals, the intended appeal to youth in one or both regions/countries was not clear. Sometimes, the appeal was described and compelling for youth in one region/country, but that appeal would likely be less strong for youth in the other region/country, and this disparity is not acknowledged or addressed. In some programs, youth in one region/country seem to be involved solely or primarily as a means to educate or train their peers in the other region/country (rather than as part of an equitable, mutually beneficial virtual exchange activity), which is not the intention of Stevens Initiative programs.
 - The context of the youth participants in each region/country is quite different, raising questions about how the activity will meet both of their interests and needs and be suited to their circumstances. Several programs, for example, proposed to include students in one country/region who would receive credit for participating, and to include young people who would volunteer to participate in the other country/region outside of the education

system (without receiving credit). It can be frustrating for engaged participants when their peers do not have the same level of motivation to attend or invest in the activities. While incentives do not, and in many cases cannot, be identical, applicants should show how there are appropriate and compelling incentives for young people in all countries/regions.

- Some organizations proposed to involve young people outside of the formal education system without adequately explaining how their continued participation and completion of the program would be overseen and incentivized.
- The age range is too broad or not adequately explained/justified
 - Several organizations proposed to include students at a wide range of age levels (e.g. middle school through graduate school), without explaining the distinct roles and opportunities that would be available to youth at each level, how the activities would be appropriate and appealing for youth at each level, or how the organization would manage the technical complexity involved.
- Participant diversity receives inadequate attention, especially in proposals that indicate they will include refugees or other marginalized groups
 - The Initiative is committed to increasing access to young people who traditionally do not have access to international experiences. Applicants that propose to reach a high proportion of participants who do not meet this criterion frequently receive lower scores from review committee members.
 - Participant diversity is not discussed or is mentioned superficially and not explained. Reaching marginalized populations, including refugees, is an implementation challenge that requires considerable planning. The applicant's plan to overcome challenges in reaching diverse participants should be clear in the proposal.
 - Several proposals have mentioned reaching out to diverse or marginalized groups of students without supporting this intention with enough detail or supporting documentation to assure review committee members that these participants would in fact be included and empowered to fully participate in programming.
- Insufficient emphasis on youth engagement
 - Some proposals put more emphasis on (and describe in greater detail) the educator or facilitator training than on the youth virtual exchange program that should be the centerpiece or culmination of the program.

Other

- Too much emphasis on in-person exchange
 - While in-person exchange is eligible as part of a hybrid in-person and virtual program, some proposals seemed to focus an inequitable amount of time and resources on the in-person exchange.
- Virtual exchange is not the focus
 - Virtual exchange seems to have been added to an existing course or exchange program and it does not clearly fit with or enrich work that seems to be the real focus of the funding request.
- Emphasis on instruction rather than exchange
 - Some proposals put more emphasis on using technology to facilitate online lectures or educator presentation than enabling communication and collaboration among youth participants.